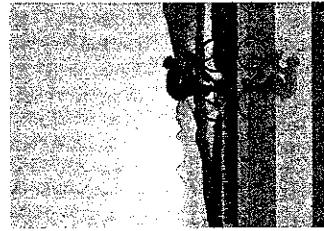


CHAPTER 9

BICYCLING AND THE SIMPLE LIFE



Simple (or Hard) Decisions

Today was not the best of mornings to ride my bike to work. It was humid and overcast, cool enough that I chose not to wear shorts (my usual commuting wear during the summer months), but still humid enough that my jeans were sticking to my legs by the time I arrived at Friends University, my destination, about 25 minutes later. It could have been worse, of course; it could have been raining. In some ways, I actually prefer the rain when I'm riding in the warm, creeping dampness that you so often experience on cloudy days. A real downpour can make navigating city streets and sidewalks a little tricky, but a good clean, moderate rainfall has never caused me any serious navigation trouble. Besides, the coolness it can bring is refreshing, especially in contrast to those days when the moisture in the air seems to surround you with a stale stillness, no matter how fast you're moving. Still, I rode my bike, as I do most days when there isn't ice on the streets or I don't have an appointment that requires me to travel to the other side of Wichita. I was happy to do so.

On the best days – and much as I like autumn, my favorites are hot, cloudless, blue-skied summer ones in July, bright days where the horizon on all sides of you lays revealed – my ride to work and home again is a quiet delight, a stream of reminders from my senses with every rotation

of my wheel of the world of nature and human deeds (good and bad) around me. But even on not so good days – like this morning – I mount my Trek 7100 to make my six-mile journey and don't give it much of another thought. It has become habitual for me. There is no *need* to give it much thought, because the half-hour I have to myself, pretty much every morning and evening during the work week, is the time I get to keep my thoughts completely to myself. I am not thinking about refilling the gas tank, I am not thinking about changing the oil, I am not thinking about how the jerk in front of me is slowing down just when I need to change lanes so that I don't miss my exit; on the contrary, I am thinking about whatever strikes my fancy, or about nothing memorable at all, because my bicycle – my relatively simple locomotion machine – is capable of getting me to where I need to be without obliging me to deal with complex realities. It is slower than commuting by car, of course, but that slowness itself gives me the opportunity to let my mind wander over the day ahead of me or the day just past, let my eyes wander over the world around me – both its busy parts and the parts which remain still – without having lost anything in the meantime. Issues of efficiency need not plague me. After all, I've already unplugged myself from the oil economy more than most people in Wichita: I'm riding a bike.

Is this all too simplistic a picture? To those for whom the idea of being responsible for physically powering one's own commute, a commute that takes place in all sorts of weather, and which includes no Internet connection or a cell phone or any means of getting any work done at all during those precious minutes you're pedaling away, it may not sound simplistic so much as pathetic. But seeing as how you're reading a copy of a book titled *Cycling – Philosophy for Everyone*, that probably doesn't describe you, at least not entirely. Still, my commuting anecdotes may beg more than a few crucial questions: is it really *that* simple? Forget the fact that anyone who commutes to work via bicycle obviously *does* have to mind the complex interactions around them: speeding automobiles, changing lights, oddly parked cars, unobservant pedestrians, and all the rest.¹ Beyond that, isn't achieving a life situation wherein any of this kind of “simplicity” is even possible itself a rather complex feat? And the answer is, of course, yes. For my family and for myself, it was the result of a series of decisions regarding what kind of career I hoped to have, where we wanted to buy a home, what activities we would commit ourselves and our children to, and more, all of which have had multiple ongoing implications, always needing to be attended to and adjusted as time goes by.



