

## European bicycling

### The politics of low and high culture: taming and framing cycling in twentieth-century Europe

by mini-special editors

**Adri A. Albert de la Bruheze** University of Twente, Enschede

**Martin Emanuel** Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Stockholm

The three articles in this ‘mini-special’ issue were first presented at the May 2011 workshop *Re/Cycling Histories. Users and the Paths to Sustainability in Everyday Life* at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, Germany.<sup>1</sup> In exploring the use of bicycles over time, the articles show the importance of the bicycle in European history as it is interwoven with mass transportation, nation building, class and gender issues, and politics. The contributions of Martin Emanuel, Anne-Katrin Ebert and Manuel Stoffers analyse cycling as a social and cultural practice in Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands respectively. In all three countries, cycling became the subject of local political interventions and decision making. The contributions show European similarities in the emergence and development of local bicycle use. They also provide building blocks for a new perspective in transportation history to explain the diversity in cultural practices of cycling. The three papers explore how cultural heritage, tax policies and local policy makers tamed and framed bicycle use into car-governed traffic management, urban planning, collective (historical) images, and material infrastructures such as bicycle lanes.

The contributions confirm that the decline of European bicycle use was not a foregone conclusion, but a contested terrain in which political interventions and decision making deliberately facilitated car ownership and use. Stockholm urban planning and traffic management is an example. Martin Emanuel shows how all the relevant social actors—politicians, governmental officials and technical experts—adhered to the ideology of functionalist modernity in urban planning and traffic management. Their planning and design of the future recalibrated a new city in which they erased many ‘old features’, including cycling, which they deemed old fashioned or out of place. The bicycle especially was a target: all actors implicitly or explicitly defined it as an old-fashioned, troublesome and dangerous

mode of transportation that had to be managed and framed into the modern car-governed city. They did so by ignoring and by blotting out the most dominant form of transportation around them, namely the bicycle, by focusing on a car future, and by discussing traffic in technical non-political terms such as 'speed', 'vulnerability' and 'safety'.

These modern views and policies came to dominate all European cities after the First World War. Either explicitly or implicitly such framing projected a negative image of the bicycle that resulted in disciplinary urban infrastructures like bicycle lanes and restrictive traffic regulation. The design and use of (separate) bicycle lanes, however, became a contested issue.<sup>2</sup> The outcome of this contestation largely depended on the number, the character, and the policy orientation of civil-society organisations that sought to represent cyclists' interests, as Anne Katrin Ebert makes clear for the Netherlands and Germany. In the Netherlands the non-politicised organisation ANWB represented both car and bicycle interests, and actively promoted bicycle tourism and (touristic) bicycle lane construction. In addition, the organisation actively engaged in linking cycling and a liberal, classless national identity. In Germany, by contrast, the bicycle became politicised as several competing political bicycle organisations emerged, which failed to build their own political power vis-à-vis the emerging might of car organisations. Bicycle taxation became the showcase as Ebert shows. Taxation provided the Dutch bicycle (and car) organisation ANWB with political influence as the organisation accepted building new roads for cars with bicycle taxation revenues on the condition that new bicycle lanes would be built alongside these roads. In Germany, political turmoil and an ideologically divided bicycle world precluded a united critical mass.

The Dutch tradition of building bicycle lanes, embedded within policy making, contributed to collective images of cycling as a normal and accepted activity. This was reinforced by deliberate attempts to link cycling to national identity as both Ebert and Stoffers show. The ANWB defined cycling as a civilised, respectable and practical way of transport that fitted and reinforced 'Dutch values' of balance, independence, self-discipline and egalitarianism. Cycling was one of the twentieth-century tools to educate and discipline the Dutch working class into responsible and law-abiding citizens.

The three contributions in this 'mini-special' issue also show that the interwar bicycle contestations resulted in negative bicycle images that became dominant only to materialise in subsequent traffic policies. Historical accounts and cultural heritage conservation, including museum collections and exhibitions, contributed and reinforced the dominant view. As Manuel Stoffers argues, historical analyses and cultural heritage can contribute to the deconstruction of the so-called 'natural and inevitable decline of cycling'.

By analysing cycling from a user perspective and within specific historical contexts of alternative and competing modes of transport, future research can show that the bicycle was and remained an important mode of individual transport until the early 1970s. Moreover, by linking past and present, the mutual shaping of materiality, culture, and politics should be shown.

Such research may help deconstruct the dominant notion that the sure way to stimulate cycling is to build (separate) infrastructure.

### Notes

- 1 The workshop was organised by Helmut Trischler (Rachel Carson Center/Deutsches Museum, Germany), Ruth Oldenziel (Technical University Eindhoven), Adri Albert de la Bruheze (University of Twente, The Netherlands), Martin Emanuel (Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden), and Heike Weber (Technical University, Berlin).
- 2 Ruth Oldenziel and Adri Albert de la Bruheze, 'Contested Space: Bicycle Lanes in Urban Europe, 1900–1995', *Transfers* 1, no. 2 (2011), 29–50.