

The Outlaw Collective:
Skateboarding and Societal Interaction

Andrew Nelson
Professor Terry Mosher
SUNY Fredonia: En 356

Spring 2001

The fabric of our social, political, and personal lives is impossibly tangled within the systems that dictate and surround our lives. Often, as we live out our lives, we make decisions and adopt beliefs without exerting any discerning thoughts over these things. These beliefs seem to be chosen freely, but Louis Althusser claims that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (301). He then goes on to say that ideology interpellates individuals by convincing them that they are freely choosing the ideology when the ideology is choosing individuals. Because of the lack of actual decision-making involved, when people are faced with situations in which their unconscious beliefs are challenged, many times their response is quite striking. Historically this can be observed in people’s reactions to situations such as the postulation of the heliocentric model of the solar system and the discovery of the spherical nature of the Earth. Discoveries such as these stand in stark contrast to people’s inherent beliefs, and those who support these types of discoveries become targets for private violence, public reprehension, and state reprimand. Although it is rare for ideas to have such far-reaching consequences, the general reaction is the same regardless of the depth and breadth of the ideas themselves. The resistance that is presently held up against skateboarding is of the same substance, albeit with less intensity, as that which was against the theory of a spherical Earth. This resistance comes against skateboarding because skateboarding is a socially progressive force which challenges some beliefs intrinsic to the capitalist-driven lifestyle.

Before discussing the ways in which skateboarding manifests its socially progressive nature, whether or not skateboarding is social at all needs to be addressed. It could be claimed that skateboarding is not social, that kids who engage in skateboarding are no different than kids who ski, collect comics, or play soccer. One might be inclined to think that this supposed organization or network of individuals is no more of a network than kids who spend most of their

free time playing video games. These assumptions, however, are ill-concocted and lack a heartfelt examination of the subject at hand. Skateboarding is an intrinsically social activity. It is social not through interpersonal interactions, but in its interactions with society at large. This distinction is essential because it necessarily and rightfully separates skateboarding from other sports.

Recently, skateboarding has been referred to as a ‘sport’ more and more frequently. The inclusion of skateboarding coverage on ESPN has contributed to its increasing association with the more generally accepted sports. This association is entirely misguided because skateboarding is fully at odds with other sports. It is not compatible with them because they create and require artificial conditions and environments for themselves. These would be things such as organization (e.g.-coaches; teams), restrictive areas (e.g.-skiing mountains; bowling alleys), rules of play (e.g.-rules of football or baseball), or commercial value (e.g.-baseball cards). Skateboarding uses none of these controlling mechanisms. Its world is extra-organizational and therefore out of reach of the control commonly asserted by our present culture: *In skateboarding the world is interacted with in the deepest sense.* This world, unlike the constructed environments and conditions of popular sports, is unfriendly, aggressive, and antagonistic.

It is essential at this point to understand the line that is, or should be, drawn between skateboarding and other “extreme” activities such as rollerblading and biking. Although these things often function in the same environment that skateboarding does, they must be discounted because of their origins. These activities are based upon, derived from, and still look up to skateboarding. The basic shape of the equipment used is obviously unique to each; however, as these things developed into “extreme” activities, they looked to skateboarding for everything that now defines them. Adding grind plates and smaller center wheels to rollerblades and grind pegs

and dropouts (added to the rear forks) to bikes was a way to modify the equipment that was already available so it could be used on the same types of obstacles that skateboarding utilizes. Biking and rollerblading adopted much of skateboarding's trick styles as well as many of skateboarding's trick types and names. They also developed their style of dress and attitude through emulation of skateboard culture. In fact, both biking and rollerblading are still following skateboarding's lead in many of these areas. From this, the point that is to be taken is simple: Skateboarding is an entity unto itself. During an interview with Thrasher magazine, John Cardiel, a professional skateboarder who has been skating for "about 16 or 17 years," addressed this issue: "**Jake Phelps:** ...does skateboarding owe anybody anything? **John Cardiel:** No it doesn't, because skateboarding is what it is" (153).

The interaction skateboarding maintains with its surroundings (discussed 2 paragraphs prior) lies at the center of its power as a socially progressive force. Through this interactive nature, skateboarding simultaneously challenges the present political system, the capitalistic nature of our country, the overbearing dominance of commercialism in our culture, and questions corporate control of private lives and decisions. This interactive nature comes into direct conflict with the ways in which the state, corporate, and commercial worlds want individual citizens to view their surroundings. In other words:

...in focusing on building elements like ledges and window sills, skateboarders reject the idea that the city is only a grand project of planners and magnificent Utopias and suggest, instead, that it is also about local micro-spaces and about actions of actual city residents....Skateboarders also ignore the intended use of buildings, and so deny the function of architecture in the whole production-exchange-consumption process (Borden 40).

