CYCLING IN A GLOBAL WORLD: INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION

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Abstract

During their transnational circulation, bicycles became glocalized as local users tailored them to fit local laws, customs, user preferences and cultures. Bicycles thus acquired many different local meanings as users incorporated them into daily lives and practices in diverse global settings. To show the importance of 'normalized use', i.e. rural bicycle use, in which cycling became enduring, sustainable, new, old and new again, we need globally grounded histories of mobility.

Key words

bicycles, modernity, rural bicycle use, globalization, glocalisation, lifestyle, sustainability.

The history of bicycles is as diverse as it is fascinating. Sociologist of technology Wiebe Bijker once declared that the bicycle as we know the vehicle today was stabilized around 1897.¹ The story does not end there, as the following contributions make clear. Bicycles acquired many different meanings as they developed over time and as people incorporated them into daily practices in diverse global settings.² The bicycle has gone through many incarnations, from serving as symbols of modern mobility and pride to the sure signs of poverty and nostalgia.³ A comprehensive historical scholarship on bicycles is not only lacking, but is also hampered by the problematic narrative of modern progress.⁴ Once modern, so the narrative goes, bicycles were replaced by new symbols of modern mobility like automobiles and planes in the twentieth century.⁵

From an anthropological point of view, bicycles have fallen through the scholarly cracks as well. Here bicycles either represent global rather than local products that fail to provide meaningful insights into indigenous cultures, or outmoded forms of mobility of the past, unfit to measure signs like Africa's progress. Such narratives of individual modern mobility account for the rich histories of automobiles and the lack of such scholarship for bicycles, but they ignore the complexity of historical developments. Automobiles did not simply replace bicycles as the preferred mode of modern individual transportation. They often rode in tandem.⁶ Nor do such narratives account for the different ways in which the uses and meaning of bicycles are embedded within local culture and daily life that defy easy periodization.⁷ Most importantly, the current state of the historiography misses the early global reach of cycling and the different trajectories outside the transatlantic world, as the special section shows.

The stories the authors bring us from Africa, Japan, China, and rural Finland suggest we need globally grounded histories of mobility to help alter such mobility narratives.⁸ Addressing scholars' neglect of bicycles is not just a matter of doing justice to one vehicle of mobility over another. By keeping a double focus on the global and the local, the case studies in this section help us to gain a better understanding of the history of modern mobility and its periodization, but also question the one-dimensional interpretation of diffusion patterns.⁹ Japan provides a prime example of how the use of bicycles skyrocketed in the postwar era at the very moment when the country's economy was booming. The example questions, firstly, the often too easy correlation made between rising incomes and the upsurge of cars replacing the outmoded technology of bicycles—a correlation that often supports the argument of why the popularity of bicycles fluctuated.¹⁰ Secondly, both the Japanese and Chinese case studies question the historiography of mobility wherein the West focuses on the 1970s as the time of the bicycle's demise and the moment automobiles took off.¹¹ To the contrary, the 1970s witnessed from a global perspective a great expansion of bicycle manufacturing in Japan and China for both domestic production and the export market to, for example, Africa.¹² Thirdly, all case studies show the importance of rural users throughout the world. What is old and useless for one set of (urban) users may be quite essential and enable new experiences for another (rural) in creating wealth and economic progress.¹³ In Africa—and in many parts of rural Europe in the 1920s—bicycles helped generate a farmer's income in complicated ways. Self-sufficient farmers with access to cash crops could afford to buy a bicycle. Yet, to get to those cash crops, often in faraway bush fields, farmers needed a bicycle. Such a cash nexus between transport and agriculture could be a vicious circle indeed, but once this was broken, the bicycle had

the potential of generating access for farmers to global markets. In short, the relationship between disposable income, economic progress, and mobility history is far from a linear narrative.

Finally, bicycles are unheralded technologies, but all four case studies remind us that what we see as old or new technologies are negotiable categories. One could argue that bicycles have been cast as old partly because their extraordinary success and normalization into daily routines have removed the aura of novelty. Yet, such quality of normalized use is what should interest us most. David Edgerton emphasizes the need to focus on the enduring technologies, those used daily and almost casually rather than those that are invented and capital-intensive. By foregrounding stories of use rather than invention, we learn to appreciate the enormous significance of these relatively low-tech technologies in people's daily lives.¹⁴ In Burkina Faso, for instance, newly bought and imported bicycles that have not been adapted to local circumstances are considered useless, whereas well-used, older bicycles that have stood the test of time have a higher status. In short, stories of innovation should not be limited to the point of production but need to include cultures of use.¹⁵

Glocalization

Bicycles—like sewing machines—belong to the history of nineteenth-century globalization, when American and British companies began to mass-produce consumer durables for a world-wide market.¹⁶ Collectively, case studies here, from Africa, China, and Japan are highly suggestive of the widespread transnational circulation of bicycles and the ways a global product became localized and appropriated. The spread of bicycles is an early example of glocalization, the process by which a globally distributed product is tailored locally to fit local laws, customs, and user preferences and cultures. In China, the early adopters of the Anglo-American bicycles produced in the 1890s were Chinese students returning from Britain and the United States, as well as colonial administrators, soldiers, missionaries, postmen, and courtesans—all closely tied one way or another to the (British) colonial world.

