

University of Chester



This work has been submitted to ChesterRep – the University of Chester's
online research repository

<http://chesterrep.openrepository.com>

Author(s): Peter Cox

Title: Introduction: Cycling cultures and social theory

Date: 2015

Originally published in: Cycling cultures

Example citation: Cox, P. (2015). Cycling cultures and social theory. In P. Cox (Ed.),
Cycling cultures (pp. 14-42). Chester: University of Chester Press.

Version of item: Authors' final accepted version

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/555426>

CHAPTER 1

CYCLING CULTURES AND SOCIAL THEORY

Peter Cox

The single term “cycling” covers a huge variety of activities, by different groups of people, in different places and for different purposes. In the title of this volume it is coupled to “culture”, which Raymond Williams (1976, p. 87) described as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”. Together they form a daunting pairing, perhaps almost so entangled as to become unintelligible. In order to make sense of the title, and of the underlying themes of the book, this opening chapter considers what they might mean when analysed together through the lenses of the social sciences. The chapter falls into two parts. Firstly, it considers definitional problems associated with thinking about cycling cultures. It introduces some ways of thinking that enable a clearer interpretation and disaggregation of the various activities that are described as cultures of cycling. The latter part of the chapter takes analytical frameworks for understanding culture and power and uses them to examine how insights from social theory can inform the practices of specific pro-cycling activism that seek to promote cycling as a sustainable transport choice. Although contrasting approaches, these two tasks are linked in their concern to understand both the mundane reality of diverse cycling cultures and the implications that this diversity has in cycle promotion.

Cycling: the act of riding a “cycle”. Cycling? Bicycling? Tricycling? Which, or all of these are appropriate? Which begs a further question – when is a bicycle not a bicycle? These questions may seem pedantic, but we live in a world where we crave definition and degrees of distinction, if only in order to be able to navigate our way through it with any meaning. The *United Nations Convention on Road Traffic* (1968, p. 5) provides an international legal definition: “‘Cycle’ means any vehicle which has at least two wheels and is propelled solely by the muscular energy of the persons on that vehicle, in particular by means of pedals or hand-cranks”. We can see here some basic principles at work. A cycle is a tool for movement. It is propelled in whole or in part by human motive power. Perhaps it might also be useful to distinguish between two forms of this propulsion, those that involve some form of linkage between the human body and the machine (for example pedals and treadles), and those that can simply be scooted along. Additionally, other sources of power may be added to augment, or even ultimately supplant the human input, at which stage, it may be safely regarded as a motor vehicle. The relationship of cycles to other vehicles is discussed in Cox and Van De Walle (2007) and need not concern us overmuch here. Suffice to say that the demarcation between motorized and non-motorized vehicles is a lot more porous than most current legal definitions allow, and that the implications of this for future sustainable mobility scenarios are extensive. To summarize the elements of cycle design that do concern us here, the cycle is a technology that produces increased mobility through the mechanical input of human power.

As machines, cycles require design and production: processes that involve deliberate choice and investment of time and money, political and economic decision making. As manufactured objects, they are traded; they gain and lose value in various sorts of markets. Values are social and economic – both use-value and symbolic-value are involved and may be contradictory. In short, as Vivanco (2013, p. 26) states: “the bicycle is a complex socio-technical object whose meaning and uses are shaped variously through its histories, production and uses”. So, while we may describe the bicycle relatively simply in terms of its mechanical qualities as an object, we should also take into account the insights from the sociology of technology (Bijker, et al. 2012) that allow us to understand that technological innovation and production takes place within, and is deeply shaped by, and inextricable from, socio-historical contexts: specific societies with their social structures, politics, and economics.

To use this technology of mobility requires space. A bicycle is only potentially a mobility device until it is ridden. The form that this space should, or does, take can vary tremendously. For example, questions of land ownership, whether or not routes and roads exist, and the local legal constraints on use of roads, rights of way, highways and other spaces all contribute to determining where and how cycling can take place. Relationships to other forms of mobility can be interrogated. What (if any) should be the principle of demarcation of road and route space? By mode of travel (i.e. vehicle type)? By speed? Should certain modes be favoured or disfavoured for social, environmental or economic reasons? Differing

presumptions underlie different stances taken in current debates over planning for cycling.

Finally, the act of riding implies a rider. Who uses cycles? How do existing narratives based on class, gender, age, and ethnicity shape uses? Does the use of any given technology feed into the creation of collective or personal identity?

The simple definitional statement with which we began seems to spiral into a whole realm of variables, possibilities centred around three key elements of machines, riders, and spaces that together provide an ensemble we call cycling. In order to navigate out of this morass, we can take a number of discrete themes that can help illuminate the practice of cycling and the formation of cultural identities around cycling. Before considering the diversity of riders and riding, let us first turn to the diversity of machinery.

A Diversity of Machinery

The range of cycles available today is perhaps greater than ever. Cycle design ranges far beyond the simple categorizations found in individual manufacturer's catalogues or even in retailers' sales lists. From compact folding cycles, through to Velomobiles and from ultra-lightweight racing recumbents to cargo cycles, there is even a trade show specifically for specialist cycles (<http://www.spezialradmesse.de>). This variety allows for different activities and different designs have consequences for their use of space in the built environment (Cox, 2007). Hadland and Lessing (2014) provide a fascinating insight into the range of ways that designers and manufacturers have tackled a range of

problems over the years. Here is not the place for endless description. What is worth noting, however, is that each design is necessarily confined by a series of parameters that serve to shape the actions of innovators and constructors. For our purposes, we may note four important elements that need to be considered, but that may pose contradictory demands upon designs: *Specific function* (e.g. intermodality, off-road capability); *Carrying capacity* (volume and/or mass, rider(s) and baggage); *Efficiency* of power use; and *Comfort and ease of use*.

