Outside Magazine: Rage Against Your Machine

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Tom Vanderbilt takes a look at the conflict between motorists and cyclists in the latest issue of Outside Magazine-- and interviews **Bob Mionske** for his perspective.

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Outside Magazine: Rage Against Your Machine

By Tom Vanderbilt

THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU DEFINES AN "EXTREME COMMUTER" AS SOMEONE WHO SPENDS MORE THAN THREE HOURS GETTING TO AND FROM WORK.

This is usually understood to be by car. It's not clear, then, how the Census would categorize Joe Simonetti, a 57-year-old psychotherapist who lives with his wife in Pound Ridge, New York. His commute takes him from the northern reaches of exurban Westchester County to his office just south of Central Park.

It's about three and a half hours each way.

By bike.

When I heard about Simonetti's commute—some 50-odd road miles as Google Maps flies—I was vaguely stupefied. It may or may not be the longest bike commute in America, but it's certainly the most improbable. In my mind's eye, there was the dense clamor of New York City, then a netherland of train yards and traffic-clogged overpasses, then an outer belt of big-box retail, and then you were suddenly in the land of golf courses and five-acre zoning—where middle managers crowd the bar car on Metro-North and hedge-fund analysts cruise in 7 Series BMWs down I-95.

The idea that this landscape could be traversed on a bike struck me as fantastic. This is America, where 65 percent of trips under one mile are made by car. But at 7 A.M. on a mid-November Thursday—among the last of the year on which Simonetti was going to ride—I packed my bike into the back of a hired minivan and headed for Pound Ridge, noting with subtle alarm the ticking off of miles as we pushed north.

Simonetti obviously isn't the typical bike commuter. For one thing, he does it only twice a week, weather permitting. For another, he doesn't ride home the

same day; he has a crash pad in the city where he can shower and sleep. But in following this supercommuter, I wanted to open a window into what it means to be a cyclist in a country where the bicycle struggles for the barest acceptance as a means of transportation.

Over the years and the miles, Simonetti has experienced just about everything a cyclist can on the roads today:honked horns, cramped bike lanes, close calls with cars, and even a few crashes—the last one landing him in the hospital. I was curious to ride with him for the sheer novelty of it, and also to get a handle on what seemed to be an increasingly prevalent culture war between cyclists and drivers, one that was claiming actual lives. At least for one beautiful morning, I wanted to move beyond the alarming headlines and toxic chat rooms and into the real world, to get a sense of how, why—and if—things had gotten so bad.

My interest isn't because I'm a cyclist, though I am, in the loose recreational sense. Rather, the issue was forced upon me by the publication of my 2008 book Traffic, which looked at the oft-peculiar psychology of drivers. Cyclists were among the book's most devoted readers, although I'm still not sure if it's because they found my dissection of drivers' foibles educational or cathartic. After all, the little things that drivers think are excusable—forgetting a turn signal, weaving a bit as they fumble for their Big Gulps—can range from frustrating to life-threatening for a cyclist.

Simonetti's house, a cozy ranch that he jokes is the smallest in Pound Ridge, sits on a twisting country lane. The walkability-measuring Web site Walkscore.org gives his address a rating of zero, meaning, basically, that you can't get around without a car. Tall and trim, with a professorial salt-and-pepper beard, Simonetti is waiting with his LeMond Buenos Aires, a 50th-birthday gift that, he jokes, makes him look "like a real cyclist." Clad in a helmet, gloves, and a blue cycling jacket, he fills our bikes' bottles with a mixture of juice and water, checks that his back pouch has spare tubes (I've forgotten mine), and clicks his shoes into his pedals.

On a still-brisk morning—it's 8:30, and Simonetti's first appointment is at noon—we push off onto a route that Simonetti has refined over the years. It was, in fact, a bike ride that brought him here from the city. After a ride across America for charity in 1998, he returned to New York feeling "a bit midlifey." His daughter was already a teenager, and he craved nature. He and his wife, Carol Goldman, a social worker, were searching for a house that "felt country" but was still within cycling reach of Manhattan. "I never want to commute five days a week by train," he says. He is surely the only person in the history of Westchester County to arrive for a house showing by bike from Manhattan. "They thought I was pretty weird," he says of the realtors. He stresses that he is purely a "functional" cyclist: he rides when he needs to get somewhere, be it the hardware store or Midtown.

