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# The sociality of cycling

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**Abstract**

The "sociality" of cycling has broader ramifications for mobility transitions. While infrastructure engineering and other planning efforts may "attract" more cyclists to the roads, we introduce key aspects of the culture of bicycle mobility, which is boosted by social movements like Critical Mass, and organizations including community bike workshops. They respond to particular social needs across race, class and gender, but also create broader "demand" for cycling, through socialization, enlisting new cyclists, lobbying, and bike-friendly actions. The "bikespace", drawing on Lefebvre, forms the "software" that complements, and builds, a cycling culture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As Peter Cox notes, "…cycling as primary mobility has shaped and still shapes significant numbers of social lives." (2019, p.3)

Cycling is, therefore, a social activity as well as a material practice (Popan 2019), and involved in the production of space (Castañeda 2020). The act of cycling fulfils basic requirements – to reach a destination, to travel through the natural and built environment, or to maintain health and fitness. But like the two other major forms of active travel, running and walking, cycling generates and is embedded in various types of social institutions, fashions and trends, and community spaces and campaigns. These include clubs, societies and interest groups dedicated to cycling in all its forms – from the *flâneurs* of the 1890s (Mackintosh & Norcliffe 2006) to contemporary urban "fixie crews" and youth groups (Azzarello et al. 2016), and from the lowriders of Los Angeles to the competitive bike racing fraternity and their teams and organizations. The material presence of a bike also has symbolic importance, as an object of desire, as a material possession, and as an expression of good technical design (Nurse 2021). For some, bikes are a favored form of transport because they are a harbinger of a low carbon economy, in which low-impact and active transport modes will become commonplace once again. Cycling has its own social politics – commonly, as a celebration and manifestation of resistance to the culture of automobility and the domination of the streetscape by polluting vehicles.

In this chapter, we explore selected aspects of the social dimensions of cycling. We show that in the many debates about how to reclaim space for bikes and increase ridership, the "sociality" of cycling and the pleasure of riding a bike also has political ramifications. Increasing the modal share of bikes means investing in much more than bicycle infrastructure like bike lanes, road and intersection treatments and bike parking (described in this *Companion* ch 20). Such transport engineering "hardware" may "attract" more cyclists to the roads, as many bike-friendly municipal planners hope (Pucher and Buehler 2008). Some even argue that we know everything that is needed to promote cycling from this planning-centric perspective (Nello-Deakin 2020). We argue that it is the culture of mobility, boosted by social movements and organizations, that creates "demand" for cycling, through socialization, enlisting new cyclists (Mundler & Rérat 2018), lobbying, and bike-friendly actions. These form the "software" that complements, and builds, a cycling culture. We term this the "bikespace."

## 2. THE BIKESPACE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMAND FOR CYCLING

The "bikespace" is something produced by different communities of cyclists, as well as by bike phenomena and social movements of different forms. These spaces are not just physically anchored ones like velodromes, bike stores or networks of cycle lanes, but also include spaces that are formed through the practice of cycling – in movement – like Critical Masses and social rides. We argue that through the interaction of "kinopolitical constellations" within the bikespace, enhanced practices and socialities emerge that can be used to enhance the demand for cycling. Kinopolitical constellations are mobile and have scale. They collapse memories into the present: one of the authors grew up in Bogotá in a time of drug trafficking and violence. He started riding from his house on the suburbs to his school on the newly minted cycle paths, and cycling made him proud of his city, and eventually made him a cycling scholar. This emotional attachment to the bike is always present. Bikes have meanings, bringing a multiplicity of perspectives related to this one object. In the aggregate form, in conjunction with infrastructures and social relations, they form a s*ystème vélo* (see also Cox, 2019, p.27),. We also show that while bikespaces are local and rooted in place, the practices and socialities that emerge from them show some similarities across the world, existing in different locations as forms of translocal assemblages (McFarlane 2009).

