

Bicycle Messengers and Fast Capitalism: An Old School Solution to the Needs of Techno-Capitalism

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The concept of accelerated capitalism, for most, implies an abstract theoretical proposition: under various names (fast capitalism, late capitalism, hyper capitalism, or post-Fordism) the turnover rate, the recouping of profits, technology adoption, and information exchange all proceed at an increased and increasing speed. While this phenomenon is well established in many parts of the world, developing nations and regions may exhibit uneven tendencies. What is not always recognized, however, is the uneven development within the so-called advanced economies. Social change is rarely a unilinear process, and technology within fast capitalism is no different. Bicycle messengers employ a decidedly nineteenth century technology to solve some of the most basic problems of capitalism: how to get bits of information from one location to another as fast as possible.

How do they do it? Why do they do it? By weaving in and out of street lanes, hopping curbs, using sidewalks, and passing the cars, cabs, and buses caught in the daily pulse of traffic, bike messengers use a small slice of the street to great effect. Carrying packages across town in the margins of the streets, though important to capitalism, nonetheless leaves bike messengers as a marginalized economic group. These riders, though they often desire to stand outside of mainstream capitalist society, end up reproducing the system: messengers support capitalism and representational government by delivering packages-for payment-faster than auto or truck delivery. When traffic gets bad in the city, especially when gridlock approaches, this marginal space becomes a niche for bicycle couriers. [1]

Why do they do it? To the casual observer, messengers may seem like lunatics on wheels. They are often represented in the media and the broader culture as the antihero of the urban jungle: the dirty, smelly recurring figures in movies and commercials that symbolize the dark underside and accelerated pace of the city. If messengers ride like lunatics they do so largely because they have to: Ironically enough, the structure of the delivery industry marginalizes the messengers with low pay, slight job security, and almost never any health insurance or other benefits.

Bicycle messengers are both marginal and liminal in many respects: they are liminal in the sense that they are somewhere in between cars and pedestrians; they are physically marginal in the space of the city; and they are further marginalized in and by the economic system. Yet this liminality and marginalization is what binds this unique community together: through rituals of working, racing, and partying messengers build and rebuild their community, in many cases taking pride in and attempting to defend their marginality (Kidder 2005).

The ubiquitous use of technology invented in the nineteenth century (the bicycle) to carry information that could otherwise be transferred in micromoments via the (increasingly wireless) information network seems counterintuitive. Yet as Jackson Lears (1981) has shown, ideas have experienced both progress and setbacks, while the adoption, diffusion, and rejection of technology have marked many of the transitions from one era to another. Antimodernism, Lears argued, reared its ugly head in the very moments of achieving what James Scott (1998) has called “high modernism.” The civilization process, as Elias ([1939] 1982) has shown (and in interesting ways Foucault [1980] also intimates), contains moments of backsliding and chaotic counter movements. The fact that a guy on a bike can get something across the downtown core faster than any alternatives shows that some sectors of fast capitalism must still rely on decidedly “slow” technologies.

The Structure of Messenger Work in the Age of Technocapitalism

Labor, in the classic nineteenth-century analysis of capitalism, works on a wage rate under the supervision of the capitalist. The difference between the amount paid to the laborer and the amount of value produced by the laborer is the amount of profit realized. Marx argued that technology would be adopted if it helped reduce labor costs, improved turnover time, or otherwise conferred a special advantage to the producer. This process contributed to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and thus to the eventual eruption of the crisis that is inherently embedded in the system (Marx [1867] 1967). The rapid adoption of new technology has characterized capitalism from the beginning, but in late capitalism, this pace has accelerated, perhaps beyond even Marx's prescient imaginings. The technology of the internet, where I google-up Wikipedia answers for vaguely phrased questions, the laptop that I write on, the email, cell phone, and fax communications with the editor, friends, the boss, family...all of these technologies that we accept into our lives so quickly and come to rely on so heavily have not managed to displace some fundamental needs. Handwritten signatures on original hard copy documents remain a legal requirement. Printed copies passed hand to hand are still the standard in many industries. Blueprints and graphic designs are often too large to be processed via information technology-and too precious to trust to the post. In order to handle these antitechnological remnants, the delivery industry remains vibrant.