The decision to live a "simple life" can often be, and historically has usually been, attached to relatively uncomplicated acts of downward mobility: a counter-culture drive to drop out and retreat from the ever-enlisting pressures and expectations that come from living in an age of modern technology, mass production, and capitalist consumption. The iconic model for this sort of passive, rejectionist approach to simplicity is Henry David Thoreau, with his call to "simplify, simplify" being inelimitably tied to his retreat to Walden Pond and his abandonment of city life. But for the majority of residents of modern, market-oriented, complex states like ourselves, simplicity is actually, well, rather complex to achieve. It is not so simple as hopping on one's bike (though, of course, everyone *should* do that, and regularly, completely aside from any philosophical or lifestyle concerns). Rather, to be able to see the bike as part of a larger, theoretical extension of the freedom to travel and work and live at a slower pace is to acknowledge that achieving simplicity can be a rather complicated project to pull off.

Simplicity and Complexity

The modern world – at least the incarnation of it so familiar to those who live in the societies of Western Europe and North America – is premised upon fluidity, calculation, specialization, transformation, and speed. That's how we have framed the acquisition of knowledge, economic transactions, social organization, and the development of the person for a few centuries now at least.² That such speeding means many good things may be lost by the wayside is a commonplace and mostly uncontroversial. What *is* controversial is believing that controlling our pace is within our collective power, and amounts to more than easy, cranky condemnations. Of course, attacks on modernity are legion, have been around since Rousseau (the original modern crank, perhaps) and the Romantics at least, and have only been made easier by apologists for globalization who see some new kind of human emerging from Thomas Friedman's Golden Straightjacket.³ But just because there are lots of anti-modern posers out there doesn't mean the problem is real, and isn't painful.

To stick with Friedman, consider the core of the case "simplicity" makes against globalization and modernity: a great many people around the world really *don't* want to live their whole lives under olive trees, but

they'd also prefer that their olive trees not be mowed down by Lexuses. To insist that the only remaining route to simplicity, to preserving the olive groves, is to live there and never move again is to engage in a long-ing for homogeneous and traditional communities which invariably privileges the perspective of educated (and usually wealthy) elites who feel themselves in possession of some custom or tradition with inherent superior value. Many of the intellectuals you find flirting with anti-modern arguments often seem to be oblivious to the limited and ordinary lives of actual families, their pleasures and labors and hopes and fears. Actually living out the traditions, customs, and ways of life which constitute "simplicity" requires work, memory, openness to change, and a chastened sense of possibility. (Not to mention a willingness to contemplate the changes that riding one's bike to work might require.) It may also sometimes mean somewhat *less* respect for the particular content of said customs and traditions. Attacking the technological diversification, and resulting alienation, which our acquisition-focused modern economy thrusts upon us demands sacrifices that many people without adequate political, economic, social, or cultural resources may not be able to make, at least not without causing themselves and possibly others (in particular their children) potentially serious harms. Far better, then, to focus on the people who desire simplicity, and the stratagems by which they attempt to secure it, than the "pure" idea of simplicity itself. (Real people ride bikes, not ideals.)

Some years ago, Timothy Burke wrote a stimulating essay⁴ defending the complexity and fragmentary nature of the modern world, with all its "dizzy, glorious excesses." The made stuff of the world is all good, in his view. Well, that stuff is stuff that the people want, surely, and borderline socialist though I may be, I hardly think the whole modern marketplace is a matter of false consciousness. So Burke is right when he condemns "those who want less not just for themselves but all the world, who want only their own vision of what is refined and elegant to propagate, who so fear the authentic popularity of global popular culture that they imagine its successes to be impossible save by conspiracy, subversion and subjugation." But he goes too far, I think, when he claims:

[I]t's true that those forms of expressive practice which are fundamentally antagonistic to a cultural marketplace – the equivalent of usufruct ownership of land, the kinds of cultural practices that are unowned and unownable, collective and communal, and that require a protected relation to power, are threatened by the explosive force of market-driven popular



culture. My feeling about that is the same feeling I have about [community] in general: good riddance.... All that is lost [through the marketplace] are the forms of social power that reserved particular cultural forms as the source of social distinction or hierarchy, all that is lost are the old instrumentalities of texts, performances, rituals. The achievement of liberty loses nothing save the small privileges of intimate tyrannies. Culture, even in the premodern world, is ceaselessly in motion and yet also steady as a rock. In getting more and more of it for more and more people, we lose little along the way.

