

# Biking in the Land of the Car

## - Clashes of Mobility Cultures in the USA

Paper for the  
Conference "Trafikdage"  
Aalborg University  
August 27-28  
2007

Ole B. Jensen  
Department of Architecture and Design  
Aalborg University, Gammel Torv 6, DK-9000 Aalborg, Denmark  
Phone: +45 9635 7134  
e-mail: obje@aod.aau.dk

### **Abstract**

This paper is theoretical in its attempt to articulate and theorize the notion of 'mobility culture'. It is empirical in its choice of cases illustrating the notion of mobility culture. The paper explores three cases in the USA; The East Coast Greenway bicycle corridor and the contemporary tensions and conflicts over bikes on Manhattan, NYC. The latter case is particularly scoped in relation to the 'critical mass' event and the NGO 'Transportation Alternatives'. Based upon the theoretical framing and empirical field studies conducted in the US the paper put forwards an illustration of how to comprehend urban mobility cultures and the power-ridden conflicts that arises when these clash. By looking into North American cases the paper brings a comparative dimension to the European taken-for-granted status of urban cyclists. Furthermore, the paper aims to show that there is more than urban logistics of transportation flows at stake when mobility cultures clashes. The clashes of urban mobility cultures make us see that infrastructures and urban transportation is about more than instrumental movement of people from point A to point B. What are at stake are also notions of community, social identities and culture.

# Biking in the Land of the Car

## - Clashes of Mobility Cultures in the USA

'To ride 3,000 miles on a bicycle is one thing; to ride 3,000 miles on a bike in a society that worships the automobile is quite another' (Pesses 2007:16)

### 1. Introduction

In the 'land of the car' (USA) there is an interesting story to be told. It is a story about alternative mobility forms. But it is also the story of ideas transgressing institutional and juridical boundaries paving the way for a discussion of how mobility interventions may facilitate new institutional settings and modes of mobility management. On top of this it is a story of how the urban mobility patterns may be reconfigured due to novel forms of intervention. But most interestingly it is a story of how the hegemonic mobility paradigm of the car is being challenged by means of not only alternative mobility forms and practices but increasingly also by means of a re-articulation of local identities and communities.

This paper is theoretical in its attempt to articulate and theorize the notion of 'mobility culture'. It is empirical in its choice of cases illustrating the notion of mobility culture. The paper explores two cases in the USA; The East Coast Greenway bicycle corridor and the contemporary tensions and conflicts over bikes on Manhattan, NYC. The latter case is particularly scoped in relation to the 'Critical Mass' event and the NGO 'Transportation Alternatives'. Based upon the theoretical framing and empirical field studies conducted in the US the paper put forwards an illustration of how to comprehend urban mobility cultures and the power-ridden conflicts that arises when these clash. By looking into North American cases the paper brings a comparative dimension to the European taken-for-granted status of urban cyclists. Furthermore, the paper aims to show that there is more than urban logistics of transportation flows at stake when mobility cultures clashes. The clashes of urban mobility cultures make us see that infrastructures and urban transportation is about more than instrumental movement of people from point A to point B. What are at stake are also notions of community, social identities and culture. The practices of cycling are much more than mere differences in mode of transportation. Here I will argue that they are windows into the production and re-production of urban culture and identity. To understand the comparative gaze of wonder between the Danish observer, (whom is a daily urban bike commuter doing approx. 20 km a day) and North American cycling practice one need only consider the almost transparent status the bike has as a Danish mobility technology. In Denmark most children will be given a bike (of sorts) shortly after they learn to walk. Even though there are many adult Danes that do not cycle at all, it seems fair to claim that there is an almost universal taken for granted understanding of bikes and their potential for mobility that is grounded in the early years of childhood. As the child grows older the bike represents the main expression of self-determined mobility and thus symbolizes freedom of movement as an important cultural signifier. One could argue that on this background the bike becomes almost invisible to most Danes. Not in the sense of it being inconspicuous in the everyday streetscape – the bike is predominantly visible as part of Danish mobility culture. But in the sense of becoming as familiar a mobility technology as say knife and fork is to everyday life's eating practices. Therefore it must be understood as less of a manifestation to see bikers in a Danish context than in an American. Until very recently the practice of cycling in the US has mostly been considered either a recreational activity or a political statement. This may be changing these years and is one of the reasons why the study of cycling practices in the US is such a fascinating topic. What is at stake is not only new ways of moving in the city, but also new ways of perceiving the city, new ways of producing and re-producing the city and ultimately new ways of constructing identities and meaning.

The paper is structured in six. After the introduction section two briefly conceptualizes 'mobility cultures'. In section three the first empirical case of the East Coast Greenway is presented. In section four the two New York cases are presented with a particular focus on the 'critical mass' bicycle event and the NGO Transportation Alternatives. The paper ends in section six with a discussion and some concluding remarks.

## 2. Thinking Mobilities

In an analysis of the meaning of mobility as inherent part of Modernity, Cresswell argues that studies of mobility should aim at the experience of the 'line' between departure and arrival (Cresswell 2006:2). To Cresswell, movement is abstracted mobility. Or put differently, movement is the abstract equivalent to location whereas mobility is the concrete equivalent to place. Accordingly movement is the 'spatialisation of time and the temporalisation of space' (Cresswell 2006:4). The crucial issue is how movement becomes mobility? As humans interact bodily in time-space relations (where stasis and flow are the two basic modes of experience) it is the mobile sense-making, experiencing and meaningful engagement with the environment that 'makes mobility'. Thus notions of subjectivity, meaning and power unavoidably must become part of the focus since:

'People's subject positions are mediated by their habitual activities in moving about the city. The common practice of walking, bicycling, bus-riding, or driving constitute distinctive forms of urban life, each with characteristic rhythms, concerns, and social interactions' (Patton 2004:21)

Thus it is to these characteristic rhythms, concerns, and social interactions of bicycling I now turn in my attempt to pave the way for an understanding of cycling practices in the US.

### Urban Mobility Cultures

As argued elsewhere (Jensen 2006) seeing mobility as a socio-spatial practice means understanding that there are a number of well-defined modes of mobility, which all have repercussions for life in the contemporary city; Walking, skateboarding, cycling, motor-biking, car driving, bus driving, train riding, and air plane and boats (as interurban mobility forms) – in other words multiple categories of 'corporeal travel' (Urry 2004:28). To each of these mobility domains there belong a set of practices and normative regulating principles that one needs to either master for practical reasons or deliberately contest by counter-practices (e.g. skateboarding on park benches or in busy streets). They may be seen as manifesting 'communities of practices' within urban mobility (Patton 2004:11). The underpinning of these mobility practices are a set of (often) competing rationalities (Jensen 2006, Patton 2007). Seen this way, I would argue that there are such things as 'walking-codes', 'cycling-codes' etc. Clearly, these are ways of acting that could be seen as more or less explicitly articulated cultures. Such 'mobility cultures' are linked to official and legal sanctions and mobility regulations. However, they are also embedded in the body as tacit mobility cultures. Some are more global generic mobility codes, whilst others are locally anchored and as such expressions of local mobility norms and customs. Elsewhere I have argued that:

'... politics and planning together with hard infrastructure may only be seen as one dimension to the contemporary urban mobility practices. These may facilitate the production of particular mobile subjectivities and identities. Time has come to realise that the armatures of the city may work as new political spaces, new mobile agoras creating new dimensions to the politics of flows other than the state-led governmentality of traffic planning or the market-led interpellation of consumerist subjects. Needless to say, multiple of everyday life examples across the globe live to prove the opposite. However, this does not stem from inaccurate analysis or misinterpretation of the political potentials of the city of armature. But rather from neglect that until now has served narrow-minded planning and cynic profit interests. From the ways the politics of mobility is exercised at multiple levels of governance we learn that state interpellation of mobile (but controllable) subjects may attempt to control the production of mobile subjectivities. However rarely do we find a complete closure of the political (and cultural) field. Thus everyday life mobility produces identification and meanings beyond the governmentality confinements of state-led mobility politics' (Jensen 2007:29)