The power of this interaction lies in its disruptive nature. Derrida felt that "Freeplay is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain" (508). This concept

of freeplay parallel's skateboarding's interaction with its surroundings. Skateboarding challenges presence because it ignores the "signifying and substitutive reference" made by its surroundings.

We, as a commercialistic culture, are taught to believe that our actions, in many cases, are dictated by our surroundings and that those surroundings are unchangeable or above our control. Contrary to this, however, skateboarding puts forth an ideal of individual control. By shifting the function of architecture "skateboarders deny that architecture is solely the product of experts, such as architects, designers and urban managers, and implicitly propose that architecture...is made and remade," and this threatens the state, commercial, and corporate attempts to control the population (Borden 40). In skateboarding "every feature of the man-made world is a challenge to street skaters. Every stair is an obstacle to be jumped. Every bench is an invitation. Every handrail, guardrail, curb (painted and unpainted, there is a difference), planter box, fire hydrant, culvert, every nub and blip on the horizon is something that can be [used]..." (Kelly). The determination of function by individuals is something that is implicit in and unique to skateboarding. The fact that "it is a sport that uses the urban landscape as its playing field" and that "wheelchair ramps, stone steps and metal railings are all part of the 'natural terrain'" (New England) creates a "dialectic between counter culture and hegemonic social practice" (Borden 42).

This dialectic is present because skateboarding challenges the illusion of public property. The importance of this illusion is often passed over or, at best, underrated. Maintenance of this illusion is integral to controlling the populace because its presence masks the forces attempting to exert control over people's lives; they would realize that their lives and ideals are manipulated, and with this realization would come a reaction against the deception and manipulation. Ideas

like public property are used to maintain the general population's ignorance of the situation in which they function. They foster an attitude of complacency and permissiveness toward controlling influences in people's lives. People view things like sidewalks, parks, and often commercial properties (because anyone is supposedly welcome to frequent them) as spaces available for all to use: public property.

This, however, is untrue. These spaces aren't for all to *use* but for all to "be" on. The only thing that people are free to do in these spaces is to "be" or to exist. Existence is **not** use. People have been trained and taught to think that the "use" of public property is the allowance of existence in those surroundings. "Use," in all other contexts, however, is generally to determine and enact something's function.

Also up for question is the "public" of public property. These supposedly public places often will exclude certain groups from the designation of "public." For instance, those without homes are unwelcome in public parks, those without jobs are unwelcome in commercial areas, if you're handing out pamphlets you are unwelcome in public areas, and, of course, these attitudes extend to skateboarders as well. Oddly enough, skateboarding doesn't impinge upon actual private property. In the overwhelming majority of cases, skateboarding takes place in what are commonly considered to be public areas. Rarely will skateboarding encroach upon an individual's private home.

Skateboarding's existence in the perceived public sphere begs the question: "Where is the resistance to skateboarding coming from?" The answer to this question will reveal who or what controls what is commonly considered public property. If it is public space, the resistance should come from the public, but it does not. Obviously, corporations and commercialism control the commercial properties, whether they are seen as commercial or not. Now, things

such as parks and sidewalks are a bit less obvious; however, they aren't that subtle either. When skateboarders are restricted and/or banned from these types of places, it is often by state authority or a combination of state and commercial influence. This fact can be seen because skaters are always thrown out either by pure police involvement, police involvement at the request of commercial owners, or sometimes by the commercial sector themselves. This could be anything from privately hired security guards to the owners themselves. As stated by John F. Kelly:

If it isn't the cops chasing you away for skating in a Montgomery County parking lot or a downtown Washington plaza, it's some private security dick threatening to take your board away and call your parents because you're on mall property or in an office building driveway. Is it any wonder that a popular item at a recent industry trade show was a T-shirt emblazoned with the words 'I can go to war, I can fight for my country, I can kill if necessary, but I can't skateboard on public property' (Okay, so it's not 'Give me liberty or give me death' but it shows a little more activism than 'I'm With Stupid.')."

"The intensification of skateboarding in public streets has led to repression and legislation...The general effect has been to embed the threat of arrest, fines and even imprisonment within skateboarding's everyday activity" (Borden 42). This war being waged upon skateboarding is taking place throughout the U.S. and is a calculated, planned, and well-implemented effort on the part of commercial and state institutions to control and sterilize skateboarding's power. A perfect example of the cooperation of state and commercial institutions in exorcising skateboarders from public property is found in the Washington Post. The article "Riding the Edge of Controversy" chronicles the struggle between skateboarders and the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corp. for the Freedom Plaza in Washington, D.C., which, incidentally, is still going on today. This battle is fairly one-sided because skateboarders have no way to fight back. They can only return and do what they love. The Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corp., however, holds much more power. For instance, in the article it states that

“efforts to remove the youngsters—including pleading with city officials, posting a security guard and “no skateboarding” signs—have been unsuccessful. But alarmed at the damage, and with what many view as the future of the plaza as a public space at stake, the battle is about to be joined again” (Escobar). Everything is here in this quote. Revealed in this quote is not only the unbalanced power being exerted, but the concept that skaters are threatening public space, when, in actuality, they are making visible the fact that this space is not public at all.