Designing for a specific function, whether cargo carrying or the ability to fold (so as to be portable as luggage on a train, for example) may be uppermost in the constructor's consideration, but the degree to which this specialized function is met can impact upon the other functions. A time trial machine built for racing within the specific regulatory restrictions of international cycle sport can afford to be uncomfortable and hard to use, as long as it is sufficiently efficient in its specific role. The more specific the role, however, the less versatile it may be: the time trial machine is little use beyond its specific athletic discipline. Most machines for more general use, however, require compromises to be made between conflicting demands. A cycle designed to fold for intermodal travel on the other hand, needs to be light enough to carry when folded, but this portability should not compromise the riding qualities, since it is also required to be used for general transport purposes, and will probably need some means to carry the usual everyday luggage.

Efficiency might initially seem to be solely the concern of the racer or the engineer, but has significant

implications in other uses. The less strong and less fit the rider, the more important is the efficient use of the limited power input. The less energy available for cycling, the more important it is to use that capacity efficiently so as to make it less arduous. Efficiency has a number of components including weight, rolling resistance, air resistance (Wilson, 2004; Burrows, 2004). Without going deeply into the engineering factors, it remains an obvious truism that gains in one area inevitably mean compromises in another.

Human power for cycling can be augmented in several ways. Adding a motor creates a hybrid machine. This can be either as a human–electric hybrid, or as a human–internal combustion engine hybrid, using very low-power motors. Although popular prior to the late 1950s, these latter are not currently legal in Europe. Such hybrids can increase versatility, but at a cost in other areas. Adding extra power is a logical and rational response especially for those who do not see (or want to see) themselves as particularly athletic or who are limited in strength. The second obvious application is when moving large masses of freight. The appropriate amount of power to add, and in what form, is an area for considerable debate, and experimentation.

Even before we consider the interaction of these diverse technologies with their riders, we can see that this is a complicated problem. What a cyclist is depends in part on what the cycle is. One way of thinking about just this element is depicted in Figure 1.1. This model sketches the relationships between some of the range of cycles around: some familiar, some less so. They are organized around the three axes of carrying capacity, efficiency and power.

It is not designed to be a comprehensive model and it is open to considerable revision (for example, other axes such as versatility might be employed). Rather, it provides a way of thinking through what we are doing and what affordances are created by different technological possibilities which may allow different segments of the populations to ride.

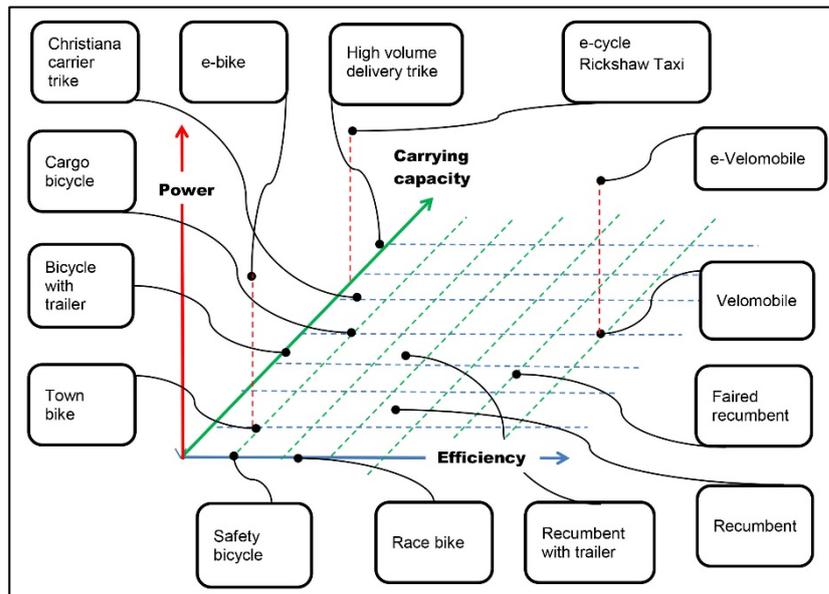


Figure 1.1. Three-dimensional grid mapping of the relationship between different types of bicycle.

Different technologies facilitate different practices. A single rider may engage in multiple practices as their needs and requirements change. We should not think of a single person as a user of only one technology. Cycle

users, especially those using more specialist machines may have a selection of machines (tools) to use for different purposes. Each of the technologies has its own “affordances”: that is, it allows different actions to be undertaken. Designs have different space-use requirements, not just those arising from the physical size. For example, rates of acceleration and deceleration and braking characteristics will vary according to the mass being moved and the design of the braking system. Turning circles and parking space requirements change with differently shaped cycles. Complex flows of cycle traffic with mixed characteristics need more space than uniform processions all going at the same pace. All these factors have implications for the building of environments of cycling. Conversely, the built environment will shape the experiences and practices undertaken within it.

Diverse technologies are the first element in the diversity of cycling cultures. Our social diversity as different people, ages, sizes and shapes, ethnicities, men and women and fitness levels produces a diversity of capacities. Each of these interacts with our variety of technologies to produce a kaleidoscopic image of cycling, ever shifting and unpredictable.

