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## INTRODUCTION

### WHY CYCLING CULTURES?

*Peter Cox*

Travelling through numerous European cities, one cannot but be struck by the proliferation of bicycles, whether parked on the streets or in transit; on roads, cycleways and other paths. Closer inspection may alert the tourist to a diversity in styles and designs of bicycles used today, and to the tremendous diversity of their riders. This book is both a reflection of the renewed popular interest in cycling, in many different forms, and an academic consideration of what that profusion of perspectives might mean.

The first idea for this book on cycling cultures was to present a series of case studies in a straightforward way that would illustrate some of this diversity. But which cases to choose? Which examples and why? What selection would be appropriate to demonstrate the variety of practices concealed within the bland singularity of the term “cycling”? Should it aspire to being somehow representative – if that were indeed possible – or should it deliberately specialize in a particular group of studies? As thinking and planning progressed, it became clear that case studies alone would not help in understanding what this diversity means – for the implications and significance of the diversity of activity subsumed under the singular title of “cycling” is not just an abstract or academic question for the study of different social forms. It also belies a pressing policy question.

If a nation, a region or a city is to have a cycling policy, what might this actually mean in light of cultural diversity? What are the pressures that it needs to deal with and how might it approach them? How can a single policy be made inclusive if it covers such diversity: what assumptions are (to be) made in such policies about the bicycle user(s)?

Therefore, a second approach began to take shape. Rather than trying to be comprehensive or representative, the chapters instead reflect a series of conversations taking place at the bridging point of academia, activism and public policy. While individual chapters can be taken as studies on their own, they also seek to inform a more central set of shared concerns with questions of diversity and complexity in cycling practices and experiences. The authors have a mixture of academic and professional backgrounds and the analyses presented here are strongly indebted to the fluid and porous boundaries between these worlds. What brings them together is not just an interest in the general topic, but the shared conversations that these texts represent, as the writers attempt to grapple with both the reality of the diversity of cycling cultures and their implications for policy and practice. Between them, they have all been concerned with questions of cycling practices, asking how that practice is constructed and what it means in different contexts to different audiences. In the work here, cycling is not just as a physical practice but a tremendously differentiated series of sites of cultural practices. These conversations take place across the differing social and political contexts, mainly of the UK and the Netherlands but also with perspectives from Germany and Belgium, revealing both contrasts and continuities, despite very different levels of activity, policy and investment. Discussions have taken place under the auspices of a number of networks, particularly the Cycling and Society Research Group (CSRG) and the European Cyclists’ Federation (ECF) supported Velo-city conferences. From a range of perspectives and interests, the chapters here share a common interest in understanding and exploring diversity in connection with cycling. From their different viewpoints, they seek to unpack the singularity of the terms “cycling” and “cyclist” to reveal the ways in which these figures are constructed from complex and interwoven strands. The studies reveal changing images over time and differing geographical experiences alongside styles and subcultures that have the capacity to cross borders. The book’s

intention is to provide the reader with a glimpse not simply of the breadth of actors and activities concealed within the linguistic singularity of “cycling”, but to provide ways of making sense of those diverse characteristics. Its structure reflects a shared desire by the authors not simply to present a series of discrete chapters, but to demonstrate how a range of voices and widely different topics can inform a shared concern with issues of diversity. The editorial voice among these is, although sole authored, a product of these conversations.

As the chapters show, the variety of cycling activities and the diversity of practices spring from profoundly differing experiences, personal and collective, shaped by national histories, class, gender and ethnicity. We should additionally note that bicycle uses, and the ways of thinking about riding, which can only be very briefly mentioned here, are profoundly different as contexts change. They range from mundane riding as transport just to get oneself or cargo around, through to riding purely for the joy and challenge in various leisure forms, however, organized or unorganized. Competitive sport, especially at amateur level is also cycling and such riders need to fall within the remit of policy provision covering use of public space, especially as their activity requires hours of dedicated training beyond the short moments of competitive activity.

