

## Social movement activism, social change and bicycling in the UK

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### Abstract

*At a number of points in British history, there have been concerted movements consciously both to defend and to promote cycling as an everyday practice. Using insights from social movement theory, this paper compares the actions and roles of cycle activism in three separate cases, first in the 1930s, then in the 1970s and then in the twenty-first century. The study examines both at the resource mobilisation dimensions of each wave of movement activity and the ways in which different sets of mobilisation sought to create value and identity. It evaluates the relative strengths and weaknesses of each instance and the extent to which each managed (or not) to produce the kinds of changes it consciously sought, but also pays attention to unsought consequences of these mobilisations and the arguments pursued, within the wider context of social change. It draws primarily on insider accounts of campaigns and frames these not only within the context of roads and transport policy, but also within the contestations of class and gender.*

## Introduction

Social movement perspectives provide valuable standpoints from which to examine a range of forms of collective mobilisation.<sup>1</sup> Papers that explicitly address social movement studies in their examination of cycling, are not as numerous as perhaps one might expect, although there are a number of important exceptions to this.<sup>2</sup> However, many more utilise key insights from the field as means to study cycling and cyclists' actions, especially in their collective dimensions.

This paper contributes to this growing literature by comparing three historically separate waves of mobilisation of cyclists' in Britain. The single geographic location enables comparison by eliminating the nature and structure of the polity as a problematic variable. While details of governance and political arrangements regarding the state may have changed to a certain extent, much of the underlying power relationships between citizen and state remain stable. Goodwin and Jasper usefully define the territory and scope of social movement mobilisation as their definition as "a collective, organized, sustained and non-institutional challenge to authorities, power-holder or cultural beliefs and practices".<sup>3</sup> While very broad, we can see in this a helpful framework in which to begin to evaluate the various waves of mobilisations, and defines their conceptual connectivity through time. However as an important caveat, defining the collective mobilisation of cyclists as a social movement does not lay claim to any specific empirical reality. Rather, the lens of social movement studies is a valuable heuristic device through which to interrogate the cultural dimensions of social and political phenomena and vice versa. Social Movements "are always objects of knowledge constructed by the analyst; they do not coincide with the complexity of the action".<sup>4</sup>

By considering cyclists actions and the evidence from their writings, drawing from contemporary sources internal to the actions and actors involved, we can begin to consider how collective identities and shared values were (and are) formed and the strengths and weaknesses of the particular mobilisations across time. As a general framework, considering the cyclists' collective actions through a lens of social movement analysis prompts a series of key questions. Using Goodwin and Jasper's organisation of the area of study, these include "when and why do they

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<sup>1</sup> Snow, Soule & Kriesi (eds.) (2007) *The Blackwell companion to social movements* Oxford: Blackwell; Goodwin and Jasper (eds.) (2015) *The Social Movements reader: Cases and Concepts* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition Oxford: Blackwell; Della Porta, Donatella and Diani, Mario *Social Movements* [2<sup>nd</sup> edition] Oxford: Blackwell

<sup>2</sup> Dave Horton, *Environmentalism and the Bicycle* *Environmental Politics* 15(1) 2006: 41-58; Dave Horton (2009) *Social Movements and the Bicycle* [<http://thinkingaboutcycling.com/social-movements-and-the-bicycle>]; Rachel Aldred, *The Role of Advocacy and Activism* in John Parkin (ed.) *Cycling and Sustainability* [Transport and Sustainability Volume 1] Bingley, UK: Emerald 2012 pp.83-100; Paul Rosen "Up the Véloration: Appropriating the Bicycle and the Politics of Technology" SATSU Working paper N24 2002. Subsequently published in: Ron Eglash, Julien Bleecker, Jennifer Croissant, Rayvon Fouché & Giovanna Di Chiro (eds.) *Appropriating Technology* University of Minnesota Press 2002;