The idea of a bikespace is based on the representations of space defined by Lefebvre in *La Production de L'espace* (Lefebvre, 1974) and by Soja in *Thirdspace* (1996). From their perspective, space is socially constructed. Lefebvre considers that space is defined by a spatial triad: 1) "*l'espace perçu*" is the space we perceive through our senses, supporting the materiality of its elements; 2) "*l'espace conçu*," the conceived space, and its production is intertwined with social conventions. It is an abstract form that is perceived but not lived, dominant among planners and professionals; 3) "*l'espace de representation*" is a representational space of symbols, including art and literature. Each one of these forms is related to the production of knowledge, to producing material things and spaces, and the production of meaning.

The bikespace combines these three elements as a form of assemblage, or mobility praxis. Although more complex definitions exist, we consider it to be a mobile, social field in which bicycles are a focus for human agency, knowledge, institutions and in places, and also attain symbolic power. Practicing bike mobilities means the bikespace forms around us and is potentially transformed by our presence as it interacts with other assemblages. We (re)make space by moving through complex assemblages of mobile knowledge, actions and power. Creating positive bikespaces is integral to mobility justice (Sheller 2018) and to supporting the mobile commons (Nikolaeva et al. 2019).

Bicycle riders, activists, and movements perceive and react to elements of the bikespace, and express it in ways we detail in the next section. Doreen Massey has a useful expression of this interaction: the "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings." These allow "a sense of place which is extraverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in

a positive way the global and the local." (Massey, 1993, p.67). Here, we are particularly interested in constellations of *vélomobilty*, a concept akin to the bikespace and following Peter Cox "(…) the assemblage of rider, machine, and space and the systemic relations of society, economy, polity and history within which they are performed." (Cox 2019, p.27).

Bikespaces take into account the many layers that are often forgotten when thinking about, promoting and researching cycling. In particular, participation within the bikespace is informed by different positions: by race (Hoffmann & Lugo 2014; Hoffmann 2016; Lugo 2018); by gender (Abord de Chatillon 2020); by ability or age (Goodman & Aldred 2018; Inckle 2019); by passion; by the importance of mobile autonomy; and by the value that some cyclists place on low-carbon transport, and even on degrowth (Rigal 2020). Such identities often overlap and intersect. Each individual who enters the bikespace does so with their own kinopolitical constellation, and this can transform over time: for example when discovering cycling and beginning to commute by bike eventually leads to participation in cyclist organizations or networks. Castañeda alerts us to the playfulness and the empowerment that arises from participation in Bogotá's Critical Mass in Colombia (Castañeda 2020). Popan describes the different types of sociabilities that arise while riding together and conversing, belonging to a club, or by participating in a carnival as people do when riding together in Critical Mass events (Popan 2019; Nurse 2021).

## 3. EXAMPLES OF ENHANCED SOCIALITY

Cycling has different meanings depending on class, space, time and culture – it has "rolling signification" that changes as society has passed through different epochs, and socioeconomic and cultural spaces (Hoffmann 2016). Héran describes how cyclists and their spatial attachment have changed over the decades in Europe: from the wheelmen of the late nineteenth century who lobbied for the expansions of roads from central urban locations to the countryside, to the working class who cycled from factories to their suburbs in the mid-twentieth century, to the "Bobos" of the early 2000s who rode in central urban locations and adopted alternative lifestyles (Héran 2015). In high mode-share cycling cities like Copenhagen, the bike itself does not stand out, since it is a quotidian and ubiquitous object. Nonetheless, the city's bike culture has been represented globally and is emblematic (Colville-Andersen 2018). Jordan (2013) tells a similar story for Amsterdam, showing how bikes defined the city over more than a century through war and peace, and survived attacks on access to key routes and spaces by pro-car planners at different historical moments.