Thus we also have a variety of terrains to consider – roads, paths and those off-road routes that fall under neither broad description. What regulations should be in place to govern these activities? How should machinery be regulated – even perhaps, should the same regulations apply to all cycles: are the build and design standards for a cargo bike designed to carry 100 kg loads still appropriate to a 7 kg racing machine? ISO standards recognize the need for different regulations for specialist designs; to what extent might other legal regulations need to think about this diversity? By exploding simplistic reductionism, these chapters can, perhaps, make a modest contribution to the debates over planning for cycling as well as being a study in the application of social theory to explicate real life situations.

As an academic text, this volume can first be located within the social science literature on mobilities appearing in the past ten years. Second, it is part of a relatively new range of academic studies on cycling from perspectives within the social sciences and humanities. Urry (2008, p. 14) maps, “five interdependent ‘mobilities’ that produce social life organised across distance”. These are summarized as “the corporeal travel of people”; “the physical movement of objects to producers, consumers and retailers”; “the imaginative travel effected through the images of places and peoples”; “virtual travel, often in real time”, and “the communicative travel through person to person messages”. Across these different mobilities, we see the case studies in this volume reflecting this production of social life; whether in the imaginative travel produced by mapping and by associated guidebooks (Deegan); the practical movement of people (van der Kloof) and goods (Cox & Rzewnicki); or in communicative travel through the social networks, online and in real space that connect riding activities within subcultures (Bunte). The chapters, therefore, reflect a concern not with the spectacle of diversity, but with the complexities of social life and social practice signalled by such self-evident diversity.

Cycling – or perhaps it should more accurately be “cyclings” – take(s) place in physical spaces, mapped out, shaped and routed. These routes may be shared with other mobile subjects, may echo with historical reference to those who have ridden the same terrains before, or may simply be mundane, unconsidered roads of quotidian travel. The qualities of space are such that layers of meaning are not inherent, but culturally produced: the roads of the monumental Paris-Brest-Paris ride described by Bunte are simultaneously the ordinary tarmac of the French national roads system.

As noted previously, the authorship of this volume reflects conversations between very different experiential worlds of cycling, the core contrast being between the UK and the Netherlands. During the later 1950s and 1960s, rates of urban bicycle travel dropped dramatically in both countries, in common with many other northern European nations (de la

Bruhèze & Veraart, 1999; Oldenziel and de la Bruhèze, 2009). But policy responses in the two were very different. While Britain concentrated on the growth of “the great car economy”, the Netherlands sought to revitalize the place of cycling in its transport culture. It drew on historic national identifications of the Netherlands as a cycling nation to justify policies of investment (Ebert, 2004; Schwanen et al., 2004). In the UK, cycling persisted largely through sports and recreation. Consequently, most British cities lack the dedicated infrastructure for cycling that was implemented in the Netherlands. Often, where pedestrianization schemes were introduced into British cities in the 1970s they served to make cycling even more difficult. Much of the UK recovery of cycling through the 1980s and 1990s was as a leisure pursuit and took place in spaces other than the public highway. Persistent campaigning has localized impacts, but little consistent or coherent national policy has ensued. Britain has seen some degree of resurgence in transport cycling over the past decade, but as a highly localized phenomenon, with London as flagship. But even the best UK cities struggle to provide a systemic approach to welcoming provision for transport cycling. Consequently, to ride a bicycle in the Netherlands today is to be integrated into a normal, unconsidered everyday practice. The bicycle is simply a tool for getting around. In the UK, by contrast, the bike represents a lifestyle choice: riding as transport a deliberate act, which in most situations will result in contesting occupation of public highways with motorized road users (Lenting, 2014). Alternatively, as Pooley et al., (2013, p. 150) put it: “cycling is a relatively popular form of recreation across contemporary Britain, but as a mode of urban transport it is virtually irrelevant”. Dedicated cycling infrastructure provision may not necessarily produce higher levels of urban utility cycling, but lack of it can be a profound deterrent. Connected to these contrasting positions the issue of status distinguishes different approaches to cycling and the meanings it invokes. For van der Kloof’s adult learners in this volume, learning to ride has a positive status impact. Pooley et al.’s study (2013) found that cycling was associated with low social status, or that it was seen as simply being a childhood activity to be left behind.