The mobile urbanite travel in the channels or 'armatures' in Shane's word (2005) and develop 'cycling-knowledge' and 'airplane-knowledge' etc. to be accumulated. In an accelerating-mobile society this process starts with the way the parents teach the small child to take care in the traffic. But the learning goes on for the rest of our 'mobile lives', as humans continue to be exposed to ever more sophisticated webs and networks of mobility practices that demand a continuous upgrading of our 'mobility-knowledge'. This is, for example, the case when new technologies regulate the flow of

urban traffic through the means of GPS-equipment or when airports are connected in evermore complex systems of access regulation and logistics (Graham & Marvin 2001, Urry 2003). By coding and decoding the urban mobility landscape, contemporary urbanites are constructing multiple layers of 'mobility meanings' pointing at the notion of 'mobility culture' as a very relevant means to understanding the phenomenon of cycling in the land of the car. From a study into the relationship between choice of means of transportation and social identity construction Thomsen concludes that:

'Bicycle riders represent a part of Danish transport culture that everybody might use. Still, compared to car usage, cycling symbolizes the limited financial means of the user and their larger awareness of and interest in their body, in exercise, and in nature' (Thomsen 2001:275)

The economical inference made here is perhaps stretched beyond its limit as there are quite many cyclists in Denmark that are not located at the lower levels of the economic income ladder. However, what is of interest here is the notion of a symbolic and cultural component to cycling. Furthermore, the quote substantiates that there is a point in trying to work, towards a notion of mobility culture. Also the potential of a strict comparative analysis between the US and Europe (or Scandinavia/Denmark) needlessly contain important insights that I shall not be able to claim within this paper. Suffice will be to acknowledge the very different historical trajectories of biking within the US and Europe:

'Bicycle touring has existed in Europe since the Industrial Revolution ... American workers did not take to this form of recreation so quickly, and it wasn't until the 1950's that bicycle tourist organizations began to form. This cultural difference is reflected in the bicycle industry' (Pesses 2007:2-3)

The experience and the bodily sensations of any mobility practice is the key to understanding both its physical as well as its symbolic meaning. The quality of the urban mobility experience must therefore be addressed within the analytical framework.

### **Urban Mobility Experiences**

Much has been written on mobility as 'right' (Urry 2000) but the mobility as 'pleasure' seems to be a less discussed dimension to it (Jensen 2007). However, there is an affective pleasure principle at work when urban travel works at its best (regardless of the means of transportation). This was noticed by Lynch as an important impetus to city planning and design:

'Travel can be a positive experience; we need not consider it pure cost. In potential, the access system is a prime piece of educational equipment. It enlarges the individual's reach, but in addition the act of moving through the city can in itself be an enlightenment. Taking advantage of that possibility, especially for children, means opening up the transport system, making it safer and easier to use, providing guidebooks, treating it seriously as an educational opportunity. Travel can be a pleasure, if we pay attention to the human experience: the visual sequences, the opportunities to learn or to meet other people' (Lynch 1981:274)

It seems forgotten that there are other motivations, values and outcomes that just efficiency to transport. Sociologically speaking, the experiential dimension in the 'travel as fun argument' hinges on mobilities based upon other types of rationalities (Jensen 2006, Patton 2007). To Lynch the city was understood by a moving subject, but furthermore he related such mobile perception not solely to functional knowledge about navigating but equally important to the realm of the evocative and emotional:

'Spatial forms are only partly sensed from one viewpoint, and require movement and a succession of views to be fully enjoyed. The fluctuations in space as you move about, the sight of the same objects in different relations, the sensations of near and far, closed and open, turning and straight, over and under, are one of the delights' (Lynch 1990:145)

Furthermore, Lynch speaks of the 'road experience' (Lynch 1990:268) and to understand a given area as a set of journeys: '*a community is also seen while passing through it, whether as a tourist or on*

*habitual trips. This may be the principal way of experiencing larger areas*' (Lynch 1990:274). Lynch even speaks of the 'educative significance' a properly designed expressway may serve the user with, a feature that is rarely realized but which Lynch saw as unexploited potential of urban infrastructure. The issue of the journey having a value in it self in a sensory, aesthetic and perhaps even playful perspective is only one dimension to this understanding. In Lynch's vocabulary and analysis resides the insight that urban mobility is an important activity that produces cultural, social, and emotional effects:

'... city design can focus on the journeys by which people actually experience cities. City trips are enjoyed or suffered, but they are remembered. The pleasures of motion, and its connotation of energy and life, are, perhaps, especially meaningful to us today [1984]' (Lynch 1990:503)

This realization is a prime condition for challenging the examples of less fortunate mobility planning and design, or for reorganizing the social and environmentally disasters that urban transport planning and design surely also have led to through urban history.

### **Bike Phenomenology**

Even though it seems less useful to privilege particular modes of transportation and forms of mobility as the 'authentic' way of experiencing mobility, one cannot escape the fact that cycling is a strong bodily and sensory experience (Pesses 2007). All forms of mobility is mediated by technology (even shoes and pavements are not neutral intermediaries to the practice of walking). Nevertheless the muscular-powered mobility form of cycling carries its own particular engagement with the city:

'Bicycling provides us with an unbuffered range of sensory experiences of the monumental urbanity we have created, and a view into the spaces of hope in its cracks, fissures, and contradictions. To bicycle through frenetic and congested cities is a work of beauty, one that can redraw the often discriminatory boundaries of neighbourhoods, redeem strained social relations, and rehabilitate a suffocating natural environment, together with the ways urban inhabitants become crippled by it. Inherently human-scaled, it is one path to an alternative understanding of the urban' (Petersen 2007:37)

As the American scholar Jen Petersen describes in her sympathetic plea for cycling cyclists are experiencing the city at a human scale and predominantly with senses that are vividly open to sound, smell, and sight:

'Choosing to know a place differently, in ways more expressive of humanistic value, invites a different, clear-eyed urbanity to shape the individual ... Consciously seeking new perceptions of urban spaces literally changes our base of local knowledge, redirecting our attention to views not sanctioned by planners or cartographers of political and economic districts. Movement, after all, is a basic expression of freedom, and a deliberate modal choice is an essential way to claim that freedom – a basic right to the city' (Petersen 2007:37)

The free choice of mobility modality not only is a claim to freedom, but also a way of relating to the socio-spatial environment and thus ultimately also to notions about self and other. Petersen offers a phenomenological advocacy for bike commuting on this background:

'Travel by two human-powered wheels is an active choice to encounter urban elements that often go unnoticed and unappreciated by people of privilege. To commute by bicycle, for example, is a choice to breathe in the dangers of diesel pollution, which the city's poorest dwellers take in by design. But such a choice also, ten minute hence, gives access to a completely unfiltered and breathtaking view of a quintessential monument to modernity – the Brooklyn bridge – stretched out in masoned extravagance. And what is more precious than to be treated, on a late night ride along the Hudson River, to a private showing of lights reflecting in the water from tall buildings on the palisades of the opposite bank, while sailboats rock in the river's currents? Cycling also promises encounters with pedestrians and other cyclists. Greetings and reassurance, not glassed in by power windows or drowned by the noise of idling engines,

can replace the sometimes violent spatial competition that plays out between travellers who move by other means' (Petersen 2007:37-8)

The observations and musings of Petersen are fine examples of the awareness and reflexivity that an alert cyclist/analytic may perform. It offers a profound understanding and description of the sensational component to cycling. However, it furthermore goes to illustrate the intimate relationship between cycling experiences and identity construction (Thomsen 2001). Thus it should be expected that experiences of this profound nature do shape the observer's understanding of self and other. Ending this paragraph on 'bike phenomenology' it must be underlined that there is a need to go beyond the individual and the personal experience towards the wider social encounters and culturally embedded values of cycling practices – towards a 'beautiful urbanism':