Our route snakes through preternaturally quiet daytime suburbs whose streets seem plied primarily by women in SUVs and tradesmen in pickups. A Latino landscaping crew smiles at us as we ride through the leaf storm they've blown up in Greenwich, Connecticut. We don't see any other cyclists until New Rochelle, and even then it's two young girls riding on the sidewalk. In the town of Rye Brook, a little after 10 A.M., we pause at a deli for

Simonetti's traditional pit-stop fare: an egg-white omelet with Swiss on a whole-wheat bagel. They all know him here, and a clipping from a local paper detailing his commute is stuck on the wall, behind a picture of the clerk's daughter.

Here, Simonetti is not some "Lycra lout," some "Lance wannabe," or any of the other epithets often hurled at cyclists. He's simply Joe. He's the guy who rides his bike to work. And, thanks to me and my questions and my questionable pace, he's late.

SOMEWHERE SOUTH of Pelham, Simonetti tells me of a crash last summer, in the Bronx, that left him with a broken collarbone. It was a "right hook," one of the most common crash types for cyclists: a driver, traveling in Simonetti's lane ahead of him, suddenly turned right—without signaling—directly into Simonetti's path. An ambulance responded quickly, but the police did not. The paramedics told Simonetti the police would deal with the driver when they arrived, he says. "But the guy left. I don't blame him." When the police, investigating what was now a hit-and-run, came to the hospital, they asked him if he'd gotten the license-plate number. "I was laid out on the ground," he laughs. The driver was never found.

Judging by recent headlines, it's not hard to believe that riding a bike has become a little like entering a war zone. No story blew up more than that of Steven Milo, a prominent New York anesthesiologist who was struck near Vail, Colorado, last July 3 by Martin Erzinger, a Denver money manager who specializes in "ultra-high-net-worth individuals." After veering off the road and hitting Milo from behind, throwing him off his bike, Erzinger drove to a Pizza Hut parking lot and called Mercedes roadside assistance. Milo, meanwhile, sustained spinal injuries, lacerations, and, according to court documents quoted by the Vail Daily, "bleeding from the brain." When the district attorney, citing "job implications" for Erzinger should he be convicted of a felony, downgraded the hit-and-run charges to a misdemeanor, the cycling blogosphere went off like a supernova. Erzinger had told police that he'd never seen Milo; among the more outlandish of his lawyer's later defenses was that "new-car smell" had impaired his client. Ultimately, the judge accepted the prosecutor's misdemeanor plea deal and sentenced Erzinger to probation, a suspended jail term, and community service.

Last September, in Maryland, Natasha Pettigrew, a Green Party candidate for U.S. Senate, was training at dawn for a triathlon when she was fatally struck by a Cadillac Escalade. No charges have yet been filed against the driver, who said that she thought she'd hit an animal until she got home and found Pettigrew's bike lodged under her car. In Florida, the country's deadliest state for cyclists—119 deaths in 2007, ten more than California despite having half the population—two riders participating in last year's annual Memorial Day ride were stabbed by a driver after words were exchanged on the road.

In 2009, the last year for which records are available, 630 cyclists were killed by cars in the U.S. (compared with 4,092 pedestrians). That's arguably a big improvement over the 1,003 cyclist fatalities that occurred in 1975, when, as Census data hint, far fewer people were commuting by bike and still fewer wore helmets. And yet, even if things have gotten safer, at least in terms of absolute deaths (which are easier to measure than where or how much

people are actually cycling), a sense of hostility—and sometimes outright violence—seems to be on the rise.