Absent technological innovations, in some ways not much about capitalism has fundamentally changed in the late term-after all, labor power is still exploited for the profit of the owner and without the extension of the credit industry, crisis may have erupted much sooner. But not much has changed in the delivery business. Bike messengers are classic service industry workers: they pick up a package, transport it across town, and deliver it within a certain time frame. For this, clients pay a price. Some amount of this is paid to the delivery person with the rest going to overhead, advertising, and to support middle management and the profits of the company. Bike messengers are generally paid on a piece-rate system-either per package or by distance. Thus, the faster the courier rides, the more she is paid. Thus, classic incentive structures act to encourage the worker to perform her tasks as fast as possible. The company still enjoys the fruits of the cyclist's labor, and the structure of the occupation assists in the perpetuation of the capitalist system through the efficient transferring of information across town (Riley 2000; Cully 2001). As Lynn Breedlove (2002) put it in her semi-fictional account of messengering in San Francisco:

You take everything in, you don't miss nothing, the whole street and things coming at you from around corners as you round corners, and you can see things before they appear to the non-messenger eye, you can see through buildings, you can look down a cross street before you even get to it, half prophesy, half feel, half hear the way's clear. You have to if you want to survive and deliver the package on time.

The organization of work in the short-distance delivery industry marginalizes couriers beyond the standard exploitative relationship of owner to worker. In typical fashion for a capitalist system, it is those who actually get the work done-those most crucial for the process-who undertake the greatest risk but receive the least reward. The pay is low, the danger is high, and job security and health care are nearly nonexistent. But couriers continue to ride, and ride as fast as they can. Since messengers are paid on a piece rate the more quickly they deliver each single piece (or "tag"), the more packages they can carry in a day, and the more cash they ride home with each week. This is encouraged and even required by the dispatchers, the delivery companies, and the clients themselves: if a tag is not delivered promptly, or if an especially quick delivery (a "rush" or a "hot shot") doesn't arrive across town in the promised time frame (sometimes ten minutes or less) then the courier may not be paid for her work at all.

Speedy package delivery is entirely the point of the industry. Messenger culture has plenty of splash, class, and panache, but the fundamental reason for being is to move materials from one place to another. Individual messengers are connected via radio or cell phone to a central dispatcher. Clients call in pickup/delivery requests to the dispatcher who writes up a tag and relays the information to a messenger, who writes down the info on a manifest sheet. The messenger goes to the pickup location, notes the time and place of pick up and the delivery address, and then proceeds to the delivery location, getting the manifest sheet signed at the drop-off point as proof of delivery. The messenger is paid for the number of deliveries each day (with rushes or long distance runs sometimes paid more, depending on the structure of the particular firm). Just like the typical cab driver, a messenger is thus dependent on the dispatcher for assigning the choice runs-much grumbling is heard about inequities perpetuated by dispatchers who sometimes favor a particular messenger (or gender, or race, or is biased against neophytes). One messenger eventually quit due to these aspects of the industry, saying "the number one thing that really made me start to hate

the job was sexual harassment and sexual discrimination.”

The structure of this system guarantees that the faster a rider is, the more money she will get paid (assuming she is favored by the dispatcher!). This is why a premium is put on speed, agility, and creative approaches to beating the traffic. Dispatchers and managers tend to “look the other way” when it comes to such creativity, as it generally involves illegality. Messengers will run red lights and stop signs, weave in and out of lanes of traffic, use the sidewalk, median strips, and even ride into oncoming traffic or the wrong way down a one-way street in order to get a package to a client just a little bit faster. Such risky behavior is required by the structure of the system, and is tacitly encouraged by the dispatchers and clients. Again, according to Breedlove (2002):

The question is not, is the light red, but can I make it across this intersection alive. You estimate the number of seconds it takes Car Driver’s brain to register that his light is green, plus the second it takes him to put his foot on the gas and move into your lane, that’s how much time you have to run the light.

Now peds [pedestrians] are a different story, as they pose less of a threat to your physical safety, but they can slow you down and fuck you up with legal shit, so you want to miss hitting them. You keep stoking, weave here, cut there, thread the needle right through the middle of them. If you slow down, they just take over and you have to stop, and a messenger can’t be stopping for a lowly ped. When that little green man lights up for peds to go, they go, and they don’t care about nothing but going, not you, not cars, not nothing, they just march right at each other like ants. You got to speed up when your light turns red, and scream, because only a bike messenger yelling NO BRAKES and barreling at them at high speeds will stop them, see.

Though this risk is not necessarily highly remunerated, it is a point of pride for many messengers just as risk-taking behaviors are differently valued in many dangerous (and typically masculine) professions (Lyng 1990; Lois 2003).

