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Taking on Hartford: Perspectives from the Seat of a Bike and a Chair in Class

Steven Craney

Because my seminar was titled “Cycling, Sustainability, and the City of Hartford,” I knew we would be exploring these concepts in great depth; exactly how this exploration would occur was another matter. The class turned out to be an exploratory and reflective course that asked us to consider and evaluate many of the urban and global issues our planet faces such as pollution, urbanization, transportation, and healthy lifestyles for ourselves and the rest of the world. Exploring Hartford by bike, we learned about the city firsthand, while using it to examine positive changes struggling urban areas could make. So, the first question we were asked during our very first class was “What do the words *cycling*, *sustainability*, and *Hartford* all have in common?” I’ll be honest; I had no idea how to tie those three together. The categories were so different and broad that I just couldn’t see the lines that attached them. Sustainability was a term I had used but never fully understood; I had been on a bicycle before so that gave me some knowledge of the cycling aspect, and Hartford was a city that had always been easily accessible for me, yet one I knew relatively nothing about. I couldn’t have possibly imagined that I would one day be able to bring all three together, not only in a paper, but even in my everyday conversations. So what are the connections that unite these words and why is it important to understand them? I think that the answer lies somewhere along the path we followed in the course, and how it became not simply a semester-long effort, but a long-lasting intellectual curiosity and a lifelong quest for knowledge and answers in a world that hides them from us.

I’m from Norwich CT. Imagine a smaller version of Hartford, a once great manufacturing hub, a little down on its luck, looking for answers to financing problems and poverty. Put rather simply, you don’t bike in Norwich—it’s pretty well accepted. There are no bike lanes, no rental programs, and as far as I know very little push for any cycling infrastructure. Drivers are very aggressive and the streets are narrow, steep, and unsafe. The little experience I had biking was mostly on trails and back roads in the surrounding towns of Franklin, Baltic, and Bozrah. Being on the road earned me plenty of dirty looks and close calls with getting hit. So the concept of biking in Hartford, a denser and more challenging version of Norwich, seemed a little intimidating. Still, I went out with Professor Del Puppo on the first optional bike ride, which turned out to be just him and myself. I was nervous, sticking mostly to the sidewalk and avoiding confrontation with traffic at all cost. Yet my Professor rode fearlessly between cars, taking on the streets with the confidence and grandeur of an Italian cyclist riding through the European countryside. I didn’t understand how he was so assertive at first, but I was also distracted by my state capital which I knew so little about. On that one ride alone, I learned about Bushnell Park, the “Stone Field” Sculpture, the Athenaeum, Constitution Plaza, and Riverfront Park. I was instantly fascinated because I didn’t know that Hartford held such a rich and diverse history, something we began to explore in class.

What sets Hartford apart from so many other cities across the nation is how it is one of the oldest colonial settlements in American history, how it has experienced almost every societal change for urban areas, and how its past holds so many stories that many have simply forgotten over time. The city started out as a scattered agricultural town that slowly expanded its shops and developed a strong manufacturing base during the 1800s. Andrew Walsh, a historian who works at Trinity, explores how Hartford grew into an industrial powerhouse in his piece

Hartford: A Global History. New factories began to produce goods such as typewriters, firearms, and of course, bicycles, while the neighborhoods expanded with retail stores and insurance companies began to build international sales. Hartford not only attracted investors and businessmen, but immigrants, as the city began to fill with Irish, Southern and Eastern Europeans, and African Americans. Wealthy entrepreneurs donated lands to create parks and recreational areas, in a push to make the city more beautiful to combat the rising industries. After WWII, many who lived in the city began to move to the developing suburbs at the same time the manufacturing base was declining. Investors and job opportunities started to leave, and with industry moving out of America, unemployment began to rise drastically. The city had a 90 percent white population in 1950, but by 2010, fewer than 20 percent of the residents were white; this has decreased at the same time the Latino population has surged (Walsh 35). Hartford now faces a high poverty rate, unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, and transportation congestion. As a result, many have given up on the city, even though it has survived through the ups and downs of American history and is still standing today.