When accidents do happen, they can generate as much vitriol as concern, as drivers circle their station wagons and trot out now familiar arguments: that the roads are meant for cars, or that cyclists don't pay for the roads—a particularly unwarranted charge, given that local streets are paid for primarily by sales and property taxes. There's a feeling among many drivers that cyclists, either by their ignorance of the law or by their blatant disregard for it, are asking for trouble. "If the door opens into a bicycle rider," opined Rush Limbaugh on his radio show in 2009, "I won't care."

In one sense, the so-called bikelash has little to do with transportation modes. In the late 1960s, a pair of British psychologists set out to understand the ways in which we humans tend to split ourselves into opposing factions. They divided a group of teenage schoolboys, who all knew each other, into two groups and asked them to perform a number of "trivial tasks." The boys were then asked to give money to fellow subjects, who were anonymous save for their group affiliation. As it turned out, the schoolboys consistently gave more money to members of their own group, even though these groups had just formed and were essentially meaningless.

"The mere division into groups," wrote the psychologists, Henri Tajfel and Michael Billig, of the University of Bristol, "might have been sufficient to have produced discriminatory behavior." Though not exactly Lord of the Flies, the experiment was a demonstration of the power of what's called "social categorization"—and the penalties inflicted on the "out-group."

This dynamic appears on the road in all kinds of ways. "We know that merely perceiving someone as an outsider is enough to provoke a whole range of things," says Ian Walker, a researcher at the University of Bath who specializes in traffic psychology. "All the time, you hear drivers saying things like 'Cyclists, they're all running red lights, they're all riding on sidewalks,' while completely overlooking the fact that the group they identify with regularly engages in a whole host of negative behaviors as well." This social categorization is subtle but dominant, he points out. When people are given a piece of paper and asked to describe themselves, "men never write, 'I'm a man.' Whereas women will write 'woman' because being male is the 'default' status in society."

And so it is with cyclists. In a country like the Netherlands, which has more bikes than people and where virtually the entire population cycles at one time or another, the word cyclist isn't meaningful. But in the U.S., the term often implies something more, in both a good and a bad sense.

On the one hand, cyclists have a strong group affiliation, with clubs, group rides, and a flourishing network of bike blogs. And yet the oft-invoked idea of "bike culture" itself betrays cycling's marginal status in America, observes Eben Weiss, creator of the blog Bike Snob NYC, in his book Bike Snob: Systematically and Mercilessly Realigning the World of Cycling. "The truth is," he writes, "real cultures rarely call themselves cultures, just like famous things rarely call themselves famous."

The dark side of the "cyclist" label is that it becomes a shortcut to social categorization. Suddenly, that messenger who cut in front of you becomes the face of an entire population. And the next time you have an unpleasant encounter with a cyclist, it isn't just a matter of his (or your) carelessness: it seems intentional. Simonetti sees this type of reaction all the time, on the road and in his practice.

"As a couples therapist, I tell people that we take things so personally," he says as we near the Whitestone Bridge, on the first dedicated bike path we've seen in more than two hours. It's easy, when a car edges too close or cuts him off, to "go to that paranoid place where they're just trying to fuck with me. We're so worried that someone else can steal our sense of self that we fight for it at every turn." But it could have been just that the driver didn't see him. Under the spell of what's called "inattentional blindness," people have been known to miss obvious things simply because they're not looking for them. Either that or what seems inconsequential in a car—passing by within a foot or two—can be terrifying to someone on a bike.

One way to find out what drivers are thinking, of course, is to actually stop and ask them, which is precisely what one Wisconsin cyclist has been doing, with interesting results, for the past few years.

THE FIRST THING Jeff Frings wants you to know is that he's not out to get drivers. (He is one, after all.) The second thing is that he doesn't have a persecution complex.

"The majority of drivers go out of their way to give me room, and are decent and good drivers around cyclists," says Frings, a news cameraman and avid rider who lives in the suburbs of Milwaukee. "The problem is, it only takes one mistake to end your life or put you in a wheelchair."