(<https://www.york.ac.uk/media/satsu/documents-papers/Rosen-2002-veloration.pdf>); Horton, *Environmentalism and the Bicycle* p.41; Dave Horton (2009) *Social Movements and the Bicycle* [<http://thinkingaboutcycling.com/social-movements-and-the-bicycle>]; Valderrama Pineda, Andrés Felipe & Nina Vogel, *Transitioning to a Low Carbon Society? The Case of Personal Transportation and Urban Form in Copenhagen: 1947 to the Present* *Transfers* 4(2), Summer 2014: 4–22; Furness, Zack (2010) *One Less Car: Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility* Philadelphia: Temple University Press

<sup>3</sup> Goodwin and Jasper (eds.) (2015) *The Social Movements reader* p.4

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Melucci 1996 *Challenging Codes. Collective mobilization in the Information Age* Cambridge: Cambridge university press p.21

occur”, “who joins or support”, “how are they organized”, “how do they interact with other players”, why do they decline” and what changes do they bring about”.

### **1930s: campaigning fails to become a movement?**

By the mid-1930s, upwards of 10 million people travelled by bicycle on British roads. They formed the largest single class of road user. Their numerical dominance, however, was not reflected in access to power. In parliament, discussions had been ongoing since the end of the previous decade to try and codify and control contesting demands on roadspace from different classes of vehicle, of which the bicycle was one.<sup>5</sup> Government action appeared to have been prompted both by demand from motor-vehicle users and by concern over the rising numbers of road deaths.

The relationship between citizenry and polity at this point was under negotiation. The 1918 Representation of the People Act was still fresh in political memory and the electorate was still expanding. 1929 was the first election with a general universal franchise that included women under 21. Consequently as Williamson puts it, from a Conservative perspective, “the political parties, the country’s institutions, the people’s liberty, the possibilities for economic and social progress and, indeed, the very existence of English civilization, were all at the mercy of a vast, new, politically uneducated electorate”.<sup>6</sup> Coupled with these fears were deep hostility to any imposition of state control over any aspect of life, moves which were interpreted as foreign to the English tradition of social cohesion through compromise and class harmony. The General Strike of 1926 had been defeated but nevertheless provided a warning reminder of the potential of organized citizenry and the need among traditional ruling elites to ensure the constant action to ensure that such combinations should not occur in future. Mass unemployment and its resultant poverty rates at the end of the 1920s foreshadowed the potential of increasing civil unrest.

To summarise the socio-political context in which cyclists’ mobilisation in the 1930s occurred, class dominated social relations. Parliamentary politics was complex. In the 1929 election Labour had a majority of seats for the first time, though on a smaller proportion of vote than the Conservatives (Labour 287 seats, 33.3% vote share; Conservative 260 seats, 38.1% vote share; Liberal 40 seats 17.18% vote share). Ramsey Macdonald formed a minority government which had to battle with rising unemployment and generally problematic economic climate. One of the achievements of this Government was to introduce the Road Traffic Act 1930, setting a minimum driving age, requiring third party insurance and abolishing the widely ignored 20mph speed limit. This latter was replaced with offences of careless and dangerous driving – potentially at least providing stronger penalties against errant motoring behaviours. It also laid the ground for the Highway Code published the following April (1931). Most notable perhaps, was that although the Highway Code did not have the full status of law, it indicated that government should be able at least to recommend necessary standards of behaviour on the roads and that roads were a legitimate sphere of government involvement. Although the Ministry of Transport had been established in 1919, in the intervening decade, considerable reluctance had been shown towards the introduction of any further compulsory national regulations to govern motor traffic on the roads.

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<sup>5</sup> Cox, Peter (2012) “A Denial of Our Boasted Civilisation”: Cyclists’ Views on Conflicts over Road Use in Britain, 1926–1935 *Transfers* 2(3) 4-30

<sup>6</sup> Williamson, Phillip (1982) Safety First!: Baldwin, the Conservative Party, and the 1929 General Election *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Jun., 1982), pp. 385-409 p.387.

The fragile minority government collapsed as a result of the budget crisis of August 1931 and a National Government was temporarily formed, going on to win a landslide victory in the October 1931 election. Although headed by Ramsay Macdonald, formerly a Labour MP but expelled from the Party for the formation of a National coalition, and nominally including members and support from all sides of the political spectrum, the National Government was overwhelmingly Conservative (until Chamberlain's resignation in 1940) and reflected the traditional interests of its supporters. Within a democratic polity, the channels of communication between citizen and state were somewhat limited. Beyond the long tradition of public meetings and of marches to voice opinion and to demonstrate one's degree of support, little could be done except by careful cultivation of particular voices in parliament willing to speak out beyond party lines.