A strong argument, perhaps persuasive to many who read this essay. But what does it have to do with simplicity, much less bicycling? Well, let me start by defining my terms.

What's the point of trying to live simply, if it doesn't involve a rejection of technology and a return to subsistence farming? I would say the point is to exist in an environment which isn't likely to multiply out of one's control, making one simultaneously dependent upon and divorced from those complex forces, actors, and decisions that shape one's options. That is, a world where one can see clear through from basic personal choices to more or less dependable results, both personal and public. Of course, the world is never *really* going to be like that: human life is an often random, frequently tragic, always unpredictable existence. (Long-distance bicyclists and bicycle commuters alike are sure to be aware of this!) But nonetheless, some environments lend themselves to being enclosed more easily than others, and enclosure doesn't just mean retreat from reality: sometimes it means cultivating the better parts of it.

For example, look at your bicycle. It is, to be sure, an impressive and demanding piece of technology, with brakes and sprockets and derailleurs all needing to be properly tended to. But that finite number of parts is available in open sight, requiring but also readily responding to simple, everyday, basic acts of maintenance. Compare that to the kind of complex, often hidden mechanisms that lay buried, sometimes inaccessible, under the hood of a car, requiring expert (and expensive) work to keep in running order. Moreover, said work often runs on and on, with one system's breakdown causing another's. This is not to say that the mechanics of the internal combustion engine cannot be "enclosed," to a degree mastered, and thus made reliably responsive to the engagement of any given driver; cars, too, can be made "simple." But it is much more difficult, and thus much more unlikely, that the typical driver will be able to reach that point. With bicycles, simplicity, the ability to see a project through from beginning to end, is much more in reach.

Of course, the danger of imposing an authoritative content upon one's—and others'—acts of cultivation which Burke makes mention of is real. The number of hippies who just wanted to drop out of modern life and tune in to their communes who ended up embracing Maoism and talked of purges in their bean rows was probably pretty small, historically speaking, but that doesn't mean such a slippery slope should be ignored. The bicycle fascist, the rider who claims to have found a public answer to all modern problems through his ancient Schwinn and is determined to make sure everyone else enjoys it just as much as he, is no more appealing than any other kind. Burke surely wasn't kidding when he spoke of "intimate tyrannies." But not all intimacies are tyrannical, and he is, I think, perhaps less attendant than he should be to how much that rock of culture he speaks of can be shattered by the roar of Lexuses driving by. John Stuart Mill scratched his head over the "half-savage relics" who choose to "sulk on their rocks" rather than embrace the liberty of (English) civilization,⁵ there is just the barest hint of a similar condescension in Burke's assumption that wanting to hold onto the rough and rocky soil in which "social distinctions" and olive trees take root is likely about "hierarchy" and holding dominion over others. Maybe, instead, wanting to enclose off certain areas of life, to set at least a few aspects of one's life into a "protected relation to power," is about wishing to exercise dominion over *one's place in the world*—which is at least part of what is meant by "self-government," after all.

Globalization, Coffee, and Sweden

Consider something even more prosaic than bicycle riding: coffee. (I'm not a coffee-drinker myself, but surely the stereotype is that urban bicycle commuters are all about their Starbucks lattes, right? Or at least so I've heard, biking along the semi-rural streets of Wichita. And don't worry; we'll be back on our bikes here soon.) The story here is a fairly familiar one. The transformation of coffee into a status marker, via Starbucks and others, has increased the demand for certain kinds of coffee. This pulls the world market towards ever greater specialized production, as patterns of work and prices shift in order to maximize profits and keep costs down, thereby making coffee cheap enough that its consumer base will continue to grow. In short, coffee becomes—as most manufacturing in our globalized world has become—part of the "pull economy,"



where power is no longer in the hands of producers and laborers but in the hands of retailers and marketers. Buy coffee, and you're buying a good that's been hurriedly yanked away from one place and out of one form then put into another, and then yet another, and then finely delivered to you, nice and hot.