A few years ago, Frings found out what happens when you encounter someone who isn't a good and decent driver. Out on a weekday ride, he was nearly sideswiped. Heated words followed. The driver accelerated away, then screeched on his brakes right in front of him. "I said, 'This is out of control,'" says Frings. "I called 911." This wasn't the only time. A similar incident ended not with a reprimand of the driver but with a threat by the responding officer to book Frings for disorderly conduct. Rattled by these experiences and dismayed by the lack of evidence, Frings mounted two small video cameras: one on his helmet, one rear-facing on the handlebars.

Frings started filming every one of the 100 to 250 miles he rides in a week, to provide proof against the claims of drivers, who are typically the only ones left standing after a serious bike-car crash. He posts the worst encounters on his Web site, bikesafer.blog spot.com, which could provide grist for a reality show: America's Douchiest Drivers. The incidents tend to follow a pattern:
1. Driver cuts him off or nearly runs him off the road.
2. Frings catches up to driver at red light.
3. Frings points out error of driver's ways.
4. Driver says something like "Get on the sidewalk where you belong, jag-off!"
5. Thus ensues what Frings calls "the Conversation," in which he notes (sometimes to police officers) that it's in fact illegal for him to ride on the sidewalk, and that while the law dictates that he be "as far to the right as

practicable," that doesn't mean the shoulder, and so forth.

Typically, this goes about as well you'd expect. "I'm trying to be less confrontational," says Frings. He's embracing politeness. "Can I just ask you one favor?" he will say. "Can you give me a little more room next time?" He takes his victories in handshakes, promises to do better, and the occasional ticket police give a driver after seeing Frings's evidence. And while he's not optimistic about converting the "haters"—those who believe bikes have no place on the road—he hopes that if he can just get one driver to be more empathetic toward cyclists, it's worth it. "Because the next time," he says, "could be my time."

The confusion over the laws pertaining to cyclists unfortunately echoes throughout the entire legal system, argues Bob Mionske, a two-time Olympic cyclist and Portland, Oregon–based lawyer specializing in cases involving bikers. "Enforcement is really where it all starts," he says. "If the police don't respect your mode of transportation, don't expect the rest of society to."

Laws are often unenforced. In researching a case in Tennessee where a driver hit a cyclist (who was "lit up like a Christmas tree," says Mionske) while passing, he found that the driver hadn't been given a ticket for violating the state's three-foot passing law—in fact, he couldn't find a case where a ticket had ever been given. Even worse, laws are sometimes used against cyclists. In 2008, a cyclist in Madison, Wisconsin, who'd been hospitalized after being "doored" was actually ticketed for riding less than three feet away from parked cars—even though, as most state traffic codes note, it's the driver's responsibility not to obstruct traffic of any kind when he opens his door. But the biker had only bad choices: ride too far into traffic and risk getting hit, or ride to the right and risk getting doored. Wisconsin has since changed the law.

In Mionske's view, justice for cyclists is often invisible, handled with civil settlements that rarely draw public attention. And criminal justice often hangs on a knife-edge. When a 14-year-old teenager in Connecticut was fatally struck by a speeding driver, Mionske notes that it was the driver's prior convictions—including multiple DWIs—that helped land him in jail. For anything but the most egregious cases, Mionske says, a driver who strikes a cyclist—even fatally—is rarely even brought to trial. In the case of the Vail hit-and-run last July, what changed things was that the victim was a successful doctor. "He wasn't going to sit down on this,"Mionske says. "Can you imagine if the guy had been collecting aluminum cans?"

Like many cyclists, Mionske would like to see some version of the liability system used in the Netherlands and other European countries, in which the burden of proof in a car-cyclist crash is on the driver—the idea being to encourage the user of the far deadlier vehicle to act more cautiously around the more "vulnerable road users," as cyclists are called in road-safety parlance.

Of course, if calling cyclists "vulnerable" makes it seem like they're never to blame, that's not true, either. It's not just those hipsters on fixies sealed off from the world by earbuds who give bikers an image problem. Plenty of well-meaning bike commuters aren't aware of the laws, or fail to use bright

flashing lights at night, or turn without giving hand signals. Statistically, some studies show cyclists running more red lights than drivers—for a number of complicated reasons, whether to conserve momentum, to get ahead of traffic and be more visible, or, more profoundly, perhaps because their out-group status leads them to act that way.

