

## 1. New voices



# The Politics of Conviviality: Mobility and the Right to the City in Bogotá's Bicycle Advocacy

In Bogota, there exists an ever-growing number of citizen's groups that gather around the bicycle with a multiplicity of aims and approaches, taking it upon themselves to develop initiatives that make visible the varied ways in which this vehicle mobilises both people and ideas. This research examines bicycle activism ("biketivism") in order to understand how biketivists attempt to take back the city from the motor vehicle, and challenge the dominant order on city streets. 11 December 2017

Research participants

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## 1/ What is your research topic? What thesis are you defending?

Over the past decade, Bogotá (Colombia) has come to be widely referenced as a regional leader in cycle-inclusion on account of a vast network of cycling infrastructure, consisting of 392km of dedicated bike paths; and the Sunday *ciclovía* , a weekly event during which several main streets are officially closed off to motorised traffic so that citizens can cycle, skate, jog, or walk. Despite these initiatives and the ideal conditions for cycling Bogotá presents, the number of people who regularly cycle-commute has, until recently, remained surprisingly low. There exists a misconception that cycling is for the working classes, and the automobile remains an aspiration for most people.

However, civil society has recently taken the lead in identifying the shortcomings of municipal efforts to increase cycling rates. There exists an ever-growing number of citizen's groups that gather around the bicycle with a multiplicity of aims and approaches, taking it upon themselves to develop initiatives that make visible the varied ways in which this vehicle mobilises both people and ideas. This research examines bicycle activism ("biketivism") in Bogotá in order to understand how biketivists attempt to take back the city from the motor vehicle, and challenge the dominant order on city streets.



A group rides on the road, alongside an empty cycle path (right) where the large group of cyclists could not fit on 12 November 2015. While the very first groups wanted to draw attention to existing bike paths, current discourse highlights the inadequacies of Bogotá's cycling infrastructure.

I focus on one specific form of advocacy: bicycle collectives (*colectivos*) are groups of people that since 2005 have been staging weekly or bi-weekly night-time cycle rides. *Colectivos* are organised by individuals in Bogotá's different localities<sup>1</sup>, and I identified over twenty of them active throughout the city, facilitating individual participation in both affluent and working-class neighbourhoods, and often working in cooperation by staging "co-organised" rides. This promotes a sense of integration but, importantly, it also enables to people to explore parts of the city that are outside their mental map and everyday trajectories. Through social media and word-of-mouth, participants are summoned to a meeting point from which the ride departs, following a route pre-established by the organisers. Lasting between three and four hours, rides typically stop mid-way at a park or plaza for a break, before continuing on to either a final destination or the original meeting point. When the ride ends, participants divide into small groups to accompany each other on their journeys home. These activities attract between a dozen and hundreds of men and women (between 18 and 40 years of age) of varied cycling experience with the aim of riding around Bogotá, exploring the city, and re-signifying the road by filling it with chatter, music, and laughter.

I argue that *colectivos* go beyond promoting cycling-as-transport. Through their discursive emphasis on *enjoying* the city in a manner respectful to other mobility actors; the celebration of the joy of cycling through lively rides; and the momentary subversion of the road into a space of encounter (with other people, but also with the city) they help make the city a more enchanting and playful space, demonstrating how people can better share city space. The focus on Bogotá provides an interesting outlook, for although the city has come to be regarded as a "biking paradise", this research shows that there remains a problem of "the car in the head": the cultural dominance of the automobile stands in the way of an ethics of mutual care and undermines the possibility for using space in creative and more enjoyable ways.

I draw on a variety of theories woven together by the notion of *conviviality*, generally understood as "a better way of being together"<sup>2</sup>. Of these, the *right to the city* – the idea that we should be able to change and reinvent the city after our dreams and desires, emphasising creativity, spontaneity, playfulness, and celebration – constitutes the basis of my claims. While many authors<sup>3</sup> have used this concept to critique capitalist urbanisation, I moved forward by seeking out interpretations of this idea that can help us conceive of alternative urban futures. Thus, while this research maintains a critical spirit, it also celebrates the possibilities that are already brewing in city spaces. By working with cyclists, I highlight the importance of mobility in shaping social relations in the city. I contend that certain forms of movement are more favourable to conviviality and bring us closer to a more democratic urban experience, and *colectivos* contribute to achieving this goal.

## 2/ If your thesis involves empirical research, what does this consist of?

In addition to a substantial theoretical component, this work draws on a six-month-long fieldwork stay in Bogotá during which I conducted qualitative research in the form of ethnography and interviews. Throughout this time, I participated in the rides of five *colectivos*; attended activist meetings, seeking to better understand the structure of the movement and how different approaches work together; conducted thirty-five interviews with biketivist leaders, cyclists, and officials from various government agencies (the Institute for Sport and Recreation; the Office for Culture; and the National Ministry for Transport); and sought out opportunities to cycle in order to better grasp the experience of cycling in Bogotá. Participating in these ways allowed me to develop a rapport with other cyclists and, importantly, approach my research from a position half-way between researcher and activist, affording me both insider knowledge and critical insight. Furthermore, because participation implied cycling with my research subjects, I was able to explore mobile research methods, producing a wealth of

