

We're not blocking traffic, we are traffic

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The image problem

I love how many things are called 'bicycle'. I commute with a folding bike with tiny wheels and aero bars and a bouncy ride and twenty kilos of steel, the hipper messengers tool around on an eight kilos of glossed titanium, and yet they're both called bikes.

This is not just an aesthetically fun point, though the massive range of bike amuses me every time I change from riding the clown bike to riding a more typical bike. No, it's politically important, because for every type of bike, there are a dozen types of riders. As an about-town type and commuter, I want equal access, nice pavement, and police who care about bike thefts. Mountain bikers want the right to trail access. Weekend cyclists want long paved corridors like unused railways. Messengers just want to be left alone to bike. Yet the whole diverse bunch of them are grouped together as cyclists.

Meanwhile, all of these groups are swamped by another bicyclist subgroup: ten-year olds. For every economist who commutes to his consulting job on a bike, there are fifty kids out there tooling around who will be driving the day they turn the right age.

The Law vs the bikers

The law treats cyclists as an outsider group. Every Senator drives or rides in a car daily; few of them sit on a bike over the course of any given year. Getting a lawmaker to think seriously about bikes—which, after all, are mostly ridden by ten-year olds—is thus a virtually impossible task.

The typical bike law says something like 'bicyclists shall behave like automobiles', with a few exceptions about what bikes can't do, like go on freeways. This law is the legislative equivalent of plugging one's ears and yelling 'I don't know and I don't wanna think about it.' I mean, it's a nice baseline to start off from, but if you spend about ten seconds thinking about it, you realize that there are a whole lot of things that bikes can do that cars can't, and traffic flows more quickly and safely if bikers make use of them.

I'm hard-pressed to believe that anyone on a bike has ever followed the behave-like-a-car law as written—it'd be suicide. When you get to the line at a stoplight, for example, it makes an awful lot of sense to move forward to the light,

instead of hanging out at the curb in the middle of the pack. [This requires lane-splitting, which is illegal for motorcycles in many places, and therefore illegal for bicyclists under a behave-like-a-car regime]. In some parts of the world, there's a space set aside in front of the car-stopping line at major intersections for bikes to gather. I was once turning left in the proper behaving-like-an-automobile manner, via the left-turn lane, when a policeman stopped me and told me that bikes must turn left by crossing through the intersection, hanging out on the curb until the light changes, and then going straight in the new direction of travel. I don't know if this is actually Illinois law, and our kind policeman's motivation was clearly that I should get out of the way so the cars can pass faster, but he was thinking—he knew that bikes can do things cars can't, and that maybe behaving like a car isn't always the best rule for all involved.

I think that police and bicyclists on the street realize the details of bike mobility and are generally reasonable about it. But the law as written is an example of how little legislators want to spend time thinking about cyclists. I once heard the LA Metro Transit Authority's internal bike advocate solicit project ideas from a group of bikers. She clarified that we shouldn't ask about striping projects (wherein a street is repainted to have a bike lane) because they're too cheap to merit the overhead expense—but the Dobbins bikeway, expected to cost \$20 million, costs way too much, so forget that too. [The first item I could find for scale is a note that CalTrans's 1999-2000 budget included \$8 billion total and \$4 billion for capital outlay projects.] We left wondering exactly what sort of projects the bicycling advocate was willing to stand behind.

The people who drive for practical need far outnumber the people who drive for play, and so lawmakers take driving seriously; there are multitudes of people who play on their bikes, and therefore lawmakers and law enforcers are inclined to think of all people on bikes as merely playing in the street. Of course, there is a clear feedback mechanism here: if laws and funding are designed around bicycles as toys, then they make it difficult to use bikes for utilitarian transport. Even bike advocacy groups have this problem, since their most important goals are usually bike arteries in the dirty city, but their funding base is the mass of weekend riders.

No solution here; perhaps we need new words for transportation bicycles to distinguish them from play bicycles. Or perhaps we bicyclists could all agree to stop enjoying our commutes and start looking bored, businesslike and/or pissed off like most driving commuters do. But until we convince the world that bicycling is boring, we won't get the funding and other support that we need.