This situation begins to shed light on some fascinating relations. Freedom plaza is supposedly a public space; yet, oddly enough, this public space is being controlled and regulated by a commercial institution. Even more interesting is the fact that the overarching view of the presence of skateboarders seems to be that they are a threat to the public space. So, the corporation is forcing people (read: skaters) to leave (this is thought to be okay), and yet it is believed that skateboarders are making the parks less public by engaging and interacting with the parks themselves.

This situation is reminiscent of Louis Althusser’s idea of a Problematic. A Problematic is made up of the “visible” and the “invisible.” “In other words, what a problematic considers to be important, or what it can think about and see, what it can *allow to exist* will be ‘the visible’; what it considers unimportant, and what it cannot think because of its own limitations, will be ‘the invisible’ (Althusser 25-6). In this particular situation, the corporate, and, more generally, commercial, control over what the general population thinks makes private control of supposed public property “unseen” or “invisible.” People don’t even recognize the meaning and consequences behind corporate control of these areas. When things are deemed “invisible,” “they are invisible because they are rejected in principle, repressed from the field of the visible; and that is why their fleeting presence in the field when it does occur (in very peculiar and

symptomatic circumstances) *goes unperceived*, and becomes literally an undivulged absence—since the whole function of the field is not to see them” (Althusser 25-6). This “undivulged absence” (people’s seeming blindness to state and commercial control) is set up by these institutions to avoid an uprising against any overt displays of power. People will remain complacent if power is hidden; however, when power is openly displayed (e.g.-Rodney King) people will have an adverse reaction to it. The “invisible” is set up as a means of control.

Returning to the case of Freedom Plaza, another intriguing aspect of these type of situations is the cooperation of commercial and state entities against skateboarding. In the article, it states that Pennsylvania Development Corp. is pursuing legislation and that “the proposed legislation, drafted by the agency’s general counsel after consulting city attorneys, is all-encompassing: “No person shall ride a skateboard upon any roadway, sidewalk or public space or upon any structure located in the Pennsylvania Avenue development area” (Escobar). Cursorily mentioned in the article is the arresting fact that this amorphous ‘area’ includes “several areas along the avenue that attract skateboarders, including the plaza, John Marshall Park, the Navy Memorial and Indiana Park” (Escobar). Easily noticeable is the fact that none of the things listed are commercial properties, and yet they fall under corporate regulation. When the fact that there is corporate control of things as public as memorials is combined with the cooperative relations between corporate and governmental entities, there begins to form a conglomeration of power-wielding structures that oversee every facet of life. Please don’t misunderstand, this is not attempting to state that these two things are focusing all of their energies on stamping out skateboarding. Rather, the situation seems to be that this power structure resists skateboarding’s influence because it runs contrary to their interests.

Their resistance to skateboarding has many advocates and takes many forms which span a continuum ranging from skateboarding as a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment to much more subtle means of control and sterilization. On the criminal end of the spectrum, skateboarding is often referred to as being a destruction of property. This argument is obviously underlaid by the idea that skateboarding destroys property. A perfect example of this attitude is the fact that “in areas such as mini-malls and office plaza’s, spaces hovering between private and public domain, urban managers have declared skaters as trespassers, or they have cited the marks skateboarding causes as criminal damage” (Borden 42). This attitude is also reflected in this quote (referring to Port Washington, a village on Long Island): ““The village enacted the law not only in response to complaints from owners of the shopping centers and pedestrians,’ Mr. Pellegrino said, ‘but also to protect the youths.’ ‘For a year now,’ he said, ‘kids have been riding up and down the parking lot on skateboards and skates, destroying benches, making long runs and doing somersaults, and putting life and limb in danger’” (Musleah).

There are two concepts voiced in this quote that point toward attempts to dominate skateboarding. The first is the implication that skateboarders (here referred to under the general heading of “youths”) must be spoken for. They do not have the ability to protect themselves, so laws must be passed in their best interest. The people like Mr. Pellegrino feel that putting yourself in danger indicates an inability to make informed decisions on your own behalf. Because skateboarders involve themselves in an activity that does not assure absolute safety, their wellbeing is co-opted by those who are not involved. This effectively curbs the possibility of skateboarders interacting with others in a productive manner.

