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Author(s): Peter Cox

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Mass culture, subcultures and multiculturalism: how theory can help us understand cycling practice

Paper presented at Velo-City 2013 *The sound of cycling: urban cycling cultures*,
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Dr Peter Cox
University of Chester, UK
peter.cox@chester.ac.uk
<http://chester.academia.edu/PeterCox>

Abstract

In recent years we have become accustomed to speaking of cycling cultures, but frequently without really examining what we really mean by 'culture' in this context. This lecture explores what insights into cycling practices can be gained from the work of social scientists who have concentrated on the topic of culture in their work. On closer examination, we can see how issues of power, legitimacy, inclusion and conflict have been central to the study of popular cultures and the presentation is designed to show how these themes can help us better to understand, and therefore respond to, the problems of advocacy. In particular, the lecture addresses how shared practices and common cultures relate to the process of social change and the formation of social movements.

Herbert Blumer (1939) classically defined social movements as "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". Asserting that the work of cycle advocacy is an attempt to establish a new order of mobile life where the cycle is no longer subordinate to the car, the lecture poses the central question of whether there is, or can be, a collective enterprise with a shared culture among the myriad of different cycling practices. Using insights from multicultural feminism, it points towards the possibility of building of alliances between groups while maintaining their diversity, showing that it is possible to work actively for change without compromising differences and even conflicts of interests between a variety of different groups.

Introduction

I come to this presentation as someone who wears two hats simultaneously – as a professional academic sociologist employed and working in the world of academia, and as an advocate working for change. Ever since Saul Alinsky (1969: 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, see Stoeker 1999 and the on-going *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 recognising in his activist manuals (Alinsky 1969, 1971). Yet, here too, the possibility of fruitful collaboration between the study of activism and activists themselves has been vividly illustrated in the production of the Vancouver citizens handbook (<http://www.citizenshandbook.org/>) and its print expansion as *The Troublemaker’s Teaparty* by Charles Dobson (2003).

My intention here is to explore how some broader studies from the social sciences can assist us as advocates to be more sensitive to the contexts in which we work, and more effective in our advocacy. In particular, the concern is with the peculiar nature of cycling as an activity in urban life, and the plain, if often overlooked, fact that as advocates we are frequently arguing on behalf of those who are currently non-cyclists and thus of whom we are *not* directly representative (see Horton 2013, Horton and Parkin 2012). In order to do so, the presentation will outline a number of insights from the study of social identity formations in the context of broader movements for change. It first examines some themes around cultures and subcultures and a brief discussion of social movement studies. It then moves on to look more specifically at issues of power and marginalisation and the means by which alliances for change can be formed.

Before these, however it is worth thinking about an underlying question that lies, often hidden and inarticulate, behind much cycle advocacy and points towards why theory and academic study may not be so irrelevant after all. Let us pose it in the form of a question and answer slogan for a demonstrations:

“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, however, produces a

kaleidoscope of responses reflecting a range of political, pragmatic, cultural and local considerations. A study of the broad range of cycling advocacy literature reveals a huge variety of arguments – indeed this variety of reasons why cycling is a good thing is used as a cause for celebration, and is what brings campaigners together 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 aims really are, once one looks beneath the immediate surface demands. Are we as advocates looking for increased cycling numbers for their own sake or as a means to other objectives, or as part of a wider package of social changes? In order to explicate these issues, we can look towards the study of cultures and subcultures to help us analyse the hidden issues.

Culture and Subcultures

“Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”, wrote Raymond Williams (1976). Despite this complexity, he 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, R and Jungnickel, K 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 developed over the years in his work and through the growing British academic school of cultural studies.

Williams wrote against a background of twentieth century social elites fearful of the emergence and development 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 of the population were understood as inimical to the preservation of high culture through the middle years of the twentieth century rendering those activities of ordinary working class citizens (the social majority) as inherently undesirable. 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 were identified with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. For our purposes, the CCS

investigations of subcultures provide 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 (2005: 1) 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”. In all but a few specific territories and times, cycling in Europe can be understood as a subcultural activity. That is, it stands outside the mainstream ‘normative’ practices of society.

Marginality and non-normativity can be separated. 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, Miliband) can ensure that numeric majorities may still not command effective or representation in relation to decision making concerning their future and the constraints on their actions. Normativity - the capacity to establish and police social legal and political norms – is therefore separate from numerical dominance. In the context of making change, bell hooks recognises marginality specifically as a site of resistance, a conceptual space in which critique can emerge and be nurtured. This link to multicultural feminist studies will be returned to later in the discussion.

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 marginalised numerically, but they were marginalised discursively. That is, that is their voice was not normative it was not that assumed to be paramount in planning and development. Practically, this resulted in their being pushed out of discussions on the future of roads policy. For the purposes of cycle advocacy, it is imperative therefore not simply to talk about numbers but about the decision-making processes through which cyclists are governed.

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. For cycling advocacy this point is of fundamental importance. Advocacy groups are usually formed by those marginalised 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 homogenise ‘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 distinction between transport, leisure, touring,

road and mountain biking, and within these other specific grouping such as fixies, cross-country and downhill and so on. These differentiations are a gift and sometimes creation of marketing - a business strategy to maximise sales through the artificial creation of identities, but also reflect differences of practice and usage regardless of machine types or styles.

Thirdly, 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 marginalisation. It is difficult for oppositional groups to make the transformation into decisions 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. For cycling advocacy, an 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 – who we feel we are as individuals and who we feel that we belong to and with.

On the other hand, continued marginalisation 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 under challenge is the very idea of a centre not just its location. 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 homogenise 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 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 historically not confronted 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.

Cycling, radical social movements and multiculturalism

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 this new turn in social

science studies (see Rosen 2002; Horton 2006). While social movements studies has developed into a large field (see e.g. Snow, Soule & Kriesi; Goodwin & Jasper; Nash) Herbert Blumer's description from the 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".

What is of particular note is that the archetypal social movements emerging in the 20th 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 moving through those to reconfigurations of the good life that challenge not simply the location of the centre of power but the arrangements of the distribution of power. Radical cycling activism is not a distraction from the broader reform programme of cycling advocacy but a vibrant and integral part of it.

The problem remains, how to build alliances of solidarity between divergent and often conflicting cycling subcultures without denying their differences. The final contribution from social theory required here is to examine how another emancipatory movement has dealt with the diversity, in the form 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 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 recognising ourselves as "cyclists" while simultaneously recognising the hollowness and artificiality of the term. As Nicholson (1995: 61) 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." 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 that we participate in. As Copeland (1996: 47) puts it, "Difference is the authentic context for interdependence".

We set the possibility to form a radical cycling movement through the embrace of differences and our choice to work together. Perhaps the best illustration of this is in the work of Chantal Mouffe she describes how feminist struggles deal with diverse cultural experiences. My suggestion is that we can begin to define an emancipatory bicycle politics by re-writing her argument to consider how it might sound if feminist is substituted for pro-bike, and women for cycling

“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

Following this map we see also appearing the basis of creating intersections with other struggles for change. To return to the opening of this paper

“What do we want ?” – “More cycling!”

“When do we want it ?” – “Now! “

“Why do we want it” – because it is part of a shared struggle for better world

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