'Such a mindful modal choice, however, is not a valuable solely because of its subversive or personally transforming qualities. Together with active engagement in organized efforts to transform cities, our daily choices educate and influence politicians, city planners, and architects by demonstration. Beautiful urbanism is the practice of urban life by which, at the level of individual experience, we project and reflect a vision of hope by purposefully cultivating new ways of seeing and knowing' (Petersen 2007:38)

Perhaps one could argue that the description made by Petersen is more reflective than would be the case for most cyclists. And, furthermore, that the practice of cycling is presented here in a very positive almost romantic vein. Be that as it may, the reason for this rather lengthy quotation in this context is the fine illustration of the relationship between the bodily sensations, the cycling practices and the cultural production of a particular dimension of urbanism. In Patton's words bicycling equivalents a 'form of life':

'Bicycling is a form of life in that the relations between the equipment, infrastructure, and people's practices shape what is socially possible. Getting someone on a bicycle creates the possibility of that person seeing the city as a cyclist. Unfortunately, the "view from the saddle" is often ugly: most city streets do not adequately support cycling and safety is the major obstacle for those who are otherwise willing to ride. While economically inexpensive, bike lanes are politically expensive because they require the reallocation of roadway capacity on streets with finite rights-of-way' (Patton 2004:18)

Arguably the mobility experience of cycling is not a unfiltered and unmediated experience since both the technology at hand and the topography and surface conditions of the urban roadscape makes important environmental conditions for such experiences.

### **Summing up**

The very rough outline of the theoretical framing made in this paper serves two primary purposes. Firstly to suggest that the mobile practice of the contemporary urbanite must be understood in relationship to particular cultural practices. Secondly, this indicates that the mobile urbanite produces and re-produces not only cultures and identities, but also that such cultural embedding serves to indicate particular lines of conflict and contestation (Fincham 2006:211). Thus mobility practices reflecting different cultures and values may (or may not) clash in power-ridden conflicts over the appropriation of spaces for mobility in the city (Patton 2007). Furthermore, these issues or stand-offs are windows into the clashes of mobility practices and cultures that need to be comprehended if one claims to have understood the meaning of mobility in the contemporary city. Relating this to the current paper's empirical cases would mean that I shall be exploring the bike route of the ECG and the phenomenon of 'critical mass' and the works of TA in NYC as expressions of challenges to the predominant American mode of mobility – the private car. The explorations of these practices thus give a primer to a predominantly car-dependent mobile culture and may also serve to indicate ideas and notions of mobility that look fundamentally different in a European perspective.

### 3. Case one: The East Coast Greenway

The East Coast Greenway Alliance (ECGA) was founded in 1991 and is the non-profit organization that has as its mission to create the East Coast Greenway (ECG), a 3,000 miles long bike and walking trail along the US east coast from Maine in the North to Florida in the South (figure 1). The trail is the first shared use urban trail system of its kind and magnitude in the US and it connects 25 major cities, cuts through 16 states, 90 counties and more than 300 municipalities. The history of the ECG dates back to a bicycle conference held biannually on the East Coast during the 1980's. Nine regular participants of the East Coast Bicycle Conferences met in New York City in November 1991 and formed the ECGA (ECG 2001:6). The ECGA likens the ECG to an 'urban Appalachian trail' drawing upon the image of the legendary 'Appalachian Trail', a hikers-only ridgeline trail developed during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.



Figure 1: The East Coast Greenway trail map (ECGA 2006 version)

In this paper the focus will be on the urban crossing with the ECG coming across the New York region. Clearly the rural mobility patterns that the ECG may facilitate are of interest in terms of deepening an understanding of bike mobility interventions in the US. However, the really interesting hot spots of the trail are the urban crossings as it is here that the trail potentially may find its largest segments of users and where the competitive interface with the car is most evident. The route is deliberately laid out where the topography is flat and safety from cars has high priority. The route aims for complete public ownership, and is supported by multiple agencies across a wide range of public and private funding bases (amongst other funding sources is a 90 mill \$ national bill). According to Executive Director of the ECG, Karen Votava *'getting money to build the trail is not the challenge ... local backing is'*. The ECGA does not run any of the trails nor does it fund the construction of it. It organizes the vision and carries the message, whereas the federal transportation funds cover most of the costs building and designing local trail sections (ECG 2001:6) via allocations to the states.. Furthermore, there is a federal policy supporting the intervention of greenways in general as in the 1991 'Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficient Act' (ISTEA). On a national level the Congress passed a transportation bill 'The Safe Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act – A Legacy for Users' (SAFETEA-LU) that included an increase in funding and interest for the 'Recreational Trails Program' and the 'Safe Routes to School Program' ([www.nybc.net](http://www.nybc.net)). In 2003 three-quarters of the Senators and over half of the House Representatives along the route had signed letters of support to the ECG (ECG 2003:5). Therefore the US context cannot be said to be one without positive policy interests in biking as an alternative mode of transportation. However, having said this it should still be borne in mind that we are in a nation where only about 10 per cent of all daily trips in the US constitute walking and bicycling, Kellerman 2006:88.

The rationale behind the ECG is partly to create a recreational mobility space for muscular powered mobility forms, and partly to contribute to a safer and healthier mobility practice amongst people living nearby the trail. The shifting of commuters and urban travelers from cars to bikes is thus an underlying value even though this is certainly not the main criteria of success here in the 'land of the car' (figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Biking in the 'land of the car'

Besides these issues there is a growing awareness of the potential that the trail might bring in terms of facilitating local walking and cycling tourism alongside the route. The 'side effect' of this mobility intervention is that neighbouring authorities that have never had much interaction now has been brought together in an effort to coordinate and facilitate the creation of the ECG.

Expanding transportation choice
Improving air quality
Reducing roadway congestion
Facilitating healthy activities
Encourage more car-free excursions
Increase options for short distance travels

**Figure 3:** ECG policy agendas (based upon ECG 2001:4)

Potentially this may have lasting effects on the inter-state communication between the public authorities as the trail reaches across different territorial entities. Finally, the argument runs, the ECG may end up changing the way regional and local identities are being understood by inhabitants along the trail as well as by visiting users. There are in other words a number of policy agendas (figure 3).

However there seems also to be a number of more implicit policy ambitions such as bringing communities together, facilitating a 'culture shift' in the perception of mobility and perhaps at the end of the day alter the mobility identities of inhabitants alongside the trail. The ECGA has as its most important function to designate parts of the trail in accordance with the general vision of linking from North to South and a set of trail criteria. As part of that endeavour multiple organizational infrastructures are built around the backbone structure of state based ECG committees. Another function is 'getting the vision out there' meaning to make sure that the public is oriented about the existence of the ECG. Finally organizing and facilitating the information infrastructure of the trail is an important task to the ECG. Thus the work on creating good signage alongside the route, information kiosks and maps is important and a part of creating a unitary narrative of the trail. The trail has approx. 20% of its route completed on off-road trail (figure 4) but has set a goal of succeeding



in completing 80% of the route where 80% of the population is located by the year 2010. This is clearly an ambitious goal that demands a sustained policy effort but also a 'master narrative' of unity. This is shown in the naming of the next period until 2010 under the label of 'closing the gaps'. The ECG even carries out 'gap studies' in its attempt to achieve its projected completion rate.

The status of the ECG spine route clearly shows that there is some way to go still. The NYC crossing is amongst the smaller sections of the ECG measured in miles (figure 4). However, measured in percentage of completion this particular section is above 50%.