Perhaps the most visible expression of public disquiet or dissent during this time was the National Hunger Marches, organised from 1932 by the National Unemployed Workers movement (formed 1921). Marchers arriving in London were met by significant numbers of police, prepared by informers, and march leaders arrested. Prosecutions arising from the demonstrations were charged with reference to the Seditious Meetings Act, 1817 "which said that meetings of more than 50 persons within a mile of Westminster, during the sitting of Parliament or of the Superior Courts, for the purpose or on the pretext of considering or preferring a petition, complaint, remonstrance or address to the King, or either House of Parliament, for alterations in matters of Church or State, were deemed to be unlawful assemblies"<sup>7</sup> Such was the concern over state use of agents provocateurs in relation to these marches and excessive use of police force against public demonstrations that these events led directly to the formation of the National Council for Civil Liberties (1934).<sup>8</sup> It is against this background that we should now consider the mobilisation of cyclists to voice concerns around the rapidly growing number of roads casualties and the failure of prosecutions under the 1930 Road Traffic Act.

In November 1933, the Cyclists' Touring Club (CTC), emboldened by its highest membership since 1906 and in conjunction with the recently founded Pedestrian's Association held a meeting at Friends' House, London, to publicly confront what was seen as an organised assault on rights and freedoms.

For months past the motoring interests, conscious of the rising public feeling against the daily butchery, have been seeking to divert attention to the alleged iniquities of cyclists, and have scattered their propaganda broadcast through professional publicity agents. Cyclists, they urge, should be more severely disciplined. ... and generally be kept in their place. Well we have had enough of this. We are now going to carry the war into the enemy's camp, and we shall not cease until something is done to make British roads safe for law-abiding British citizens.<sup>9</sup>

Through the ensuing months, further public meetings were held, attracting crowds of several thousands at a time and uniting leisure cyclists with sporting cycling organisations (both the

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Parliamentary debate By George Lansbury, MP in debate on National Unemployed Workers' Movement (Arrests). *HC Deb 22 December 1932 vol 273 cc1268-300 1268*

<sup>8</sup> Public order, discontent and protest (Harvester Press); Protest movements, civil disorder and the police in inter-war Britain (MEPO 2) [microfilm]

<sup>9</sup> *Gazette* "Editorial," November 1933, 366

National Cyclists' Union and Time Trials Association). Further support also came from industry, both through the backing of individual Manufacturing firms and collectively through the British Cycle and Motor Cycle Manufacturers and Traders Union Ltd.<sup>10</sup> (Millward 2010).

If we try to account for the mobilization of cyclists at this specific moment in time and to understand the relative success and failures of the mobilization, we can usefully employ perspectives from analytical frameworks from both resource mobilization and political opportunity structures. First, we can consider the externalities of the cyclists' protests. Tarrow argues that "[w]hen institutional access opens, rifts appear within elites, allies become available, and state capacity for repression declines, challengers find opportunities to advance their claims. When combined with high levels of perceived costs for inaction, opportunities produce episodes of contentious politics."<sup>11</sup> ( ).

Assuming the (relatively) united cyclists lobby as a political challenger, we can see that several factors can be interpreted as providing specific opportunity for the emergence of a collective movement in the early 1930s. Governing elites were divided as to how to ensure and maintain order on the public roads. Although there was generally agreement that something had to be done, whether that should involve speed limits was deeply contentious. Death rates had been rising rapidly, and despite continued claims by coroners and newspapers that it was all the fault of non-motorists getting in the way or of inadequate spending on roads maintenance, the mounting evidence of irresponsible motoring was becoming undeniable.<sup>12</sup> The measures of the 1930 Road Traffic Act were immediately recognised as inadequate, parliamentary questions being raised as to the minimal number of prosecutions for driving offences. Although accident figures decline immediately after the 1930 bill, by 1934 they had returned and exceeded prior figures. The perceived cost of inaction over road casualties was deemed was certainly deemed too high, being framed in economic terms during parliamentary discussion, noting the costs on hospitals and loss of work. Cyclists' organisation had found common cause with manufacturers and created lobbying alliances to promote the cause of the cyclists.