Social Practices and Identities

As we go further, however, it is valuable to consider the relationships that may exist between using a cycle (cycling) and being a cyclist. Horton and Parkin (2013) point to the inverse relationship between the prevalence of a cycling and its contribution to the formation of a specific identity around that practice (see also Vivanco, 2013:, p. 14; Lenting, 2014).

In the UK, to ride a cycle of any description for everyday transport is to be part of a tiny minority, as low as 1% of travellers (or fewer). When one is part of a visible minority, identity matters. A sense of belonging to and realizing a collective identity legitimizes the isolated individual. It binds them to a broader reality. This identification works both ways. It comes from external sources as well. The 80% of staff who arrive at work by car (at my home university in the UK) are not identified as “the drivers” whereas the 1% who arrive by bike are classified and get referred to as “cyclists”. The reality of the situation is that cycle commuting is so rare that I know almost every rider on my route to work by sight and almost every member of academic staff at the university who rides regularly. In contrast, at the research institute in Munich where I write these words, cycling to work is so unremarkable as to be not worthy of comment. It is just a way of getting to the office, whether by the most junior intern or the institute director. They neither consider themselves “cyclists” nor consider their commuting practice as worthy of mention. Indeed, to describe oneself as a cyclist implies a kind of enthusiasm bordering on fanaticism or fetishism.

As minority riders however, we allow and even embrace this collective identity because it offers us solidarity. It offers security and protection. It assures us that we are each not just isolated deviants. It can even offer leverage to be seen as part of a significant minority. In C. Wright Mills’ (1959) expression, it allows the personal troubles we may individually encounter as cyclists, to be transformed into social issues. Simultaneously, we also should acknowledge that this

collectivity is – adopting Benedict Anderson’s (2006) term as it has been re-employed in social movement studies – an “imagined” community: an artificial grouping forged of convenience not a pre-existing empirical object (Melucci, 1996). Though cycle commuters, wherever they are, may acknowledge, even recognize each other and say hello as we pass on the morning journey, we have little or nothing in common with each other, save a mode of locomotion. The term “cyclist”, signifies little more than “shoe-wearer”. It is a true depiction of common practice, but the term only becomes meaningful if it refers to something more. Is there really anything that we share, culturally speaking?

What makes imagined communities meaningful for any minority group identified as a group, is their shared marginality, often the shared confrontation of an externally hostile world, a shared oppression. To be a “cyclist” in the UK is to recognize that one shares a minority practice confronted on a regular basis by hostility from dominant masses of road users in cars. The term “cyclist” is therefore a political necessity for survival, but still an imagined unity.

To understand any further, we need to disaggregate the practice itself. We need to think about the diversity of practices, of users, of the variety of technologies that combine with our diverse population to make an even more complex and ever changing kaleidoscope image of cyclists. (After all a cycle without a rider is merely one more item of clutter, and a bicycle rider without a bicycle is ... not a cyclist.)

To explore the diversity of cycling practices we can first consider the variety of activities and behaviours that

may be conjured up by the term, irrespective of the identity of the rider. Cycling activities are normally divided up by journey purpose: as utility, leisure, sport. These are our more familiar categories with which both manufacturers and policy makers work. But these are only arbitrary categories, we can think of other ways that are more appropriate to depict the diversity. Trip-chaining and multi-functional journeys are recognized as common phenomena that disrupt this trip purpose analysis in other forms of transport study and planning, but rarely in relation to cycling. In an earlier study (Cox, 2005) I argued for a more complex differentiation of leisure that distinguished between “play” and “organised leisure”. The difference between these two categories is the goal orientation of the latter and its emphasis on the acquisition of skills associated with the practice in whichever form it takes. Cycling as play allows the activity to be important in and of itself, particularly since this is the first form of riding that most encounter. It may also be a means to other goals, such as family bonding. Whether bicycle users change to other modes of cycling or not, the ludic element is not to be dismissed lightly, especially as it has the capacity to underpin all subsequent riding, as is particularly visible in literary memoirs and reflections on cycling (see e.g. Bobet, 2008). Rather than there being a clear conceptual division between sport, leisure and utility riding, therefore, we can see a continuum of activity in which riders occupy different positions at different times.

Coupled with this spectrum of activity, Figure 1.2 was employed to map the range of meanings and values that were attached to cycles and cycling. This was devised in conjunction with cyclists interviewed, and was used to

help think about both machinery and rides. What became clear through fieldwork discussions, and is illustrated by the two axes in the chart, is that people not only behave in different ways when they ride, but also understand their activities and technologies in different ways. These can vary for a single person as occasions and practices change, as will be illustrated in the next section.

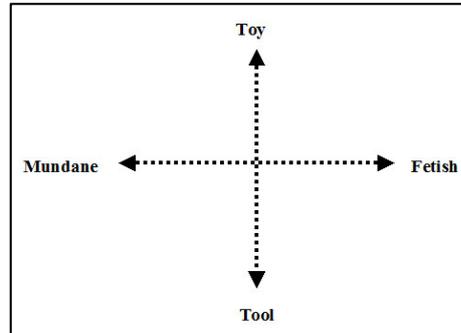


Figure 1.2. Attitudes to the bicycle and the ride.

Unpacking the Practice

A more general framework for understanding social practices examines the interaction of three elements found in every practice: competences, meanings and materials (Shove et al., 2012).