How global products became local, and in some sense global once again, is a key thread running through this compilation. Policy-makers in Japan as well as China came to prefer bicycles as their instruments of economic modernization. English producers like Raleigh exported bicycles as part of British colonial policies to Nigeria, India, and China where they were then assembled and modified locally. But exportation was not just a one-way street of finding new markets. Hans Peter Hahn reminds us how in 1946 a Nigerian entrepreneur, catering to the vast home

market for bicycles for oil drum transportation, visited Shanghai to discuss importing Chinese bicycles to Western Africa. These fascinating episodes of transnational circulation could serve as inspiration for future research in *Transfers*.

Although the historical development of cycling is often told as a narrative, that of shifting from leisure to utility, bicycles were much more than useful modes of transportation. Both the Finnish and African cases reference how, in the rural culture of shared use and lending, bicycles were also important status symbols. Tiina Männistö-Funk provides details of how in Finland bicycles gave young people in the countryside the opportunity to spend the long Scandinavian summer days in new ways; they could visit dances and evening parties at distant locations, and be back in time for the next day's work. Thus bicycles were at one and the same time tools of work, pleasure, and status—an insight further elaborated and confirmed in the case study on Africa.

Bicycles also became localized through top-down policies. After Mao's Great Leap Forward, China's communist party ordained the production of heavy-duty accessorized bicycles that could function as "donkeys that don't eat hay"; this was in the working-class tradition witnessed in Western Europe in the interwar period.¹⁷ Horses, hand-pulled rickshaws, pedicabs, and public transportation alternatives like buses were the more usual competitors on the road than cars. In China, just as in nineteenth-century Europe, contemporaries compared bicycles to horses ("iron" or "flying" horses). The rickshaw, invented in Japan as the modern replacement of the once modern sedan, was exported to China, where it was appropriated first as a symbol of modernization before becoming one of exploitation. Cars in 1910s China represented the vehicles of the future. By the 1930s, however, bicycles surpassed cars and competed against rickshaws, becoming vehicles of utility and pleasure. Oil shortages during the war stimulated an entirely new development of the bicycle-Pedicab, a vernacular Asian invention that we hope will attract its own scholarship in *Transfers* in future. In China, the pedicab replaced the rickshaw by decree, predating the arrival of the communists in power. And in the context of the 1950s, when buses were usually overcrowded, bicycles represented a sense of freedom because policy-makers heavily invested in them. In short, depending on the historical context, bicycles fit into different mobility trajectories that defy easy narratives of rise and fall.

Policy

The Chinese case study highlights first and foremost the significance of policy interventions in shaping mobility infrastructures.¹⁸ Edward Rhoads

tells how, in 1958, the communist regime ordained the bicycle as a “modern vehicle.” The state established its own industry. Policy decisions were again important in determining the fate of bicycles in China during the 1990s: the socialist market economy policy of 1992 dethroned the bicycle by designating cars as the vehicles of the future. It has resulted in a somewhat contradictory situation that the United States had found itself in a century earlier. While paving the way for cars as the vehicle featuring in its economic domestic policies, China became the largest manufacturer of bicycles in the world.

In the push and pull between user preferences and state policies in shaping individual mobility modes, Japan is perhaps the most remarkable example, as told by William Steele in his contribution. One could construe the development of Chinese bicycles as the logical outcome of both policies and the lack of alternatives like cars, but Japanese consumers had the alternative to choose cars. They did not. In fact, the first postwar urban plans dealing with the war’s devastation and housing shortages—just as in most of Europe and the United States—projected car-governed cities. Perhaps luckily for cyclists, those plans implemented throughout the Western world were not carried out in full. The government policy of benign neglect toward cyclists, instead of disciplining and marginalizing them, resulted in their dominance in Japan’s urban landscape. Only during the 1970s did the government seek to regulate cyclists by relegating them to sidewalks. These governmental attempts to control cyclists and make way for cars caused conflict with pedestrians, but did not lead to the disappearance of bicycles as happened elsewhere.