The assumption that skateboarding destroys property is also entirely false. Metal rails aren’t broken, steps, curbs, and benches aren’t smashed, and certainly the sidewalk isn’t

damaged. Some might insist that the concrete is damaged, cracked, and defaced from skateboarding. Again this is entirely false. First of all, the urethane from which skateboard wheels are molded is the exact same hardness as rollerblade wheels. So, to ban skateboarding from parks for damage to sidewalk concrete means that all rollerblading activities must be banned as well. Because the wheels are the same hardness, simply riding along the ground cannot be allowed. Roller hockey especially would need to be banned because smacking the sticks on the ground is just as likely to crack or chip the pavement as landing on a skateboard; even if it lands upside down, the wood of skateboards is no more or less damaging than the hockey sticks. Secondly, skateboarders must put wax on the ledges, benches, and other things to be able to grind them. This wax lets the skateboard slide across the concrete, effectively avoiding chipping and cracking, and causing, at worst, a black buildup on the concrete and a rounding of the edges. Again, argument may be made that this is defacing the property (something akin to littering). However, if someone happens to drive their tires along a curb, they aren't harassed or arrested. Driving car tires along a curb has the same rounding effect as skateboards and leaves a black buildup as well.

The contradictive nature of the argument that skateboarding causes damage that wouldn't normally occur is perfectly revealed in this quote: "John Clift, director of facilities at Trinity Church, has nothing personal against the skateboarders. He just wishes the black that edges the steps were the honest scuff off the shoes of parishioners, not skateboard wax" (New England). Important to notice in this quote is the use of the word "honest." The implication is that skateboarding is dishonest. The relation between "honest" and "dishonest" is morality and criminality. Through the use of this phrasing, skateboarding has suddenly become immoral and criminal. The conclusion of all this: The idea that skateboarding is destructive and mischievous

is a product of the state and corporate resistance to skateboarding. The consequences of this: Kids involved in skateboarding are automatically perceived as trouble-causing, lawless, disrespectful youth. The reality of the situation is that the ‘trouble and destruction’ they are supposedly causing is simply a construction of the state/corporate world. This is dictated to the rest of the population in an effort to discourage skateboarding outside of a controlled setting.

As was mentioned earlier and implied by the last sentence, overt methods of suppression, such as arrest, fines, etc., are only one approach that can be taken. There are other, more subtle and subversive means of control implemented. The most pervasive of these is the support for and opening of skate parks. Whether public or private, skate parks are incredibly effective at sterilizing skateboarding’s intrinsic power to resist. There are multiple reasons for this. First of all, they remove skateboarders from the streets; they confine them to environments in which their interaction with objects becomes meaningless and useless. Interaction becomes artificial. Secondly, parks are a place where state and commercial influences can be imposed upon skaters. They can charge admission if they so please (to maintain the commercialistic system that’s so important to them); they can make rules that are enforceable (because people can be told leave, therefore making skating something that they control); the system even inundates young children into the role of a good consumer who ascribes to the same ideals put forth by the television set twenty four hours a day. Also, parks provide a place where behavior is observed and regulated. Skate parks are used as a means to restrict skateboarders’ activities in the real, raw world that they normally function in. When parks are installed, the police, store owners, and others can then say that skaters aren’t allowed because they have another place to go. Skate parks become an excuse or a dumping ground: something for authority figures to resort to when they come up against people who want to use public property as public property. Skateboarding is corralled.

In the words of Ruquayya Freeman (a concession stand crew leader), “They need to make a park where they can skateboard so they won’t come over here” (Munoz).

This idea of skate parks as a means of control is not something that has developed recently in the battle between skateboarders and state and commercial institutions. It’s been a tactic from the beginning. “Twenty years ago, commercial skateboard parks were opened. (In 1976, Fortune magazine endorsed skateboard parks as a best bet for entrepreneurs.) But of the 200 parks built then, only 2 remain” (New England). About a decade later (in 1989) the New York Times ran an article on the present state of skateboarding. In this article there was a quote that said:

When you see skateboards in advertising during the Super Bowl, you know it’s become mainstream. And parents realize it’s a great alternative to gangs and drugs”. In the past, some have viewed the skateboarder as a rebel, someone who wore punk-rock clothes and decorated his skateboard and equipment with skulls and crossbones. “Some people tended to equate skateboarders with skinheads and Satanists,” Mr. Cozens said. “But nothing could be further from the truth. Now that it’s more middle America, that perception is changing (Bad Boy Image).

The attempts that were made in 1976 to control skateboarding are the same as the attempts made in 1989 and the same as those being made today. An article in the Washington Post, published in April of 2000, reveals that the same type of tactics are still being used.

Vans, the California-based shoemaker, opened its fourth and largest skatepark in the country on Saturday at Potomac Mills, which seems a smart spot given that it’s Virginia’s top tourist attraction with 24 million visitors a year. It’s Vans’ first park on the East Coast—and its first outside of skate-central California—but at least judging from opening day, it looks to be well worth the \$4 million-plus it cost to build it. “There’s a line out the door,” Neal Lyons, Vans’ president of retail, practically giggled on Saturday. (It stayed that way all day.) Then Lyons pointed inside to the skaters who were making time to the hip-hop music and said, with much glee: “These kids, they’re all paying.”...So of course, the little hellions are welcome—as long as they bring cash (or their parents’ charge cards) (Berselli).