- Competences. The skills and abilities brought to bear or required by an activity
- Meanings. The range of meanings, symbolic and signficatory understood by the practitioner and those conveyed to the outside world by the action. Also those meanings imputed by observers of the practice

- Materials. Not only the technologies of the bicycle itself in its myriad forms, but also the range of assorted infrastructures and technologies of space in which to ride – the materiality of space.

Most importantly, these elements are interrelated and interact: change the technology of the bicycle and it may require different competences and acquire different meanings, as described above. The easiest way to demonstrate this is by thinking through some different journeys (without changing the rider). These scenarios can enable us to think about the changing construction of a practice, from perspectives of both actor and observer.

Monday morning. Raining again. Off to work. A pile of marking and several textbooks to take back to the office. The extra weight doesn't really matter, keeping dry does, so the raincoat and trousers to keep my work clothes dry are the most important. The material technology of the bike, its step-through design, lights to cut through the gloom and mudguards are all designed to make this stop-start journey easy. Speed is not an issue but as I arrive, I am signalling my own competence as a cycle-traveller by arriving dry (unlike others who have got wet at the bus stop or walking from the car!). But the knowledge of what is needed to arrive in this state, and the material technologies to enable this are the result of experience. The interplay between competences and technologies is mediated through experience and the affordances of my status as a middle-class professional with sufficient income to economically afford these choices. The technologies deployed signal different things to different people, depending on their own journeys and experiences.

The same journey in the bright sunshine of a summer morning is altered. Its meaning shifts radically. Instead of comments of pity or admiration of my hardiness from co-workers, it evokes comments that might even border on jealousy over the half an hour I have already spent outside enjoying the morning sunshine before the working day starts. I can choose to increase the resentment by talking about the herons, cormorants and other birds spotted on the tidal riverside as I rode to work. These sets of meanings are also dependent upon the place I work, the patterns of journeying in this city, this nation.

Another day, I take out my carbon-frame race bike. Its minimally lightweight and low rolling resistance urge me to wear cycle specific clothing, close fitting so it doesn't flap in the wind and minimizes air resistance. Clipping into the pedals, it feels like putting on a pair of gloves. It provokes me to accelerate rapidly and go looking for hills to climb nodding my connection to the local sporting club-riders out on the road. I don't want to be on the separated cycle path designed for riding at much slower speeds and shared with pedestrians and dog-walkers. When I am in this guise, they transform from fellow travellers to potential threats. The material technology allows my speed and gives me tremendous enjoyment simply revelling in the experience of movement.

But this technology also has its constraints. It is useless when anything needs to be carried. When I wave a friendly hello to a fellow "cyclist" going to the shops on her town bike to buy a newspaper, it only produces a look of baffled bewilderment: "who is this and why are they waving at me?". The meaning is ambiguous not inherent.

The ride shows off my competences – my relative fitness – knowing that other racing cyclists will subtly (or not so subtly) make sure I “deserve” or have “earned the right” to be riding the cycling equivalent of a Ferrari.

The practice of cycling can therefore be understood in the interplay of competences, meanings and materials. Each of us can think about our own and/or others’ cycling and not-cycling behaviours, what we ride (or don’t), for what different reasons. What we project in our practices, what competences and experiences are required to undertake this ride – from the choice of bicycle we have made, to the clothing we wear and the sense of self that is invoked or produced. We choose for different reasons, not just what we want to do, but also who do we want to be? We constantly re-create kaleidoscopic patterns of diversity.

The interplay of competences, meanings and materials is also context-reliant. Take me away from the context of my home town in the UK and these identities, with their subtle shifts and conveyances of meaning, matter far less. In some places, for example, I become just another bicycle rider: one of thousands, whichever cycle I choose. In the context of urban transport, the race bike which is so much a joy on long, open roads is even somewhat absurd, like using a Ferrari to do the shopping. My level of competency can also change, depending on the context of riding. Unfamiliar streets and unknown local habits of moving in traffic, or riding in unfamiliar terrains can impute new sets of meanings and emotions attached to the same overall practice.

Yet beyond this variability we can also see clusters of shared identities and meanings begin to emerge around

shared practices: the beginnings of what can be called cultural identities. Practices may be diverse but they are also visible in clustered form. Shared experiences and narratives, through face-to-face, social media or print communication create clusters of common knowledge for which the language of culture seems appropriate. Although there is much more to be said about the role of space in cycling, sufficient mention has been made in the foregoing to indicate its essential contribution to the formations of identities and cycling cultures, without devoting further discussion to it. For the moment we can move on to think about the cultural dimension of practices and begin the transition to the second part of the chapter, moving from a descriptive interpretation of cycling cultures, to an analysis of the implications of thinking theoretically about cycling cultures in cycle promotion.

Culture and Subcultures

Despite the complexity of the language of culture, Williams (1976) nevertheless distinguished three main strands of use which intertwine but can be differentiated.

- A general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development.
- A particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group.
- The works and practices of intellectual, and especially artistic, activity (i.e. signifying practices).

It is the middle of these categories, reflecting a growing ethnographic and anthropological interest in social scientific investigations of cycling that is generally

employed when discussing cultures of cycling (e.g. Aldred & Jungnickel, 2012). The significance of Williams' thinking about culture and society, however, is that it is rooted in consideration of its relationship to power, a theme he developed over the years. As an analysis of the relationship of culture and power, we can make a shift from the previously largely descriptive insights of the variety of activities that might be described as cultures of cycling, to a more analytical understanding of the role of cultural identity and practice in processes of social change.

