

I hate your e-bike

March 17, 2018 § 16 Comments

YEP, I SAID IT. I HATE YOUR E-BIKE. I WOULD LOVE TO TAKE IT OUT BEHIND THE SHED AND SHOOT IT, DISMEMBER IT, and throw all the parts into a customized, one-off, e-bike shredder. Do you know how happy it would make me to hear the sound of that lithium battery getting ground into a million little pieces?

Real happy. Real, real happy.

My wife and I were on the S&M bike path yesterday morning. It was about 8:00 AM and bitterly, bitterly cold for Los Angeles, probably 54 or maybe even 55 bone-freezing degrees. As we approached Admiralty, a really happy, helmetless, zippily commuting dude whizzed past. It was galling as I glared at his fat rear hub.

There I was, all dressed up in my finest bicycling underwear clown suit, daintily pedaling my 100% carbon bike while introducing my duly impressed wife into the mysteries of #profamateur cycling, and some jerk on a 60-pound bike owned me like Muhammed Ali in the 8th Round of the Rumble in the Jungle. My hatred knew no bounds until, of course, we got back up on the bike bath and began overtaking him.

He had eased off the gas considerably, perhaps to save battery power, and as we prepared to pass him he veered over onto us, looking only just as he veered, then jerking his behemoth bike back over to the right. But did he apologize? Oh no, not he. He was having too much fun on his dogdamned e-bike. "I know your pain," he said as we passed.

"If you really knew my pain," I thought, "you'd shoot yourself."

The evil of the e-bike

Much has been written about these scourges, technological monsters that give everyone and anyone the power to go fast with no skills, no training, no protection, as they mix it up with non-powered bicycle traffic. People claim they are dangerous but the reason I hate them is simple: They are an affront to my swollen and sensitive ego.

I've spent a lifetime developing this level of grumpy snobbishness about bicycling, and in one fell swoop the e-bike has deflated my ego balloon with the flip of a pedal-assisted switch. They've made me so paranoid that my first look now isn't to see whether the overtaking bicycle (there didn't used to be any!) is Dura-Ace, SRAM, or Campy, but whether the huge, ugly battery is in the hub or the down tube. And those rolling, fat-tire abortions that go as fast as a Tarmac? It's all I can do not to break down and cry when they pass.

And let's make no bones about it. E-bikes are cheating because they break the fundamental rule of cycling, stated so eloquently by **Thomas Beller in the New Yorker** (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-electric-bike-conundrum>): "The momentum you give is the momentum you get." There is something horribly wrong, Beller notes, about the e-bike rider who hadn't worked to go that fast and who, after he braked or came to a stop, wouldn't have to do a lick of work to pick up speed again.

Call it whatever you want and point to whatever benefits you want, but it's cheating. Cheating who? I don't know. Cheating what? Don't know that, either. But I knows me a cheater when I sees one.

The gathering storm

If you hate e-bikes, well, you have a problem. The problem is that they are experiencing astounding growth in China and Europe, and astonishingly, even here in the United States of Lazy and Fat. According to a #fakenews story at CNN (<http://money.cnn.com/2018/01/17/technology/ebikes-electric-bikes/index.html>), one e-bike executive claims that "This is the beginning of a multi-year shift away from regular pedal to electric bikes. When people first jump on an ebike, their face lights up. It's exciting and joyful in a way that you don't get from a regular bike."

What he means is "You get to whizz around and look like a cyclist and go faster than a cyclist, but without having to sweat or strain or show up for work looking like you've run a half-marathon in a plastic suit."

In this vein of boosterism, the article goes on to quote another e-bike CEO who also happens to have a snarling dog in the fight, saying "There's tremendous opportunity to get a generation of people for whom suffering isn't their thing. E-bike riders get the enjoyable part of cycling without the massive suffering of climbing huge hills."

Translation: "Get everything, do nothing." Everything, I'd add, except the feeling of accomplishment.

These guys are blunt, but the numbers are blunter. Sales of e-bikes in Holland and Germany are up by 8-9%, sales of dinosaurs are down 5%. E-bikes are 30% of the market in the Netherlands, a country similar to Holland in many ways. China of course leads the way in use, sales, and production, as it is the global leader in everything these days. And you will notice if you have eyes anywhere in your head that there are now e-bike stores peppering Santa Monica, not to mention the local bike shops that stock a big inventory of e-bikes alongside their dinosaurs. Guess which models are saving their bottom line?

How can you get fit doing nothing?

I've never ridden an e-bike, and I never will, until I do. While waiting for that to happen, I have to rely on the statements of others. Here are some of my faves:

"You don't feel like you're pedaling at all."

