

1. Projects



Bicycle Workshops: places to build autonomy and lifestyles?

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Over the past decade, bicycle self-repair workshops have been growing throughout France. These collectives, which are still a recent phenomenon, have so far been hardly studied, despite being places of socialization to mobility, in a context where people are pressured to change behaviors (especially in terms of mobility) to cope with environmental issues. Beyond enabling people to be more independent by teaching them how to repair their own bicycle, do these workshops bring about a more global change in their participants' lifestyles and views of society? Are they an opportunity to transition to more sustainable lifestyles?

Research participants

- Alexandre Rigal

Over the past ten years in France, cycling workshops have multiplied across the country. These collectives promote cycling by reusing unused bicycles and teaching people how to repair them. Since 2008, these collectives have become part of a national network called "L'Heureux Cyclage," which literally means "Happy Cycling" but is also a play on words, as it is homonymous to "le recyclage" which means recycling. Its website outlines the workshops' three founding principles

Notes

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* Sharing mechanical skills. The workshops are indeed places to learn about the mechanics and practice of cycling by sharing knowledge among members. They are cooperative and supportive places

that allow members to gain skills and thus increase their autonomy.

- Reusing bicycles and giving them a renewed value. The workshops' activity revolves around repairing unused bicycles and spare parts.
- Active promotion of cycling in the city. The workshops aim to give a renewed value to this mode of transport, especially in opposition to cars, and to grow the number of cyclists in cities by offering the possibility to acquire a bicycle and maintain it at low cost.

These workshops are rooted in the environmental and protest movements of the 1970s and their teachings are underpinned by various life ideals inspired by ecological, social or political values. Some workshops focus primarily on repairing and promoting bicycles; others also advocate for greener, less-motorized lifestyles, others focus on the emancipation of women, while other workshops defend a political project aimed at upholding left and far-left ideals.

THE CORE QUESTION

In today's society, lifestyles are shaped in a context of strong individualization and the waning influence of total institutions (convent, prison, asylum, etc.). People are also far more dependent, especially on everyday goods that are produced on an industrial scale, because of their intrinsic complexity and sometimes of their planned obsolescence, which entrap individuals into habits of heavy consumption. In this context, bicycle self-repair workshops are therefore worth studying because they aim to empower individuals by teaching them how to repair their bicycles and because they are alternative places of socialization. In this capacity, they might contribute to the emergence of alternative lifestyles.

The general question here, therefore, is whether beyond the primary purpose of strengthening autonomy through the learning of repair skills, these workshop lead to more global changes in the participants' lives, by changing their representations, affirming their gender identity, evolving their whole way of life, etc. There are also questions about the political significance of these collectives: are the workshops becoming focal points to nurture other values that are broader than the practice of cycling, and thus building elements of a social project even in workshops that aren't explicitly politically engaged?

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The first step in the research is therefore to propose a framework that allows us to think about the issue of lifestyle change within the broader context of societal transformations. To shed light on these transformations and understand the changes, Alexandre Rigal revisits the process of individualization that has gradually shaped our contemporary lifestyles over the last centuries and highlights its paradoxes. Sociology identifies two moments in this process of individualization.

The first individualization: the manufacture of autonomous generic individuals

A first process of individualization was born out of Christianization, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and/or the French Revolution. Its main feature was separating individuals from their original groups of belonging, in tandem with the rise of the modern state and the weakening of feudalism. With the Industrial Revolution, the division of labor and urbanization led to the multiplication of groups of belonging and the anonymization of individuals, who were therefore subjected to fewer normative constraints than when they lived within a stronger identity group. At the same time, we saw the emergence of individual rights, which became sources of action and decision-making. This new model was conveyed by social institutions such as schools, that became more widespread and lead to the manufacture of generic, autonomous and reflexive individuals with private lives. Individualization became the dominant norm.