The reputation as antihero is well earned. Messengers live a lifestyle well outside the mainstream. They are at once professionals who help to keep the wheels of capitalism greased, and are also individuals who resent “the system” and often talk of “ending the oilgarchy,” through a revolution that, paraphrasing Gil Scott-Heron, “will not be motorized.” Couriers are jokingly said to exist solely on beer, bong-hits, and pizza, and though this is clearly an exaggeration, during one discussion amongst messengers regarding how best to fuel the body for a long day’s ride, many couriers suggested peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, protein bars, tofu, or a big steak. One courier responded:

Don’t forget beer! Readily available carbohydrates, fiber, protein, calcium, potassium, phosphorus and vitamins B, B2, and B6. No cholesterol or fat. Plus it’s cheap and portable, for when you don’t have time for lunch.

While the numerous nutritional claims made on behalf of beer may be disputed, this messenger certainly represents the stereotypical beer-swilling cycle courier.

Such conceptions-celebrated by some messengers, abhorred by others-are used to damn the entire community by many in the media and the larger society. National Public Radio’s commentator Aaron Freeman [2] suggests that:

Reckless, testosterone-engorged bike messengers are agents not merely of business communication but Satan. They frighten our pedestrians and annoy our drivers.

And a UK poll commissioned by Horlicks [3] (a brand of hot milk drinks, a subsidiary of GlaxoSmithKline) found that bicycle couriers are number 3 on a UK list of the least liked workers (below traffic wardens and bouncers, above telephone sales representatives and politicians).

Messengers see themselves as many things, including all of the stereotypes above. Perhaps the most common view is expressed by one messenger from Germany:

In my opinion bike messengers neither are heroes, nor asphalt cowboys or whatever they are described as. This does not mean, that this job is no fun and it does not push your adrenalin, but in the first place it is a service and it is sport.

Messengers are labeled as hero, anti-hero, lunatic, and athlete. They are liminal characters that move in between labels and personify a shifting terrain of meaning.

Bicycle messengers are neither drivers nor pedestrians-the two main groups considered by officials in designing streets and passing traffic laws. Instead, cyclists are liminal-they are somewhere in between. Though they can often deliver a package faster than an auto, there are clear advantages of speed, acceleration, and weight in a car. Yet cyclists have the same advantages over pedestrians. This is the uneasy unity that messengers represent on so many levels: “This coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the particular unity of

the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both” (Turner 1967:99).

According to Turner (1967), the characteristics of liminal groups extend to ideas of tolerance and an emphasis on nonstructure. As Turner points out, they are often a “community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions. This comradeship transcends distinctions of rank, age, kinship position, and, in some kinds of cultic groups, even sex” (1967:100). Bicycle messengers often take pride at the tolerance and antistructure that their community possesses. Those who are attracted to messengering as a profession generally express as an ideal the non-hierarchical organization (such as alleycats, described below), and sometimes bristle at the direct orders that come from the more authoritarian dispatchers, police on the street, and sometimes even from one another.

Messengers also blur the boundaries between work and play, similar to Turner’s (1982) discussion of the seriousness of human play (pp. 30-39). The bike is, in western cultures, a symbol of youthful playfulness. It is not something that grown men and women use for work—except perhaps as an athletic tool in sport cycling. But bicycle messengers take the child’s toy and apply it—well modified—to gainful employment.

While Turner’s ideas on liminality are primarily regarding a temporally-based cultural transition—from boyhood to manhood, from religious novice to the initiated—it is very much a spatially-defined period. As with the Australian aborigine on walkabout, the liminal subject must often physically ostracize themselves, survive, and return to the spatial confines and comforts of the tribe. The overlap between spatial and temporal transitions, boundaries, and processes is a well-defined area of study by many geographers, foremost, perhaps, is David Harvey. The bicycle messenger, as a liminal subject, is simultaneously a temporal and spatial one—a marginal being as well as a liminal one, effected by political, economic, cultural, and historical factors (Gilbert and Wehr 2003). The many structural forces combine through contingent and sequential circumstances to define the landscape of the city. Cityspace, what the bicycle messenger navigates daily, has been built layer-by-layer in space, and moment-by-moment over time.

