

Custom bicycle constructors in Bucharest. Human infrastructures for bicycle promotion

Custom bicycle constructors are able to engage others in emphasizing their cultural capital. In Bucharest they are “untold kings” of a growing online community. Under a gentrified approach on urban cycling, I argue that solid bicycle infrastructures can be achieved by converting these online communities into offline critical mass.

“The number of bicyclists in our city is under 1%. We don't have the bicycle culture in Germany, Austria or Belgium”. This statement by a representative of the Street Administration Department of Bucharest is the main reason authorities aren't investing any money in building cycle lanes. “For now, the priority in Bucharest are the drivers”, Carmen Dinca added this last August. Most of the bicycle lanes in our capital (122 km) have been disbanded this year due to poor design and misplacement on the sidewalk.

Despite statements by authorities, Bucharest is a burgeoning scene for bicycle culture. More and more people are using bicycles, not only for leisure or shopping, but also for daily commuting. I have carried out an ethnographic research in the midst of a community of custom bicycle constructors in Bucharest, that concluded last year with a master's thesis in anthropology. I argued that those bicycle builders are not mere trend-setters among gentrified bicyclists, but they can also muster cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973) likely to cause changes in urban mobility policies.

Top-down initiatives to building bicycle infrastructure in Bucharest have failed for now. The municipality has spent over 10 million euros for bicycle lanes, soon after taken down for being inadequate. In contrast, several bottom-up initiatives are creating human infrastructure that compensate the physical one (Lugo, 2012): NGOs suing authorities, critical mass actions, internet platforms, community events, illegal alley cat races etc.

PortocalaMecanica.ro (The Clockwork Orange) is an internet platform I launched in March 2009 with the scope of promoting the bicycle culture. It is one of the first media to address the needs of urban cyclists in Romania and it soon was followed by others. We organize several events for the community (flea markets, repair workshops, expositions, bike lessons). Portocala Mecanica has helped bicycling becoming not only more and more visible, but also more and more part of the public agenda.

On the 27th of October 2012, Bucharest hosted a protest in favor of bike lanes, gathering more than 1.000 participants. It was considered the biggest bicyclist gathering in history in Bucharest. Still, the number isn't enough to beat that ominous 1%. We are certainly more than that. Portocala Mecanica's latest ambition was to create a national online census to get a fairer picture of our ever-growing community. In February 2013 we launched www.catibiciclistisuntem.ro that will be available for completion until the end of March.

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