State	Total Route (miles)	% Completed (Constructed)	Miles Completed (Constructed)	Miles in Development	Miles Pending Development (in public control)	Route Miles defined but not in public control	Gap Miles (Off-road route not defined)
ME	390,8	7%	26,9	30	129,8	35,3	168,8
NH	17,2	0%	0	0,5	4,5	11,5	0,7
MA	143,2	14%	19,6	32,5	62,55	0,5	28
RI	48,4	40%	21	19	0	0,85	7,55
CT	194,9	23%	44,8	62,85	60,8	0	26,4
NY	41,58	49%	24,9	6,1	1,3	6,7	2,58
NJ	91,9	52%	43,35	19,85	5,4	10	13,3
PA	75,7	9%	1,7	29	4	12	29
DE	37	54%	20	3	0	8	6
MD	163,3	39%	63,6	23	0	0	76,65
DC	8	44%	3,95	2,4	0	0	1,65
VA	254,4	7%	3,4	0	0	119,3	131,7
NC	380,1	12%	31,2	26,8	11,5	59	251,6
SC	295,5	6%	13,1	98,9	48,4	0	135,05
GA	161,3	1%	2,4	15,25	50,2	30,5	62,95
FL	595,9	44%	263,1	256	30,3	23,5	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>2899</b>		<b>583</b>	<b>630,4</b>	<b>418,15</b>	<b>305,5</b>	<b>948,3</b>

**Figure 4:** The status of the ECG Off-road spine route in June 2007 (Source ECG board)

The first long-distance trail of its kind, the Greenway is as mentioned referred to as the 'urban Appalachian Trail' because it links all the major cities of the East Coast. Unlike the famed Appalachian, however, the Greenway is accessible to users of all ages and ability levels and serves cyclists, equestrians, wheel chairs and skaters along with walkers (ECG 2005:1). This is certainly part

of narrating the trail where the ECG narrative feeds upon a notion of mobility deeply embedded in cultural practices and webs of meaning that are reaching beyond the frenzy flows of contemporary mobility. ECGA board member David Lutz framed it this way in the Gotham Gazette:

‘Unlike the Appalachian Trail, the East Coast Greenway would go right through the central business district of every big city on the coast. Thousands of visitors would use it for recreation, for exercise, to see the sites – ecotourism – but perhaps its more important purpose would be as practical transportation by pedestrians and bicyclists who resides in places like New York City’ (Lutz 2003:1)

In September 2000 ECGA entered a partnership with train-operator AMTRAK under the heading of the ‘Bikes on Board Program’. The AMTRAK East Coast route and the ECG runs in parallel and this initiative was the organisational and practical dimension hereof securing that trail-riders with ease could use a ‘hop on hop off’ service with their bikes. On the launch of the program Executive Director of the League of American Bicyclists, Elissa Margolin said:

‘Bikes on Board facilitates leaving one’s car at home, encourages low-impact, healthy exercise, promotes cities with less congestion and air pollution, and provides greater convenience for commuters and recreational users of the East Coast Greenway’ (ECG 2001:10)

Interestingly this is the first example of giant train operator AMTRAK establishing partnerships with NGOs, but might carry a pre-eminence of a new model in transport planning and policy. In the words of ECGA Executive Director Karen Votava:

‘This trail sign placement in Union Station [Washington, DC] is very appropriate, as the ECG is the first of potential Amtrak links with trails that criss-cross the US ... we are proud to team up with Amtrak in this new millennium of transportation planning. Our partnership along the busiest corridor in the US will ease traffic congestion in dense urban areas and be a model for similar transportation partnerships nationwide’ (ECG 2001:11)

The ECG thus is an interesting case of a ‘multi-use urban spine trail system’ (ECG 2001:4) which has a size and coverage worthy of the famous Interstate highway facilitating car mobility.

‘Slower forms of travel (coach, rail and canal) once fostered interdependence between our eastern cities like Philadelphia and smaller neighbours like Chester and Bristol. Ironically, the advent of the car served to disconnect many of these communities. The interstate system built in the fifties and sixties often bypassed small towns, leaving them economically adrift’ (ECG 2001:5)

The ECG works by means of what they label a ‘bottom-up trail making process’ (ECG 2001:3). Needless to say many issues and conflicts may arise when the crossing of multiple urban regions, governmental boundaries and commuter zones:

‘The tension between the national and state levels of our organizations has sometimes been prickly. But getting board local buy-in for this national trail is essential’ (ECG 2001:3)

The ECG represents an interesting combination of urban and rural mobility facility as well as it serves as a window into the contested values of car-based mobility. Often ECG events are organized around performative notions of bike mobility mobilization. One such case in point was the ‘Wave’.

### **The Wave – a Mobile Event**

In an attempt to raise public awareness of the ECG a special event was launched in September 2000. The East Coast Greenway Wave relay transported bottles of water from Key West to Canada along the ECG trail by non-motorized means. Initially the event was made to raise awareness in the public about the ECG but it turned out to facilitate a much deeper layer of mobility meaning as it worked to bring together different communities along the trail:

‘What really amazed people about the ECG Wave was that the water bottles arrived without any one person or service responsible for getting them to Canada. They were passed from neighbour to neighbour and stranger to stranger. The relay was the catalyst for community connections on many different levels on a ‘trail connecting cities’. For some it was a community connecting with itself – citizens, politicians and advocates getting together however briefly – while for others it was connecting with an idea after seeing a TV new highlight or reading a newspaper article. Yet for others it was communities connecting with communities’ (ECG 2001:12)

This sort of ‘mobilising mobility politics’ seems to suggest that the ECG is about much more than riding bikes between and across cities. ECG Board Chair Charles Flink puts it this way:

‘As the urban equivalent to the Appalachian trail, the ECG offers tremendous benefits, not only in terms of recreation but also economic development, health and wellness, and alternative transportation’ (ECG 2005:5)

That there is a community-building and cultural component to the practices of ECG is articulated by the Assistant Director of Recreation and Conservation at National Park Service:

‘Working through 16 ECG state committees, in collaboration with state and local governments, they [the ECG] are transforming that vision into reality. And they are doing more than just building a trail; through their efforts they are helping to ‘recreate’ community, linking places together by foot and bicycle and connecting people of all ages, backgrounds and interests in a way that brings new meaning to our busy, stress-filled lives’ (ECG 2001:1)

The ECG is obviously a political intervention in space. Accordingly, there is a need to articulate, frame, persuade and reason about the particular intervention. In other words there is a particular ‘logic of representation’ embedding this actual intervention. One way of trying to understand such a complex endeavour is to think of it in terms of a ‘spatial mobility narrative’. By this is meant that the whole articulation and framing of this (until 1991) non-existent entity leans heavily on someone’s framing and ability to envision this as a real life policy issue. Arguably, there were a network of trails already, but not until the ECG articulates the connection of these multiple ‘tissues’ will there be any chance of bringing it into a real live policy process. The ECG has in other words to become a ‘site’ of spatial intervention. Not in the sense of an bounded entity like an enclosed plot of land, but in the sense of a mobility corridor or ‘armature’ (Shane 2005) that must be simultaneously framed discursively in a mobility narrative and implemented socially via complex organisations and spatially in the physical layout of the new mobility network.

### **NYC crossings**

In this paper the focus is on New York City as a general site location of all cases involved. In NYC there are multiple agents with different interests within the ECG itself. There is a New Jersey Hudson River group that wants the ECG to go up the Jersey side and over the George Washington Bridge. There are Brooklyn representatives who wish to see the routing going through Brooklyn and Manhattan representatives want it to go through Manhattan.

The main vision is based upon a representational logic of the ‘line’. Thus for instance suggestions to bring the ECG across NYC by means of a loop were sought to be at odds with the ‘magic of the line’ – even though the loop in NYC probably could have given the ECG a more instant support amongst stakeholders and NGO’s in the region. However, the ECG executives are very aware of the narrative power that lies in arguing for the single line. The rationale then seems to be that if this is jeopardized in the NYC area it might be up for discussion in other large urban crossings of the ECG. In the words of long time bike grass root activist and NGO member David Lutz:

‘It took New Yorkers to come up with an idea as big as the East Coast Greenway, a trail that would extend from Maine to Florida. And, though it is now almost a reality, it could take just a

few minor, short sighted decisions of the City of New York to short-circuit the route in the city, sending it instead over the George Washington Bridge to New Jersey' (Lutz 2003:1)

To Lutz the NYC crossing represents a particular case worthy of politicising since the bike friendly infrastructure of NYC do carry the potential for improvement (although the new Traffic Plan endorsed by Mayor Blumberg in April 2007 is highly ambitious on behalf of cycling):

'The fact is, the East Coast Greenway is mostly in place within New York City, and all remaining links are on the Department of City Planning's Greenways Plan for NYC. There is no long-term obstacle to bringing the East Coast Greenway to lower Manhattan, which is remarkable considering that we are talking about what may be the most densely populated developed property on the planet' (Lutz 2003:1)

Arguably, New York is not the most car-dependent US city one could find (Kellerman 2006). However, the bicycle does not (yet) seem to be part of the mobility culture in a very general manner here either. In the NYC/NJ Metropolitan region a number of region-spanning trail projects are underway, but the ECG clearly is the longest of them all cutting through the region (Hiss & Meier 2004:27). At the local level the ECG taps into the 'NYC Greenway Manhattan Waterfront' which trail coincides with the routing of the ECG on the Hudson River side of Manhattan.