The second individualization: the manufacture of singular individuals

After the Second World War, states and religious institutions were subject to widespread criticism and rejection, marking the beginning of the second individualization. It was based on the rejection of the core universal values of the first individualization and driven by a new interest for singularity and the different categories of minority views. This turning point was accompanied by the appearance of various experiments and alternative thought movements: neo-rural, hippies, feminism, homosexuals, etc. It was at this time that ecological activism appeared. These various experiments and protest movements strengthened the differentiation of individuals, who sought to further deepen and refine their singularity.

The limits of individualization

These processes of individualization present some paradoxes: while generalized individualization has become the norm, individuals have also lost some of their autonomy of action, with regards to the importance of the State's role in daily life on one hand, and in relation to industrialization and the many means and facilities it offers on the other.

This theoretical framework has thus shed light on the ways and modes through which these bicycle workshops participate (or not) in the transformation of lifestyles, beyond simply acquiring autonomy through skill-learning.

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question, Alexandre Rigal began by drawing up an overview of these places of collective learning, their influences and affiliations as well as the skills they teach, by exploring the websites of workshops that are part of the "Heureux Cyclage" network. This overview enabled him to identify different types of workshops and target two kinds, those focused on mechanical skills and those that are also places of political experimentation.

Two workshops were identified as being representative of this dichotomy, the "Pignon sur Rue" workshop in Ambilly and the "P'tit Vélo dans la tête" in Grenoble.

The "Pignon sur Rue" workshop, founded two years ago, has more than a thousand members, one temporary employee and one permanent employee who is also one of the founders. The workshop is really focused on the mechanics of bicycles and less on wider political goals, so as to not exclude any users. It is however part of the city's political and administrative fabric, in order to promote facilities and infrastructure for bicycles. The "P'tit Vélo dans la Tête" workshop is the oldest existing workshop in France, founded about 25 years ago. Run by volunteers, it has more than a thousand members. It organizes bike shows, "velorutions" and other activities that come from the cycling counterculture; "non-domination" is a core value.

Both workshops were the subject of an in-depth field survey, which was based on the description and detailed analysis of the workshop's location, the layout of the premises, the practices that take place in the workshops, and the teachings on offer. In addition to this analysis, forty semi-direct interviews were conducted with employees, volunteers, current and former members.

THE RESULTS

Bicycle self-repair workshops, a new player in bike-related socialization

The project

The workshops seek to increase “velonomy”: this term refers, on one the hand, to the idea of acquiring cycling skills, and on the other to the idea of being more autonomous, with the symbolic replacement of the prefix “auto” (reminiscent of cars) by “velo” (which means bicycle in French). Thus, they define the autonomy enabled by bicycles in opposition to the heteronomy of cars, which are a cumbersome means of transport, dependent on oil and traffic, etc. By allowing people to free themselves from these constraints, bicycles are a vector of autonomy and even of “self-emancipation.” The workshops thus define their project in opposition to cars, with the goal of diminishing their use and replacing them with bicycles. The names of workshops reflect this desire for change: “Place au Vélo” (Make way for bikes), “Change de Chaîne” (Change the channel/chain), “Osez l’veélo” (Dare to bike), etc. To promote this change, the workshops need to give bicycles a good image, and they do so by focusing on the efficiency of bicycles compared to cars.

But this efficiency, frequently attributed to technical objects, comes from industry. In other words, the analysis reveals that while cycling is part of the industrial world, people come to these workshops to feel the sense of empowerment that comes from being freed from the heteronomy caused by industrial objects – and especially cars, which have become an emblematic nemesis for them. However, these workshops are about an alternative industrial economy, one that is born out of the recycling of waste from the traditional industry: old bikes are repaired instead of being discarded and many spare parts recovered from unusable bicycles are reused for repair. Moreover, this alternative industrial economy offers the added possibility of reducing dependency by teaching people how to self-repair.

The organization of the workshops

These workshops showcase a desire for “self-empowerment” through a near-total absence of constraints: unformal ways of addressing each other, flexible opening hours, very open spatial organizations, an openness to wider society through bike recovery and events such as bike shows, etc.