Externally, therefore, a number of conditions can be seen favourable to the emergence of a contentious politics of cycling and road use in the period. Yet, as Diani and Della Porta emphasize, "it is not enough to discover the existence of tensions and subcultural conflicts: we also have to study the conditions which enable discontent to be transformed into mobilization."<sup>13</sup> Here one has to consider the material and personal resources that are available to be mobilized. Financially the cycling lobby was relatively well-supported. The Manufacturers and Traders Union produced its own material and the CTC was similarly able to produce its own publicity.

Yet the ultimate outcome of cyclists' public meetings, petitioning and the arguments of a small number of sympathetic MPs was not to achieve any serious alterations to the dominant pro-motoring narratives around road law. That is, the continued assumption that cycle traffic should be

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Millward, "A 'Considerable Strain upon the Resources of the Hospitals', A Discussion of the Politics of Cycling Promotion in the Interwar Period" (paper presented at the Cycling and Politics symposium, University of Lancaster, September 16, 2010)

<sup>11</sup> Tarrow 1998:7 cited in Chesters and Welsh (2011) *Social Movements The Key Concepts* London: Routledge.136

<sup>12</sup> The debate on the second reading of the 1934 Road Traffic Bill (*HC Deb 10 April 1934 vol 288 cc167-294*) provides a clear indication of the framing of the problems at this time.

<sup>13</sup> Della Porta and Diani *Social Movements* p.15

held responsible for its own safety, and its presence on roads was not integral part of the transport system but a hindrance to motor traffic. The 1934 bill re-introduced speed limits (although to considerable opposition in the house) but this cannot be attributed to the cycling lobby, since their contributions through the entire decade barely merited parliamentary mention.

The failure to transform discontent into a more meaningful movement for change at this period needs to be sought in further factors. Foremost among these might be the (perhaps understandable) inability to find any means beyond the established methods of politics. Cycling organisations whether CTC or NCU had their 19<sup>th</sup> century roots firmly in bourgeois gentlemen's leisure. Despite the rise of mass cycling as proletarian transport having fundamentally transformed the activity on the roads, the organisations remained largely framed by their separation from these masses.

As bourgeois organizations, the only legitimately understood paths to action were those that operated within the confines of conventional politics. In order to interpret the complexity of Melucci, in his *Challenging Codes* developed a set of cognitive maps to assist in the exploration of the range of potential forms of collective action. Three axes are employed to assist in the differentiation between a range of activities. The first is between solidarity and aggregation. The second, runs between conflict and consensus, while the third dimension considers the polarities of maintenance versus breaching of system limits.