So we began to take on this city by bike, learning about its important features in class and then physically seeing them on the weekends. Hartford suddenly became fascinating and intriguing, with monuments, beautiful parks, and hidden places only a select few knew about. I found myself exploring on my own, taking my bike out to retrace routes we had done in class and to discover new ones. I had never really considered cycling as a means of transportation, yet it seemed ideal; using my bike was cheap, good exercise, and fun. I saw much more than if I was in a car, and could travel very far in a reasonable amount of time. I think this feeling was strange for me because, as an American, we tend to look at the bike as a toy for children and mobility for the poor. Automobiles are the primary mode of transportation, being a crucial part of the American lifestyle and something that many people aspire to have even if they can't afford it. This is a direct result of the car culture that has developed over the past century or so, and the fact that urban areas have historically been designed for drivers, not anyone else. In this regard, Hartford is certainly an example, with multiple highways that bisect the city and only a few scattered bike lanes.

Therefore, I suppose it was a bit of a culture shock to learn that, while Americans prided themselves on a few, decently active cycling communities, some countries and cities focused predominantly on bikes. As I started to look at the benefits of biking, it became clear why so many people around the world still utilize this machine. Pete Jordan, author of *In the City of Bikes*, accurately captures the cycling culture of the Netherlands in his writings. There, people of all ages rode bikes to almost every destination they needed to go; additionally, people rode "...beat-up old bikes...that were held together in part by string, twine, yarn, wires, rubber bands, inner tubes, shoe laces, masking tape, duct tape, etc..." (Jordan 6). Americans are shocked to see this behavior, as cyclists here are usually rather financially stable middle-aged men riding the most expensive bikes money can buy or conversely, those who are unable to afford another means of transportation. But in many other countries, cycling is a lifestyle or a necessity, not a hobby. As an urban planner, Jordan went from desperately trying to find cyclist activism in Pittsburgh to being in a country where bicycles ruled the streets. *In the City of Bikes* illuminates the very different mindsets between American and Dutch cultures, specifically focusing on their perceptions of the bicycle and its uses in the modern world.

The same dumbfounded conclusions that Jordan had in the Netherlands were similar to the Dutch who came here. He wrote about how travelers and immigrants were shocked at the fact that no one walked, how most cities were dominated by cars, and the difference in peoples'

attitudes when they were on a bike versus in an automobile. Similarly, Alex Davies of *Business Insider* writes about the differences in cycling perspectives between America and many other countries. Americans see cyclists as extreme athletes, and the bikes that they proudly ride are for exercise, not transportation. He also argues that Americans have forgotten how cycling has always been a means of transportation and how car-dominated almost all cities and roadways are. Hartford, for example, was the cycling capitol of the world around 1900; now there is a relatively small cycling culture present. Seeing how many European cities have narrow roads and were still able to fit in bike lanes, he questions why American cities, with such wide lanes, cannot accommodate new configurations. Just like Jordan, he examines both the cultural differences between the Netherlands and the United States, as well as the barriers that prevent cycling from expanding here. However, what both Jordan's and Davies' writings demonstrate are the many differences between the United States and cycling-friendly countries, something we began to evaluate in class as we debated whether cycling was beneficial or a challenge.

