

1. New voices



Utopias of slow cycling: Imagining a bicycle system

New voices

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In his quest for a society that would reverse the logic of speed that governs cities today, Ioan-Cosmin Popan starts by imagining slow cycling. In this thesis, original in both its form, which borrows from utopian literature, and in its criticism of the prevailing utilitarianism, Popan lays the foundations for creating a new society and addressing the urgent need to reduce emissions. This work received the 2021 New Voices Award from the Mobile Lives Forum.

Research participants

- Ioan-Cosmin Popan

New Voices Awards 2021

Thesis title: Utopias of slow cycling. Imagining a bicycle system

Country: Royaume-Uni

University : Lancaster University

Date: 2018

Research supervisor: John Urry, Monika Büscher, Tim Dant

Cosmin Popan was born in the city of Jibou, north-west Romania, on the 4th of April 1982. He completed his PhD in Sociology at Lancaster University in 2017, under the supervision of John Urry, Monika Büscher, Katerina Psarikidou and Tim Dant. Cosmin joined the Department of Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2018, where he is currently a Leverhulme Early Career postdoctoral researcher. His current research focuses on the platform-based gig economy and its reconfiguration of urban spaces, by investigating the management, solidarity and resistance of cycle couriers in three European cities: Manchester, Lyon (France) and Cluj (Romania).

1. What is your research topic? What thesis are you defending?

My doctoral research explores the future of urban mobilities, with a focus on cycling as a means to both decarbonise societies and bring about a social deceleration which is essential in order to challenge the prevalent economic growth paradigm. My thesis draws on the rich tradition of mobilities studies, which, in the last two decades, have reshaped the ways in which we think both about the automobile's supremacy within cities and the manifold meanings we attach to our everyday urban movement (Urry 2004).

Specifically, in my work I set out the foundations for a slow mobility paradigm centred on cycling as a means to address some of the most urgent global crises brought about by unfettered economic growth and neoliberal urbanism. I argue that cycling has the potential to make a decisive contribution to avert climate catastrophe which is greatly driven by society's over-reliance on fossil fuels. At the same time, cycling presents the opportunity to reconfigure contemporary urban living by challenging the utilitarian and market-driven approaches characterising everyday mobilities. Using an original approach, which involves scenario-building techniques, I advocate for utopian imagination as a useful tool for both thinking of and enabling futures beyond the dominant contemporary doctrine of fast (auto)mobilities.

The research questions my thesis aims to answer are:

1. What might a bicycle system look like?
2. Under what circumstances will it operate?
3. How will it differ from other mobility systems?
4. What are the broader individual and social changes it necessitates and further instigates in the process of establishing itself as a dominant urban mobility?

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

The task of researching and bringing into existence a slow cycling utopia, i.e. something which is not there yet, but which can still be prefigured, is a complex process, which requires imaginative research methods. Grasping the contours of a cycling future which has not yet arrived calls for an attentive exploration of the existing cycling practices and institutions that could anticipate such a possibility. I take a multi-sited ethnographic approach to capture the micro and macro levels at which a slow cycling future is already unfolding.

I begin my investigation with an intimate auto-ethnography which uses mobile methods (Büscher and Urry 2009) to reflect on the embodied nature of cycling while capturing the rich sensorial experience of moving under one's own steam. I argue that cycling enables a distinctive and richer way of being in the world

and contributes to a sense of freedom which are increasingly denied by the car. A future bicycle system would considerably expand the human senses, often beyond what automobility affords. New senses become apparent when cycling as the visual and the auditory are complemented by a range of more intimate senses, such as equilibrium, kinaesthesia or pain, which both attract people and deter them from the practice. The more gentle, organic rhythms and flows of cycling could create meanings that are distinct from and potentially more rewarding than those associated with less embodied forms of urban movement. When moving at a more human pace under their own steam, cyclists connect more effectively with urban environments while appreciating the natural and social worlds in ways that car driver cannot.

Autoethnography of cycling in London. Aldgate - British Library



Autoethnography of cycling in London

My own cycling in various environments (Lancaster, London and Amsterdam) was further complemented by 'ride alongs' with various groups whose practices of cycling together anticipate a future of slower, more inclusive and more convivial mobilities. I investigate various instances of people cycling together, ranging from mainly unacquainted cyclists 'swarming' at rush hour through the intersections of Amsterdam to the highly regulated and fast-paced road cycling groups gathered for a club ride outside London. They are all enabling ways of interacting which follow rules that differ significantly from those governing automobility. Many of these sociable instances within the practices of group cycling could generate new patterns of interaction which not only resist the interaction order of the car system (which relies on formal understandings of the traffic code) but are also more convivial and different from car traffic in terms of speed, bodily proximities, face-to-face encounters and co-presence.





Cyclists 'swarming' at rush hour through an intersection in Amsterdam (Credit: Cosmin Popan)

Focusing on a more macro perspective, I then engage in an extensive mapping of cycling worlds, proposing a fictitious description of a slow bicycle system as it might present itself in the year 2050. This draws on my own involvement in a broad range of academic and non-academic conferences, seminars and workshops; trade shows; competitions and festivals; activist and advocacy meetings; bicycle repair workshops. These rich and diverse encounters, which enabled me to travel across the UK, but also France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria, gave shape to the architecture of a slow bicycle system while at the same time critically unpacking existing visions of fast cycling futures. As it displays the coordinates of urban mobilities in London in a few decades' time, the bicycle utopia advanced here draws from past and present realities as well as from inferences about how they could evolve in the following years. I propose eight important factors to explain how more than half of the trips in London could be done by bicycle in 2050: (1) radical changes in urban landscape, (2) the integration of cycling with other alternative mobility systems, (3) the transformation of mobility policies, (4) changes in the cultural status of cycling, (5) the rise of the bicycle economy and big data, (6) technology and know-how transfer amongst countries, (7) innovation in bicycles and accessories, and (8) broader societal and economic changes.

