

Dreaming Illich

An Open letter to the Lancaster symposium on the politics of
the bicycle

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September, 2010

I am sorry I have not been able to attend as I believe this conference is both important and timely, and because many questions need to be asked. I am assuming, perhaps presumptuously, that participants envisage a world where communities interact on the energy scales permitted by a bicycle-led transport system, rather than the much larger systems we currently have, focused around the combustion engine.

In 1973 Ivan Illich pointed out how speed was reshaping society and its physical spaces. His book, *Energy and Equality*¹ showed great prescience regarding current discussions on the challenges posed to human society by ecological needs and finite resources, particularly in the post-industrial nations. Of particular relevance to this symposium is that he argued strongly in favour of the bicycle over the combustion engine.

Illich, a socialist who argued for “convivial technology”², saw the car as part of the problem of capitalism, as a tool whose promises of freedom instead contributed to the atomizing of society and entrenching industry-based hierarchies. By moving back to technologies which connected directly with people such as the bicycle, rather than being purely mediated through industry, he essentially envisaged a world focused on individuals in communities which were based around principles of sustainability. Though he did not describe it as such, I would say that this was his dream, and it is close to the ones held by many on today’s radical green left.

However, there is a subtext to Illich’s work that underlies his criticism: that the physical environment in which humans live and work has changed precisely because of the ever greater speeds that come with an oil-based economy. It is obvious that in the close on 30 years since Illich wrote these changes have become yet further entrenched, both culturally and physically. Society is optimized to the combustion engine to the point that we are now blind to its pervasive effects.

I argue that the challenges this offers to the politics of bicycles and to other strategies of energy descent are under-estimated. If the dream of Illich is to be achieved then we need to be aware of the social ecology of the bicycle, that is:- the network of infrastructures throughout society, physical and otherwise, that not just maintain it, but also limit it.

So, my first open question is to ask how we could re-envisage Illich’s work — what would a society in which switched *en masse* from car to bicycle actually look like? What new structures are required, both at a physical and a societal level?

Impossible to disentangle from this is the nature of transformation required, again, both of physical spaces and society?

The get-out answer is that it will be a slow transition, one done over time. It is precisely this cop-out attitude that allows difficult questions to be avoided and thus ultimately betray the transformatory power of technologies such as bicycles. It fails to

¹ Energy and Equity, Ivan Illich, 1973.

www.davidtinapple.com/illich/1973_energy_equity.html

² Tools for Conviviality, Ivan Illich, 1973.

www.ournature.org/~novembre/illich/1973_tools_for_conviviality.pdf

recognize that the world is changing fast with that time and resources in increasingly shorter supply. No change happens in a vacuum: the laws of supply and demand are always waiting to pounce, even in non-capitalist worlds, and especially in resource-deficient economies.

One terrain of contention is the physical space of cities. Changing the speed of transport changes the ecology of the city, something that is neither cost nor carbon neutral. Whereas a car can deal with pot-holed roads and other minor obstacles, they are much more problematic for a hoard of bicycles. Turning roads over to bicycles require different levels of maintenance. For instance, it is not enough to say that without cars there would be less damage, for this does not take into account the damage that extremes of weather cause, or the potential increase in gross bicycle weight the road would experience. Even with low levels of degradation, unless people are using relatively high-spec bicycles there are likely to be longer term health effects due regular shock to wrists.

In such ways infrastructure we currently take for granted become issues for a future culture based around bicycles.

Yet, even accepting a greater degree of discomfort, to simply switch to bikes as the primary means of transport would require non-trivial changes in the geography of urban and suburban zones. There would have to be a re-coalescing of society around less diffuse communities, which is not something that happens for free. It requires material and labour input to reshape and then maintain—which requires a potentially significant consumption of resources; and social change to (re-)adapt to a world where places have become further away than before in terms of effort to reach them. Rural areas will have their own distinct challenges.

Of course, there would be many apparent benefits, especially for those considering this from a green anarchist perspective. For a start, there would be an end to large, out of town supermarkets, which would be good for re-establishing less atomized communities. However, that has its own knock-on problems, in particular around the internal sustainability of communities which requires adaption of the existing physical infrastructure to replace much of what has been lost. The change could be painful, especially for those already disadvantaged.

How will we move all the large materials on which society currently depends without lorries, etc? We would still have roads, but a vastly changed economy without the same economies of scale and other attributes that make our current society and its foundational infrastructure viable, including it has to be said, the roads. It is regularly assumed (explicitly & implicitly) that it is relatively straight forward to make part of the existing transport infrastructure bicycle orientated, to the point that society itself will start transforming; I would say it is likely to be anything but, and costly to boot.