The role of culture and identity cannot be overstated. Recent decades have seen affluent, environmentally conscious publics adopt cycling as a marker of progressivism and "wokeness", what Hoffmann and Lugo termed "creative class bait" (Hoffmann & Lugo 2014, p.45). Examples in the West include largely white and affluent urban advocates who lobby and campaign for better infrastructure and bike lanes, thereby producing spatial relations in ways that fit their favored image of an urban streetscape (Stehlin 2019). An archetype would be the recent college graduate who lives in a central location in a moderate to high-density city like Portland, Oregon, USA (as represented in TV shows like *Portlandia*). By contrast, in Mexico and parts of the US, stereotypical cycle commuters are low-income men who have no access to motor vehicles (Guerra et al. 2020) – a group inappropriately labeled as "invisible" cyclists (Barajas 2016). Only 2.2% of the wealthiest quintile of Mexican workers commute by bike (Guerra et al. 2020, p.8). In Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, dubbed Africa's "city of two wheels", bicycles and mopeds still predominate after decades of urban expansion and roadbuilding, forming a unique roadside culture (Batterbury, 1997; Ouedraogo, 1986). Culture, class, intersectional identities and the meaning of cycling vary within and between urban populations, and according to wealth and access to other transport modes.

The French city of Grenoble is the most bikeable in the country for a city of its size (Fédération des usagers de la Bicyclette 2019). This is due to decade-long investments in infrastructure and more recently

an innovative long-term bike hire scheme (Métrovélo), as well as the presence of a very lively network of community organizations (Rigal 2020). Yet some residents still feel disenfranchised and excluded from spaces that provide access to cheap and affordable mobility. They include recent immigrants working as food couriers, and some Muslim youth and women (Vietinghoff 2021; pers. obs. 2020). Vietinghoff argues racism exists in this bicycle culture, but is concealed by France's official statistics in which religious background or ethnicity can't be gathered by law. In New York restrictions have been placed on food delivery workers who use e-bikes, many of them migrants, while preserving access for publics with more privileged identities (Lee 2018). Race is erased when discussing policies that could inform and improve the demand for cycling in the French-speaking context, while class and racial inequalities are perpetuated in the US (Lugo 2013).

Over forty years in Santiago, Chile, bike movements have promoted cycle inclusion while shaping participatory processes in the city (Sagaris 2015). These movements have 1) helped shape urban policy; 2) encouraged behavioral change; and 3) promoted what Sagaris calls the cycling economy. Political engagement by cycling movements and the spaces they provide have helped to teach people to ride and learn repair skills, and have provided spaces of sociality that help to build community bonds. Following the September 2017 earthquake in Mexico City “bikepilling” volunteer crews were organized by the community to bring supplies to collection points across the city as part of the emergency response, and to tend to the wounded and other victims (Cabezas, 2017). Barajas (2020) found that Spanish-speaking migrants in San Francisco's Bay Area find themselves alienated from workshops and cycling events dominated by white upper-middle class participants. These communities have lobbied for the development of "supplemental infrastructure" that goes beyond hard infrastructure investments, to include services such as bike repairs, shared mobility services, and bike rentals, that emphasizes the role of social bonds and community identification.

Bike cultures have also benefited from short-term changes. During the global COVID-19 pandemic from 2019, cycling has received support, particularly given the greater risks of infection on public transport and the need to maintain fitness during lockdowns. In France and the UK, subsidies were available for bike checkups, reconditioning and repairs (D'Halluin 2020). There was a lack of new bikes to satisfy the demand induced by the pandemic, favoring repair and re-use. Under the French *Coup de Pouce Vélo*, 900,000 bikes were refurbished by November 2020, some by community bike workshops (*ateliers vélo*), and 500 workplaces were supported through government assistance totaling 80 million euros (Fédération des Usagers de la Bicyclette 2021). Temporary "coronapistes" (covid tracks) emerged in France - some of which have turned permanent under public pressure (C. 2020).

**Community bike workshops**

Community bike workshops, "bike kitchens" or *ateliers vélo* are important bikespaces in cities (Batterbury 2021). In all of them, donated or scavenged bicycles are repaired, and parts are re-used (Figure 1). There are at least two types of workshops: 1) those that fix bikes for others – often for disadvantaged populations, with a few even exporting bikes to the Global South, like Working Bikes in Chicago (https://workingbikes.org); 2) those where tools, parts and bike stands are on offer for anybody to use, assisted by workshop volunteers and sometimes by salaried mechanics. The latter mode contributes to *vélonomie*, enabling an autonomous cyclist to ride safely and to maintain a bicycle. Workshops perform social and material functions, and they have grown in numbers, particularly since the 1990s. They can help little-used and abandoned bikes get back on the road much more cheaply than most bike shops, and they can interrupt the waste stream, re-using bikes and parts, for example those collected by authorities, or cleared from storage. They are, therefore, agents in the circular economy. Some secondhand bikes may be sold to support the workshop (to meet its ongoing costs and pay for often-precarious premises), but their ethos is largely not-for-profit (Batterbury and Dant 2019). Workshops