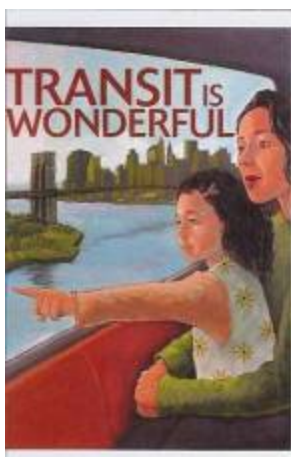
The ECG obviously demands a much more thorough description to do justice to the size, scope and complexity of it. However, here the prime concern has been to show it as one of the many bicycle activities mushrooming across America at this moment in time. However limited the impact on actual car-based mobility the ECG case goes to show part of a new attitude towards cycling in the USA. The ECG has a large scale ambition of reaching across multiple American states but let us from this macro project look towards the street level as we direct attention towards the New York based NGO Transportation Alternatives and its fight for bikes in NYC.

#### 4. Case two: Bikes in NYC – Transportation Alternatives (TA)

The second case to be looked at is the organisation of Transportation Alternatives in New York City. Transportation Alternatives is a NGO founded in New York City in 1973 as a reaction to what is termed ‘one hundred years of auto accommodation in the city’s policy’ (TA 2006). Much inspired by the local transport critic Jane Jacobs (1961), the TA started articulating policies and working under the general mission statement: ‘Our mission is to reclaim New York City’s streets from the automobile, and to advocate for bicycling, walking and public transit at the best transportation alternatives’ (TA 2006). TA has a permanent staff of 15 and a large number of voluntary people working in relation to TA events in the city. They also monitor the public awareness to transportation issues in the city:

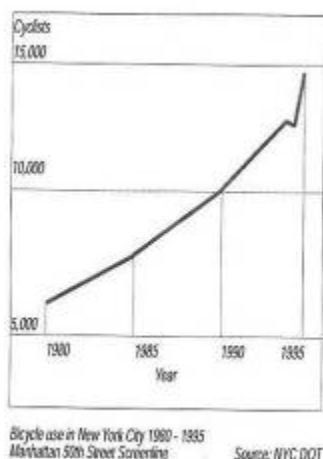
‘Transportation Campaign poll showed that more than three-fourths of New Yorkers (79%) consider traffic jams on city streets to be a problem, including 53% who consider it a "major problem." And fully half (50%) believe traffic congestion in Manhattan on a normal workday is unacceptable. Seven hundred Park Slopers turned out last week to [say no](#) to a misguided DOT plan that would bring more high-speed traffic to their streets. And in town hall forums in all five boroughs, New Yorkers have told the Mayor to put traffic relief at the top of his sustainability agenda’ (TA 2007)

TA targets City Government policies in general, and works in a proactive manner in relation to city government and communities in the City. Improvement of bike safety and establishment of safe routes across the city has high priority. But the TA also works with educational programs for children as well as they target the conditions for senior citizens e.g. in relation to the timing of traffic lights to slower walking speeds. Social equity issues in relation to transportation are also important focus points to TA. Even though TA works with policies related to mass transit (fig. 5) as well as to pedestrians and cyclists the role of bicycling does seem rather predominant within the policy portfolio of TA.



**Figure 5:** ‘Transit is Wonderful’ – campaign art from Transportation Alternatives

The number of cyclists on the streets of New York on a daily basis is estimated to be 120.000 persons (Associated Press 2007). Not a large number compared to the 8 mill. inhabitants in this global city. However, it seems that the number of cyclists is constantly growing (fig 6) as an antidote to the estimated 830.000 vehicles entering the Central Business District on Manhattan (Schaller Consulting 2006:1).



**Figure 6:** Bicycle use in New York City 1980-1995 (Source: NYC Department of Transportation here cited in NYC DOP 1997)

According to the Department of City Planning statistics show that daily bicycle use in 1995 has increased by 124% over the 1980 level (NYC DOP 1997). These figures are rather old and suggests that bicycle use in New York today probably has increased more substantially even though the number in absolute terms still does not effects the overall picture that much. In the current policy climate the Mayor Bloomberg administration has published a rather ambitious plan aiming for even more incentives to favor cycling and mass transportation which may be understood as part of a wider US policy shift reaching back to the 1990's where walking and biking slowly started gaining attention (Patton 2007:930). In the largely launched plan to better the infrastructure in New York that Major Bloomberg proposed in 2006 the importance of bettering mass transit is the main issue. But also congestion charge and even promotion of cycling has a place in the plan (City of New York 2006). The construction of a new financing agency SMART (Sustainable Mobility and Regional Transportation) is the institutional and financial backing to Bloomberg's fight against car-transit congestion. Of the bike lane extension proposed approximately half of the estimated \$ 23 Mill. that it will cost to build it from 2008 to 2030 will be allocated from SMART (City of New York 2006). There are many bold policy proposals and formulations, and even the much disputed congestion charge is mentioned: '*Time has come for New York to try congestion pricing*' (City of New York 2006). Amongst 16 policy initiatives there is one to 'promote bicycling', yet another example of the fact that there might be a mental shift towards including biking into the group of 'serious' mobility practices. The plan proposes to finalize the 1.800 Mile bike lane master plan and promote cycling even though the bike's relative small proportion of NYC mobility practices is recognised:

'Cycling in the city is estimated to have risen 75% from 2000 to 2006. But there is still plenty of room to grow: less than 1% of New Yorkers commute to work by bike' (City of New York 2006)

At the top-policy level there on the one hand seems to be a positive reception of the bike as new everyday commuting vehicle and there are many nice words to go along such a mental shift: '*In addition to implementing the master plan, we must provide support for cyclists and encourage New Yorkers to explore this form of transportation*' (City of New York 2006). On the other hand this nice rhetoric is at odds with the severe policing of bike demonstrations such as Critical Mass (which I will return to in the next section of the paper).

One of the main opponents that TA are facing on a continuing basis is the parking lobby which see the policy proposals of TA and the attempts to reduce the number of cars in New York City as a treat to their business. In the words of Greg Susick, Senior Vice President of the company Central Parking which operates 230 garages in Manhattan:

'I think it's [a car ban] destroying the fabric of New York ... People don't drive into New York because they like to. They come here to work and shop. I think it's hurting a lot if people who are trying to make a living' (Susik in New York Times, November 26, 2001 quoted in TA 2007)

This opposition towards one of the main targets of the TA clearly suggests that it is an issue of contestation. Moreover, such difference in valorization of the particular mobility forms and modes of transportation most certainly has to do with different public perceptions of cycling and car-usage in the US:

'The public perception of cycling in the US is recreational ... So for most Americans cycling does not come to mind as an everyday mode of transport. It is not like taking the car or even the bus ... In the US ... this is the home of the automobile ... Even in cities like New York where car ownership is less than 50% we are just so wedded with the concept of the auto and to challenge that is very difficult ... In suburban America where the land use and the urban design ... its not an everyday option for people' (Noah Budnick, Deputy Director Transportation Alternatives, New York, Interview on April 26th 2007)