"It's incredibly easy."

"When you hit a hill you don't have to pedal any harder."

"It's effortless."

This goes against everything I know, which is that if you desire the benefits that come from physical fitness you have to dedicate your life, monk-like, to the enslavement of interval workouts, of grueling, all-day slug-fests in the mountains, of horrible rides in the freezing rain (slush if you can afford it), and more than anything else you have to punish yourself like a Spartan. Physical fitness is misery and isn't it beautiful?

This assumption, that fitness only comes through great unhappiness, dedication to a silly sport, and wanton purchases of instantantly depreciating assets, has never been seriously challenged, by which I mean I've never taken the time to research it. However, in my hatred of e-bikes, I scoured around and found that other, more objective people have in fact asked the question "Do all those idiots who look like idiots riding those idiot bikes actually get any health benefit from it?"

And the heretical answer is yes, they do. People for Bikes **links to a study on its web site** (<https://peopleforbikes.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/1-s2.0-S2214140516303930-main.pdf>) that examines this question, albeit in slightly more academic terms than mine. It notes that the most recent study of this question looked at cycling and e-bike riding in Norway and found that e-bike riders, while spending less time and effort than on dino bikes, still get moderate physical activity from it. The researchers define and quantify the phrase "moderate physical activity," if you're into such things as facts (I'm not); this phrase is kind of a holy grail in the world of public health because people who get sufficient moderate physical activity 150 minutes a week obtain significant, life-altering health benefits.

The study also notes that many researchers have explored and concluded that "the impacts of active transportation modes," i.e. getting off your fat ass, have a big effect on physical health. Active transportation modes such as walking, cycling, and, gulp, e-biking, are associated with reduced obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. Using active transportation modes for even part of a commute is associated with engaging in other physical activities for exercise and recreation (shocking).

Furthermore, the study notes that involvement in active commuting reduces the risk of all-cause mortality and increases the number of years lived without cardiovascular disease. Even smokers benefit, as higher levels of activity result in more years of life expectancy as well as more years of life without disability. The study reports that among a prospective cohort study of adults in living near Copenhagen, active transportation to work via cycling was associated with a 40% decreased risk of mortality, even after controlling for other sources of aerobic physical activity.

To all of this I would say, and I think you would agree, that death, disease, and crippling disability are a small price to pay for not having to ride a heavy motorized bike, happily, helmetless, in flip-flops, with a pair of equally floppy and comfortable dickhider cotton shorts. However, the news gets worse.

The study showed that compared to a real bicycle, although e-bikes average 28% to 32% less energy expenditure, the amount of energy expended easily qualifies as moderate physical activity, ushering in the short and long-term health benefits that all developed countries so desperately need, especially Texas. About 56% of the study guinea pigs rated the e-bike as "very enjoyable," compared to only 31% of

the conventional bicycle trials. Most ominous for the future of the carbon-underwear crowd, only 6% of respondents rated the e-bike trip unenjoyable or very unenjoyable, in contrast with 19% for conventional bicycling.

Another study shows similar results (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27299435>). E-bikes make sedentary people fitter, and speeds aren't especially high, averaging 12 mph.

In sum, and I hate sums, plotzing around in your comfy dickhiders on a fat-tire, motorized #fakebike will make you fitter, healthier, and, if you believe in quality of life (I don't), happier.

Mobility and social justice

As you might expect, rich white guys hate e-bikes, not because e-bikes are bad, but because a subversive element of society uses them to do things like survive. Ground zero for rich white guys is Rich White Guyville, a/k/a the West End of Manhattan, where a **horrible person clearly modeled after Palos Verdes Estates's own Robert Lewis Chapman** (<https://www.wnyc.org/story/peoples-guide-power-regulating-e-bikes/>), has begun a campaign to stamp out the crime of speeding e-bikes. With his bald head and background in finance, he even looks like Chapman.

A very well written article in **The Outline** (<https://theoutline.com/post/2447/everyone-hates-e-bikes?zd=1&zi=k72e33jd>) by Aaron Gordon points out that in the urban setting, e-bikes are a means of survival for predominantly poor, predominantly first generation Latinos and Asians (from the countries of Latin and Asia, I suppose) who use them to get through grueling 16-hour days as food delivery couriers. It makes sense that the people who are rich enough to order take-out would want to eliminate the means of transportation used by the working poor who bring them their Chinese food.

