

In Praise of the Bicycle

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CONTENTS

The bicycle: from myth to utopia 7

The Myth Experienced

The myth and history 13

The discovery of oneself 28

The discovery of others 35

The Crisis

The myth in ruins 44

The urbanization of the world:
in search of the lost city 53

Escaping the crisis? 57

Utopia

Bicycle freedom 69

The youth of the world 77

The pedal stroke effect 84

Back on Earth 88

The pedal stroke effect

The ‘pedal stroke effect’ is the new fashionable expression. It has replaced the expression ‘butterfly effect’. You may recall the lecture given by the meteorologist Edward Lorenz in 1972 and the provocative question he used as a title: ‘Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?’ Social science researchers today ask themselves whether chaos theory might not be applied even more relevantly to global reality. With the sharp sense of retrospective predictability that often characterizes them, they point out that perhaps everything started one day with a municipal initiative in a city in northern Europe, to essentially and officially protect the first pedal stroke of a city rider. The example stuck, as we’ve seen in France, first in a few small cities and then in Lyon and Paris, and quickly in all other French cities, but also, and even more so, in all the large metropolises throughout the world. The change in quality of life and the improvement

in the ecological health of the planet are obvious benefits for the most part, but the collateral effects are in fact stupefying, notably in the social and political realms. Class barriers have opened or collapsed. Powerful oil companies have fewer and fewer customers, and, facing consequences that delight the more cynical of observers, religious proselytizing has faded away. It seems as if cycling polytheism has overcome petroleum monotheism. Granted, there is fierce competition among bicycle manufacturers for sales, but the potential customer base has become enormous and its demands insatiable. African bikes are challenging bikes made in Asia. We are seeing an increasing number of new and newly rediscovered designs (folding bikes, portable bikes, convertible bikes, bikes with invisible assistance, musical bikes, submersible bikes, aquatic bikes, sail bikes...). Scientists are working on means to capture and transform the energy expended in pedalling; experimental, specially built roads are being constructed for tests. The hope is that entire spans of the energy grid will be fed by the pedalling of cyclists.

Some observers occasionally express the fear that the initial freshness of the global cycling movement will decline over the long term. In the meantime, enthusiasm is intact. To the call of a certain number of governments – ‘Cyclists of all countries, unite!’ – huge festivals have brought together millions of people of all ages in Beijing, San Francisco and Johannesburg. Production is in full swing. Techniques for marketing and promotion compete in ingenuity. Capitalism is certainly benefiting, but the demands of bicycle users as regards the organization of work, education and leisure time are such that people now wonder whether the generalized use of bicycles will ultimately open a third political path, one which, situated between liberalism and socialism, is concerned above all with the happiness of individuals. International conferences are being held to study the question. The most recent ones, at the university hub of Aubervilliers, France (‘The Bicycle and the End of Ideologies’ in 2036, and ‘The Bicycle or the Death of God’ in 2037), had a worldwide impact. Finally, these handful of successful initiatives have enabled us to realize that the generic

human (the human being, man or woman, young or old) and his new machine are now as one. The most recent initiative is also the most amazing, and images of it remain forever engraved in memories: ever since the first human pedalled on Mars in front of nine billion Earthlings, something has changed in the history of the planet and in the consciousness of humankind.

Back on Earth

In lingering in utopia, we risk falling from above. And so I will conclude with the above evocation of pedalling in a state of weightlessness. However, we believe now more than ever before that we know weightlessness, or that we know how to recognize it. Images from the world today revive the dream of it when they offer the sight of oversized aeroplanes taking off with several hundred passengers on board; rockets on Cape Canaveral taking off majestically; sparkling megalopolises on our television screens flown over at night by an invisible helicopter; the planet observed by satellites or by fictional characters such as Batman or Spider-Man, whom all the cinematic special effects propel into the four corners of the universe. If these images fascinate us, it is because they illustrate and awaken our desire to escape the heaviness of the everyday. There is no doubt that when they ride a bike people satisfy something of that desire for fluidity, lightness, I