Professionalism, Risk, and Gettin’ Paid

Though messengers are often assumed to be employees of a delivery company, this status is actually quite unstable. Most messengers are categorized as “Independent Contractors” (ICs) who are paid per delivery with no fixed contract. They can show up for work one day and skip the next (though this behavior generally earns a bad reputation). Couriers often can work their own schedule: half a day or the full day, this week or that week, taking a delivery offered by the dispatcher or not. They generally have to provide their own bike, their own bag, their own helmet (or not, as is often the case), and sometimes their own insurance and bonding. This set up, while having significant disadvantages to the couriers, is accepted and even embraced by many couriers due to the value of having no fixed hours: This allows the hard-drinking lifestyle that many couriers indulge in. Other couriers decry IC status as akin to indentured labor: because of this status there is no job security, no health care or other benefits, and no protection provided to other delivery professionals, such as bonding and insurance and perceived professionalism. As one courier put it:

well, I was told at this one building that I had to leave my bag. in a wooden box. on the dock. which was open, so basically they were telling me I had to leave my bag. unattended. in the alley. fedex, ups, any old yahoo walking-in in a suit could be carrying any manner of package or luggage and they don’t get so much as a second glance.

Because of the perception of messengers as unprofessional or worse—a perception that is produced and reproduced through IC status—the messenger is forced to the economic margins of a capitalist system.

But who is forcing whom? While IC status relieves messengers of many of the protections that other workers enjoy, the freedom and marginality is also clearly relished by many riders. Life in the margin of the streets is dangerous, and many messengers see themselves as opposed to several different enemies: commuters, cops, cabs, and busses. Pedestrians (as above) are simply obstacles. But other professionals of the street may exhibit outright malice towards bike messengers. How some riders deal with this is less than professional—one’s life is, after all, potentially at stake. One messenger expressed typical outrage at how drivers might harass him, suggesting that an appropriate response would be to swing the steel U-shaped lock that most messengers carry in their back pockets for easy access:

I don’t recall askin’ for the cops to fuck with me or anybody else but that’s the way things are and as long as I have to use my u-lock or some language that may offend to get yours or anybody else’s attention who is endangering my life then that’s what I’ll do. do I want or like havin’ to yell to avoid being hit every day? no but I do not want to die.

Others chafe at such suggestions, asking instead that riders be more professional and clear-headed in their interactions with others on the street:

Spitting in someone's face or taking off their rear view with your lock feels REALLY good the split second you do it but keep in mind, the next time this motorist has a incident with a cyclist/messenger, they will remember "the last time" and said cyclist may not be fortunate enough to get away from his/her assailant. Most cities with a messenger community want people to look at them as professionals. When people witness lock-swinging or spitting etc. it only reenforces the negative stereotype of the Bicycle Messenger. Do yourself and others a favor and don't give Joe Public any more fuel for their already twisted idea of what Bicycle Messengers are about.

There is a dynamic interaction at play between independence and professionalism, with a clear understanding of image portrayal: some messengers see their work as a day-to-day brush with death while others see it as a chance to cultivate an image. Still others note that the whole point is not to swing a lock or get in someone's face, but instead:

being a messenger is not about dodging things, or swearing at cops or people who are in your way, it's about being invisible, so you don't HAVE to dodge and swear, you're not the only one that's in a rush.

There is an interesting logic of control at work here. As Braverman (1974) argued, management requires that workers give up control of the workplace and the work process (p. 58). But IC status both gives messengers flexibility while also forcing them to relinquish a certain amount of control. Messengers cannot be micromanaged as assembly-line workers may be. When your office is the street, and your job involves bending the vehicle code, independence is important. Similar to Knights and Willmott's (1989) argument against dualism in classical labor process theory, the work of bike messengers shows that management versus labor, control versus freedom, and professionalism versus independence are false dichotomies.

But unlike many groups forced to compete for scarce resources at the economic margins, messengers are not fierce individualists. Though their work is often done alone in traffic and their economic and spatial marginalization contributes to individualistic orientations, couriers also organize together to address the negative aspects of the industry. Bicycle Messenger Associations (BMAs) have been organized in most major U.S. cities, along with national BMAs and an International Bicycle Messenger Association. Several cities have successfully established labor unions, and affiliation drives are underway in several more locations. These associations act together with or in the place of a labor union to address the typical labor concerns of hours, wages, and working conditions. The BMAs and unions have also taken on the media's inaccurate portrayal of messengers by writing letters to local papers and have engaged in politics on behalf of messenger issues by similarly writing to administrators complaining about unsafe conditions. One example followed the recent death of Sebastian Lukomski in London on 23 February 2004. Seb was the seventh documented messenger to be run over by a Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV), a type of truck that weighs more than 7.5 metric tons. Bill Chidley, the Chair of the London BMA wrote to the Mayor of London and the various political parties with representation in the City. While the city officials and party representatives have taken the LBMA seriously, little actual change has taken place [4].