A few years ago, Daniel Brook wrote an interesting article about Sweden in *Dissent*.⁶ This highly egalitarian country, where more than one-half of the total GDP goes to the government in the form of taxes, has weathered the storms of globalization with its high standard of living, generous welfare state, and low wage differentials mostly intact, despite the fact that, strictly speaking, Sweden is poorer than every American state except West Virginia and Mississippi. This is an interesting story, but what I found most intriguing about it was how it explained what it means to provide and serve coffee in a country of "capitalism without capitalists":

[C]all it the \$3 cup of coffee debate. One of the most striking things for foreigners about Sweden is the high price of consumer goods. A simple cup of coffee at a café in Stockholm costs nearly \$3. The main reason a cup of coffee in Sweden costs two to three times what it costs in the United States is the labor costs in the café. Pouring coffee is a minimum wage job the world over, but in Sweden the lowest wage is much higher than in the United States, and the employer is responsible for more social benefits. On top of that, a 25 percent value-added tax is paid by the consumer. I would gladly have paid \$1.25 for a cup of coffee in Sweden, but ... consider what my \$3 bought. The added cost made sure that the person who poured my coffee lived in decent housing, enjoyed health care coverage, and could send her kids to college if they could get in. Swedish society had decided that coffee would cost more than anywhere else in the world in exchange for these public goods. Weren't they worth the money?

It's not that Swedish society is wholly admirable; there is much to complain about in regards to the choices they have collectively made. But Sweden has determined, in at least a few key areas, to resist the Golden Straightjacket of the globalizers, and instead to impose some rules and controls of their own, directing (though some would say warping) the local coffee market so that it became a part of their own larger, egalitarian enclosure. There's nothing about "simplicity" in Brook's article; and indeed, one might argue that they've been able to "buy off" the frustration which must inevitably arise from controls such as these by making sure numerous cultural and social outlets remain unobstructed,

open-ended, diverse, and complex. Still, the basic point remains: this is a society that has undertaken the work to construct an environment wherein a certain simplicity, a certain socioeconomic humility, abides. Coffee is not native to Sweden; if they want to drink it, it has to be grown and processed and shipped from somewhere else. The Swedes, in effect, decided that if they want coffee to be part of their environment, they need to pay the price for it, and they need to *put that price to work* in sustaining what they already have.

The application of this "Swedish lesson" in the structuring of transactions and choices in Sweden to debates over paying for building bike lanes on busy streets, constructing more extensive bike parking options, and adjusting work schedules and expectations should be fairly obvious. Not that the needs which such projects would serve are necessarily vital to the achievement of a simpler society, anymore than it was vital for the Swedes to express their egalitarianism through coffee prices. But the fact that they don't leave such a prosaic good out of their considerations ought to be suggestive to those who might balk at broad, public actions being taken in the name of making the movement of people a simpler, more reliable affair.

Are there costs to all this? Of course. Creating an environment where even comparatively simple goods -- like the time used up in biking instead of driving, or the expense of a cup of coffee -- are socialized, to prevent costs from falling solely on singular individuals who choose to buck the trends of complexity, narrows the margins of invention. It always partially *encloses* things, places and plans them, in the same way that a frugal person might think hard about her every purchase, reflecting on the space which the item bought or used may take up and the waste which will likely result. Only in such a way can her footsteps be light and her personal ecology resist being swept away by the lure of complexly produced, low-cost, high-impact goods. No, Sweden is not a place for mad, brilliant, disruptive entrepreneurs -- but it is a place for working citizens and families, most of whom prefer to exercise a little control over the vicissitudes of existence, and preserve a place for a reliable, secure, and more simple everyday world. Few people would describe Sweden as a conservative country, yet compared to the US there is a sense that they "conserve" far better than we do. As with many other social democratic countries, in the Swedes' analysis of their own situation you can see evidence that socialists and egalitarians of many (if not all) different stripes share an intellectual preoccupation with agrarians and others: the "conservative" concern with tending to what one has, and a willingness to



structure life so that one's tending isn't made moot by realities that *ought* to be subject to the will of the people. Karl Marx and Edmund Burke aren't necessarily that far off from each other, at least not at their roots.⁷