3. What are the main findings?

Contemporary visions of cycling futures are heavily indebted to prevailing ideologies of smart urban mobilities, efficient cities and unfettered economic growth. Cycling as a fast mobility is intensely advocated and performed through the everyday practices of cyclists, transport engineers, designers, policy makers and businesses. In the last three decades, cities across the world have embraced cycling as a cheap, clean and healthy alternative to driving. At the same time, a new field of bicycle economics, or 'bikenomics', has started to make headway, using narrow utilitarian lenses to calculate the benefits of cycling in relation to various indicators: space saving, productivity lost in traffic, urban regeneration and job creation.

I argue that, while cycling has experienced a much-welcomed revival, too often the practice is co-opted by the prevailing economic growth and neoliberal doctrines emphasising fast and seamless mobilities within a free-market environment. The mayoral policies in London in the last few years, which emphasise the construction of cycle superhighways, alongside a comprehensive cycle network, to attract businesses and affluent residents in different areas of the city, is one such example which I focus upon in my thesis. Against this backdrop, a slow cycling future could not only reappraise the overall velocities of our streets, but, more generally, it could challenge the fast and productivist paces of everyday urban living.



A fast cycling utopia imagined for London by the architecture company Foster + Partners (Credit: Foster + Partners).

4. What is your contribution to theoretical and policy debates?

Up until the last decade, the research of urban mobilities has been largely dominated by transport studies, resulting in a general tendency to regard everyday movement from a utilitarian and instrumentalist point of view. My research builds on the increasingly important strand of academic work which challenges these narrow perspectives and argues that urban mobilities must be understood as an entanglement of movement, representation, and practice (Cresswell 2010). While the dominant mobility paradigm today revolves around fast (auto)mobilities, some of the cycling practices and associated meanings which this thesis explores and brings to the fore are prefigurative of radically different mobility futures.

Most academic research to date tends to frame cycling as an alternative and subordinate mobility, while placing the practice within the dominant automobility regime. This thesis takes a different approach and proposes utopianism as a productive means to free cycling from these constraints and enable the practice to carve a future beyond the existing status quo.

More importantly, I advocate for a bicycle system which doesn't accelerate mobilities and societies but, on the contrary, aims at slowing them down. In doing so, I challenge the current dominant utopias of speed, the practices of fast production and consumption that they nurture and the promises of economic growth that they embed. I explore to what extent alternative utopias of slowing down societies and mobilities could represent more viable solutions for the future. The social and environmental challenges which societies are encountering today warrant the consideration, investigation and even promotion of such counter-narratives to the hegemonies of speed and growth.

A slow bicycle system and the de-growth alternative it proposes are nevertheless imbued with tensions and contradictions. Taken on its own, slowness can be emancipatory, but, similarly, it can become a privilege of the few. Slow mobilities should then be understood relationally, through their interdependence with fast mobilities. For this, I argue that new vocabularies and sensibilities must be invented in relation to urban velocities, guiding us beyond the simplistic fast versus slow dichotomy. If cycling is indeed the closest you can get to flying, as actor Robin Williams famously said, maybe lightness, flow or quickness are more appropriate metaphors to describe and guide our mobile lives.

In terms of policy debates, this means acknowledging that not all cycling is necessarily good cycling. While the promotion of cycling remains vital for our urban futures, we need to reflect more not only on how cycling can sometimes exclude certain of us from the city, but, more generally, what kind of cities do we want to live in. The challenge faced by our cities is not only linked to replacing automobility but also to reconfigure human movement, from the mere functionalist, quantifiable and economic valuations towards more human-scale, convivial and non-utilitarian mobilities. This starts with planning urban environments which are not car-dependent by enabling shorter essential everyday mobilities (for work, leisure or shopping). And, more ambitiously, it envisages a redesign of urban living and movement to embrace our appreciation of public roads for what they should also be: sociable spaces and not mere capitalist throughfares for trade.

Conversation Sociabilities



Cycling sociabilities in Amsterdam

5. What questions have arisen from your research that could be addressed in the future?

The co-opting of cycling into the smart mobility and smart city agendas is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon, which my thesis has only briefly addressed. More recent developments, such as the proliferation of dockless bike sharing systems or platform food deliveries by bicycle, are pushing for a fast cycling future against which I am arguing throughout my thesis. Heralded by the advocates of smart cities and the gig economy (a labour market characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts as opposed to permanent jobs) as providing unparalleled opportunities to design and enact more efficient, sustainable, competitive and open cities, while also creating flexible and autonomous jobs for an entire new class of entrepreneurs, these phenomena are not without negative consequences.

My current academic research is situated within the emerging field of critical smart urbanism and focuses on the exploitative and precarious working conditions resulting from the integration of cycling in the gig economy. As a continuation of my doctoral research, the Gig Work post-doctoral project I have recently started aims to further my critical inquiry into cycling and its dialectical relationship with the slow and fast cities of tomorrow.

6. Download

Download the full thesis

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

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

Mobile methods

Mobile methods produce insight by moving physically, virtually or analytically with research subjects. They involve qualitative, quantitative, visual and experimental forms of inquiry, and follow material and social phenomena.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Alternative mobilities
- Futures
- Proximity
- Representations
- Rhythms of everyday life

Policies

- Ecological transition
- Cycling & Walking
- Cities & Territories

Theories

- Methods
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