Lack of health care is a particularly important issue for many messengers (primarily in the United States as Canadian and many European messengers have a nationalized health care system to rely on). Due to IC status, any accident that happens "on the job" actually has few repercussions for the delivery company in terms of worker's compensation claims. Many messengers avoid any such claims (whether due to ignorance or IC status), and instead get health care where they can (which usually means either a county hospital or none at all). One innovative solution to this is the Bicycle Messenger Emergency Fund (BMEF), which was started by an enterprising and civic-minded former messenger. In the traditional mould of the nineteenth-century benevolent association, the BMEF raises funds from informal charity races and individual messenger donations and distributes the funds to injured uninsured couriers.

Such community endeavors show the commitment of messengers to their colleagues. Cooperation in the face of adversity is certainly nothing new, but given the effects of a broader culture that teaches fierce individualism and within a structure that encourages competition, it is amazing to see the camaraderie and good will on the streets. As one messenger glowingly recalled:

When I first became a messenger I was inspired by the spirit and generosity of messengers. My first day on the job, I got a flat. I didn't have a patch kit or pump and at least 3 messengers stopped to offer help to fix it. It was a completely different world. Strange couriers waved hello, and some offered advice and some concern. It didn't make sense in today's world. Most

people seemed to actually care about each other. I felt like I was part of something that could teach the rest of the world a few lessons.

How is such community maintained, reproduced, and transformed?

Alleycat Races / Community Matters

There is a high degree of overlap between bike messengers and the punk rock community. Many messenger events are marked with a punk music show, and many of the distinctive stylistic markers are shared between the two groups. Both groups also share some overlap in the political stance of anarchic tendencies. Why this affinity? Messengering offers an outside job: free from the offices, they are free to have their own style and to be as different and strange as they want to be. Messengers can be society's doppelganger or auslander: the "other" wandering the streets, both seen and unseen, in and out of the system, flying at lethal speeds, thriving on danger and loving the rush but hating the war of internal combustion engines versus human-powered vehicles. Its "do it yourself" [DIY]: simple and outside the system.

Yet just like punk rock, it is inside the system to some extent: punk uses the same three chords as any pop song—though faster and noisier and with amplifier feedback and screaming lyrics. And it is also beyond the system, a community on its own that takes care of its own, a place where you can be what you are and not be judged for it. It is a place where bigotry, homophobia, sexism are both challenged, subverted, and perhaps almost as often, reproduced. Punk rock and bicycle messengering have an affinity because they are both communities at the margin of the system. As one messenger put it:

This is the only non co-opted, dynamic, vibrant punk rock subculture left. They tried to co-opt it but we fuckin' resisted.

While this resistance is clear and strong, it is not necessarily unidirectional or monolithic. Messenger style—the fixed gear bicycle, the bag, the clothing, the outlaw attitude and the aggressive riding style has been much copied, which could be argued is a form of cooptation. In fact, at messenger races there is a new entry category created just for these copycat riders, half-messenger and half-poser, these folks are sometimes called "posenger." But while some messengers strongly resist any form of selling out, others have actively pursued cooptation. The 2005 Cycle Messenger World Championships (CMWC) was sponsored in part by the athletic gear manufacturer Puma, who also sponsors a team of messenger-racers. They get clothes, bikes, and travel money from race to race. While some view this as clearly selling out, others see it in the starkest of terms:

Everyone else is getting' paid. Why shouldn't we get paid too? [One Puma racer] has a family to support, no health care, no pension. Why shouldn't he get paid?

Sponsorship, free merchandise, and getting paid are all stops in the vast grey area between the judgments of "authentic" and "sell out." But what marks this community much more than the debates over whether a major clothing manufacturer should sponsor a team of messengers in order to give the corporate brand "street" credibility is the emphasis on how much community matters and is celebrated. In December of 2002, I attended the North American Cycle Courier Championships (NACCC) in Houston, Texas. Such a race is a massive undertaking: where a local event may draw up to 30 riders, the championship races often draw hundreds or even thousands riders. This is a three-day party, with lots of beer, lots of riding, and lots of live music—generally punk rock. One courier told me that in the Cycle Messenger World Championships (CMWC) and the NACCC "the final C should really stand for celebration." In fact, there are only modest rules governing the race, one of which in the NACCC is that riders must be "at least mildly sober."

