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London's two-wheeled revolution

By
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Bicycles represent up to half the vehicles on the roads at rush hour in London, where cycling is a phenomenon boosted by local politics and social media.

There's a lot of talk about a bicycle renaissance in various countries, and specifically often in the world's big cities. What I've been studying is cycling policy and advocacy in London in the UK, so I'm going to talk a bit about what's going on there, about what kind of things the advocates are asking for, what the policy situation is, and thinking about cycling as a social movement of people as engaged in making political demands around cycling. You need to know something first about the UK context: in the UK we have had a transition in terms of cycling. In 1952, cycling was 12% of all distance travelled – so we had a multi-modal society in the UK. That completely disappeared in the 20 years after 1952. By 1972, cycling was 1 to 2% of distance travelled and it stayed at that level ever since, despite attempts to resuscitate it. So at a national level we have very little cycling in the UK, but the interesting thing from an academic and a policy point of view is that it's not evenly distributed. There are some places where cycling levels are high, and there are some places where cycling levels have gone up. In terms of advocacy, in terms of the politics of cycling, it's quite interesting to look at what's happening in those places where cycling is going up because it hasn't been on the agenda and now it is. There are potentially lessons for other cities like Paris, New York, Berlin, and so on, where cycling is also increasing.

Cycling: an individual choice from marginalized people?

So to introduce some themes when we're talking about cycling policy in the UK, traditionally cycling is seen as an inferior mode of transport. It's seen as something local; it's not strategic, it's not of national importance. Government ministers don't see cycleways in the same way they would as, for example, high-speed rail. High-speed rail is prestigious and large; cycling is cheap and therefore less interesting. Cycling is also traditionally seen as something that is marginal, or that marginal people do. It's seen as something that people do because they have no choice – it became the mode of the poor very quickly after World War Two. Or it's seen as something for leisure – that children do, or people do in their free time. It's not a serious transport mode; it's something that's at the margins. What's also important, I think, is that even when cycling is seen as a good thing (and in the 1990s onwards it's been described as a good thing – it's good for health, it's good for the environment, it's good for congestion and all these other things), it's still seen as an individual choice. It's not seen as a system or a service. So we might talk about the rail system in the UK, we might talk about the bus service, but we don't talk about the cycling service or the cycling system. That's really important from a political point of view because it means it's something for the individual; it's not something that you demand, that the authorities are held to account for. Keeping that in mind, I'm going to move on and say something about London and try and

give you a sense of why London is so interesting and potentially so important. London is a city of 8 million people living within the Greater London area. It's also got a growing population, a growing economy, so unlike some other parts of the UK it's in those respects thriving. London's cycling levels have always been low and this is again intriguing. It's not a place with a history of cycling. For example, I've cycled in London for 11 or 12 years now, and people from other parts of the UK would often say, 'You must be very brave to cycle in London'. It's seen as somewhere where it's particularly eccentric to cycle. But then it's one of the few places in the UK where cycling is going up, albeit from a low base. So at the moment it's one of the places that's bucking the national trend, where people are increasingly choosing to cycle.

Relying on the public transport system when it's raining

London spends a lot more on public transport than do other parts of the UK. One of the things that this means is that we have a reliable public transport system. Now for a long time this has held cycling levels low – because people have used public transport instead. What's really interesting is now, when you have people taking up cycling, one reason why they're able to do it in London is because there's this reliable public transport system (a lot of people don't own a car). The fact that there is a good bus service, a good tube service, means that they can then get public transport if it's raining, if something happens so that they don't feel like they can cycle.

Who is cycling in London?