But the red lights may be a red herring. The way cyclists get hurt seems to have less to do with their own culpability and more to do with getting hit by cars—either from behind or when a car turns right, the way Simonetti was struck. Echoing research in the UK, a recent three-year study by Australia's Monash University found that in 54 recorded crashes among a sampling of cyclists, drivers were at fault nearly nine out of ten times.

Regardless of fault, there's another twist here. As various studies have found, the more cyclists and cycling infrastructure a town has, the safer it becomes statistically, not just for cyclists but for drivers and pedestrians alike. When New York City put a protected bike lane on Ninth Avenue, some protested it as unsafe for people on foot. But since the lane's opening, pedestrian injuries on Ninth have dropped by 29 percent. Last year, as miles of bike lanes were added, New York had its best pedestrian-safety record ever.

While Mionske is generally positive about recent initiatives like Oregon's Vulnerable Road User law, which stiffens penalties for striking a pedestrian or cyclist, and the bicyclist bills of rights passed in a number of other states, he believes that laws are not enough. "Until the public attitude changes, you're not going to change the experience everyone has out there in the world," he says, "whether it's other kinds of discrimination or modism—discriminating against people because of their mode of transportation."

THERE ARE TIMES, however, when the gulf seems too wide to span. On one of his rides, Frings was hailed by a man standing in his front yard. The man announced he had passed him earlier in his car. He told Frings he had almost hit him, because he was riding too far into the road. "I tried to explain to him the concept of 'taking the lane'—that the lane's too narrow for us to be side by side, and drivers would think they could pass me even when there's oncoming traffic," Frings says. "That concept, before I talked to him about it, was completely foreign to him. He couldn't understand how it would be safer for me to ride farther out."

Hence one of the major fault lines of driver-cyclist relations. While virtually every cyclist in America is also a driver, relatively few drivers are also cyclists. "People either don't know how to handle you," says Andy Clarke, president of the League of American Bicyclists, "or they don't want to handle you." There's an empathy gap that, as you know if you've spent much time on cycling blogs, can cut both ways.

In one study in which drivers were asked how they feel about cyclists, one of the recurring labels was "unpredictable." When asked to elaborate, drivers often blamed the "attitudes and limited competence" of the cyclists themselves, rather than the "difficulty of the situations that cyclists are often forced to face on the road." When asked to describe their own actions or those of other drivers, however, they blamed only the situation. Psychologists call this the "fundamental attribution error."

So drivers, perhaps already stressed out from being late for work or stuck in traffic, then have to negotiate their way around a vehicle they essentially don't understand, causing even more stress, which they tend to attribute to something about cyclists. It's a vicious cycle—most vicious, in terms of actual harm, for cyclists.

Cyclists, too, can be as susceptible as anyone to "modal bias," thinking that one's mode of travel is the "normal," even superior, one. After researching my book, there may be no more conscientious—or paranoid—driver on the American road than me. But I am still occasionally flummoxed by some wrong-way night rider wearing black. I want to tell them, "Don't ruin it for everyone!" Then again, I wouldn't tell a rude fellow driver not to ruin the image of drivers.

Yes, cultural politics are getting weird, which may also explain some of the tension, as Brian Ladd, author of the 2008 book Autophobia, argues. "Most Americans," he wrote in a December post on the urban-planning Web site Planetizen.com, "know one thing about the bicyclists they see on the roads: they are losers, and you thank God you're not one of them." But wait, he says, noting the fashionability of cycling: Who's doing the sneering here? "It's harder to dismiss cyclists as beneath contempt," he says, "when you suspect that they might just be contemptuous of you."

In thinking about how to improve driver-cyclist relations in America, the easiest thing is to simply get more people on bikes. Growing up in the small Wisconsin town of Twin Lakes, Mionske notes, he "didn't see more than two road bikes in my entire childhood." Now, he jokes, "you've got packs of 40 guys riding around pissing people off." But with each new cyclist, he says, it's no longer "the Other; it's us."