Williams wrote against a background of twentieth-century social elites fearful of the appearance and growth of various forms of mass culture. The emergence of mass culture, as a feature of mass society, was contrasted with the maintenance of social elites as a safeguard against barbarism, (*pace* Arnold, 1869). Practices of the mass population were understood as inimical to the preservation of high culture from the second quarter of the twentieth century, rendering those activities of ordinary working class citizens (the social majority) as inherently undesirable. The practical upshots of this fear in relation to the bicyclist can be seen in this letter from *Car and Golf* (Spring 1926):

The cyclist is commonly supposed to be a poor man, a man of the working classes, a Trade Unionist in other words, and to compel him to carry a red lamp would not increase the popularity of any government, it would not bring any additional revenue to the treasury, and it might possibly be used by the Trade Unions and other political bodies as a club with which to

belabour any government that introduces such legislation.

Where cycling was the transport choice and practice of the many, this rendered it vulnerable to elitist suspicion.

Williams' work stands as part of a new wave of critical voices from the 1950s onwards, re-examining cultural practices and identities to counter these assumptions of elitist suspicion. In the UK these voices coalesced in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. For our purposes, out of the vast range of work arising from this source, the most valuable for our study here is work on subcultures, which provides a number of observations that can be used to help understand cycling through a cultural lens.

While subcultural study has taken various forms and directions (see Williams, 2011), Gelder usefully notes that subcultures can be distinguished as the narratives of groups, "that are in some way represented as non-normative or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it" (2005, p. 1). Through the second half of the twentieth century, European nations became dominated by structures of automobility (Urry, 2007). That is, the norms of mobility practices were, and in most cases remain, shaped around private motoring, irrespective of whether it is numerically predominant. Therefore, in all but a few specific territories and times, cycling in Europe can therefore be understood as a subcultural activity inasmuch as it stands outside the mainstream "normative" practices of society.

Pursuing Gelder's definition further, we can make a distinction between marginality and non-normativity. The former indicates a level of separation from the main flow of the culture and practice of a society. Usually, it is associated with distinctive difference from the majority practice or identity of a society. Being on the edge of the mainstream of thought or practice is frequently a useful indicator of one's relationship to power within a given society. However, analysis of social class, and especially of the power and role of elites (see e.g. Mills, 1956; Miliband, 1984) can ensure that numeric majorities may not command effective control or representation in relation to decision making over their future or constraints on their current actions. Small numbers of elites, by virtue of privileged access to the instruments of economic political and social power, control the capacity to create and maintain normative discourses. Normativity – the capacity to establish and police social, legal and political norms – is therefore separate from numerical dominance.

But this does not mean total dominance by structures of power. Spaces of resistance constantly open even within the most apparently closed systems (McKay, 1996). In the context of making change, bell hooks (1990) recognizes marginality specifically as a site of resistance, a conceptual space within which critique can emerge and be nurtured (this link to multicultural feminist studies will be returned to later in the discussion). The margin is not just the space (physical in the case of much road cycling) to which one is confined, but also a vital resource for the formation of resistant counter-culture. Being distanced from centres of power provides critical distance, allowing

the formation of perspectives and allowing analysis that is impossible from the centre.

In the case of cycling, historical research shows that in the UK, for example, even when cyclists were the physical majority of road users in the 1930s, road policy was still formed around the interests of the promotion of motor traffic (Cox, 2012). Cyclists were not marginalized numerically, but they were marginalized discursively. In other words, though a majority, their voice was not normative: it was not assumed to be paramount in planning and development. Instead, the voices of the minority (private motor-vehicle owners) were prioritized. Practically, this resulted in cyclists being pushed out of policy discussions on the future of roads. Majority power is not an automatic correlate of numerical superiority.

One uniting factor bringing cyclists together at local, national and even international levels since the very earliest days of cycling, has been the formation of clubs and other formal associations (for example, the Cyclists' Touring Club (CTC) in the UK was formed in 1878). Almost from the beginning, these clubs, especially as national associations, had both an inward support and social function, coupled with an outward, representative function. Although the CTC was originally formed from the social elite as a means to preserve and replicate their privilege, by the 1930s it recognized the need for broader representation. This latter rapidly grew into a lobbying function developing advocacy for cyclists' rights, whether as tourists, facilitating travel across international borders, or in more specific campaigning for rights on the roads and in other interactions with other forms of mobility. In this example, we see a very clear imagined community

formed around shared concern but also creating its own cultural identity through shared practices and common communication. Importantly, these shared practices are not only governed through regulations relating to the use of roads and the public spaces in which they travel, but also through the normative discourses of the broader society. To summarize, we can note that the normative assumptions concerning mobility reflect power elites rather than mass practices. These may coincide, but not necessarily so.

The second insight from subcultural studies is that the further the distance from the norms of society a subculture is, the more important the role of distinctive identity formation and maintenance, as noted above. For cycling advocacy this point is of fundamental importance. Advocacy groups for any community are usually formed by those marginalized from mainstream policy discourse, and in territories in which cycling is a relatively marginal and minority activity, the formations of distinct identities as “cyclists” has been both necessary and pivotal. This is not to homogenize “the cyclist”. Indeed cyclist subcultures frequently exhibit multiple (even recursive) fragmentation into ever smaller sub-groups with particularly clear demarcations, perhaps only visible to “insiders”. One may think here of the distinctions between transport, leisure, touring, road and mountain biking, and within these other specific grouping such as fixies, cross-country and downhill. These differentiations may be a gift and sometimes a creation of marketing – a business strategy to maximize sales through the artificial creation of identities, but also reflect differences of practice and usage regardless of machine types or styles. Yet through

national organizations, all these varied practices can be potentially united in a singular identity.