exist in the liminal space of the alternative economy: they vary from highly organized and rule-driven, to cooperatively managed along consensus or anarchist principles (Batterbury and Dant 2019).

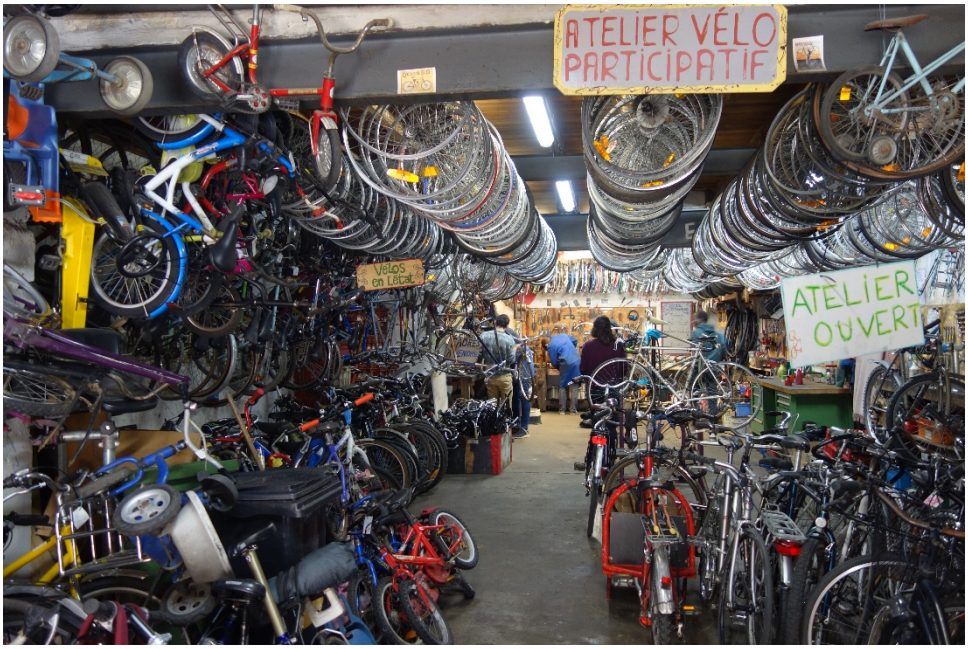


Figure 1. The old Récup'R workshop in Bordeaux, France (February 2020, before relocation). Source: Simon Batterbury.

In some countries, particularly in France, workshops have become a social movement, with structure and collective purpose. Bike!Bike! is an annual get-together for community workshops in the Americas (https://en.bikebike.org). L'Heureux Cyclage (LHC, https://www.heureux-cyclage.org) is the national network that includes most French DIY bike coops. Its activities include cycle promotion, by lobbying local and regional governments; guidance for community organizers to develop new bike coops, and popular education programs that teach how to ride bikes and to repair them (LHC 2019). LHC's annual Panorama reports register the growth of workshops, and detail their premises, volume of bikes fixed, personnel and staffing. There were at least 250 workshops registered in France serving 110,000 people in 2019 (LHC 2019, p.3). LHC also works with other organizations that promote the circular economy, and a slower way of life based on principles that value justice, community, and self-reliance.