By this point, we had already studied the history of bikes and their impacts on the modern world. Our class then began to explore the social concepts behind cycling, and many of the arguments and ideas that people normally don't consider. Our class looked at things like the unequal perceptions of biking versus driving, the segregation and racial/gender divides among cycling throughout history, as well as the hidden prices involved with driving through Paul Tranter's concept of effective speed. For me, these lessons became a valuable and enlightening experience, especially the effective speed research. Effective speed is the concept of calculating the total cost of driving a car, incorporating time spent to earn the money to pay for the car and car-related purchases like gas and repairs. Ultimately, riding a bike was three times faster than driving for my personal commute every day to high school, after taking all expenses into account and the time needed to work to pay for these. I ended up tracing the finances behind using my car, discovering the amount of money I had dumped into that little '92 Corolla and the time I could have saved by using my bike even once in a while. Effective speed was an incredible learning process that really silences the critics of cycling, as we all agreed how much effort and work it saved in the long run. When taking all costs into account, cycling becomes quicker and cheaper over short distances than driving. Leaning more towards the social issues, the article *Invisible Riders* was astonishing to me. Dan Koeppel explains how America already has a cycling culture, but one that we tend to not notice. All across the country, day laborers and immigrants from around the world rely on bikes for transportation to find work and make money for their families. Often times, these two-wheeled machines are critical to their livelihood, yet most people tend to not even notice. For these "invisible riders," the type of bike doesn't matter, and the reason they use it doesn't either. It's a very interesting and diverse world from the spandex-clad, expensive Italian bikes many Americans imagine when they think of cyclists. This article also made me begin to notice how many people used bikes as a source of transportation in Hartford. When I went out, I would count anywhere from a couple to almost a dozen other people on bikes. These were often department store, beat-up clunkers, but they got the job done. The social forces behind cycling were very powerful, but our class had also begun to investigate the sustainability aspect of cycling, and connect it to other areas in our lives—starting on campus.

Cycling and sustainability come together because the two go hand in hand. Cycling is clean energy, uses few resources, and promotes healthy lifestyles and a more positive atmosphere for everyone on the streets. But sustainability becomes much more complex in other areas of our world, such as college campuses. In class, we discussed Mitchell Thomashow's

Nine Elements of a Sustainable Campus, which outlined the president of Unity College's top goals for campuses around the country. He believes that sustainability is directly linked to higher education, and that using the campus as a creative place of learning and experimentation will spread sustainable practices to the lives of students, faculty, and parents. His nine categories focus on how colleges can improve their actions and footprint through energy use, material choices, waste, and education to name a few. The article inspired our class to consider how Trinity is both sustainable and unsustainable and what we, as students, can do to help solve these issues. Some of the big concerns we found were food waste, high energy use, and a lack of sustainability-based programs or classes. The other national problem we began to consider was the idea of "greenwashing" a campus, or making small changes that have relatively little impact and claiming to have accomplished much. Sustainability started to become a term that not only focused on our role in the school as a central point, but how we could expand into the world from there.

Leslie Paul Thiele and his work in *Sustaining Economics* was one of the last articles we read but by far one of the most influential and controversial. He discusses the unsustainable nature of humanity's industrial development and our rapid depletion of nonrenewable resources while damaging the Earth. With the U.S. alone consuming 6.5 billion metric tons of raw materials and producing 1 million pounds of waste per person per year, we are living in a way that the Earth will not be able to support in the coming decades (Thiele 147). Thiele goes into great detail to show the areas of extreme consumption in our current economy, such as water, oil, agricultural land, and forests. Thiele also highlights the negative effects of industrial growth and addresses ways to solve them through taxation, responsibility programs, and pollution limits. Looking at developing nations, he also explains how industrialized, advanced countries tend to export pollution and environmental problems to locations other than their own. Overall, the purpose of his article was to elaborate on how we cannot continue to structure our economy as we have in the past, as it is systemically unsustainable and we have enough resources and creativity to find new ways to act. While Thiele makes some very bleak predictions about the future, his writing is convincing. Whether it be the economy, manufacturing, transportation, or many other areas of our lives, we often do what is easiest for us and not what is best for the planet and future generations. He is not alone in this observation either; in 2011 the *Harvard Business Review* published an article with very similar ideas to what Thiele was expressing. The authors discuss how companies are rarely forced to pay for their impacts on the environment, discuss sustainability and full cost pricing, and attempt to place a price on our rapidly depleting resources. It eerily echoes Thiele's conclusions, again backed up with more statistics and facts. The question many are asking is what will happen to future generations when the effects of our poor decisions start to impact their lives? This concept of changing the way we live is scary and difficult for many to handle; instead we respond by keeping things the way they are.

