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The Row Boat

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What Hipsters Can Learn From Hasids About the Bedford Bike Lane

A couple weeks ago I was riding my usual route from home in Clinton Hill to the Williamsburg Bridge when I saw that the ground had shifted beneath my bicycle gears. As I crossed Flushing along Bedford Avenue, into the heart of Hasidic Williamsburg, Brooklyn, my bike lane was gone. Only a faint, sandblasted remnant remained.

The first thing I did was call out to the cyclist in front of me, a stranger yet a comrade, with an unpublishable outburst of indignation. That is typical. I'm not usually a very aggressive person, but I've learned it is an attitude that helps me stay alert enough on my bike to stay alive. When cars don't notice me, I make them notice. When roads don't make room for me, I make my own room, and I run through red lights in the process.

One early morning soon after the lane disappeared, a team of hipsters and Hasidim took to the streets to illegally repaint it. I was all for that. The same goes for the December 13 funeral procession of a couple dozen bicycle lovers making a New Orleans-style ruckus on Bedford. I only wished we had caused trouble earlier, in time to save the lane. On the 19th, I went to see what was billed as a topless "panty ride" through the neighborhood. The snow kept the cyclists' clothes on, but the ride drew people anyways.

The most common reason I heard for the erasure was a reactionary urge that was easy to resent: "They're essentially moving it because they don't want to look at girls dressed like sluts," said Calisha Jenkins, one of the organizers of the December 19 ride. The official reason apparently concocted for the community meetings had to do with school buses and traffic patterns--but none of the bike activists seemed to buy that. "There's nothing unsafe about bikes. Bikes pose no threat to anyone," said Theo Angell, a 41-year-old artist who lives in Bushwick and who participated in the protest as well. "I heard they were shutting down bicycle lanes for basically religious reasons, and I believe in separation of church and state."

To me, no reason is a good reason to remove a bike lane, but prudishness seemed like an especially bad one. So I took the time to walk up and down Bedford, asking anybody who would answer why they really thought the lane had disappeared. One of the first people I met was a Hasidic school bus driver who invited me up into his bus to talk. (He asked not to be named.)

"Bikes don't obey any laws!" he complained. "They don't stop. They just zoom through at a high speed." He knew of three cases in which neighborhood children had to go to the hospital after being hit. "They don't care about the kids," he added, not saying anything about proper dress until I asked.

"I wouldn't say that is the major problem."

A Satmar man named Moshe told me about the time he saw a bike hit a child. "They go the wrong way," he said, pointing to the one-way traffic on Bedford, "and people don't know to look."

Person after person told much the same story. When pushed, it is true that most of those I spoke with noted their disapproval of the influx of--yes, visibly underdressed--outsiders. But, as one told me, "It is a free country." I made my way home afterward believing that if bikes had been more courteous on Bedford, there might still be a lane there. The Hasidim probably wouldn't like it at first, but they'd at least tolerate us, and maybe even come to appreciate us in the end.

The city has added hundreds of miles of bike lanes in recent years, and bicycle commuting has more than doubled since 2000 as a result. I see new lanes being added all the time and feel grateful every time I do. Each one lowers my chances of getting whacked by a taxi.

As the city finally starts investing in keeping us safe, it is time for cyclists to do our part. "There is not a single community board meeting about bike lanes where cyclist behavior is not an issue," says Wiley Norvell of Transportation Alternatives. His organization has launched Biking Rules!--a program to encourage more responsible riding in New York City.

The rules are simple and, from now on, I'm going to do my best to follow them: Pedestrians come first. Stop at red lights, and don't ride against traffic. Obey the laws. Wear a helmet, and use a light in the dark.

I hope you'll get on your bike and join me too. (You'll be amazed at how pleasant winter riding can be with a pair of good gloves.)

"Those 3 feet can change a neighborhood," Moshe told me, and this is true. That's why I care so much about bike lanes in the first place--I know they can foster stronger, healthier communities than car culture has given us. When we show skeptics that bicyclists can be a positive addition to a neighborhood, we'll be in a much better position to demand a truly bike-friendly city.

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