Racing, of course, is not just about winning meager pots of cash at the end. In fact, most races offer the winner only bragging rights. But they do offer the space for community celebration. They are moments of Durkheimian collective effervescence where competition, adrenaline, camaraderie, and controlled substances mix freely.

An "alleycat" race is the other end of the spectrum from the CMWC and regional championships like the North American Cycle Courier Championship (NACCC). They are loosely organized, relatively informal, not sponsored, and illegal. I participated in many in my days as a messenger, but one in the northern Midwest was particularly memorable. It was a cold and wet February morning and we had to drive an hour to where the race was being

held. We rolled into the messenger shop at 7:30 for the 8 A.M. race. The shop is really not much more than an old warehouse with a cracked cement floor and beer cans and cigarette butts covering all available surfaces: tables, chairs, window ledges, and the floor. A few lockers lean precariously against one wall and there is an office in a corner with a disheveled desk, two phones, and an outdated computer. There is a vile-looking and worse smelling bathroom containing more beer cans than toilet supplies. But mostly there are bikes and bike racks everywhere. Chaos rules: there is no rhyme or reason. The bikes are jammed into the racks that are jammed into the shop that is shoehorned between buildings at the end of an alley. But it is downtown and the rent is cheap. Such is the office of a local courier company that is putting on the alleycat race. We signed in and joined the crowd comparing bikes and swapping stories while several messengers had a foamy breakfast of Miller Genuine Draft.

A crowd formed around the tricksters as they showed off in the alley outside. They did their stuff-having fun and warming up. One guy performed no-handed skids on his fixed-gear track bike. [5] Another rode his track bike backwards in easy figure eights. Another stood up on the top tube of his bicycle, surfing the parking lot on his trusty steed. Then we mobilized for the start line a couple miles away in the industrial section south of the city, right on the water.

An alleycat is not usually called a race because it is an illegal, underground venture. Calling it a race implies sponsors, insurance, and prizes—none of which are generally involved. Modest entry fees are collected, pooled, and given to the high finishers—the money usually ends up buying beer for all the participants at the end of the race. The race itself can take many different forms, but all mimic the trials of a messenger's workday. The most basic is a list of delivery addresses made up by the organizers, which the riders must visit (sometimes in a specific order, other times not). In other races the rider may have to perform a feat (doing push ups or hopping over barricades while carrying the bicycle are popular). The winner is the first rider to complete all of the tasks and visit all of the addresses. The race offers a time and place for messengers to gather together and recreate their community, as well as an opportunity for good-natured competition. In the continental championships (Europe and North America) and in the Cycle Messenger World Championships (CMWC) the victor wins very little more than a new messenger bag and bragging rights for the next year, but these are formal, sponsored events. At an alleycat you also may win bragging rights, but the course is on the city street and you must deal with live traffic, and so is a more test of a messenger's ability.

Alleycat races are a place where messengers can congregate and reaffirm their status as members of a community who have similarities, differences, but one thing in common: cycling in the city. Some may drink, smoke, and ride like lunatics. Others are straightedge professionals in training for spring races. Still others are simply trying to make ends meet. Alleycat races are a place to produce and reproduce their solidarity with one another, as well as their antipathy towards autos. With 20 or 30 cyclists on the road, cars lose their advantage. In a group that large, cyclists can dominate the road and take back the pavement.

After a map was passed around with the delivery locations listed on it, an organizer at the head of the group of 20 cyclists dropped a U-lock to simulate a starting gun, and we were off. We grabbed our bikes from where they were leaning against a fence, and the first guy to his bike managed to knock everyone else's down (on purpose?). He sprang into first place while we extricated our bikes from the ensuing melee and tried to chase him down. The track riders are almost always the fastest, and sure enough after a four block all-out sprint I found myself with two fixie riders trailing the first place rider ahead of us by a block. Since I had no knowledge of the city, I introduced myself to the two racers next to me. One was from a city farther north, and the other was, happily, a local. I suggested that we could compete against one another and all lose, or we could work together and try to catch the leader. The local could tell us where to go, and all three of us would cooperate on pulling[6].

We worked together but the other rider was almost immediately out of sight. He took a left where we took a right and we did the deliveries in a different order. At each stop we would see other racers doing the drops and moving on, all of them choosing their own routes through the city. We crossed cobblestone streets that, when wet, made turns impossible, and riding in a straight line difficult. The city is built at the meeting place of two rivers, and the racecourse crossed multiple metal bridges known affectionately amongst the local messengers as "cheese graters." They get extremely slick when wet, and if you go down on them, they'll gouge at you like a massive cheese grater.