This brings up a very telling point, made by Gordon, which is that the horror of e-bikes is a white rich person's problem: The Chapmans of the world scream that e-bikes are unsafe, but refuse to implement safety regulations or infrastructure, CERTAINLY NOT HERE. And when you think about it, that's how the rich, spoiled, and entitled assholes of the world stop regular bikes, too, by protesting against the bike lanes, multimodal funding, road diets, and anything else that infringes on their right to do whatever they want, whenever they want, to whomever they want in their cars.

The foamy flecks of racism and oppression that drip from the lips of Mayor King in PVE are the same flavor of vitriol spewed in both Manhattans—Beach and NY. The corollary to PVE-Robert Chapman nimbyism is, of course scapegoating like they do in China, where, according to the **New York Times** (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/world/asia/beijing-traffic-electric-bikes.html>), the boundless spawn of e-bikes and their clash with cars is a function of the explosion of the purchase of online goods and services. I'm sure you may have noticed, what with your Amazon Prime account and all, that once that shit is ordered it then has to be delivered. And by "delivered" I mean "Right fucking now, please."

As in China, you may also have noticed that it's not the Silicon Valley overlords who do the delivering. That's left to the impoverished, here and in China, where the poorest of the poor migrate to the city, buy an e-bike, and drive it all day long to do do slave-wage fulfillment for Alibaba. And in an unsurprising non-twist of the predictable, it turns out that the real reason people in China have problems with e-bikes is because the e-bikes clog the sidewalks as a result of the cars that have clogged all the bike lanes.

In China, like LA and NYC, there is way too much of something for traffic and therefore society to function well. And It's not bikes.

The Times quotes an e-bike courier in China as saying "We're just scapegoats. They always say that electric bikes are the road killers, but the cars are the real killers." And with that the courier makes the most powerful point of all: Cars in Los Angeles are associated with unspeakably greater numbers of deaths, injuries, illnesses, and social problems like traffic and poverty than all the e-bikes in the world put together.

Scapegoating, nimbyism, and villifying a viable, cheap, and safe mode of transportation as a destroyer of society. Where have I heard that before? I know! At the last Palos Verdes Estates city council meeting I attended where they shot down a few safety signs for bicycles, that's where. From East to West, the tactics are the same and propagated by the same horrible people.

And what it really points out is that the conflict with e-bikes is a rich-poor conflict on another level as well: The collision of the transportationists and the recreationists. An e-bike is heaven for one, and hell for a small but vocal subset of the other, like me.

Move over, cars

For recreationists, the nub is simple: E-bikes give you free momentum, and cheating is cheating. With an e-bike you're not as tired as you would be on a bicycle, just as with a bicycle you're not as tired as you would be walking, and just as with walking you're not as tired as you would be slithering on your belly. I bet there were hate blogs from a rich vocal subset of the gastropods when slugs evolved limbs. "Those damned slugs don't have to work nearly as hard to get to the rotting pile of flesh as I did when I was a kid!"

For transportationists, though, it's simpler. To sum up an article in **Outside Magazine about e-MTB's** (<https://www.outsideonline.com/2081076/chill-out-e-mountain-bikes-are-not-end-world>), e-bikes are new technology, they're not going anywhere, so get used to it. People who use e-bikes to get from point A to point B, rather than those who cycle to make a social statement, show their superiority, improve their standing on Strava leaderboards, or to collect carbon, have bought into the e-bike not as an alternative to dinosaur bicycles, ***but as an alternative to cars.***

This is breathtaking when you think about it. Every commuter and delivery person on an e-bike is a replacement for a car. If Robert Chapman drove to work instead of hunkering down all day in front of his computer trolling the Daily Breeze, he'd get down on his knees and blow kisses to every e-bike on the road simply because even he would be smart enough to understand that fewer cars means less traffic means faster commute time for HIM.

In **Germany and the Netherlands, of course, they're already there** (<http://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/business/e-bikes-electric-bicycles.html>). Can you say double-digit growth in sales? E-bikes are not viewed as MAMIL ego killers, but as the entry point into electric mobility, and that includes electric cars. E-bikes are simply a practical transportation option in countries

where traffic, costs, and pollution from cars have consequences. With electric-assist bicycles, the Times piece notes, “If you run out of power in an electric car, you have a problem. With a bike, you can still pedal.”

None of this even begins to touch on the very real issue of mobility for the elderly. I noted on my bike trip across Germany several years ago that a huge number of riders on the Rhine bike path between Cologne and Koblenz were old people, many of whom could never have gotten out and ridden on a dino bike.

E-bikes solve another awful problem for transportationists, especially in Europe. **Riders sweat less** (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/19/business/e-bike-sales-are-surging-in-europe.html>). If you’ve ever been on a Berlin or Paris subway in the summertime, you know what this means. E-bikes are single-handedly taking a stand against stinky European B.O. Can someone give those e-bike folks a Nobel Prize, please?