By taking the title *Cycling Cultures*, then, this volume is not simply attempting to chronicle the variety of practices to which the title of cycling can be attached, but to point towards the manner in which social practices are bound up with meaning-making. In relation to the second of those two terms in the title, Bauman, in the introduction to the 2003 edition of his *Culture as Praxis* (1973, p. xv ff.), points to the ambivalence that the idea of culture constantly inhabits. It is poised, he argues – consonant with Raymond Williams’ work on the topic (see discussion in Chapter 1 of this volume) – between two poles. First, culture exists in reference to activities of freedom, of self-defining creativity. The second pole is that of routinized social ordering, just as anthropology traditionally uses the concept of culture to specify that which defines deviance against routinized cultural norms. If we locate the bodily practice of cycling within this ambivalence we perhaps can have a clearer explanation of the tension between two poles of cycling’s public presentation. On the one hand, there are the cultural images of cycling promoted in advertising campaigns (for everything from holiday cottages and wine bottles to insurance policies) with their clear promises of freedom and liberation from routine. These liberatory images are shared within much of the magazine press devoted to the celebration of leisure cycling activities. On the other hand, there is the reality of the vast majority of everyday, quotidian riding for transport. Routes and times are constrained by the routines of everyday life and journeys regulated by urban infrastructure, which can be described in terms of a regulatory regime designed to produce a disciplined subject (Bonham & Cox, 2010).

The task of beginning to unpack the relationship between theories of culture and practices of cycling provides the theme of the opening chapter of the book. It brings together an assessment of the diversity of cycling practices as seen through a number of lenses provided by social theory. It then turns around the gaze to ask not how cycling advocacy may be viewed as a social movement, but what the consequences and implications of viewing it as such might

be for the advocacy movement itself. These themes are also revisited in the final chapter which re-examines the questions posed by the intervening contributions.

In her chapter, Ida Sabelis considers how the very ordinariness of the bicycle as a transport choice in the Netherlands can actually render it invisible despite its ubiquity. Whereas the resurgence of Dutch cycling in the 1970s was brought about by concerted policy intervention (Stoffers, 2012), the very success of these processes four decades on risks losing grasp of the mechanisms needed to bring about change. Moreover, normative assumptions about what it means to travel and about the travelling body become problematic for those who do not, for whatever reason, conform to those norms. A process of “othering” takes place. Applying insights developed in the sociology of diversity and applied in business, she shows how these barriers, physical and conceptual, might be overcome. Thus, the chapter is also illustrative of the diversity of analytical approaches and models found within the social sciences themselves. Whilst not explicitly discussed in the chapter, it is worth noting that the manner in which the topic is explored here typifies work emerging from the mobilities field in that it is clearly indebted to postcolonial and feminist theory for its framing of the problematic and in the search for solutions. Similar underlying theoretical perspectives can also be seen in the chapter from Angela van der Kloof.

A striking contrast is provided by Horton and Jones in their contribution. Here, two researchers involved with the *Understanding Walking and Cycling* project demonstrate the consequences of the very different legacy of transport policy on cycling in England. With the notable exceptions of a few cities, there are few gains to be lost. To ride is a marginal and negligible activity, but even within these very small numbers there is profound diversity, largely ignored in policy making. The argument of these two authors is a powerful one: the structures of normalized expectations are such that transforming patterns of mobility cannot just be about cycle promotion but requires analysis of the structures that currently serve to maintain a car-based mobility system. Here they draw attention to the ideological dimensions of culture, and the conflicts that are inherent in any challenges to current arrangements of power and the vested interests by which they are supported.

The next chapter, moving the focus back to the Netherlands, further illustrates the contrasts between the two nations in terms of practice, but it also highlights the commonality of ideological conflict. Van der Kloof writes specifically from her own experiences as a cycle trainer, understanding how cycling behaviours can be shaped by cultural norms and experiences that may be nothing to do with cycling itself. To plan interventions whilst being sensitive to cultural preconceptions is revealed as a complex task that demands sensitivity and patience. Provision of adequate infrastructure and even the presence of dominant narratives of everyday travel behaviour that normalize cycling are not enough to enable individual cycling practices without further encouragement. Her chapter demonstrates potential disconnection between macro-level assumptions about intervention and the micro-level attention to the cultural dimensions that shape individual life. To assume that we are all independent agents of choice, working within a frame of free-floating rationality over our decision-making process is to miss the embeddedness and sociality of existing lives. Yet simultaneously, her narrative demonstrates that such embeddedness should not be essentialized. Actions are still contingent and open to change, but the constructions of those behaviours may need to be understood differently. Finally, she makes the important observation that practices in the formation of cycling cultures and in the enculturation of cycling can also be affected by policy considerations beyond the obvious factors, in this case those to do with immigration, not transport.