was going to say liquidity – that desire which is also expressed in the words they use to talk about the new technology (they ‘surf’ or ‘navigate’ the Internet). ‘Rivers are paths that move,’ Pascal wrote. It is conceivable, inversely, that people have wanted to transform paths into rivers. Moreover, Pascal, it is said, invented the wheelbarrow. Without any other help than the increased strength of one’s body, the bicycle in a certain sense enables us to achieve that ideal of easy mobility. The cyclist’s dream is to see him or herself on land as the fish is in water or the bird is in the sky, even with the acknowledged constraints of space.

The true advantage of cycling, as opposed to the perhaps overly seductive illusion above, is indeed that it imposes on us a sharper awareness of space, as well as of time. We see this today in Paris where Vélib’ bikes pile up at docking stations located at the bottom of hills. The little vans used to replenish empty stations thus function as ski-lifts that enable the lazier riders to indulge in the delights of a heady descent, free-wheeling whenever they want. But even

these energy ‘freeloaders’ are learning in their own way about real space and terrain. If they refuse to ride up the steep rue Saint-Jacques or rue des Martyrs, it is not always out of choice or pure sloth; it is sometimes because of their age or because they are out of shape, and they are aware that they need to work on those weaknesses insofar as they can. They might try again at a later date, after dieting and exercising. The most marvellous quality of the bicycle is that it functions quietly as a friendly biological reminder, just as it requires minimal vigilance by all those who ride.

ANY TENDENCY TOWARDS a passive lifestyle, which for many individuals is strengthened by their connection to various types of media, vanishes as soon as they get on a bike. They assume responsibility for themselves and immediately recognize that responsibility. They become simultaneously aware of the place in which they find themselves, the space in which they can travel in every direction, and of the routes that take them away or bring them home.

When we also take into account the fact that riding a bicycle in general brings back a rider's childhood memories, and they are thereby inspired to reflect on the continuity of their life, we may conclude that the experience of riding a bike is a fundamental existential feat: I pedal, therefore I am.

The current success of the bicycle, notably among young people, is above all revealing. It is like a symptom. Indeed, what escapes us today, in this world of images and media messages, is mainly the principle of reality. We blithely pretend we exist by expressing our opinions far and wide, shaped as they must be by the ambient milieu. We express them to our neighbours when we have them, on the Internet if we know how to navigate it, on TV if we are selected to express ourselves there, or in polls if we are questioned, and even if we aren't, since for the most part polls tell us what we think. The current popularity of bicycles probably comes in part out of that opinion phenomenon. But as soon as we're on the saddle, things change and we find ourselves, we take ourselves in hand. Our personal history

takes care of us. The external world is imposed on us concretely in its most physical dimensions. It resists us and forces us to make an effort of will, but at the same time it offers itself to us as a space of intimate freedom and personal initiative, as a *poetic* space, in the full and primary sense of the word.

Children, more so than adults, are naturally philosophical and are constantly wondering. They are not yet *used to*, and the spectacle of inert things surprises them as much as do various forms of biological life. At the same time, children behave as poets, they play, they invent stories. But unlike the adolescent who risks giving in to his fantasies and diurnal dreams, leading him to develop neuroses, as Freud reminds us in his article 'Creative Writers and Day-dreaming', children know how to keep things in perspective and distinguish their play world from reality. Riding a bike in a way gives us back our child's soul and restores both the ability to play and an awareness of the real. It is thus similar to a sort of *refresher* (like a booster vaccination), but also to *continuing education* for learning again about freedom

and clarity, and as a result, perhaps, about something that resembles happiness.

Just the fact that riding a bike renders conceivable the dream of a utopian world in which life's pleasures would be everyone's priority, a world that would ensure respect for all, gives us reason to hope. A return to utopia, a return to what is real – they are the same. Get on your bike to improve everyone's life! Cycling is a humanism.