Here the 'coming to mind' is the key issue. The mobility cultures hinges on certain rationalities that to the individual suggests themselves as what 'comes to mind' as the usual, right or most adequate practice. In NYC 120.000 people rides bike everyday. This is more than in any other city in the US, and with 2.5 mill. bike owners both City Government and TA see this as a huge potential and estimates that over the last 10 years daily cycling has increased with 50% in NYC (Noah Budnick, Deputy Director Transportation Alternatives, New York, Interview on April 26th 2007). According to TA this is more than a reflection of differences in modes of transportation as biking has become the signifier of a more 'cool' mobility form and may as such be interpreted as part of a larger cultural shift:

'Biking has become cool ... so you have this slow cultural shift, where biking is just a normal thing ... you are going out and you say 'OK let me just grab my bike' and it's automatic ... Culturally it has been interesting to watch how the coolness of biking in the fashion has become more common' (Noah Budnick, Deputy Director Transportation Alternatives, New York, Interview on April 26th 2007)

Obviously the positive interpretation from e.g. TA is not to be understood as a complete neutral. They are advocates to the cause. However, 'even' the City Government of NYC now seems to verify that there is an underused potential (NYC DOP 1997). Also in a newly released report prepared for TA Schaller Consultancies concludes that:

'Reallocating street space from cars to pedestrians, bicyclists, buses and trucks would improve the mobility of persons and goods in Manhattan. Improving mobility would in turn bolster Manhattan's economic engine' (Schaller Consulting 2006:3)

The report list five main findings with repercussions for the bike policy in New York (Schaller Consulting 2006:2):

1. The personal auto accounts for most of the traffic circulating in the Manhattan CBD
2. Autos represent the least productive use of scarce public space
3. For most people making CBD trips, the personal auto is more of a hindrance than a help to getting around
4. For most commuters who work in the Manhattan CBD, driving is a matter of choice, not necessity
5. Traffic congestion ... is exacerbated by the large number of motorists who drive into and then out of the CBD to reach non-CBD destinations

In particular the fourth point is note worthy as the current policy debate over car-based urban mobility in Manhattan (and elsewhere) is based upon notions of the 'necessary car commute' (Fincham

2006:222). Furthermore, the report ends recommending congestion charge by noticing the example of the London congestion charge's relatively large success.

### 5. Case Three: Bikes in NYC - Critical Mass (CM)

The third and final case also related to New York is the phenomenon of 'Critical Mass'. According to the Critical Mass web site the event started in San Francisco in the beginning of the 1990's and has since become a global phenomenon:

'Critical Mass is an event that began in San Francisco in the early 1990s and has since spread to hundreds of cities around the world. It usually occurs monthly (sometimes weekly). As bicyclists spontaneously come together to ride the ordinarily car-clogged streets of their cities. Critical Mass focuses on the rights of bicyclists and the rights of pedestrians on our own streets. It also brings attention to the deteriorating quality of life -- starting with the toxic levels of air and noise pollution -- that cars create for cities. It is a leaderless ride, free and open to all, where bicyclists take to the streets to promote bicycling as the best means of urban transit' (<http://www.critical-mass.org/>)

Characteristically CM has invented the slogan "*We aren't blocking traffic; we are traffic.*" Suggesting the moral point of view that cyclists need not argue for the right to the city space on grounds of being different. Rather the basic underpinning rationale for urban mobility needs widening up to include bikes as the 'normal' state of affairs. Since the Republican Party convention in 2004 where the Critical Mass event evolved into regular street-fights with the New York Police Department (NYPD) there has been a tense and hostile relationship between the CM riders and the authorities. This is arguably one of the reasons why more bicycle enthusiasts and biking NOG members have become reluctant to show up at CM as chances for random arrests and conflicts with the police seems inevitable.

On January 27th 2007 the NYPD published a revised set of rules regulating parades in the city's streets (TA 2007). As a reflection of the clashes with Critical Mass the rules represents a confinement on the citizen's ability to gather. Of particular interest is the rule that 'recognizable groups' of fifty or more must obtain a parade permit and a route planned and endorsed by the NYPD. TA considers this to be a barrier to biking and will risk reducing the number of bikes that will ride (TA 2006). Seen in this light it becomes clear that even though TA and Critical Mass may share overlapping interests in opening up the streets of the city to cyclists, TA keep a safe distance to CM and its increasingly radicalized encounters with the police. During this research this author spoke with several New Yorkers that had given up riding and participating in the CM events due to this radicalization of politics. Clearly the issue is not about a homogeneous social group of disobedient bikers which subversive practices is intrinsic linked to the bike. The bicycle becomes an intermediary object in a political and cultural conflict that reaches beyond the daily cycle trip. However, bicyclists without veneration for the radical politics of CM might avoid the very important moment in the public deliberation process in which the bicycle is fighting to be acknowledged as more than a recreational toy. This outcome put a strategic pressure on people within CM in so far as they hold any longer reaching strategic views on the future of cycling in the US that transcend the next fight with the NYPD.

Searching the Internet based encyclopaedia 'Wikipedia' one find much information about CM. Also when it comes to the notion of protest and critique:

'Critical Mass is a bike ride typically held on the last Friday of every month in [cities](#) around the [world](#) where [bicyclists](#) and, less frequently, [skateboarders](#), [roller bladers](#), [roller skaters](#) and other self-propelled commuters take to the streets en masse. Critical Mass is not led, and has no officially-stated message, though it is largely understood to be an effort to promote alternative (non-motorized) modes of transportation and to raise awareness about the safety issues that face commuters using non-motorized forms of transportation when sharing the streets with motor vehicles. Participants meet at a set location and time and enjoy the security and companionship of traveling as a group through city streets' ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page))



The predominant perception of CM in the public is as mentioned one of a radical protest organization, and this is particular the case for CM in New York:

‘Critical Mass rides have been perceived as [protest](#) activities. For instance, a 2006 [New Yorker](#) magazine article described Critical Mass's activity in [New York City](#) as "monthly political-protest rides", and characterized Critical Mass as a part of a [social movement](#)[2]; and the [UK e-zine Urban75](#), which advertises as well as publishes photographs of the Critical Mass event in [London](#), describes this as "the monthly protest by cyclists reclaiming the streets of London"[3]. However, Critical Mass participants have insisted that these events should be viewed as "celebrations" and spontaneous gatherings, and not as protests or organized demonstrations[4][5]. This stance allows Critical Mass to argue a legal position that its events can occur without advance notification of local police[6][7] ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page))

Of particular interest is the practice of ‘corking’ a phenomenon which has been instrumental in contributing to the image of CM as rebellious and conflict-oriented. Basically the practice of ‘corking’ implies a tactics where side roads are blocked in order for the main bulk of CM riders to proceed without interruption. The web lexicon explains the rationale in the following manner:

‘When explaining the principles of corking to newcomers, many riders use the metaphor of a large [bus](#) full of people travelling as a group, which should not be split up, even if the light turns red after the group has entered the intersection. Critical Mass rides typically accommodate and yield to [emergency vehicles](#) and often even [pedestrian](#) cross traffic; unlike a group of [cars](#), [space](#) can be made quickly, and groups of bicycles are typically more fluid and responsive to their surroundings’ ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page))

Needless to say such practices of counter mobility has often led to conflicts with not only law enforcement and authorities but also with fellow mobile urbanites depending on car-based transport.

### **Friday night in New York City**

To exemplify the level of conflict here follows two short eye witness descriptions from the CM event in New York City on April 27 2007. The site chosen for observation was Union Square although the event could also be seen at Washington Square Park, Tompkins Square Park and Madison Square Park where riders also gathered. The event was a celebration of the 14th year of CM events in New York City.

Arriving at Union Square at half past six to see the seven pm. CM event take off the author circulated around the square and noticed a massive police presence at all corners of the square. Closing in on seven pm individuals and small groups begun to congregate at the square (fig. 7) However as time passed there were a far cry from the mass protests announced in other places. Asked directly one of the participants said, this was only to be expected after a full day of rain and ‘*more than two years of police harassment*’. Another participant said that the massive presence of police might just lead the CM participants to walk their bikes along the sidewalk as ‘*this will confuse them*’. Clearly one sensed a ‘cat and mouse’ tension at the square but also a certain fatigue among the participants as they felt unable to maneuver.