Sustainability

Finally, the authors consider the current incarnation of the bicycle as the much-touted vehicle of urban sustainability. Despite a bad reputation among policy-makers, in many cities from Europe to Latin America and the United States bicycles are once again making a comeback as the vehicles that will help to achieve sustainability.¹⁹ Historically, bicycles first became popular with farmers, women, and the working class. Thereafter the bicycle transformed into a lifestyle vehicle with young urban professionals, who have recently engaged the bicycle as the latest cool toy or lifestyle gadget rather than a utilitarian form of transportation. And in its latest incarnation in Japan, the bicycle has acquired a new reputation for reliability after the devastation of the tsunami. Here all large technical systems came to a standstill, but cyclists discovered they could ride all over the disaster areas without having to depend on many infrastructures. Yet, as the case of Burkina Faso reminds us, sustainability

has a very different meaning in Africa. The bicycle is embedded in socially sustainable relationships rather than in environmentally defined Western terms, as famously articulated in Gro Harlem Brundland's 1987 UN report on the environment *Our Common Future*: leaving the world as we found it.²⁰ We hope that reading this compilation of essays will lead us not only to revisit the Western view of mobility but also to revise its traditionally linear and car-centered scholarship by looking at mobility use rather than innovation.²¹ The globally grounded case studies on offer help us understand that bicycles need to be central to current histories of modern mobility.

Notes

1. Wiebe E. Bijker, *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1995), 19–100.
2. Hans Peter Hahn, "Global Goods and the Process of Appropriation," in *Resistance and Expansion: Explorations of Local Vitality in Africa*, edited by Peter Probst and Gerd Spittler (Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2004), 211–230; Nelly Oudshoorn and Trevor Pinch, eds., *How Users Matter: The Co-construction of Users and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 2003), 103–190; David Arnold, "Technology and the New Subalternity," *Cadernos de Estudos Culturais: Subalternidade* 3, no. 5 (2011), 27–36.
3. Ruth Oldenziel and Adri Albert de la Bruhèze, "Contested Spaces: Bicycle Lanes in Urban Europe, 1900–1995," *Transfers* 1, no. 2 (2011), 29–49.
4. The existing bicycle literature can be roughly divided into two categories. First deals with Victorian cycling emphasizing emancipation, liberalization, modernity and progress. While rich in detail, such studies do not question the narrative of the rise and fall of cycling: Richard Holt, "The Bicycle, the Bourgeoisie and the Discovery of Rural France," *British Journal of Sports History* 2 (1985): 127–139; David Rubenstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," *Victorian Studies* 21, no. 1 (1977): 47–71; Christopher S. Thompson, "Bicycling, Class, and the Politics of Leisure in Belle Epoque France" in *Histories of Leisure*, ed. Rudy Koshar, 131–146 (London: Berg, 2002); Glenn Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity: The Bicycle in Canada, 1869–1900* (Toronto: University of Tronoto, 2001). The more recent body of literature either calls for studying cycling's rise and fall or questions the notion that cycling was a prelude to (inevitable) automobility. Karl Hodges, "Did the Emergence of the Automobile End the Bicycle Boom?" in *Proceedings Fourth International Cycle History Conference*, 39–42 (San Francisco, 1993); Frank C.A. Veraart, "Geschiedenis van de fiets in Nederland" (MA thesis TU Eindhoven, 1995); Zach Furness, "Biketivism and Technology: Historical Reflections and Appropriations," *Social Epistemology* 19, no. 4 (2005): 406–411 and his *One Less Car: Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); Gijs Mom, "What Kind of Transport History Did We Get? Half a Century of *JTH* and the Future of the Field," *Journal of Transport History* 24 (2003): 121–138; Manuel Stoffers and Harry Oosterhuis, "Review: 'Ons populairste vervoermiddel.' De Nederlandse fietshistoriografie in internationaal perspectief," *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 124, no. 3 (2009), 390–418; Jennifer