So who's cycling in London? Well if you look at the overall mode share you'd think not many people, because the mode share has doubled but it's gone up from 1% to 2%, so it still looks pretty marginal. But if you look other places you'll find a lot of cyclists: if you count cyclists on London's bridges going in in the morning to work, then quite often 50% of the vehicles on the roads are bicycles. It's really prominent, really visible, and in particular the people we're seeing cycling are people who live in Inner London and commute to Central London. The percentage of people commuting by bike from Inner London now is 7.2%, and for comparison the figure commuting by car is only around double that. In some boroughs, the numbers of people commuting by bike are higher than the number of people commuting by car. So amongst some people, at some times, in some places you'll see an awful lot of cycling in London. But then if you go along those same roads, those same bridges at 11.30 in the morning, you won't see cyclists. So it's very concentrated and that has really interesting implications in the politics and the debates around policy. If you look at the counts of cyclists in the morning then you'll see one thing; if you look at the transport survey and you look at cycling as a percentage of all journeys you see something else. So it's politically contested what figures are important, what figures we use to plan cycling.

Cyclist deaths are now newsworthy

The other figures that have become, sadly, quite important are the injury figures. One idea that people have in terms of cycling is that we have the safety in numbers effect, so as you have more people cycling the risk falls – more cyclists, more safety. But unfortunately in London we don't seem to be seeing that; it's not a clear pattern that we're seeing, safety in numbers. We're still seeing relatively high numbers of deaths and serious injuries compared with, for example, the Netherlands, Denmark, and so on. We're not seeing the reduction in injuries and deaths that we might have hoped to see alongside the increase in cycling. Cyclist deaths are increasingly news in London, so I did a little pilot research project with some colleagues when we looked at reporting of cyclist deaths in the Evening Standard (our local London newspaper). In the 1990s virtually none of the deaths were reported. Twenty years on you see that nearly all of the deaths are reported; increasingly, cyclist deaths are seen as newsworthy. So that is also part of the political debate. Expenditure is going up: expenditure on cycling in London

has gone up from around 3 million in 2003 to around 73 million in 2010. That's a pretty big increase; it has political support. People say in surveys that they want more to be spent than less. But the infrastructure quality is often poor and it's often aimed at this image of what Transport for London described in the first London Design Standards as 'the hardened commuter' – somebody who is assumed to be happy sharing space with fast motor traffic. The very word 'hardened' gives you the image that the cycle commuter has an exoskeleton, is somehow protected, and they're someone who's happy to cycle on London's busy roads. So the infrastructure is often catered for the idea of what that cyclist wants.

The explosion of the internet-based activism

What we've seen alongside this growing prominence of the rise in cycling, but also the issue of injuries, is a rise in social media activism, which I found really interesting to follow. There's a profusion of blogs, and I could just give you some examples (not chosen in any particular order): 'Crap Cycling and Walking in Waltham Forest', 'War on the Motorist', 'The Alternative Department for Transport' and 'Vole-au-speed', which is one of my favorite names for a blog. It's a play on 'velocipede', and the picture he uses on his blog has a folding bicycle with a stuffed toy vole on it. There's a lot of humor in those blogs. They're basically a way in which people can share ideas, share arguments, and organize on the internet. A lot of these blogs are people who want to see better investment in cycling, more effective investment in cycling, and more responsibility taken for the deaths and injuries on London's streets.

The importance of video-blogging

Some of the things that have been really important for blogging, I think: firstly that people can share ideas, text, video, really quickly. Video has been really important because now you don't just have to describe a junction; you don't have to take a picture of it, even. You can just video it and you can show what it feels like – the idea is to cycle through this junction. This is really powerful: people look at it and they think 'Wow, it's like that. That's how bad it is', or 'That's how good it is', potentially. People speak when they're blogging, when activists are talking about how cycling could be better in London. They often share the idea of speaking for the non-cyclist: not speaking for their community of existing cyclists, but the 98%, people will say, who don't currently cycle – what do they want? So you're kind of speaking for an imagined political subject, this non-cyclist who doesn't currently cycle but who wants to, which is quite interesting. It's allowed expertise, I think, to be more democratized as well, because often transport debates are very exclusive. People feel like they need to be able to read engineering diagrams, they need to have access to a lot of information, they need to have read the TSRGD – you know, the various transport signs manual – and so on. It can be very off-putting; it can be very difficult for people who are outside that to understand these things. I think one really important thing that these bloggers have done is that they've opened up debates around what cycling should look like. So for example they'll take up an engineering drawing and they'll present that in pictorial terms; they'll present videos, they'll show people what that would feel like if the engineering drawing was actually implemented.