This subtle control is also starkly illuminated in a quote from a New York Times article from October 1998. The article is discussing skateboarding in New England. It states that “now that boarding has been reborn as a street sport, some cities, like Boston, are trying to corral their boarders by building public skateboard parks, nonprofit areas where skaters can practice. Boston has allocated \$2.6 million for two parks. There are about 300 public parks in the United States....”

One of the most fascinating aspects of this battle is the fight that the skateboarding community has been able to maintain. They fight without any kind of monetary or political leverage against two of the most powerful of forces. As the entrenched institutions try to neutralize skateboarding by attempting “...to institutionalize adolescents in trade and consumption, skaters set up their own parallel world distinct from the one organized by parents, corporations, and the state” (Borden 39). Their most effective weapon is something akin to nonviolent resistance. This is simply the fact that the best way to avoid the attempts at control through skate parks is to not go. If skateboarders don’t go to parks, they will close and thus will end their ability to regulate and compartmentalize skateboarding. Along with this boycotting tactic comes skater-opened parks that exist without regulations as an alternative to the commercialistic parks that periodically pop up. For instance, “Portland, Ore., had two skateboard parks—the one that the city built for \$41,000 (which closed after two years for lack of insurance) and the good one that a bunch of skaters threw together under a bridge” (Homemade Skatepark). This quote states that the city park closed for lack of insurance, but what that implies is that the park wasn’t making enough money to pay for the insurance they held. Also, an interesting and relevant side note to this article, the park that was thrown together under a bridge has become one of the most famous skate parks in the world: Burnside. It has

also inspired similar parks in other cities. In Philadelphia, FDR skatepark was built in the same manner (a concrete park built under a bridge) and it is becoming nearly as well-known as Burnside. These two places are without a doubt the two most well-known and well-respected concrete skateparks in skateboarding today.

The popularity of these two places is so important because it is indicative of a deeper statement being made. These two parks, among the most well-known parks in skateboarding, have no owners, no rules, no hours, no fences, no age limit, no insurance waivers, and no helmets. They are a physical representation of the heart of skateboarding. In light of this, it is no surprise that when towns like Farmington, ME build a skate park (worth around \$35,000), it closed within two years because it lacked use (New England). As the state-commercial-corporate alliance attempts to curb skateboarding, skaters refuse to go without a fight. Skateboarding will not be pushed out of public spaces by threats of fines, confiscation, or arrest. Skateboarding refuses to be “corralled” in skate parks where it can be regulated, restricted, controlled and manipulated. Skateboarders even seem to somehow muster enough cohesiveness to avoid being torn apart by increasing corporate over-marketing and exploitation.

Corporate influences have tried to neutralize skateboarding by making it “cool” as well. The logic is that if it become “cool” enough, it will lose its effectiveness because of the sheer number of kids doing it. It will be pushed more and more into the public eye, and, if it’s pushed far enough and enough kids are involved, it will come to be in the best interest of the state and corporate mechanisms to bring much more of their power to bear on controlling and compartmentalizing it. They will pass laws that ban skateboarding outside of a regulated, restricted, supervised setting (parks). They will steepen the penalties for violating these new laws. They will begin to apply rules to skateboarding (how to skateboard, what tricks you can

and can't do, etc.), and they may even institute a system similar to the one which is in place at skiing mountains. When you go to a skate park you would have to take a skateboarding test to assess your ability level. Once that is checked, you would be given a pass to use certain parts of the park and not others. If you violate this you would be kicked out. Skateboarding will become quarantined into parks and away from the streets where it can make an impact.

Oddly enough, skateboarding has again been able to resist these attempts as well. An article written in 1989 quotes a skate shop owner saying, "Kids using skateboards used to have a bad-boy image. But the clothing is now more preppie." Earlier in this article it says, "For the second time since it was introduced in California in the mid-1960's, skateboarding has made a comeback. But those involved in skateboarding say that this time, the sport will not fade away, as it did in the late 1970's, just after a brief resurgence" (Bad Boy Image). If you remember from earlier in the paper, this brief resurgence occurred around the time that over 200 public parks were built in the U.S. After this boom, skateboarding dropped from sight for about a decade. Then, like clockwork, it began to gain popularity in the late 1980's. More parks began to be built, skateboarding was inserted into the media (the Super Bowl, as mentioned earlier), and "many city and town governments throughout the nation, citing the sport as a public nuisance, have passed laws to prohibit skateboards on sidewalks, in streets or in public parks" (Bad Boy Image). After this boom in the late '80's, skateboarding once again plummeted in popularity and retreated back into its normal, comfortable form. Until, as usual, a decade later it began to surface once again.