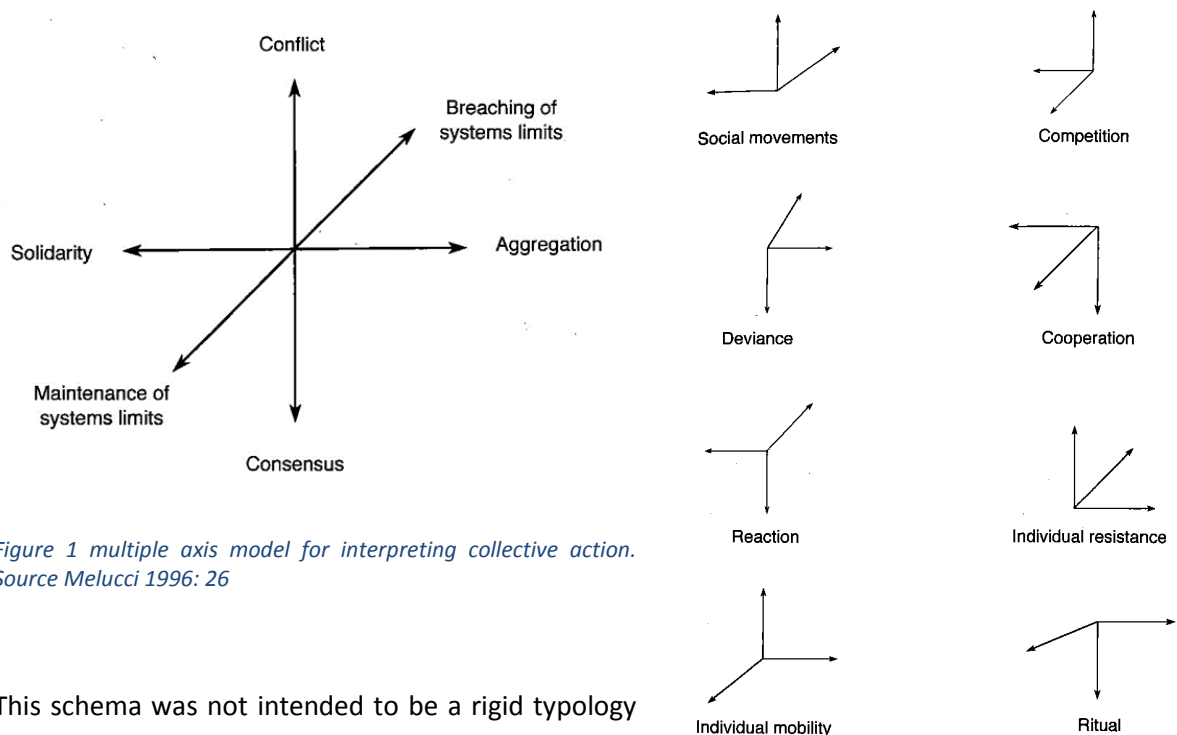


Figure 1 multiple axis model for interpreting collective action. Source Melucci 1996: 26

Figure 2 Forms of collective action. Source Melucci 1996: 35

This schema was not intended to be a rigid typology but rather to assist analysis of a range of frequently blurred collective actions. Importantly, at this point, the actions of cyclists do not seek to breach system limits, but stay within the realms of political action.

Cyclists sought to defend their existing rights and privileges within the boundaries of existing systems of action. While solidarity was certainly sought, the gaps between the mass of those using bicycles as mundane transport and those choosing to ride was hard to overcome. Much of the campaigning might well be interpreted in Meluccian terms as a search for co-operation. Its failure was that the legislative body with which they sought to co-operate was unwilling to do so.

Mass meetings did not translate into mass action. Indeed within the political situation of the time, the defence of privilege mentioned at the outset counted heavily against those who did seek more public challenges to the existing operations of political action. Demonstrations and marches, although recognised as important forms of contentious politics, were being actively undermined by the state. Returning to Tarrow's observation cited above, a characteristic of this period is that the state capacity for repression, far from being weakened, was actively being strengthened against incursion whether through policing or through the operation of public debate. The third estate, was far from a neutral player in this. Politically, the Upper House, in particular, remained a power-base for the pro-motoring lobby.

Millward, commenting on the countervailing power of the motoring lobby in the 1930s (contrasted with the efforts of cycling industry) suggests that a similar case can be made with Hamer's 1970s study on the road lobby and its links with established power.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, when one looks at the conduct of the debate around the Alness committee report in the 1939, the extent of the hostility towards non-motoring travellers is remarkable. As William Leach MP tried to argue: "[o]ne sees from this report that it is the view of their lordships that the chief menaces, indeed almost the only menaces, to road safety, are children, pedestrians and cyclists. In other words, the principal sinners are the victims themselves. For every motorist killed on the highways, 20 other people die on the highways, and their lordships blame the 20 others."<sup>15</sup>

In sum, if we are to explain the failure of the cycling lobby to form a coherent movement in the 1930s, the organisation of the cycling lobby could not overcome its separation from the masses of those it sought to represent. Nor could it fully recognise the impotence of working within the traditions of existing political structures, especially given the power of vested interests (both class and industrial) within the existing political structures. Finally, the political climate was entirely unconducive to any form of mass mobilisation or demonstration as evinced by the crackdowns on other marches, especially those associated with a proletarian politic.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Millward A 'Considerable Strain; Mick Hamer (1987) *Wheels within wheels: a study of the road lobby*, London: John Murray