Simple (or Hard) Gifts

So, fine. Perhaps you, dear reader, are persuaded – or at least intrigued – by the claim that “simplicity,” if it does not just mean a rejection of modern life, may necessarily involve an element of intentional, restrictive, enclosing, and thus expensive action: a social restructuring (maybe to a radical degree) in order to conserve the ability of ordinary men and women to exercise real control over, have a real connection to, and feel a real identity with the choices they make and their forms of life. Simplicity, then, isn't so simple; the experience of it may be, but the achievement and maintenance of it is not. So I return to the beginning of my reflections: could bicycling be part of that structured simplicity, in the same way the Swedes have made their cup of coffee part of a system of dependency? To which I say: no *can* about it; it absolutely is.

A few years back, my brother-in-law, a physics professor, expressed to me his discontent with the high technology and science that surrounded us all. In an email he asked:

Have we become slaves to our machines already? If we live too far from work and have to drive to work, then are we slaves to our cars? If we can't grow our own food, are we slaves to the trucks that drive in the food and to the machinery that plants and harvests and processes our food? I have often thought of our trips to the gas station as a type of worship service – we go to pay homage to the gods of petroleum – the gods that dictate how we live our lives and to whom we must pay our tribute.

Americans today have no excuse to not be well versed by now in the obvious expenses generated by our national dependence upon oil; that trade deficits, labor costs, foreign policy, interest rates, job openings, working conditions, and so much more depend to a discomfiting degree on the price of a barrel of oil is not easily disputable. Perhaps even more important, however, are the less obvious, even hidden, costs that shape the basic infrastructure of our lives. For example, a huge amount of the congestion on the roads in American cities is a function of the crowded

spaces which automobiles occupy while moving from one point to another: in other words, the crowded nature of our roads. Why are they crowded? Ironically and to a surprising extent, because so much land has to be used to place those cars when they *aren't* being used. The amount of parking space which our nation's automobiles necessitate equals in size the state of Connecticut, and the cost of maintaining those “free” spaces (mall parking lots and street-side parking, to name a couple) in the face of competition over real estate (not to mention roads!) amounts to subsidies to drivers of over \$220 billion per year.⁸ This is not to argue that such expenditures aren't warranted, or just. Rather, it is simply to point out the hidden as well as the open costs that shape and control our available decisions in a complex society. Leaving aside the car the next time you commute – or planning one's work choices so that one *can* leave aside the car – is thus a powerful blow for personal control over one's choices, and hence for “simplicity.”

“I really felt the bicycle could be for the world's cities what the spinning wheel was for Gandhi,” was how John Dowlin, a 1970s-era bicycling activist, put it.⁹ Gandhi's vision of restructuring India's economy around self-sufficient means of production – that is, spinning its own cloth – was hardly a simple undertaking, but its goal was a society which could extract itself from the complex dependencies of Great Britain's imperial economic order ... and along the way, it became a symbol of independence, local reliance, and, yes, simplicity.¹⁰ The bicycle – and, more specifically, the bicycle commuter – could be, and should be, the same.

That is not to ride over the difficulty and sacrifice that may be involved in shifting gears in our pattern of existence away from an automobile-centric one to a bicycle-centered one. In my family's case, upon moving to Wichita, KS, deciding where we would live required above all a determination of the routes I would take to work, and the limits within which we would look for a home (this meant no more than 9 miles from campus). Given that we wished to pass along our commitment to bicycling to our children, that choice was also affected by where our kids would go to school, and how they would get there.¹¹ And then, of course, there follow issues of extra-curricular activities and after-work responsibilities: how many can we accept, and how many must we turn down, if we are committed to having only one car and relying on walking or the bicycle for everything else? It obliges us to turn local, and turn down our level of programmed commitments in order to keep our lives simple and sane.