The difficulty of changing away from a highly centralized just-in-time distribution economy based on cheap oil allowing access to global markets is rarely given its full credence. For instance, the supply of food would necessarily return to being more local (less variety), but also more exposed to the vagaries of both our own climate and

seasonal variation. Food security is not simply reducible to localism; nor does it take into account the issues of distribution necessary to provide food to our cities. How would a bicycle based transport economy handle this practically?

These are a few examples where digging deeper into the dream exposes underlying structural problems facing any dream of transformation.

And how will it be financed? If you accept that deep level structural changes to society's physical space are needed, then society will have to pay for it. The transition from dream to reality first needs to go through the painful awakening process we call economics. If the transition is to be fair and equitable, not one riven by class inequalities how is to happen? It is all very well for the likes of the privileged Norman Tebbit to tell people to get on their bikes, but is that realistic for many communities?

That is the second question.

The third question follows from the first two: what will be the effects and changes required of society and its individuals?

For a start, we will be living much further from those not in our immediate communities, and travelling much more open to the vagaries of weather and road maintenance (and how does the logistics of maintaining a national road network work out in this new world?).

Work and the workplace necessarily have to change. People will be forced to become fitter to keep up if they are not working in their immediate community. Will there be new hierarchies of health? Workspaces will have to move closer to each other and to the resources they need, including labour. If not managed right this could drive population movements, which in turn require housing and other infrastructure requirements in place to make them viable. For all that we have the benefits of hi-tech, we are still very much mired in a real world as opposed to a virtual one.

Of course, there are always trains, but what happens if you apply the same open questions being posed here? And then, what if you live in the centre of Scotland or Wales? Consider also how this is going to have greater impact on people with mobility issues, for whom the car gives greater freedom. It is not that nothing is insolvable, it is the new scales of cost and effort that accompany the solutions that are need considering as well.

There are positive changes that may come out of this, but if badly managed then history tells us that it is the disadvantaged classes who inevitably pay the heaviest price. The need for social change remains implicit in this politic.

The fourth and final question is about the wider relationship the bicycle has to capitalism and industrialization.

Our bicycles are products of energy and resource intensive processes that consume the earth's materials (coal, iron ore, water) and release considerable CO₂ at all stages from the digging to the smelter to the factory to the consumer and all the transport in between. The rule of thumb for technology, is that the higher the level of technology used the more energy is consumed. A transition to a bicycle culture will be less dam-

aging than cars, but given the much increased use of bicycles instead its contribution to the using up of the earth's resources and sinks will no longer be quite so trivial.

Any change to a lower energy economy will push up the costs of extraction and transport of raw materials, in turn pushing up the relative cost of bicycles. Then there are the hidden elements in the soil of this ecology, for example how easy it is to get access to the various tools and parts required to maintain a bicycle, relatively cheap because they are currently piggy-backing on an energy intensive manufacturing infrastructure — the same one we are challenging. Imagine having to make your own ball-bearings by hand?

Happily, there are politically interesting answers to these challenges; for example, crofter-style industries that return skills and manufacturing to communities would become more viable, if action is taken to establish them. However, will class structures be replicated in the quality and styles of bicycles people own? Currently they are not that cheap, and that is with the benefit of a large scale economy plus access to low cost foreign labour.

Capitalism cannot be ignored either. It will not consider a transition to a bike culture in any sort of fair or reasonable way; it will insist just as strongly on its economies of scale when not seeking monopolies of production. And then only once the state has relinquished its commitment to petrol.

The current financial crisis offers its own problems, exposing the declining power of the United Kingdom. The lack of a manufacturing and skills base combined with a weakening currency exposes us ever more to market vagaries and competition for the shrinking pool of resources. Basically, much of the materials we have no choice other than to purchase from abroad will become ever more expensive.

Other countries already have a significant part of their economy focused around bicycles. While useful examples to learn from, their existence does not necessarily mean a transformation in the UK, coming from a different, more oil focused direction will be directly comparable.

If all this sounds negative, consider that once you deal with these issues (I believe these changes are fairly inevitable anyway, if just from an economic viewpoint) you are left with a society that has far more new spaces in it, one on which capitalism does not quite have the same hold and which might just be an interesting place to be for those interested in radical social change.

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<www.dysophia.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/dreaming_illich_web.pdf>

An open letter asking awkward question on whether a transformation to a bicycle
based economy is practical, possible or even sustainable.

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