Brian Deegan writes from the perspective of a sociologically trained planner and engineer, working to find measures that can reflect and be sensitive to different needs in a concrete situation. Taking mapping as the focus, his chapter emphasizes the need to employ appropriate

methods in order to generate data beyond any prior assumptions. By making a discursive analysis of the mapping processes, he explores the normative discourse employed by mapmakers, and the assumptions underpinning what might outwardly be considered a neutral and objective process. While the specificities of London wayfinding form the central element of the investigation, the processes revealed in Deegan's focus groups can be replicated in any other cities.

Where the first four chapters take a broader view on the diversity and how to manage it, the latter chapters in this volume explore the specificities of particular types of riding. The chapter by Peter Cox and Randy Rzewnicki combines the two perspectives of a sociologist of cycling and the insights of someone centrally involved in practical project management in relation to the object of study. Examining the changing uses and fortunes of cargo bikes demonstrates how some aspects of cycling exist as functions of other sectors of the economy. Use of the cargo bike has been profoundly tied to changes in the shape of retail and the relation of the retail sector to its customer base. What had virtually disappeared by the mid 1970s, re-emerged as part of a counter-culture arguing for a different mode of economy and society in the past decade, digital technologies and energy prices have once more reshaped the retail sector and rendered new strategic importance to logistics. An older technology is now recycled to become once more a vital part of the urban mobility landscape, for both domestic and commercial uses.

Heike Bunte's chapter on randonneuring is a study of a very particular and relatively exclusive set of cycling practices, albeit a very longstanding one. These rides and riders fall into a category of activity that might well be called serious organized leisure. The riders do not compete against others, strictly speaking: it is ultimately only the self that is challenged in the long hours of long-distance riding. Every finisher within the time limit gets the same ultimate accolade. Energy resources and resourcefulness itself are the prime qualities required of those who take part in this specialist subculture. At another level, her chapter highlights the importance of thinking about cycling in rhythms. The cyclical repetition of the pedalling body, coupled with the linear travel through space, engage a dialogue of space and time echoing Lefebvre (2004). She stresses the importance that these riders place in finding their own individual rhythms and the constant pace. No place here for the sudden accelerations and attacks of racing, or the stop-start rhythms of urban commuting, but long hours of self-constrained, and self-contained relentlessness. Perhaps the only other parallel in the Anglophone world is the similarly little-explored experience of the long-distance (twelve- and twenty-four hour) time triallist.

By narrowing our gaze to a specific case study, the final illustrative chapter on women cyclists in the British CTC (Cyclists' Touring Club) allows us to show the degree to which roles and norms can vary tremendously over time. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the 1930s are revealed as a decade in which opportunities for women opened up and the social definitions of their roles became more malleable. Cycle touring is exposed as a means through which change could be forged. Yet it is also clear that the gains were opportunistic and as social structures changed in the 1950s, so the gains of the 1930s were all but forgotten. The study can also be read in conjunction with van der Kloof's chapter, to remind ourselves how rapidly attitudes and practices can change. Cycling is a cultural phenomenon but one that reveals how malleable cultural traits are, rather than essential. Perhaps we may conclude that studying cultures of cycling informs us both about the practices of cycling and the construction of cultural identities.

A single volume such as this can only provide a tiny set of windows into such a complex world. Thinking about cycling as a cultural practice, we begin to open up the space to think not simply about a singular activity but a range of diverse, even disconnected practices that may be read through a range of different lenses. Connecting the individual chapters together, in different ways, and reading them against one another assists in thinking through the issues of

complexity and diversity in cycling, and we hope shows how these can contribute to the bigger processes of change in which we are all involved.

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