The sometimes hard – but invariably pleasing – choice of the bicycle structures our lives, in the same way the supposedly liberating powers of free market competition structure the shopping, schooling, and commuting of millions of drivers. In seeking a different structure, we find ourselves becoming rebels, living lives less noisy with organized demands, and more responsive to needs and choices that are more organically our own. Of course, there are still demands: I leave a little earlier for work than I might have to otherwise, and there are opportunities for building relationships and impressing friends and colleagues that my family and I no doubt miss out on. On the other side of the road, there are also meaningless distractions that our slower, simpler structure of life enables us to avoid (my co-workers have more than once expressed jealousy at the fact that I am excused from late-running faculty meetings, since I have to bike home). And then there are other compensations, my intimate familiarity with all the variations in Wichita's weather being one.

The old Shaker hymn, "Simple Gifts," is deceptive. It speaks of the gift of simplicity and freedom, yet it connects such gifts with turning and bowing and bending "till we come round right." Simplicity ain't easy. In modern, fragmented, fast-moving, overtime-working, traffic-stressing, coffee-gulping, oil-guzzling America, that's doubly true. The decision to ride a bike to work won't make simplicity suddenly easy – on the contrary, especially at the beginning, investing one's time, money, and energy into a rethinking of one's conception of daily life will probably be hard; it will involve no small amount of bowing and bending, to see the way through to a freedom from the complex dependencies we all carry with us. But in the end it will come round, like the wheels of your reliable, muscle-powered, two-wheeled transportation machine. The same logic holds for any attempt at public restructuring. Building and maintaining resources for bicycle commuters and families who want to use that humble form of transportation for their daily routines will face great obstacles, though perhaps becoming slightly less so as more people hop on saddles after recognizing the hidden costs of a complex market that broadly structures our lives without much input from us. However achieved, it will be a gift. A small gift, perhaps. But a gift all the same. It may be one that will not be appreciated at first; maybe it won't be fully appreciated until you've experienced plenty of both hot and rainy days on your bike. But then, the weather, like many other things, is a gift that those who never step out of their automobiles rarely know.

NOTES

- 1 There is something particularly American about this "obviously," though: American bicycle commuters have come to recognize themselves as, and have fought to be recognized as, vehicles with as much right to streets as cars – which means American bicyclists have to think about traffic constantly. This is not so much the case in many parts of Western Europe, where the bicycle as a primary mode of ordinary transportation has been long accepted, with the result that more peacefully ordered and extensive bike lanes, with their own norms and patterns, are plentiful. Contrast the descriptions of Amsterdam bicycle commuters and American ones in Jeff Mapes, *Pedaling Revolution: How Cyclists are Changing American Cities* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2009), pp. 75–6; and Robert Hurst, *The Cyclist's Manifesto: The Case for Riding on Two Wheels Instead of Four* (Guilford: The Globe Pequot Press, 2009), pp. 133–7.
- 2 This account of the modern Western world is indebted to many authors, but probably none more so than Charles Taylor. See his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); and *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 3 Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), ch. 6. The "Golden Straightjacket" refers to the idea that adapting one's society, economy, and patterns of personal behavior to the norms and expectations of the wealthy, expanding, trade-hungry capitalist states of the West is difficult, with results that many cultures experience as confining and homogenizing. The material benefits, in terms of medicine, jobs, technology, education, and consumer goods, however, are undeniable.
- 4 Timothy Burke, "They Call Me Dr. Pangloss." Available online at www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/tburke1/perma101204.html (accessed September 9, 2009).
- 5 Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, ch. 16, "On Nationality," in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- 6 Daniel Brook, "How Sweden Tweaked the Washington Consensus," *Dissent*, Fall 2004.
- 7 For more on this theme, consider my essay, "How Germany Made us 'Conservative.'" Available online at www.frontporchrepublic.com/?p=3018 (accessed September 10, 2009).
- 8 Donald Shoup, *The High Cost of Free Parking* (Chicago: APA Planners Press, 2005).
- 9 Dowlin cited in Mapes, *Pedaling Revolution*, p. 37.
- 10 For more on this argument, see Rebecca Brown's forthcoming *Gandhi's Spinning Wheel and the Making of India* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- 11 I say more about this in my essay, "Walking to School, Slacktardom, and Other Revolutionary Acts." Available online at www.frontporchrepublic.com/?p=2807 (accessed September 8, 2009).