**Figure 7:** Critical Mass, New York City, April 2007

Due to the massive presences of NYPD representatives and the bad weather things were a bit slow and indeterminate for a while. Then the word circulated that someone had suggested simply; 'to go elsewhere'. Then the event took on a self-organizing quality and the idea spun into a proposal to take the bikes to the subway and in this way detach the NYPD surveillance and then surface in another part of town let loose from the eye of the authorities. On Saturday, April 28, 2007, the day after the CM event in New York City there was the following account of the event at the pro-bike/pro-CM 'Bike Blog' under the heading 'Critical Mass takes off...on the Subway?':

In a bizarre twist of spontaneous regrouping and the immediate need to not be lambs for the slaughter, a small group of legally gathered, un-permitted bike riders (less than 50) took another form of transportation...the subway to start the April Critical Mass. At around 7:30pm, April 27th, 2007 less than 50 people gathered at the North side of Union Square for the monthly critical mass bike ride. It was kind of sad really, that our numbers have been so whittled down by the tiresome antics of the NYPD. I haven't gone to critical mass in almost a year, but with the break in the action of foul weather and watching a lot of messed up video footage, I felt like it was time to attend. It has really gotten to the point of "not going" makes the police win in their war against a fun event, especially with all this talk of Green Initiatives and reducing global warming. I just get this feeling, that the bike riders are in the right and with persistence, we can be like that blade of grass breaking through concrete and thus eroding the system. I mean, lets not forget the basics...we started this ride, and after all...we are JUST RIDING BICYCLES! So it was looking grim, there in Union Square, 40 of us die-hards who were starting to be outnumbered by scooter cops, people with video cameras and those who came to support the ride, but didn't bring bicycles...just to see if there was any action, like mass ticketing or tackling. I know, I didn't want to leave Union Square and quickly have to dodge cops or watch my friends get ticketed for no reason. Is this what Critical mass has become? Ugh. Someone surfaced the idea that we hop on the 4 subway and go somewhere else. This idea became increasingly popular as the time moved away from 7:30, about when the mass gets started and no one had any intention of being the first to leave the park on bike. This is what eventually happened...and it worked! We all walked to the subway stop at the North End of Union square, picked up our bikes and went on the subway...amazing. As we searched for metrocards and passed through the turnstiles...a group of uniformed officers, desperate to have some sort of retribution, ran over to a few riders and questioned them about whether they swiped their cards...with enough erratic fervor that you could of sworn Richard Colvin Reid, the shoe bomber, had escaped Gauntanomo and was loose on the subway. "Stop, hey you, did you swipe your card?" Ridiculous. Other than that, we were scott free. We waited on the GREEN train platform, squeezed into multiple cars, which would have been a lot more difficult if we were more than 50 and headed to Fulton Street in the downtown financial district area. When we got downtown, we got out and gathered on Broadway and then began critical mass...POLICE FREE. This was truly amazing. We had one giant wheel unicycle, one tallbike and about 40 other riders. We had lost a few people along the way, some didn't go on the subway, some got off at the wrong stop and there was rumor that a group went to Brooklyn, thinking we meant the other Fulton St. For the most part, we were united as a group, taking up all the lanes of traffic and engaged in a fun critical mass. As we

headed up Church St. towards Canal, it seemed that a lot more people knew who we were. There was a lot of friendly supportive honking from motor vehicles and crowd waving. We stayed mostly downtown and our numbers grew a little as others joined in and meet up from Union Square...I still think we were always just under 50...so we were technically legal. It was a successful critical mass...no tickets, no arrests and no cops. Interesting. This new tactic of taking the subway and starting the ride outside of Union Square, seemed to work really well, but we were a tight group. It definitely brings up ideas of starting future rides elsewhere or meeting in a new spot all together...hmmm. I say we start the multiple meet-up spots, or get back to the text messaging list where you don't find out the start till 7:30pm. The thought process is that no matter what we do, the cops catch wind of it (with all their infiltration) and spoil our fun anyway. Its still worth a try and it was really amazing to have a successful critical mass. We need to get the numbers up...so come to the next ride! (<http://bikeblog.blogspot.com/2007/04/critical-mass-takes-offon-subway.html>, web site accessed May 10 2007)

The reason to bring this rather lengthy quote is not just to bring an eyewitness account of the event, but also to bring forward the sense of contestation and the level of conflict exposed by the tone of the account. Clearly more tensions and conflicts between CM supporters and NYPD may be foreseen in the future. However, the situation where bike agitators end up using the subway as a means of facilitating subversive actions is an interesting example of multi-modal mobility politics, where the nomadic and uncontrollable practices of the CM proponents clearly defied the authorities to control, manage and ultimately 'produce' loyal and obedient mobile subjects.

## 6. Discussion and concluding remarks

This paper cannot claim any fixed and finished results of a large cross comparative study of Danish and American cycling culture. Rather what is the aim is to offer a discussion, and some tentative concluding remarks that would point in a direction for further theoretical as well as empirical work. Even though all cases point at the fact that cycling is not a big thing in the US, there are indications of a change of the discourse and the imagination related to cycling in the US. According to the ECG news letter there is now an initiative to propose a '*Bicycle Commuter Act*' (ECG 2007). Accordingly, such an act would extend the financial benefit available to car drivers and transit users to bike commuters. Practically it would work as a tax reimbursement to bike commuters. The proposal is now being discussed in the Senate and the House of Representatives. This is another example on the pressure for cycling and the transformation of the public discourse concerning the mobility practice of biking. Few years ago only recreational understandings of the cycle would have made sense to the public legislators.

One could stipulate that there do exist something to be termed a 'national mobility cultures'. However, this is strictly speaking a fiction since many of these practices and meanings crosses the nation state borders in both practical (the border commute) and imaginary (the global tourist) senses. If there is anything closely reminiscent of a national mobility culture (or perhaps a mega-regional one) one might stipulate that it must be created in a complex and dynamic interplay between national self-perceptions, socio-cultural groupings, life style choices, economic performance, physical/natural/infrastructural environments, legal and regulatory regimes and relations. As mentioned another way of thinking about mobilities are in the frame of 'communities of practices' and relating to underlying rationalities (Patton 2004, Jensen 2006). To Patton the situation is one of 'incommensurability' between the competing and divergent rationality forms (Patton 2004, 2007). Convincingly this is captured by the notion that car drivers long for the open road with as few 'obstacles' as possible, whereas e.g. the pedestrian is attracted to streets full of people – and thus 'friction'. However, seen from a practical point of view the question is what it takes to make them 'commensurable', to make dialogue possible? In Patton's analysis the road to mutual understanding goes via a notion of 'technological pluralism' in an attempt to design infrastructures for social heterogeneity (Patton 2004:211). I do not disagree, however major challenges lies ahead in terms what Patton defines as 'inertias' – physical, institutional, economic, social and culturally (Patton 2004:205). Biking in the land of the car thus faces multiple challenges. The political philosophical underpinning of a mobility politics of multiplicity must be one that acknowledges the 'Other' without necessarily reaching consensus. Cycling politics may thus have to be formulated within the vocabulary of an 'agonistic' notion of political articulation (Mouffe 2005).