This resurgence is exactly what is going on right now. Skateboarding is returning from its usual decade-long era of existing in its normal form. Everything from the mass-marketing of skateboarding, to its airplay in prominent media groups, to numerous new parks being opened,

and even more strenuous legislation being passed is once again being revisited. The assault that skateboarding is taking right now is in all of the same forms and from all of the same fronts that it has dealt with in the past. Whether or not it will be able to withstand this attack again remains to be seen. However, this seemingly cyclical nature implies something deeper that needs to be examined, something that is integral to skateboarding's power as a socially progressive force: What is it about skateboarding that holds it together? Why does skateboarding keep resurfacing in all of the same forms and with all of the same societal prejudices and reactions? The simple answer is "because skateboarding is what it is" (Cardiel 153).

This answer, although correct, isn't sufficient. There is further inquiry to be made. Skateboarding "is what it is" and, by being what it is constantly, it creates a common consciousness to which kids are indoctrinated by experience and involvement. This collective consciousness that is formed comes from numerous sources, none are essential but each contributes enough to be irremovable.

One of these is a common experience as far as the activity of skateboarding goes. This is easily evident in this description of kids skateboarding at a plaza:

The skaters swarm toward the main part of the plaza, raised three steps from where they've just been. That's not a problem. They jump the steps, like salmon hurtling upstream. They're in the Congress House now, skating across the inlaid pattern of the capital's original design. One kid, amazingly, has a camcorder hoisted atop his shoulder and is recording all the action, including the part when a well-dressed, fiftyish woman wades into the pack and starts lecturing them about destruction of public property, making loud noises, dangerous activity, you should be ashamed, etc., etc. (Kelly).

This scene and experience is something that all skaters can relate to. If you skateboard and you haven't had this experience then you haven't been skateboarding very long, or you bought into skate parks as an acceptable and viable alternative to skating street and have rarely ventured out into the surrounding world.

Also evident in this passage, which, incidentally, was written by someone outside of skateboarding, is the fact that most people view, and therefore treat, skateboarders as a group. They are seen as a collective so any experience a person has with a skateboarder is automatically generalized to all skaters. Many times, I have personally been treated as a deviant and a trouble-maker, not for anything I had actually done, but because I am a skater. The person had a bad experience with a skater in the past and this transferred to me.

Being interacted with on a collective level is very disorienting at first. When you start skateboarding you can't figure out why people would think of you a certain way because of someone you don't even know. However, as you stay in skateboarding longer you become accustomed to this and begin to act accordingly; you accept the fact that people view you this way, and you begin to realize that you have a great store of experiences in common with other skateboarders. So, although it is difficult to accept and understand at first, you have inadvertently become indoctrinated into this collective of skateboarding.

Aside from the common experiential background that is developed, there are other things that create a common consciousness among skaters. One of these things is the type of people that tend to become involved in skateboarding. “[Skating] tends to draw in the kids that aren't really team players,” says Bostick. “There's a lot of quiet people. Skating for them is a form of self-expression. They find that skating gives them some self-identity, self-worth. It's something they can excel at, progress at at their own rate without peer pressure” (Kelly). Obviously, as stated above, because of the nature of skateboarding, the people who are drawn to it will normally have certain personality traits. This is also important in relation to the cycle of skateboarding. When skateboarding becomes popular for a period of time, there is a lot more diversity in skating. As it gains recognition, people are attracted to it who wouldn't usually be

involved. However, as people's interest in it wanes, those who weren't committed to it will fall away; the only kids who are left are the ones who really care about it and identify with it.

Also woven into that quote is the idea that being involved in skateboarding will often shape who you are. If you are willing to be committed to it, love it, and identify with it, it will mold you as a person. Skateboarding will become a part of your identity, your self-worth: Skateboarding will get in your blood. This interesting phenomenon contributes fairly heavily to the creation of a collective or common consciousness between skaters.

Just as skateboarding itself begins to form who you are, involving yourself in skateboarding gives you a set of common experiences. These are similar but somewhat different than the kind of common experience discussed earlier. When you go out skating in a city or to a spot in your home town, chances are it won't be too long before you are accosted by an absolutely livid individual who feels that you are the spawn of Satan sent to destroy their way of life. The longer you skateboard, the larger your collection of stories will become. Skateboarders who aren't afraid to take what they love to the street where it belongs will constantly be dealing with the underbelly of humanity. They will be hated by people before they say one word to them. They will have things thrown at them, be pushed off their skateboards (sometimes by people who are just walking by), often people (store owners and people along the street) will try to hit them with whatever is laying around. These descriptions may seem overstated. They are, however, stated from my own experiences and those I have witnessed, so they may be biased. I do not believe this though because I have seen them reflected throughout skateboarding culture (videos; magazines; other skaters).