The third important observation arising from observation and analysis is that subcultures, once defined, frequently perpetuate their own continued distance from the mainstream. The obvious reason is the need to preserve and maintain themselves in the face of mainstream opposition. The perpetuation of a distinctive identity serves as a necessary survival strategy in the face of opposition. However, the corollary of continued opposition is two-fold. On the one hand, the perpetuation of distinctiveness serves to maintain marginalization. It is difficult for oppositional groups to make the transformation into decision-making groups. This can be illustrated clearly in relation to the transformation of green political movements in a number of European nations through the 1980s and 1990s. Access to power and electoral success produced internal division and splits as some sought to maintain distinctiveness, accusing those who argued that they needed to work within the mainstream of political discourse of “selling out” and feeling betrayed by them. A break between idealism and pragmatism became visible. A similar tension can be seen for example in the UK as sport cycling rapidly shifts in the twenty-first century from being largely ignored to achieve iconic status on the back of international sporting success. Talking to longstanding cyclists, it is possible to identify some who are resentful of this new found popularity and the possibilities of working with systems of governance. For cycling advocacy, awareness is needed of the very real tensions at work. Both perspectives are legitimate and the stakes are not simply

matters of intellectual assent, but of personal and collective identity.

On the other hand, continued marginalization may crucially enable a greater level of critique to be developed. What is so good about the mainstream that one should want to join it so much, runs the argument. Distance from the centre is essential because what is under challenge is the very idea of a centre, not just its location. Marginality, in bell hooks' argument, is the site through which critical gaze can be developed. This is a central theme of queer theory. The challenge posed by queer theory is not just to change social norms but to undermine the fundamental arrangement by which norms operate to homogenize society and to erase or elide difference. Normalcy itself becomes the focus of critique. Queer theory poses a challenge to cycle advocacy especially in terms of the presentation of cycling as a rational choice for an efficient city. Is the aim of cycle advocacy to encourage greater levels of cycle commuting simply to produce a more efficient capitalism, or is activism for cycling cities conjoined with other forms of social critique? These are questions that the cycling advocacy movement has traditionally not addressed in any serious dimension. However, these are the very questions posed by recent social sciences studies on cycling that cross the border between academia and advocacy, creating what the transport historian Gijs Mom (2011) has called a new "emancipatory" subfield. It is to the way in which social theory can go beyond the interpretation of events and enter into dialogue with the objects of its study that we turn for the final section of this chapter.

Cycling, Radical Social Movements and Multiculturalism

The relationship between academic theory and activism has not always been smooth. Ever since Saul Alinsky (1969, p. ix) wrote that “The word ‘academic’ is a synonym for irrelevant” in the preface to his *Reveille for Radicals*, the relationship between academic research and activist advocacy has been a troubled one. One of the most powerful sets of responses has been in the field of community organising and community development, where academic research and community empowerment have gone hand in hand through the processes of participatory research (for a classic response to Alinsky, see Stoeker, 1999 and the On-Line Conference on Community Organizing at <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/>). In the sociological study of social movements, the relationship between groups working for change and the academics studying them has been particularly acute: a situation that Alinsky was recognizing in his activist manuals (Alinsky, 1969, 1971). Yet, here too, the possibility of fruitful collaboration between the study of activism and activists themselves is clearer in examples such as the Vancouver Citizens’ Handbook (<http://www.citizenshandbook.org/>) and its print expansion as *The Troublemaker’s Teaparty* by Charles Dobson (2003).

To explore the relationship between theory and advocacy, this final section takes elements from studies in the social sciences to interrogate the practices of cycling advocacy groups, especially as they use the framework of cycling cultures as a significant element in their presentation of public arguments for increased levels of

urban cycling. This is most clearly illustrated in the Velocity conference 2013 hosted by the city of Vienna, which assembled more than 1,400 international delegates under the title of “The Sound of Cycling – Urban Cycling Cultures” (<http://velo-city2013.com/>). The level of activity and participation to be seen at such conferences is indicative that what may once have been a subcultural minority activity has now entered mainstream policy debate. National and international organizations are no longer just lobbying on behalf of their members but are now frequently arguing for change on behalf of and affecting those who are currently non-cyclists and thus of whom they are not directly representative (see Horton, 2013; Horton & Parkin, 2012).

Yet the question remains, taking us back to the first part of the chapter. How is the diversity previously indicated adequately (re)presented by organizations that speak for cycling? Is it possible to find ways to unite these diverse practices, experiences and subcultures without traducing or misrepresenting them? Are there grounds for creating political unity amidst diversity without erasing the differences?

Before responding to these, however, it is worth thinking about an underlying question that lurks, often hidden and inarticulate, behind much cycle advocacy – as for many other movements for change – and points towards why theory and academic study may not be as irrelevant as Alinsky suggested. Let us pose it in the form of a series of question and answer slogans for a demonstration (one might substitute a number of different demands depending on the particular campaign target).

What do we want? – More cycling!

When do we want it? – Now!

Why do we want it? – Errr ...

