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Bikenomics: How Bicycling Can Save the Economy

By Elly Blue

Microcosm, 2013

Reviewed by Jesus M. Barajas

Planning often prioritizes transportation projects based on quantified costs and benefits to the community. Recognizing decision-making standard, in *Bikenomics* Elly Blue delivers a pro-bike argument with which planners and bicycle activists might be familiar, but she supports this argument with facts and figures that will make city comptrollers take notice. A Portland-based writer and bicycle advocate, Elly Blue backs her claims with research that spans popular blog writing, advocacy organization reports, and academic articles in a way that informs, engages, and entertains. She invites an understanding that individuals, businesses, and cities all benefit from more and safer bicycling in their communities.

Bikenomics is largely organized around common refrains about the impossibility of making bicycling a coequal mode in the US transportation system. In the first few chapters, Blue tackles the high cost of automobiles and car ownership relative to the bicycle. Costs are borne, Blue argues, not only by individuals who must spend a high proportion of their income on transportation, but by all taxpayers who must pay the long-term debt incurred by borrowing to build roads. On the other hand, investment in bicycle infrastructure costs a fraction to build and maintain and, as argued later, bring local economic benefits that a new highway interchange cannot.

In the remainder of the book, Blue addresses topics common in writing on bicycling, but, unlike other journalistic and advocacy pieces, she focuses explicitly on quantifying costs and benefits. For example, in the chapter titled "Superhighway to Health," Blue describes the interrelationship between lack of access to healthy food, chronic disease, and sedentary lifestyles, asserting that a bicycle-based lifestyle could improve health outcomes and reduce total health-care costs. In a later chapter, Blue relates how two companies that paid employees to bicycle to work saw productivity gains and health-insurance-premium savings that exceeded the amount of the incentives. She approaches bike sharing, bike parking, and the economic impact of bicycling on local businesses similarly in order to build a case for the bicycle as a savior of the economy.

One of the most important contributions of *Bikenomics* is its consistent, explicit emphasis on equity issues in bicycling. Some equity issues

associated with current urban form and the transportation system are well known, such as the high cost of housing and transportation for the poor relative to their income. However, other topics Blue addresses have been discussed to a lesser extent. For example, bicycling and bicycle advocacy have, until very recently, been the domain of middle- to upper-class white males, creating barriers for women, people of color, and low-income families. Partly because of these barriers, practitioners have little systematic data on how and how much these marginalized populations are bicycling. Blue claims the lack of attention causes a vicious cycle: marginalized groups are not perceived as bicyclists and do not receive bicycle investments in their neighborhoods, which prevents their easy entry into bicycling. Advocacy organizations such as the League of American Bicyclists are already talking on these issues—recent publications have noted the changing demographics of bicycling, and a new equity initiative has launched to systematically include concerns of people of color in day-to-day bicycle advocacy work.

Blue effectively buttresses her arguments using a variety of sources, including blog posts, advocacy reports, government statistics, and academic publications. Her strongest writing comes through when analyzing topics systematically and as exhaustively as possible. For example, the chapter titled “Rethinking Safety” cites studies on how bike infrastructure reduces crashes, presents survey results that dispel the perception of the “ever-present” scofflaw cyclist, and introduces readers to basic domestic and international traffic policy analysis. However, some important claims go uncited throughout the book, so the work would benefit from additional endnotes pointing readers to the proper source material.

Unsurprisingly, Blue’s work is unapologetically both pro-bike and anti-car—or at least against our current autocentric transportation system—and those searching for a neutral viewpoint will not find one here. The book’s central claim is that if more people ride bikes, local economies will thrive; people will be richer, healthier, and have more life opportunities; roads and bridges will last longer; and transportation will be more environmentally sustainable. At times, however, the writing is too optimistic about bicycling as the panacea for the multiple crises we face: economic, climactic, and health, just to name a few. A variety of factors from global economic markets to local land-use zoning would prevent widespread success of bicycle-centric living. Indeed, the final paragraphs of the book invite such criticism, proclaiming that bicycling may not “save either the economy or the world that we have now,” but provides a vision of what our cities could become.

Nevertheless, *Bikenomics* will make a welcome addition to the bookshelves of bicycling advocates and planners who make a living thinking about bicycling, as well as the lay audience who is interested in how bicycling

can bring positive impacts to their lives. Unlike some other nonacademic writing on bicycling, the book's reliance on data weaved together with the author's personal narrative and case studies make a more convincing argument to support bicycling for businesses and governments interested in objective metrics.