A few studies illustrate the important social dimensions of community bike workshops (Batterbury and Vandermeersch 2016, Rigal 2020). Rigal shows how DIY bicycle workshops become spaces of resocialization, where members (like the authors) can become bike advocates. Bike activists can help to shape policies that give form to the territories they traverse at the local level (Rigal 2020). The P'tit Vélo dans la Tête workshop in Grenoble, one of France's oldest, helped to shape and implement the Métrovélo program, which is managed by metropolitan authorities (pers. obvs. 2020). In cities like Lyon and Melbourne, struggle for the rights of women to work in bikespaces as mechanics, enthusiasts and volunteers has challenged a predominantly male-dominated space, and has involved new organizations, actions, and collaboration (Figure 2, Abord de Chatillon 2020).

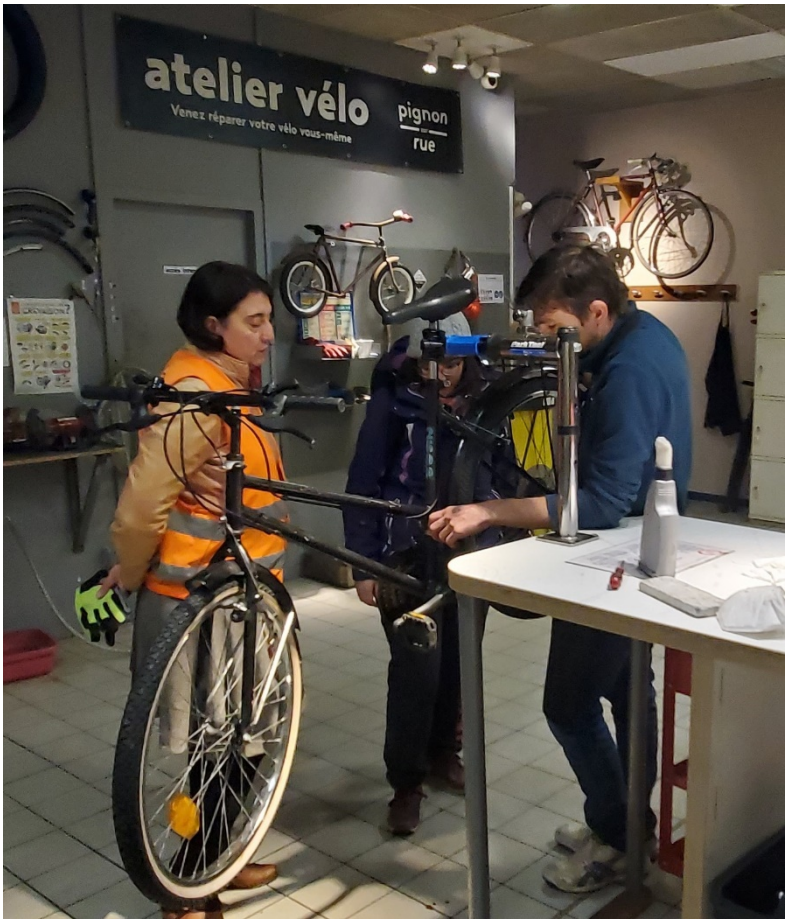


Figure 2. Atelier Pignon sur Rue, Ambilly, France. Expert women mechanics teaching a (male) workshop employee a specific repair (December 2020). Source: ©Alejandro Manga

**Critical Mass/*Vélorution* and bike events**

Critical Masses are social rides where cyclists take over city streets, congregating and then cycling slowly in large numbers, under the slogan "Critical Mass isn't BLOCKING traffic -- We ARE traffic" (D'Andrade 2021). From countercultural origins in the city of San Francisco bike messenger culture during the 1990s, by the mid-2000s they had spread to over 200 cities around the world (Furness 2007, p.300). The term in the French-speaking world is *Vélorution* - referring to the major symbolic challenge of tackling automobility as a hegemonic system (Carlsson 2002; Rosen 2004; Furness 2007). In Bogotá, Colombia, the *Ciclovía* involves the closure of 117 km of arterial roads so that people can walk, exercise and cycle on a Sunday, as a kind of formalized Critical Mass, and many other cities have adapted the practice (Figure 3, Montero 2017). Significant bikespaces have emerged, and cycling policies have been shaped by these convivial mass cycling events.

Figure 3. The first Ciclovía to take place after the first COVID-19 Lockdown, Bogotá, Colombia (September 2020). Source: ©Alejandro Manga.