These experiences foster certain attitudes among the kids involved. Living under this kind of hate, simply because you're trying to engage in an activity you love, forms a cynical

attitude in even the most optimistic individuals after some time. I have personally been shoved and punched off of my skateboard by people who are just walking by. I have been screamed and sworn at by priests, old women, and mothers with their children standing right next to them. I've been told I'm worthless, stupid, destructive, an asshole, and much worse. I've had things thrown at me from cars while I'm just coasting down the street. I've been threatened with fines, arrest, and sometimes a beating by police, security guards, pastors, store owners, principals, administrators, veterans, and grandparents. Kids have tried to get into fights with me simply because I was carrying a skateboard at the time. A group of my friends were even attacked by an old man with a broom handle. This man was in his 60's and the kids were only about 15, and yet, because they were skateboarders, no one felt that the man should be talked to or held accountable for his actions. My best friend lives in a small town near mine. The police in his town know where he lives and they know that he is a skater, so every time a window gets broken or a wall or storefront gets vandalized, the police will come to his house and interrogate him about whether it was him or one of his friends. This type of oppression and hate creates a bond between individuals because, although you may not have been there for their story, you probably have one that is fairly similar. Constantly dealing with this horrible, unseen underbelly of society warps your sense of humanity and the world around you. I know this because I have been skateboarding for about 6 years, and because of this I have become tainted. I was a fairly optimistic person and I maintained that for a while but about 2 years ago I realized that I no longer saw the world in the same light.

The 'skateboarding collective' isn't all based around negative experience, however. There are aspects of skateboarding which give hope. They show that understanding is possible. Skateboarding is something that "...unites young people from different backgrounds. Indeed, a

visit to the [plaza] on any weekend proves [Willigan's] point. At least on the surface, blacks, whites and Asians, from the District and the suburbs, are judged solely by one factor: how they perform" (Escobar). This equality goes even deeper than that. It becomes, according to some, almost a belief system. For instance, John F. Kelly, writer for the Washington Post, had this to say:

And it's not like they don't believe in anything either, because they do. Call it the Zen of skating, the credo, the gospel, the secret you learn when you enter the brotherhood of the board: It is to skate as much as you can. To get as good as you can. To learn, invent and perfect as many tricks as you can, and then to teach those tricks to other skaters. It's to call the little 9- and 10- and 11-year olds skate rats coming up behind you "kids," not to disparage them, but to marvel at their purity and eagerness and superhuman ability to learn a trick in half the time it took you and then to do it twice as well.

This supportive, equal, understanding community is something that is forged in the flames of the hate of the rest of the world. Because you're a skater, even if you meet some kids you've never seen before, you can be friends and understand their history, their struggles. You understand the absolute elation felt when a trick is landed. You can know, without a doubt, that those kids would jump into a fight to help you if someone was giving you a hard time because you would do the same for them.

This idea of a common consciousness and a classless, egalitarian society is not something that is new to the world. It has been posed before. Skateboarding could, if looked at from the right angle, be considered a sort of micro-Marxist society. I don't think that this is true. Skateboarding is a manifestation of a group of united individuals: A true collective. This is one of the more subtle characteristics of skateboarding and makes it a force of resistance against our commercialistic, capitalistic society. Our government and the Corporate-Commercial world that surrounds our lives wants us, as a population, to feel that a collective is bad. Individual selfishness is force-fed to us when we're children. Stepping on others to get what you want is

accepted and encouraged. We're taught to only look out for ourselves, and, above all, to always do what we're told.

The most intriguing aspect of skateboarding, and the most frustrating to the systems trying to control the lives of citizens, is how truly unique skateboarding is, as far as groups, organizations, and collectives go. First of all, skateboarding does not have one single leader that lords over the institution. There isn't one person making rules for skateboarders, dictating the Credo of the Skateboarder. This fact frustrates state and commercial institutions because they can't target one person. This isn't suggesting assassination; the government and corporations can't cut down, discredit, or mar someone who doesn't exist. Without a specific target, the normal, media-centered tactic of a smear campaign loses much of its utility. It is possible to attack skateboarding as an activity; this has been tried periodically with moderate success, as was discussed earlier.

Secondly, skateboarding does not have a specific goal. All of the social progression that skateboarding poses is intertwined within the activity itself. Skateboarding wasn't designed to make a difference, and skaters who think they're making any kind of difference in society are so rare that you will probably never meet one. The intrinsic nature of the social progression in skateboarding is a thorn in the side of those in control because they can't demonize it as they would an organization. They can't make people hate skateboarding for its social nature because skaters won't even acknowledge its existence. No one would respond to any attempt to paint skateboarding like that because it would just sound ridiculous and silly. Skateboarding's power is quite dependent on its veneer of apathy. There is, however, a definite danger that accompanies this attitude about skateboarding. Without an overarching structure, skateboarding is quite susceptible to being misled. The absence of a decision-making body or regulatory institution

allows the speedy proliferation of ideas that run counter to skateboarding's social progression. The lonely singularity of each individual that allows skateboarding to be more powerful than it appears can quietly and efficiently be turned into a tool and a trap.