After riding through 12 deliveries in about 45 minutes and covering 20 miles worth of city streets, we finally came to the last address, listed on my manifest sheet simply as "the garage." Not knowing anything about it, I followed our local and around a wet turn he suddenly took off in an all-out sprint. Our companion had tired long ago and it was down to the local and me. He raced, I raced, and we came down the street next to each other at breakneck speeds—easily 30 miles per hour. All of my focus was on the sprint: making sure not to hit the rider six inches to my left, avoiding a slick manhole cover, jumping around an opening car door, when all of a sudden I caught the sign's

image in the corner of my eye: blue neon advertised a local bar called The Garage. I was between the other rider and the curb when my companion headed toward a driveway near the bar's entryway-I did the same, half to avoid him and half to beat him to the finish. We both went into a skid but he stopped more quickly than I and we both went down, grinding to a halt on the sidewalk in a jumbled mess. Jumping up, we presented our manifest sheets to the race official at the same moment and were proclaimed a tie...for second place. The other local who took off a block in front of us at the start of the race had beaten us by about a minute.

Not all alleycats are like this, but all are serious on some level. One alleycat is famed for its serious attempt at a lack of seriousness. It is held in late January in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It can be as much as 30 degrees below zero, with plenty of snow and ice, and as if this weren't enough, each delivery requires you to drink alcohol. Since it is always run on the same day as the famous football game, they call it The Stuporbowl.

Both punk rock and messenger communities strive to be places where bigotry, homophobia, and sexism are not tolerated, are challenged outright, and sometimes subverted. This is not to say that sexism, homophobia, and bigotry do not exist. There are few black couriers and few women. One ten-year veteran, a woman who many look up to for her hard work, leadership, and skill, recently quit as a courier. Her reasons were her own, but she had this to say, as quoted above:

After about my 6th or 7th year the things that bugged me the job were starting to crowd out the things that I loved about it. The number one thing that really made me start to hate the job was sexual harassment and sexual discrimination.

This particular courier has won many races, sometimes taking both the first female category as well as the first overall. Though there are strong and skillful female couriers and there are woman-owned courier companies, gender bias has been a constant struggle in this testosterone-charged community. Race organizers now strive to give equal prizes to male and female categories, but this was not always true. Overall, the profession (if you can call it such a formal endeavor) is one filled with young white men.

That messengers are predominantly white and male this does not, ipso facto, make it sexist. But there are such elements. For example, though many couriers make it a point to be inclusive in language and action, labels are not always politically correct. For example, many couriers ride track bikes, as described above. They are both honored by those who admire the skill needed to ride one, and vilified by those who believe that riding a bike without brakes at breakneck speeds in live traffic is just plain dumb. A compromise position, to ride a fixed gear bicycle with brakes mounted in case of emergency seems to get no respect from either side; such riders are branded a "bitch" or a "pussy." Just as with the larger society, efforts to break away from sexist language and customs founders on the rocks of hierarchy, power, and inertia. At base, punk rock and bicycle messengering have an affinity because they are both communities at the margin of the system, but both reflect significant aspects of the system that they rebel against.

One group that showed up to the NACCC takes the identity of bike punks to the extreme: they throw full cans beer at each one another, at nearby couriers, and even at racers on the course. These are athletes who smoke, drink, and do drugs while dressed in clothes reminiscent of the Hell's Angels. Body piercings and tattoos abound. At one point they tossed their bikes into the bicycle version of a mosh pit, [7]spray-painting them and lighting them on fire. Laughing at the whole idea of the race, one courier yelled: "Budweiser is my sports drink of choice!" After an abysmal showing in the qualifying race, another said "maybe we should go into rehab so we can win some races."

The community of messengers, though filled with antagonistic individuals, professionals, anarchists, activists, and many other cyclists who are unable to be categorized, remains a community. As one messenger said, "we are part of the most amazing profession with such creative, alive people who work so hard for each other and their community." I can think of no better example of this than a group of Buddhist messengers in Japan who held a Critical Mass where they rode to a Shinto shrine and prayed for the safety of messengers around the world.