It is important though to understand that the current work on cycling in the US is only in its infancy and therefore also that many of the standard issues and questions that may arise within planning such as 'how wide used are bikes in NYC?', 'which districts in the city account for the most bike riders?' etc. cannot be answered by this research. Rather what can be engaged with is the phenomenon of bike riding as a window into the wider understanding of American mobility culture. By starting to reflect upon the marginal practice of bike riding a beginning understanding, not only of this phenomenon on its own, but also of the hegemonic basis of American car-dependent mobility culture is presented. From the point of departure in Danish cycle culture one might stipulate that there are (at least) four fundamental motives and rationalities behind biking:

1. Recreational practice
2. Everyday life mobility (e.g. Commute)
3. Identity marker
4. Political statement

As argued elsewhere in this paper the Danish mobility culture contains more of the first three than the fourth. Not so much due the lack of political interest in the culture of biking, but due to the fact that most Danes have a bike and that a quite substantial number of them ride their bike for either recreational or everyday life mobility reasons. The third dimension of the cycle as a marker of identity construction relates immanently to the everyday life practices, and might be said to be tacitly and

unreflectively present amongst many Danes. Yet it still seems important to point to this since the way people chose to move is a reflection of their understanding of self and other as much as it is an instrumental act of movement in space. This research into biking in America seems to suggest that here the recreational and the political dimensions are much more profound. That is to say, the Americans use bikes either mainly for recreational purposes or they make political claims and statements by these mobility practices. This may well be thought of as a tentative hypothesis rather than a solid and verified piece of empirical knowledge. However, it seems instructive that the cultural awareness and practice of biking start out from a rather different set of values, principles and norms. The interesting thing is if there is in fact a 'cultural shift' under way. In case of which it should be expected to see a slowly but gradually reversal of the hierarchy in the direction of including the second dimension of bike culture namely that of the everyday life mobility. Needless to say, this does not mean that the political dimension withers away. Rather it is to be expected that whatever may become of American cycling culture it will for long to come be related to ways of political articulation given the profound hegemonic status of car culture. This paper has not tried to foresee a revolution dismantling the car from its omnipotent stratus within American mobility culture. What has been suggested though is that there are new windows into our understanding of the car-based hegemony in general, and to the meaning of cycling in particular as biking in the land of the car increasingly becomes an illustration of clashes of mobility cultures in the USA.

#### **Author's Note**

The author wishes to thank Adjunct Associate Professor Brian McGrath and Adjunct Associate Professor Petia Morozov from the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University (GSAPP), NYC for inviting me to talk at the 'Urban Mobility' symposium in November 2005 and for providing work space at CU for the first part of this research. Thanks is also owed to Adjunct Professor David Grahame Shane from the GSAPP, NYC for providing workspace as well as intellectual simulation to the second part of this research in April 2007. Also a big word of gratitude to Karen Votava, Executive Director of the East Coast Greenway Alliance for inviting me to join the ECGA board meeting on Friday 4th November 2005 in New Haven, for comments on the ECG case and for having the ECGA staff providing fast up-date information. Thanks to ECGA Westchester County member Carl Podowski for taking time to explain some of the complexities related to the ECG crossing NYC. Also gratitude is owed to Noah Budnick, Deputy Director Transportation Alternatives, New York for taking time to give an interview on April 26th 2007.

## References

- Associated Press (2007) Judge says that NYC can continue to regulate mass bike rides, *Associated Press*, April 18, 2007, article written by Larry Neumeister
- City of New York (2006) *PLANYC. A Greener, Greater New York*, New York: The City of New York, Major Michael R. Bloomberg
- Cresswell, T. (2006) *On the Move. Mobility in the Modern Western World*, London: Routledge
- ECG (2001) *East Coast Greenway 2001 State of the Trail Report*, Wakefield: Richmond
- ECG (2003) *Annual Report 2003. The East Coast Greenway Alliance*, Wakefield: Richmond
- ECG (2005) *East Coast Greenway News*, Issues #25, Winter 2005, [www.greenway.org](http://www.greenway.org)
- ECG (2007) *ECG News Online*, April 2007, [www.greenway.org](http://www.greenway.org)
- Fincham, B. (2006) Bicycle messengers and the road to freedom, in Böhm, S, C. Jones, C. Land & M. Paterson (eds.) (2006) *Against Automobility*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 208-222
- Graham, S. & S. Marvin (2001) *Splintering Urbanism. Networked infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition*, London: Routledge
- Hiss, T. & C. Meier (2004) *H2O Highlands to Ocean. A first look at the Outstanding Landscapes and Waterscapes of the New York/New Jersey Metropolitan Region*, New Jersey: The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation
- Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Vintage Books
- Jensen, O. B. (2006) Facework, Flow and the City. Simmel, Goffman and Mobility in the Contemporary City, *Mobilities*, Vol. 2, No. 2, July 2006, pp. 143-165
- Jensen, O. B. (2007) *On the Fluid Production of Meaning and Identity. Urban Mobility as meaningful Everyday Life practice*, Paper for the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, San Francisco April 17-21 2007
- Kellerman, A. (2006) *Personal Mobilities*, London: Routledge
- Lutz, D. (2003) *An Appalachian Trail through the Heat of NYC*, Gotham Gazette, June 9th 2003, [www.gothamgazette.com](http://www.gothamgazette.com)
- Lynch, K. (1981) *Good City Form*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press
- Lynch, K. (1990) *City Sense and City Design*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press (ed. by Tridib Banjeeer and Michael Southworth)
- Lynch, K. & G. Hack (1984) *Site Planning*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press
- NYC DOP (1997) *New York City Bicycle Master Plan*, New York: Department of City Planning
- Mouffe, C. (2005) Some reflections on and Agonistic Approach to the Public, in Latour, B. & P. Weibel (eds.) (2005) *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 804-807
- Patton, J. W. (2004) *Transportation Worlds: Designing Infrastructures and forms of Urban Life*, PhD Thesis submitted to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, New York: Troy
- Patton, J. W. (2007) A pedestrian world: competing rationalities and the calculation of transport change, *Environment and Planning A*, 2007, vol. 39, pp. 928-944
- Pesses, M. W. (2007) *Do Two Wheels make it more Authentic than Four? Spaces of Bicycle Tourism*, Paper for the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, San Francisco April 17-21 2007
- Petersen, J. (2007) Pedaling Hope, *Magazine on Urbanism*, no. 6, 2007, pp. 36-39
- Schaller Consulting (2006) *Necessity or Choice? Why People Drive in Manhattan*, Brooklyn: Schaller Consulting (prepared for Transportation Alternatives, February 2006)
- Shane, D. G. (2005) *Recombinant Urbanism. Conceptual Modelling in Architecture, Urban Design, and City Theory*, Chichester: Wiley
- Sucher, D. (2003) Getting Around, in M. Larice & E. Macdonald (eds.) (2007) *The Urban Design Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 392-404
- TA (2006) *Transportation Alternatives Magazine*, Fall 2006, Vol. 12, No. 4, [transalt.org](http://transalt.org)
- TA (2007) *Transportation Alternatives Magazine*, Winter 2007, Vol. 13, No. 1, [transalt.org](http://transalt.org)
- Thomsen, T. U. (2001) *Persontransportens betydning for individet i et identitetsperspektiv – med focus på transportmiddelvalg*, Aarhus: Handels Højskolen i Aarhus, PhD afhandling
- Urry, J. (2000) *Sociology beyond societies. Mobilities for the twenty-first century*. London: Routledge
- Urry, J. (2003) *Global Complexity*, Oxford: Polity

### **Used Web Sites**

[www.greenway.org](http://www.greenway.org)

[www.gothamgazette.com](http://www.gothamgazette.com)

[www.nybc.net](http://www.nybc.net)

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/home.html>

<http://www.transalt.org/>

<http://www.critical-mass.org/>

<http://times-up.org/>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)

<http://bikeblog.blogspot.com/2007/04/critical-mass-takes-offon-subway.html>

### **List of figures**

Figure 1: The East Coast Greenway trail map (ECG 2001:2)

Figure 2: Biking in the 'land of the car' (photo taken by the author)

Figure 3: ECG policy agendas

Figure 4: The status of the ECG spine route in October 2005 (Source ECG board)

Figure 5: 'Transit is Wonderful' – campaign art from Transportation Alternatives

Figure 6: Bicycle use in New York City 1980-1995 (NYC DOT)

Figure 7: Critical Mass, New York City April 2007 (photo taken by the author)