Another social good is that in some industries, such as the German post office, it saves an aging workforce as older employees can work for longer, no small benefit in a country where the birth rate continues to decline and far-right Nazi parties further restrict the entry of young immigrants.

And the high margins on e-bikes have saved more than one bike shop, as inventories suggest. But is this a Pyrrhic victory, like saving the local bakery so it can sell Wonder Bread? I don’t know. But I do know that there is a cultural conflict that the e-bikers are going to win. Make that, “have already won.”

You probably cheat on your dino bike, too

What is the difference between an e-bike and a dino bike? Most people in my crowd of snobby carbonites would say, “An electric motor, dummy.”

To which I’d ask them to explain the workings of their drivetrain, because if they are running Di2 or eTap, guess what? They’ve already motorized the dino. And for those who don’t think that motorized drivetrains make a difference, all I can say, the e-bike advocates, is that you’ve obviously never used one. So yes, you’re already cheating if you have Di2 or eTap, and there’s a real solid argument out there that you’re also probably cheating if you have a power meter, Garmin, Strava, GPS, or a heart rate monitor, simply because all of those items invoke electrical power to improve performance, efficiency, and speed.

Just like, you know, the e-bike that we all hate.

But there’s more. Every single e-bike increases the total number of bikes on the road, and study after study shows that the single most important factor in traffic safety for bikes is just that, having more bikes on the road, which is why they have that little thang called “Critical Mass.”

And apart from the transportational logic behind e-bikes, their riders have an emotional ace in the hole that trumps dino bikes easily.

It’s the ace of looking like you’re riding a bike without doing a fucking thing. As Gordon puts it in the Outline article, “The most obvious benefit to the e-bike is the way it handles hills. I traced my old commute which begins with a fairly sizable slope. Usually I am a little winded when I get to the top on

my single speed, but I maintained 14 miles per hour pedaling on the e-bike without having to exert any additional effort. I e-biked more than 50 miles that day without breaking a sweat. Except for the one close call, it was 50 miles of pure urban transportation bliss.”

To which I’d respond: Did you puke? Did you moan? Did you have to sleep four hours in the middle of the day and eat a pizza? No? Then maybe you didn’t bike after all. You did something, maybe, but you sure AF didn’t bike.

Henry Grabar, **in this fluff piece on Slate**, (<https://slate.com/business/2018/02/e-bikes-could-be-the-next-big-thing.html>) accidentally nails it: “But it’s not the top speed that really differentiates the experience; it’s the speed with which you get there and the ease of maintaining it. It feels like you have superhuman strength, and that’s how people look at you, too (with a mixture of envy and anxiety).” Even the transportationists can relate to the free momentum buzz they get from an e-bike. It’s one of the rare places where the work of getting somewhere is actually fun.

Grabar goes on to poetically note that “Bicycles are the sharks of transportation, virtually unevolved through a century of technological upheaval in automobiles and airplanes.” I love that because it’s true. We are the sharks, simple and elegant, fierce and feared. But we are quickly being replaced by the more efficient and specialized bony fishes, and the e-bike happens to be the piranha.

For now the ungainly, ugly, stupid hubs, the nausea-inducing, hideously ugly down tubes, and the rat’s nest of wires stuck on like a blind drunk person set loose with a can of Silly String scream “FREDDIE!” every time I see an e-bike. But in ten years, tiny internal down tube motors with internal aero wiring will deliver huge watts, slim beauty, and a stake through the heart of traditional cyclist egos. Fortunately, I’ll be 64 and in the market for my first such bike. Hopefully they will also be made of carbon.


And if you believe the Internet, which I unquestioningly do, the **future is already here** (<https://electronwheel.com/buy-now>): For less than \$800 you can pop an electrical wheel into the front fork of your killer carbon machine and climb like the TdF pro you never were.

And the best part? Strava will never, ever know.

END

Tagged: are e-bikes safe, e-bikes, e-bikes v. bicycles, ebikes

§ 16 Responses to *I hate your e-bike*

- Jon Phillips (https://www.facebook.com/app_scoped_user_id/10211725384785533/) says:
March 17, 2018 at 9:05 am (<https://pvcycling.wordpress.com/2018/03/17/i-hate-your-e-bike/#comment-47091>)
Annoying, frustrating etc yes but they’re great to draft on the way home when you’re dog tired and they’re cruising at 20mph on the bike path into the wind.....
-  gcziko says:
March 17, 2018 at 9:22 am (<https://pvcycling.wordpress.com/2018/03/17/i-hate-your-e-bike/#comment-47092>)