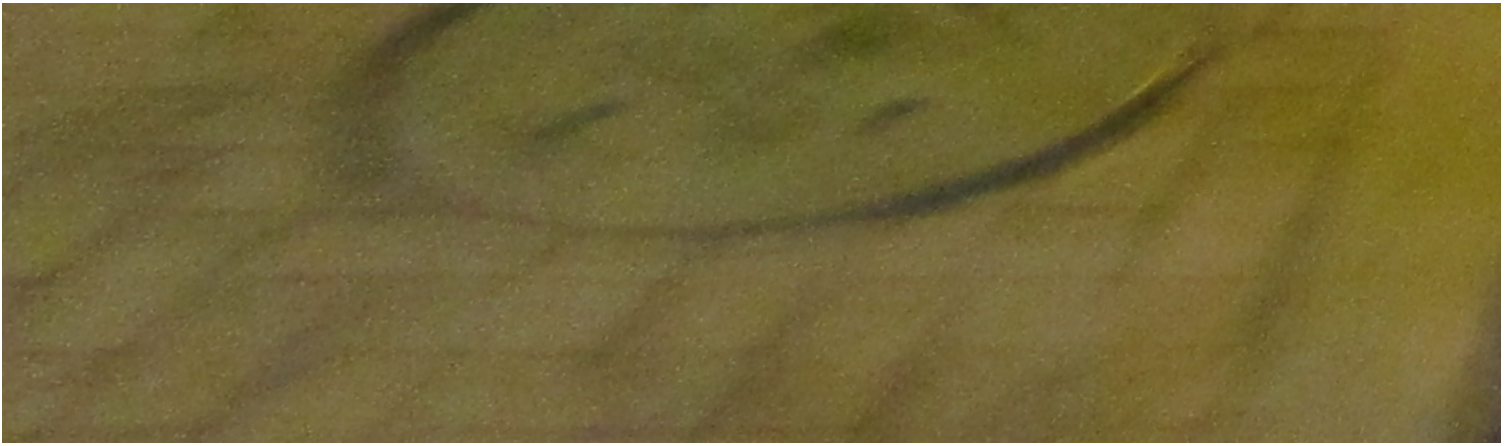
audio-visual materials such as photographs, videos, and audio-diaries recorded during rides.

### **3/ What is your contribution to theoretical and policy debates?**

While there is plenty of research on cities in Latin America, my work went beyond examining the inequalities and perils of Latin American urbanisation, instead focusing on the creative ways in which citizens take charge of their mobility: riding in these groups allows participants to sense that the city is not unsurmountable, become aware of their bodily potentials, and produces a change in the 'rhythm of life' of individuals. Furthermore, my research approached the right to the city from an angle that has received little attention from scholars and the public, but which is better suited for thinking about cities in terms of the kinds of social relations we want to have in our everyday lives. Importantly, I raise the issue of considering people's lived experiences and desires when planning for cycling: while Bogotá does have vast cycling infrastructure, its configuration maintains the primacy of the automobile, which limits the development of convivial relations. Finally, this research re-iterates the idea that the bicycle is not just transport, but also a means of appropriating city space and finding enjoyment in cities by challenging our expectations of urban experiences, the city's rhythms, fast-paced lifestyles, and the meanings of urban infrastructure. Nevertheless, my work falls short in assessing the contributions of biketivists to actually increasing bicycle modal share and does not account for the perspective of critics: while there were no discernible, organised groups manifesting opposition to colectivos or their activities, it is still the case that negative encounters may occur that are not reflected in my work.







*On 26 November 2015 a group was lead to El Dorado International Airport and cycled along the departures drop-off lane.*

#### **4/ What questions have arisen from your research that could be addressed in the future?**

While Bogotá continues to be regarded as a regional leader in transport planning, there remains a need to research everyday mobility in the city, which could challenge the city's status. Enquiring into the city's cycling culture and people's everyday experiences of cycling could shed light on the pitfalls of current policy programmes. Furthermore, there remain questions of how bicycle activists engage with government and the degree to which these relationships influence transport policy and planning, and in what ways. Meanwhile, the emergence of similar initiatives in Latin America sets the stage for comparative analyses of bicycle advocacy, or research into trans-local advocacy networks. Methodologically, important insight into bicycle social movements could be gained from an engagement with discourse analysis to unpack the meaning of categories such as "sustainable transport". In addition, mobile methodologies proved essential to the development of my research, and further engaging with these kinds of methods seems necessary to advance the field of mobilities research.

#### **Paola Castenada's videos :**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b\\_ncn8beeAA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_ncn8beeAA)

Recorded during a Halloween-themed ride on the 30 October 2015, this video shows a typical ride. At 0:14 we can see how two cyclists detach from the group to block incoming traffic and allow the rest of the cyclists to cross the intersection safely and keep the group together.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxMOjXu\\_MGk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxMOjXu_MGk)

During mid-ride breaks, cyclists bring spaces which are under-utilised in the night time back to life. They showcase their bicycles and skills while others socialise and enjoy the music.

#### **Download the thesis**

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## Notes

- 1 Localidades are the administrative divisions that make up Bogotá.
- 2 The notion of conviviality has most famously been proposed by Ivan Illich (1975) and has been further developed by others like Peattie (1998), Fincher and Iveson (2015), and Amin and Thrift (2002). Conviviality is seen as a kind of social energy stemming from shared moments of joy and vivacity. Importantly, it can be a guiding ethic for living together in cities and, in terms of mobility, it draws us to think about modes of transport that foster vitality, sociability, and a spirit of generosity and responsiveness towards others.
- 3 See, for example, the work of David Harvey (2008; 2012), Peter Marcuse (2009), Don Mitchell (2003), and Mark Purcell (2013).

## Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

## Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

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### Associated Thematics :

#### Lifestyles

- Alternative mobilities
- Aspirations
- Living environments
- Diversity of lifestyles

#### Policies

- Civic Action
  - Reducing inequalities
  - Cities & Territories
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1 <http://owncloud.forumviesmobiles.org/index.php/s/YpOgWffnMyfJgWu>