- Bonham and Peter Cox, "The Disruptive Traveller? A Foucauldian Analysis of Cycleways," *Road & Transport Research* 19, no. 2 (2010): 150–154; Oldenziel and Albert de la Bruhèze, "Contested Spaces"; Jennifer Bonham, "Forum: On the Bike? Bicycle Politics: Review Essay," *Transfers*, 1, no.1 (2011): 145–153; Manuel Stoffers, "Cycling Culture: Review Essay," *Transfers*, 1, no.1 (2011): 155–162.
5. Jean-Pierre Bardou, *The Automobile Revolution: The Impact of an Industry* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Matthew Paterson, *Automobile Politics: Ecology and Cultural Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Thomas Fläscher, "Stahlross auf dem Aussterbe-Etat: Zur Geschichte des Fahrrads und seiner Verdrängung in der 50er Jahren," *Journal für Geschichte* 9 (2000): 4–22; Ruud Filarski, *The Rise and Fall of Transport Systems. Changes in a Historical Context* (Rotterdam: Ministerie van Verkeer en Waterstaat, 2004).
6. Monika Burri, "Das Fahrrad: Wegbereiter oder überrolltes Leitbild? Eine Fußnote zur Technikgeschichte des Automobils," *Preprints zur Kulturgeschichte der Technik*, no. 5 (1998), www.tg.ethz.ch/dokumente/pdf_Preprints/Preprints5.pdf, accessed November 15, 2011; Peter Cox and F. van der Walle, "Velomobiles and the Modelling of Transport Technologies," in *Cycling and Society*, edited by Peter Cox, David Horton, and Paul Rosen (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2007), 113–131; Oldenziel and Albert de la Bruhèze, "Contested Spaces"; Manuel Stoffers, Harry Oosterhuis, and Peter Cox, "Bicycle History as Transport History: The Cultural Turn," in *Mobility in History: Themes in Transport*, edited by Gijs Mom, Peter Norton, Georgine Clarsen and Gordon Pirie, 265–274 (Neuchâtel: Editions Alphil-Presses Universitaires Suisses, 2010); Anne Katrin Ebert, "Cycling towards the Nation. The Use of the Bicycle in Germany and The Netherlands, 1880–1914," *European Review of History* 11 (2004): 347–364, here 361–362.
7. See for example Horton, Rosen, and Cox, eds., *Cycling and Society*, 1–25.
8. The articles in this special issue were first presented at the Rachel Carson Center's workshop Re/cycling Histories: Users and the Paths to Sustainability in Everyday Life, May 27–29, 2011, Munich, Germany. Organizers: Adri Albert de la Bruhèze, Martin Emanuel, Ruth Oldenziel, Helmuth Trischler, and Heike Weber. http://www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de/events_conf_seminars/event_history/2011/conf_ws_sem/ws_recycling/index.html
9. Gijs Mom, "Frozen History: Limitations and Possibilities of Quantitative Diffusion Studies", in *Manufacturing Technology, Manufacturing Consumers. The Making of Dutch Consumer Society*, edited by Adri Albert de la Bruhèze and Ruth Oldenziel (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2009), 73–94.
10. Adri Albert de la Bruhèze and Frank C.A. Veraart, *Fietsverkeer in Praktijk en Beleid in de Twintigste Eeuw. Overeenkomsten en verschillen in fietsgebruik in Amsterdam, Eindhoven, Enschede, Zuidoost Limburg, Antwerpen, Manchester, Kopenhagen, Hannover en Basel* (Eindhoven: Stichting Historie der Techniek, 1999), 181–199. For the Netherlands see for instance J.C. van Ours, "Gezinsconsumptie in Nederland, 1951–1980" (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, Ph.D. dissertation, 1986).
11. Oldenziel and Albert de la Bruhèze, "Contested Spaces," 32–33; Mom and Filarski show that while during the 1960s, car mobility in The Netherlands started to boom nationally, bicycle mobility dominated locally: Gijs Mom and Ruud Filarski, *Van transport naar mobiliteit. De mobiliteitsexplosie 1895–2005* (Zutphen: Walburgers, 2008), 264 and 397.
12. David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (London: Profile Books, 2006), 45.

13. For the use of and the relation between old and new technologies see: Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old*; Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 233–235.
14. Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old*.
15. Horton, Rosen, and Cox, *Cycling and Society*; Oudshoorn and Pinch, *How Users Matter*; Oldenziel and Albert de la Bruhèze, "Contested Spaces."
16. David A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800–1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States*, "Studies in industry and society" (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), Chapter 2; Andrew Godley, "Selling the Sewing Machine around the World: Singer's International Marketing Strategies, 1850–1920," *Business History Conference* (2006), 266–301.
17. Oldenziel and Albert de la Bruhèze, "Contested Spaces," 31–38.
18. See also Albert de la Bruhèze and Veraart, *Fietsverkeer in Praktijk en Beleid*; John Pucher and Ralph Buehler, "At the Frontiers of Cycling: Policy Innovations in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany," *World Transport Policy & Practice* 13, no. 3 (2007): 9–56; John Pucher and Ralph Buehler, "Making Cycling Irresistible: Lessons from the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany," *Transport Reviews* 28, no. 4 (2008): 495–528.
19. Johan Whitelegg, *Critical Mass: Environment and Society in the Twenty-first Century* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), 190–192; Pucher and Buehler, "At the Frontier of Cycling," 9–56; Pucher and Buehler, "Making Cycling Irresistible," 495–528.
20. Gro Harlem Brundtland, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
21. Mom, "What Kind of Transport History Did We Get?" 130–131; Mom and Filarski, *Van transport naar mobiliteit*, 29 and 56.

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