Safety from the individual responsibility to the public date

Another important way in which these bloggers have contributed is in reframing debates, for example, around safety. Traditionally in the UK, as I was saying, cycling is seen as an individual choice and safety is seen as an individual responsibility. Hence we have the responsibility to wear helmets, to wear high-visibility clothing, to have all kinds of gadgets to keep us safe. What's really important about the blogging in London is that it's shifted that debate to what can the authorities do to keep us safe? What can others do to keep cyclists safe? The way that they've made their arguments, the way that they've networked and the way that they've presented this approach has, I think, contributed to a shift in

established campaigning organizations. We've seen, generally, a rebirth in London of offline activism as well; the online and the offline have acted together.

Voting as someone who cycle

So to illustrate some of these points I just wanted to say a couple of things about an organization called Londoners On Bikes that I've been studying: I did some interview research, some survey research and some ethnography with the organization. They're a pop-up campaign that was set up in January 2012, and the idea was to mobilize the bike vote in the London elections, the mayoral elections. This is something that's quite novel; there hadn't been a bike vote before. Why on earth would you vote with your bike on the basis of being someone who cycles? They managed to sign up 6,633 people to pledge to vote with their bikes, which they generally saw as quite an achievement. They organized both online and offline, so they would have, for example, leafleting that would be organized on Facebook, on Twitter and so on. It felt a little bit – doing the ethnography – like a secret society. You'd sign up to do some leafleting, you'd turn up, there would be some people you'd never met there.

Londoners On Bikes as a commuter choice

One thing that the Londoners On Bikes activists had to deal with was the fact that in the UK, cyclists, as I was saying, are seen as marginal. They're seen as a group that many people don't want to be associated with; they don't want to be seen to be a cyclist, it has a lot of negative connotations. So Londoners On Bikes deliberately defined themselves as Londoners, and then on bikes. They were keen to stress that they weren't keen cyclists; they weren't interested in bikes for the sake of bikes. It was a commuter choice that they made; it wasn't something that they did for leisure, it wasn't something that they did for fun. There's kind of an appeal to respectability, of a respectable transport mode. It was also important for these activists that Londoners On Bikes was a short-term campaign; it was aimed at influencing the mayoral election. They didn't have to be cycle campaigners – they could just do it for a little bit. So they could frame it very much around London, and what they wanted London to be like, but also draw on their experience of London locally, places that were near them that they wanted to be better. As I was mentioning, there's been a shift in seeing cycling as an individual issue to more of a collective political issue, and Londoners On Bikes is part of making that happen through seeing it as something that you could campaign around in elections, something that became an important voting issue.

Drawing on models of political activism

My final point on this is that they were able to draw on other political narratives, other political discourses. Many of them had been involved in, for example, peace campaigning, and they were able to draw from that. I just wanted to read out one quote from an activist that really illustrates how people drew on these other narratives about political activism. So this activist says: 'Peace is not just this big thing for the UN to sort out in hideous conflict zones. It's something that we live with, day-to-day, and particularly I work with young people. Thinking about what peace means in London is something I spend quite a bit of time on. So I started to think, well there is this other space in which there is an absence of peace'. By that she meant the streets in London, so she was applying her experience with young people and in conflict resolution to what was happening on the London streets. So just to say something finally about the Londoners On Bikes movement and about many of these new advocacy networks, I think it's interesting that they make two types of claim. They make a claim both in terms of distribution – for material things, for infrastructure, they're demanding more space for cycling, better cycle facilities. But they're also making claims around what's called recognition, cultural claims. They're making an argument that they should be seen as people on bikes, not as a minority group of cyclists. So there's these two things going on there, and that's potentially what's made it so politically

powerful, that you've not just got the claim for resources but you've also got the claim for cultural recognition.

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.

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Associated Thematics :

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-



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