In addition, the workshops offer many levers, i.e. possibilities for action on and thanks to an object. In addition to having hundreds of tools to repair bicycles, the workshops receive every kind of bicycle, from the oldest to the newest, from hiking bikes to exercise bikes, from foldable bikes to tandems and delivery bikes. This also serves to show the wide range of possibilities enabled by the use of bicycles. Finally, the workshops are set up as a welcoming public space that can be accessed free of charge; there are kitchens, bookcases, newspapers, etc. promoting discussion and knowledge sharing beyond the subject of bicycles. The bookcases are filled with books and newspapers discussing the values promoted by the workshops: non-domination, women’s emancipation, etc.

Individual changes in bicycle self-repair workshops

Bicycle self-repair workshops are thus ideal places to initiate or welcome lifestyle changes. Alexandre Rigal identifies three types of transformative trajectories that start or continue in bicycle self-repair workshops; three-quarters of the sample’s forty respondents followed one of these trajectories. For the remaining individuals, taking part in the workshop didn’t lead to any profound lifestyle change. The first type of change, which concerns nine respondents, is called Extension: cycling is integrated into a lifestyle composed of different practices that revolve around common, counter-cultural and left-wing values. An individual discovers a new practice - bicycle repair - which has some form of kinship with preestablished habits. For some respondents, the workshop is one among several other associations they attend, and here they consolidate their skills relating to bicycles, while others find in the workshop a way to unite scattered practices. For instance, one of the respondents reported that the workshop combines cycling, associative activism and environmental activism.

The second type of change is Polarization; it concerns eleven respondents. For them, cycling was just a habit, but it gradually became a passion that polarizes all other habits and monopolizes the individual’s time and desires. One of the respondent’s trajectory is a good example of this: after developing a fondness for cycling in university, he then became the founder of a bicycle self-repair workshop, took care of a bike facility on campus and started collecting old bikes. Repairing bicycles

has become a defining trait of his identity: he is regularly stopped in the street by people who ask him for tips on how to repair their bikes. His love for cycling has also become central to his identity, both in how he sees himself and how other people see him. Mastering bicycle mechanics feeds into his whole life: leisure, volunteering and salaried work. This is a characteristic found in all respondents whose lifestyle is being polarized.

The third type of change identified, which concerns nine respondents, is Conversion, which is a concept that comes from theological and philosophical vocabulary. It is a radical lifestyle transformation, which is first individual but then maintained within a group. This is the story, for instance, of a former car engineer who decided to quit a lifestyle and job that he found absurd in order to go travelling on his bicycle, which led to him being recruited in a self-repair workshop. For respondents with this type of transformational journey, the new lifestyle is most often a way of correcting negative experiences in their previous professional life (workplace stress, a lack of meaning in the job), which led to self-reflection and the development of new life goals. Lifestyle changes often involve much more limited financial resources and the loss of a certain social status, which can generate new tensions, especially with the family. But unlike the process of polarization that revolves primarily around one's appetite for the activity, conversion engages one's entire life meaning and implies a break with one's primary socialization and life models inherited from childhood.

Conclusion

As such, bicycle self-repair workshops, whether they are focused on the practical side or they carry a strong political project, are ideal places to initiate or accommodate lifestyle changes in various forms. While for some, the change starts from engaging with a new practice - repairing bicycles, which can then take up more and more space and polarize one's whole lifestyle - it is sometimes one's whole system of values that is impacted by the change.

Bicycle self-repair workshops, through the levers they offer, the values they convey, the projects they carry or the discussions they foster among members, are places where these new trajectories are consolidated. By welcoming and accompanying these lifestyle changes that make cycling more important, these workshops are part of the cycling system and contribute to the ecological transition.

To go further

Download the synthesis

Download the theoretical framework (available in French only)

1 heureux-cyclage.org

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

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- Change in practices
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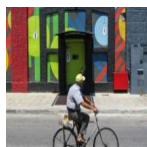
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