For instance during a Critical Mass in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2011, an angry car driver crashed into the crowd and injured at least a dozen people (G1 2011). One year later, the first *Foro Mundial de la Bicicleta* was organized and as a memorial to the occasion. Some two thousand riders rode a commemorative ride as part of the Foro (Belotto et al. 2011). From its countercultural roots, the Foro has grown to become the biggest cycling event in Latin America. Government officials, academics and planning practitioners have participated in the yearly event including former New York transportation commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, academic Peter Cox, and the pro-cycling former Mayor of Bogotá Enrique Peñalosa (Navarrete 2015). The 2015 event was conducted in Medellín, Colombia and had more than 6,500 participants (Morales and Pareja 2015). Events like these also enhance socialities, and new kinopolitical constellations emerge.

Bike collectives and Critical Mass have been part of larger social protest movements, for example the Chilean *"el estallido social"* protests following an increase of transit fares in Santiago in October 2019 (Trejo 2020). These have spread to campaigns to defend women's rights and against street harassment; against car-based violence; and in favor of a new constitution (Figueroa 2020). This *Revolucíón Ciclista Plurinacional* has linked diverse social movements, persisting right through the COVID-19 pandemic when mobility was severely constrained (Schüller 2020). In Los Angeles, Adonia Lugo describes the longstanding campaign to increase adoption of cycling, including organizing the first CicLAvia in 2010. These social rides and celebrations of mobility are still taking place today (Lugo 2013; https://www.ciclavia.org). Important networks and new practices are created through such social interactions.

Changing culture is key to altering mobility practices towards more active travel, and sometimes, to the production of new public space, building on cycling networks. A "commoning of mobility" agenda goes beyond individual bikespaces and campaigns: it involves "(...) a process that encompasses governance

shifts to more communal and democratic forms while also seeking to move beyond small-scale, niche interventions and projects. (…) rethinking the value, meaning, and practice of mobility as a step towards reconfiguring societal mobility regimes in more equitable and environmentally sustainable ways." (Nikolaeva et al. 2019, p.353). The governance and control of urban movement and mobilities remain highly unequal and commercialized, and movements to reclaim *vélomobility* are both social and political in nature (Sheller 2018). A just urban mobility transition begins on the streets and in bikespaces, and less so with the "displacement of poorer households under neoliberal urbanization" from real estate investment and gentrification, in which bike lanes and road treatments are sometimes included (Temenos et al. 2017, p.117).

## 4. CONCLUSION

We have made three points in this chapter. **Firstly**, we have shown that bicycles form part of an assemblage of social and material processes, together forming the bikespace. This is an all-encompassing term that nonetheless describes the particular constellation of forces that are anchored by cycling, social relations, and mobility spaces. The bikespace and the conviviality and social relationships that bikes enable, can be a window into broader societal issues that involve mobility justice (Sheller 2018).

**Secondly**, the contemporary desire by urban planners and some political actors to increase cycling mode share, particularly in cities, as part of a drive towards sustainable mobilities and lower carbon forms of transport, is unlikely to succeed without cultural change. It also requires recognition of diversity and the social life of the bike and its users, complementing and feeding the material changes to the supply of cycling infrastructure described elsewhere in this Companion. Demand-side variables, or the cycling "software" we describe above, are essential tools for engineers, urban planners, educators, and transportation professionals.

**Thirdly,** we have provided examples of some of the cultural spaces where sociality thrives. Within mobile bikespaces like Critical Mass rides and *ciclovías,* different publics mix together, from politically motivated participants to inadvertent observers, swept up in a collective experience. While cycling generates a degree of conviviality, particularly in the growing phenomenon of bicycle workshops and the sudden interest in bikes bought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, it also takes the form of protest. People are prepared to join together to struggle and fight for safer and less polluted roads, better access to public space, and to battle the culture of automobility that still dominates most western cities and across the global South.

The remaining question for those interested in this heady mix of bicycle assemblage, planning and protest is how best to bring about the sustainable mobility transitions that cities deserve and need, while involving those excluded from urban and transport planning.

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