Few American cities have done a better job of getting people on bikes than Portland, Oregon, where around 7 percent of the population bikes to work and children cycle to school in huge "bike trains." And yet, last year, like many recent years, no cyclist was killed. (By comparison, Tampa, Florida, a city where fewer than 1 percent of the population commutes by bike, had nine cyclist fatalities in four months in 2009.) Greg Raisman, a traffic-safety specialist with Portland's Bureau of Transportation, says one key to getting people biking is providing infrastructure—actual or symbolic. The city features "bicycle boulevards" and bike-only traffic signals, and it's planning new six-foot-wide bike lanes. It recently put some 2,100 "sharrows" bike symbols on 50 miles of residential streets. He says the symbols send messages to motorists and are, as many Portlanders have told him, changing "people's mental maps of the city."

"We need to get people to change the way they think about transportation," Raisman says. While all road users need to step up in terms of behavior, he believes, calling for cyclists to be licensed, as some critics have lately done, isn't the right place to start. "I recently got my driver's license renewed," he says. "They just asked me if my address was the same." Among the things he was not asked was whether he was aware of traffic-code changes like the 2007 Vulnerable Road User law or a new Oregon rule that makes it legal for cyclists to pass on the right so they can filter to the front past queues of cars

stopped at traffic lights.

THE GREENWAYS of Portland seem very far away as Joe Simonetti and I pedal down a street in the Bronx that looks like the nightmare underbelly of America's car culture. In front of myriad body shops sit subcompacts with mashed-in crumple zones and SUVs with spidery shattered windows. A billboard urges auto-accident victims to dial 1-800-I-AM-HURT. Cars honk and weave, delivery trucks wait parked in the bicycle lane. "The Bronx is lawless," says Simonetti. "It's the Wild West, dog eat dog—or car eat car."

We cross the Madison Avenue Bridge into Manhattan and a few minutes later reach the Central Park loop, one of the few car-free spaces of the day. Our ride has gone off without conflict, not that it's always so. "It's hard to ride ten years without some incident," Simonetti says. There's a crash—not always major—every season or so, not to mention logistical concerns like bathroom breaks. He says he enjoys two-thirds of the ride but admits to having to "push myself" through the final third.

But the benefits are clear. For one, Simonetti, despite being nearly two decades my senior, seems ready to keep riding, whereas I'm struggling from an old knee injury that's come wriggling up like worms after rain. For another, knee notwithstanding, I feel fantastic. In a study by the University of Surrey, car commuters reported having the "most stressful" commutes, while cyclists saw their journeys as "interesting and exciting." Indeed, where driving into New York City always leaves me feeling edgy and irritable, I now feel curiously alive.

To cycle in America today is to engage in an almost political act, but what's often obscured is the simple idea of pleasure. Andy Clarke notes that bike-component maker Shimano, in some research it conducted with the design firm IDEO, found that when you talk to adults and ask them about their earliest childhood memory, "it invariably involves a bike—exploring their neighborhood, careening down a hill, ditching the training wheels." We need to rediscover that, he says. "They don't want to feel like they have to be Lance. People want to be normal, and they want cycling to be a part of normal life."

Returning from a visit to Cape Cod last summer, I was staggered to see a traffic jam stretching for dozens of miles, heading to the beaches. Almost every car had several bikes lashed to it. You could almost feel the collective urge to escape traffic and get on a bike. I thought: This is the country that hates cyclists, that sees them as a road menace?

Simonetti and I draw to a stop outside his office building, two people on bikes amid Midtown gridlock. I ask him why he does it. "I have a tremendous feeling of accomplishment," he says. "No matter what else happens in the day, I can feel good about the ride. There aren't many other things that make me feel that way."

How many people can say that about their commute? After saying goodbye to Simonetti, I head home myself, riding over to the Hudson River Greenway, that jewel of New York's expanding—and controversial—bicycle network, where none of the larger thoughts about cycling in America intrude. I'm just

enjoying the breeze off the river and thinking about that final climb over the Brooklyn Bridge.