Conclusion: Old School Solutions to New School Capitalism

What enables a bike messenger to do his job so quickly is not just muscles and gears and creative (illegal) approaches to traffic; he also needs a radio or cell phone, a decidedly twenty-first century technology. How can nineteenth century technology co-exist with the latest wireless communications in a seamless version of fast capitalism? Processes of social change are clouded and crosscut with contingency, and history is a process of both continuity and change. As it is with bike messengers in the dawn of the twenty-first century, so it was with

modernist and antimodernist tendencies 100 years ago. Jackson Lears characterizes antimodernism as a search for medieval alternatives. It is “a longing for a regeneration at once physical, moral, and spiritual” (1981:xii). As such, antimodernism is partially backwards looking. Yet Lears also identifies Theodore Roosevelt’s “cult of the strenuous life” as a manifestation of antimodernism. How can the famously “progressive” president be both progressive and antimodern (1981:xii)? The answer, for Lears, is that the “antimodern sentiment was unstable, ambivalent” (1981:xii). It represents the yearnings for that which is lost in the march of rationalization and demystification. Antimodernism is, in part, the carryover from times past, the continuity in history’s dialectic of change.

And so it is with bike messengers. In part due to the quirky traditional legal requirement of an original signature, and in part due to the geographic concentration of office space in the downtown core and the concomitant traffic, we see that sometimes the solution to the needs of accelerated capitalism is, in fact, nineteenth-century technology: a guy on a bike can get the package across town and into a client’s hands faster, cheaper, and more reliably than anything else.

Endnotes

1. The bulk of the data presented in this paper comes from a four year participant observation research program in which the author worked as a bicycle messenger and joined in the many different activities related to this business and the adjoining culture: messenger races, national, regional, and global gatherings, critical mass demonstrations, and the daily grind of delivering parcels by bicycle to destinations all over the city. The messenger’s voices that give weight to this study come from over 100 individual interviews and group conversations at gatherings of all sorts (races, parties, formal and informal rides), from an international electronic discussion list, from several book-length published accounts of messengering, and from other published sources such as newspapers and other periodicals. All grammatical errors, slang, obscenities, and other colorful material from the interviews have been left as-is for this paper.

2. National Public Radio’s All Things Considered, 3 May 2004 “Commentary: Bicycle Thieves’ Essential Role” (<http://www.npr.org/features/feature.php?wfId=1869196>)

3. Reported by Borkowski Press Centre: http://www.borkowski.co.uk/archives/press/2004_01.html. The poll was conducted “amongst a representative sample of 2,086 adults aged 16+.”

3. See <http://www.londonmessengers.org/hgv.html>

4. A track bike, also known as a fixed-gear bike, or a “fixie,” is a bicycle stripped down to its most basic and historic elements. The bike has a single gear with no freewheel (hence the name), without a rear gear cluster, no front or rear derailleur, and often no brakes. The front and rear chain rings are connected via a highly tensioned chain, thus, when pedaled forward the bike will go forward, if pedaled backwards, the bike will go

backwards. Those who ride without benefit of brakes simply apply reverse pressure on the pedals to slow down, or stand on the pedals to halt the rear wheel completely and skid to a stop. The reasons for riding such a contraption are myriad, and one is certainly style. But the bikes are also very light and thus very fast. Because the rider cannot coast, he or she is continually either accelerating or decelerating, so there is a continual dynamic balance between the bike and the road—hence there is more control. This type of bicycle was developed for racing in a velodrome, a special bicycle-racing track, hence the name “track bike.”

5. Pulling is a term for what the lead rider of a pace line does. The rider in the front of the line “pulls” the others by cutting any headwind, letting those in the rear rest. The spinning wheel also creates a draft effect that, when the riders are six inches or closer, gives an additional pull. It is commonly thought that such drafting techniques will save the rear riders perhaps 30% of their energy. Riders take turns in the front of the pace line.

6. A “mosh pit,” or simply “a pit,” is the term for an anarchic place on the dance floor at a punk rock concert where participants throw each other around, pushing, pulling, and hitting one another. (The term probably comes from the word mash, as in to mash potatoes. One, possibly apocryphal, story is that the ability to control someone by pulling their hair impelled punks to shave their heads, thus the popular skinhead look.) Slamming into one another in a mosh pit (hence the label “slam dancing”) may appear to an uninitiated observer as violent and chaotic. In fact, there are complex rules of behavior, both self-organized and self-enforced. Participants may indeed behave violently but rarely do people brutalize each other on purpose. In fact, one important rule is that if someone falls, others pick them up to keep them from being trampled.

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