For the first two elements, a degree of consensus is easy to discern if one listens to a variety of advocacy groups internationally. The third question is a frequently unasked one behind numerous calls for social change. The degree to which it remains unarticulated is an indicator that movements for change rely on building pragmatic alliances. Stopping to consider underlying reasons, or even ultimate goals risks damaging often fragile coalitions of interests and identities. Not asking ultimate “why”, or “to what ultimate end” questions allows the facade of a unified culture to remain. If the “why” question does get asked it may produce a kaleidoscope of responses reflecting a range of political, pragmatic, cultural and local considerations. A myriad of responses reflect the very diversity discussed above. A study of the cycling advocacy literature from the 1930s to the present day and across a number of locations in Europe and the Americas reveals a bewildering variety of arguments. Indeed, this variety provides a cause for celebration in the programme of the Velo-city conference mentioned above, and is used to bring together campaigners from very different backgrounds. Yet it also poses very real questions: firstly, about long-term solidarity and secondly, about what any particular campaign’s long-term aims and vision really are, once one looks beneath the immediate surface demands. This dilemma, as mentioned, is not unique to cycle campaigns and advocacy but can be found in a range of social movements.

Cycling as a Social Movement

The idea of cycling advocacy as a social movement or as integrally linked to the emergence of new social movements was a founding theme of the new “emancipatory” subfield of social scientific studies described by Gijss Mom (see Rosen, 2002; Horton, 2006). While social movements studies has developed into a large academic field of study (see e.g. Snow et al., 2004), Herbert Blumer’s description from the late 1930s is still a valid starting point for understanding the emancipatory thrust of movements for change. Social movements are, he said, “collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in the condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living” (Blumer, 1939, p. 199).

What is of particular note is that the archetypal social movements emerging in the twentieth century, the women’s movement, gay liberation, the green movement, have each been responsible for developing new emancipatories arising from their shared collective identities and pushing at the boundaries of what currently exists. Seen through these lenses, we should expect cycling as an activist movement not simply to develop arguments concerning the arrangement of urban traffic patterns but also to include more profoundly – politically and socially – transformative elements. In keeping with other social movements, we should not be surprised to find both reformist and revolutionary forms of activity and activism. In almost all broad social movements, we see combinations of those who seek modifications within

the existing social system, and those who would radically transform the arrangements of society. Thus not only may we find a diversity of activities, but also a diversity of political dimensions within the movement. Radical action and reform go together in historic movements, not as a distraction from one another but as necessary, vibrant and integral parts of a broader process.

The problem faced by actors within a movement remains: how to build alliances of solidarity between divergent and often conflicting elements without denying their differences. Disparate cycling cultures and subcultures can draw on parallels with other social movements in order to understand the interrelationships of parts. One of the most important and certainly one of the clearest examples of another explicitly emancipatory movement dealing with questions of profound diversity is that of multicultural feminism. While ideas and practices of multiculturalism may be devalued by simply reducing them to the observance of a plural society, or be challenged and undermined by current neo-conservative politics as Modood (2013) argues, it is ever more important to rediscover ways of building solidarity across divisive boundaries of separation and difference without dissolving or ignoring our diverse experiences and identities.

As feminist politics has had to come to terms with the complexity of women's lives and move away from the idea of a universal identity of woman, so we can see parallels to the problem of recognizing the category of "cyclists" while simultaneously recognizing the hollowness and artificiality of the term. As Linda Nicholson argues,

To give up on the idea that 'woman' has one clearly specifiable meaning does not entail that it has no meaning. Rather, this way of thinking about meaning works upon the assumption that such patterns are found within history and must be documented as such. (Nicholson & Seidman, 1995, p. 61)

What binds diverse and often unconnected experiences together is their shared position of struggle. Connection does not come through similarity but through the diverse struggles in which we participate. Copeland (1996, p. 147) puts it even more clearly: "Difference is the authentic context for interdependence".

Diverse cycling cultures, experiences and identities do not invalidate the idea that groups or campaigns can speak about "cycling" but can explore the possibility of forming a radical cycling movement through the embrace of differences and by choosing to work together. Returning to best illustrations from feminist theory we can perhaps reflect on the work of Chantal Mouffe. She describes how feminist struggles deal with diverse cultural experiences.

Feminist politics should be understood not as a separate politics designed to pursue the interests of women as women, but rather as the pursuit of feminist goals and aims within the context of a wider articulation of demands. Those goals and aims should consist in the transformation of all the discourses, practices, and social relations where the category 'woman' is constructed in a way that implies subordination. Feminism, for me, is the struggle for the equality of women. But

this should not be understood as a struggle for realizing the equality of an empirically definable group with a common essence and identity, women, but rather as a struggle against the multiple forms in which the category 'woman' is constructed in subordination. (Mouffe, 1995: 329)

What happens if another identity is substituted for the terms woman and feminist in this passage? Can Mouffe's analysis be used for a wider analysis of other forms of marginalized identity? One may argue that the precise social location of women's oppression within the structures of patriarchy is unique and that no substitution is possible, yet it would undermine the strength of her theoretical argument to insist that her basic analysis cannot be generalized.

Therefore, can a study of social theory and cycling cultures be used to arrive at a better understanding of bicycle politics? I would suggest that this is the precise task of applied social theory: to not only assist in a better understanding of existing conditions, but also to engage with the concrete processes of change that are part of the everyday world. To return to the sloganeering, "Why do we want it – because it is part of a shared struggle for a better world", allows a space to recognize the diversity of cycling cultures but also to make the idea of cycling culture meaningful.