Modern change and a sustainable future is exactly how the city of Hartford and sustainability are related. Hartford has declined in the past decades due to the changing atmosphere of the United States and the world. This is where evolution becomes critical. Hartford's manufacturing and industrial base has dwindled with respect to a half-century ago. The financial industry is also facing challenges in a steadily globalizing market. Therefore, it must look at new ways to rebuild its economic base, as well as new ways to make the city more inviting. Hartford is not alone in this effort either; cities all around America and the world are starting to reconfigure layouts and planning, attract new businesses and investment, and steer urban areas into a modern era. Obviously business is one area of innovation, but the urban

structure of cities themselves is in question as well. Crumbling infrastructure, poorly planned routes, and traffic congestion have forced engineers and planners to find new ways to make cities more effective. Complete Streets, a recently passed law in CT is a perfect example of a new concept that has been applied with success; city streets are reorganized to allow cyclists, buses, pedestrians, and cars to maneuver safely and securely. Such streets often look better than a multiple lane road and the increased mobility has proven to be beneficial for local businesses. Another effort, as seen in the *Greening America's Capitals* article that focused on Hartford, is redeveloping urban areas to serve more beneficial purposes, connect neighborhoods, highlight specific features or buildings, and help ecological performance. Hartford has numerous areas that aren't used optimally, or maybe just need some work which would provide perfect opportunities for these projects. In addition to creating many of these "green spaces" the plan also calls for creating bike lanes and more space for pedestrians, similar themes seen in other plans. The results from these new developments have been stunning in other cities; previously dreary spaces have been transformed into bright, bustling, business and environmentally friendly urban retreats. It is designs like this that Hartford must realize are necessary for urban success, because cities must move away from the industrial model and into a more modern and sustainable one.

The narrative of our class is hard to tell, as each student has a different perspective and most likely took away different things. What I would like to see as a next step is hard to identify, because there are so many avenues the class could pursue. I think that case studies of cities very similar to Hartford would be an excellent idea, to see specifically what other urban planners have done to respond to modern problems. I know that sustainability projects around campus would be a good start to sparking a positive movement among students. These might not be big, but if the class tackled maybe five or six individual efforts it could leave a real impact. I felt that the readings flowed nicely and were appropriate to the sequence of topics we discussed. But I know I would want more bike rides. They were exciting and informative, and I found that being out in the city really helped me build friendships with many of the other students in class. If we continued for a second semester I would require more rides, maybe even a few very adventurous ones, for example, I wanted to see the tunnel that holds the old Park River under Bushnell Park. Urban exploring is definitely very exciting and Hartford is an ideal place to do it. Also, I really would want to do a race around the city. Similar in design to Cranksgiving, we could hit checkpoints and see who could find the best or fastest route to a particular location. While I know these are not really classroom-style suggestions for continuing the class, the rides were by far my favorite part and I think they really brought what we learned in class to life.

I think that my reflections capture where cycling, sustainability, and the city of Hartford all come together. It was never a one day realization, but more of a cumulative development that brought all the bits and pieces together to form a common idea. The writings that I discussed might not go in a particular order, but my understanding of that initial question did not develop in a certain sequence. It took trial and error, curiosity, and asking questions to gain a conscious enlightenment about the purpose of our course. Why I found myself so intrigued throughout the semester was simply because we covered so many different topics and explored so many different avenues, many of which remain full of questions to be answered. I think that for the students, the class became more of something to take with them for life. It developed into a set of ideas that can be applied and taught to other people; maybe how different types of transportation can be beneficial to all, or how to fix a flat tire, or what Hartford has to offer for cultural and musical appreciation. But we now take with us a new way to approach a variety of

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issues, new ways to ask questions and look at problems, and a more developed understanding of the steps we must take as human beings to survive on this planet.

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