Thirdly, unlike almost all other groups or collectives that exist, to be a skateboarder you don't have to abandon any part of yourself; you don't have to ascribe to any ideals; you don't have to sign a contract; you don't have to promise to be good; the only dues you pay are paid through your body and the abuse that it takes. This is an absolutely essential aspect of skateboarding. It allows the creation of a group and a group mentality, the maintenance of the group through the consistency of its binding ties (these allow the make-up of the group to stay consistent), and the constancy of the group's activities without the sacrifice of any portion of each member's individuality. The uniqueness of this is difficult to see without some kind of comparative context. To provide this, we need look no further than another organization that is also struggling against corporate power: the Labor movement. Although this movement has had a bit of success, recently there has been a regression in all they have fought for. The Labor movement is presently on the verge of collapse (Chomsky). I would argue that one of the main reasons for this is its required ideals. By having its members ascribe to its ideals, the movement gave commercial entities a point to attack. The commercial institutions interested in putting down the Labor movement were able to attack it at this point by comparing it to Socialist, and often Communist, organizations. By doing this, they changed the public's opinion of the Labor Movement. Their opinion was twisted so far that people now believe that involvement in a union requires the sacrifice of their individual freedom to believe as they choose. Similar things have happened to, among others, the Feminist movement as well.

This is where the power of skateboarding lies. Without any organizational structure, rules, or standards, skateboarding has maintained its original form, intent (or lack of) and attitude for well over 30 years. This lack of a center and calling the function of things into question is similar to the definition of Post-Structuralism. Both are “...less interested in knowing how systems worked than in finding out how they might be undone” (Rivkin and Ryan 334). Another powerful theory that skateboarding seems to parallel is the theory of the Rhizome presented by Deleuze and Guattari in their book One Thousand Plateaus. They posit the idea that a root or tree structure in society is a means of domination. The idea that exists outside of this dictated norm is a sort of collective web of individuals. Information exchange isn’t maintained through a central authority, it is held in the common interaction of each individual part of the rhizome with any other part. This formation of a heterogeneous, constantly evolving collective is exactly what skateboarding is. Skateboarding, unlike other collectives, is a collective of individuals as individuals, not of individuals transformed. To be a skateboarder, you can believe whatever you would like, you can be political or not, or you are welcome to be apathetic as well. You can be Atheistic, Christian, or Islamic; you can be of any nationality and of either gender. No matter your background, beliefs (or lack thereof), or intentions, you can be a skater. One of the most underrated aspects of this idea is the fact that you don’t have to try to be political to support the socially progressive nature of skating. You are just as much of a contributor if you refuse to care about what is happening in society. All you have to do is skate. Again, John Cardiel sums it up best: “**Jake Phelps:** If you could be remembered for one thing as a skateboarder, what would it be? **John Cardiel:** *Somebody who skateboards and puts all their energy and their whole life into everything they do. One hundred percent skateboarding*” (153).

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Literary Theory: An Anthology. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 294-304.
- Althusser, Louis. Reading Capital. London: Verso, 1979.
- Berselli, Beth. "Going Indoors for Some Air: Skateboarders get a park at the mall." The Washington Post. 17 April 2000: C1.
- Borden, Iain. "Chariots of Ire." Blueprint July 2000: 38-42.
- Cardiel, John. "John Cardiel." By Jake Phelps. Thrasher January 2001: 150-3.
- Chomsky, Noam. Class War: The Attack on Working People. CD. Epitaph Records, 1995.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. A Thousand Plateaus. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Differance." Literary Theory: An Anthology. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 385-407.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Criticism: Major Statements. Ed. William Davis Anderson and Charles Kaplan. 4th Ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000. 493-510.
- Escobar, Gabriel. "Riding the Edge of Controversy." The Washington Post. 1 August 1991: DC 1:2.
- "Homemade Skate Park." The New York Times. 13 November 1994: VI 25:1.
- Kelly, John F. "Board Silly." The Washington Post. 17 May 1991: WW 12:3.
- Munoz, James. "Invasion of Skateboards Damaging Downtown Parks." 3 July 1987: C1b.
- Musleah, Rahel. "Jump, Spin, Skate: But is it Danger or Self Expression?" The New York Times. 17 September 1995: XIII-LI 1:1.

“New England Tries to Adapt to Sounds of Skateboards.” The New York Times. 18 October 1998: I 33:1.

Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan. Introduction. “Introduction: The class of 1968—Post-Structuralism *par lui-meme*.” Literary Theory: An Anthology. Ed. by Rivkin & Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 333-357.

“Skateboarders Outgrow Their ‘Bad Boy’ Image.” The New York Times. 30 July 1989: I 47:1.