References

Aldred, R., & Jungnickel, K. (2012). *Cycling Cultures: Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations*

- [ESRC funded research project] retrieved from <http://www.cyclingcultures.org.uk/Final-report-cycling-cultures.pdf> [accessed on 16 April 2013].
- Alinsky, S. (1969 [1946]). *Reveille for Radicals*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Alinsky S. (1971). *Rules for Radicals*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised and extended). London, UK: Verso.
- Arnold, M. (1869) *Culture and Anarchy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford World's Classics. Bijker, W., Hughes, T., & Pinch, T. (2012). *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology* (anniversary edition). Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Blumer, H. (1939). Collective Behavior. In R.E. Park, ed.). *An Outline of the Principles of Sociology* (pp. 219–280). New York, NY: Barnes and Noble.
- Bobet, J. (2008). *Tomorrow, We Ride*. Norwich, UK: Mousehold Press.
- Burrows, M. (2004). *Bicycle Design: The Search for the Perfect Machine* (second edition). London, UK: Pedal Press.
- Copeland, M.S. (1996). Difference as a Category in Critical Theologies for the Liberation of Women, *Concilium* 1996(1), 141-151.
- Cox, P. (2005). Conflicting Agendas in Selling Cycling. Presentation, Web publication and CD-Rom Conference Proceedings Velo-city 2005, Dublin. Dublin: Dublin City Council, 9 June 2005.
- Cox, P. (2007). The Role of Human Powered Vehicles in Sustainable Mobility, *Built Environment*, 43(2), 140–

- 160.Cox, P. (2012). A Denial of Our Boasted Civilisation: Cyclists' Views on Conflicts over Road Use in Britain, 1926–1935, *Transfers*, 2(3), 4–30.
- Dobson, C. (2003). *The Troublemaker's Teaparty: A Manual for Effective Citizen Action*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society.
- Gelder, K. (2005). Introduction: The Field of Subcultural Studies. In K. Gelder & S. Thornton (eds.), *The Subcultures Reader* (2nd edition) (pp. 1–15). London, UK: Routledge.
- Hadland, T., & Lessing H.-E. (2014). *Bicycle Design: An Illustrated History*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- hooks, b. (1990). Marginality as a Site of Resistance. In R. Ferguson, M. Gever, T.T. Minh-ha, & C. West (eds.), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (pp. 341–144). Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Horton, D. (2006). *Social Movements and the Bicycle*. Paper presented to the conference, Alternative Futures and Popular Protest, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, April 2006.
- Horton, D. (2013). *Towards a Revolution in Cycling*. Retrieved from <http://thinkingaboutcycling.wordpress.com/towards-a-revolution-in-cycling/> [accessed on 16 April 2013].
- Horton, D., & Parkin, J. (2013). Conclusion: Towards a Revolution in Cycling. In J. Parkin (ed.), *Cycling and Sustainability* (pp. 303–325). Bingley, UK: Emerald Press.
- Lenting, H. (2014). Comparing and Learning From Each Other for a Better Cycling Future. Paper presented to

- the Networked Urban Mobilities Conference 2014, Copenhagen 5/11/14.
- McKay, G. (1996). *Senseless Acts of Beauty. Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties*. London, UK: Verso.
- Melucci, A. (1996). *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Miliband, R. (1984). *Class Power and State Power*. London, UK: Verso.
- Mills, C.W. (1956). *The Power Elite*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Mills, C.W. (1959). *The Sociological Imagination*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Modood, T. (2013). *Multiculturalism: A Civic Ideal* (second edition). London, UK: Polity Press.
- Mom, G. (2011). "Historians Bleed Too Much": Recent Trends in the State of the Art in Mobility History. In P. Norton, G. Mom, L. Millward & M. Flonneau (eds.). *Mobility in History: Review and Reflections*. (pp. 15–30). Lausanne, Switzerland: Editions Alphil.
- Mouffe, C. (1995). Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics. In L. Nicholson & S. Seidman (eds.), *Social Postmodernism* (pp. 315–331). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Nicholson, L., & Seidman, S. (eds.) (1995). *Social Postmodernism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosen, P. (2002). *Up the Vélorution: Appropriating the Bicycle and the Politics of Technology*. (SATSU Working paper N24 2002). Science & Technology Studies Unit, University of York, UK.

- Shove, E., Pantzar, M., & Watson, M. (2012). *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes*. London, UK: Sage.
- Snow, D.A., Soule, S.A. & Kriesi, H. (eds.) (2004). *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Stoeker, R. (1999). Are Academics Irrelevant? Roles for Scholars in Participatory Research. *American Behavioural Scientist*, 42(5), 840–854.
- United Nations Convention on Road Traffic, Vienna, 8 November 1968. E/Conf.56/Rev.1/Amend.1 accessed at <http://www.unec.org/fileadmin/DAM/trans/conventn/crt1968e.pdf>.
- Urry, J. (2007). *Mobilities*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Vivanco, L. (2013). *Reconsidering the Bicycle: An Anthropological Perspective on a New (Old) Thing*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Williams J.P. (2011). *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts*. London, UK: Polity Press.
- Williams, R. (1976 [1983]). *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (revised edition). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, R. (1985 [1958]). *Culture and Society 1780–1950*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Wilson, D., with Papadopoulos, J. (2004). *Bicycling Science* (third edition). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