<sup>15</sup> *HC Deb 05 July 1939 vol 349 cc1333-453* "On the sins of cyclists, pedestrians and children, my Lords waxed really eloquent. I ask hon. Members to listen to this: Children under seven cause 23.9 per cent. of the accidents to pedestrians. So we are led to suppose, from this statement, that the responsibility of infants and tiny children for avoiding accidents is exactly the same as that of the motorist. Any legislation passed on that supposition would be a wicked innovation in British law. Having let go on the sins of babies, their Lordships say, on the shortcomings of pedestrians and cyclists: It would seem...that many pedestrians are unwilling to sacrifice any of their rights to the common cause of safety....There is much thoughtless conduct amongst cyclists which is responsible for many accidents. There you have the key-note to all the recommendations which follow in this report. They go on to make them. They recommend that no cycling under 10 years of age should be allowed. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I hear approval of that recommendation in the Committee, and I ask the Minister to note it. The Committee recommend that all child cyclists should be banned. They also recommend that all cyclists should be registered and compulsorily insured. It might be thought, of course, from that recommendation in regard to insurance, that their Lordships meant a life insurance for the benefit of the widows or relatives of the cyclists. They do not. They specify third party risks, so that, if the cyclist should run down and kill a motorist, he should be made to pay.

<sup>16</sup> It is perhaps worth noting the cabinet's refusal to enforce sanction on British fascist meetings and marches in the same period even when the chief commissioner of Police was urging action. See Andrew Boyle (1962) *Trenchard* London: Collins p.652ff.

## Cycling protests in the 1970s

Concerns over the status and use of roads and the traffic on them at the end of the 1960s, in many ways mirrored those of 40 years previously. Private car traffic had come to dominate public concern and political debate, in no small part due to over a decade of explicit emphasis on and promotion of private car ownership at all levels of politics. By 1969 half of households in Britain were reported by the Department of Transport to have access to a car, and there was growing public and official realisation of the problems of urban traffic. Conversely, as Rivers (1972) pointedly commented, that also meant that 80% of the population had no exclusive access to a car.<sup>17</sup>

Successive government actions, particularly those under the Conservative transport ministry of Ernest Marples had served to deliberately degrade the role of rail as passenger transport. Though *Traffic in Towns*, the report by Professor Colin Buchanan commissioned by Marples in 1960 was ambivalent about the benefits of transforming cities around the car, its public presentation was firmly skewed toward the impression that there was only one conceivable transport future, and that was the private car. In the *Preface* to a mass market paperback version, Sir Geoffrey Crowther, former editor and chairman of *The Economist*, wrote that,

“to liberate the motor vehicle ... we shall have to make a gigantic effort to replan, reshape and rebuild our cities. ... What the Victorians built, surely we can rebuild. Nor is this an unpleasant necessity. Our cities, most of them, are pretty depressing places, and to rebuild them would be a worthwhile thing to do even if we were not forced to it by the motor car.”<sup>18</sup>

The Labour Party (in office 1964-1970), in thrall to Wilson’s modernising rhetoric did little to change this direction, only reinforcing the justification of policy through a determinist depiction of technology. The 1970 White Paper (published shortly after Heath’s Conservative election victory), *Roads for the Future* laid out a strategy for a 4 billion pound investment in trunk roads to double capacity in the next 20 years.<sup>19</sup> Although these plans were not immediately implemented (and subsequently significantly reduced in a 1977 White Paper), the clear implication was that both the urban and rural environment should be rebuilt to accommodate motor traffic.

However, voices were also being raised against this dominant trend and against specific plans through which it was being met. The London Motorway Action Group was founded in 1971 to oppose expansion of the London Ringway inner-city motorway plan that would have erased significant historic areas of housing, displacing and estimates 60-100,000 persons.<sup>20</sup> It united civic societies, residents association and rate payers associations: a significant cross section of potentially affected populations bridging economic and social divides. Similarly, newly founded environmental action groups also began raising opposition to the continued expansion of the road network. John Barr, editor of FoE’s *The Environmental Handbook: Action Guide for the UK*, contributed an essay

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick Rivers *The Restless Generation: A crisis in mobility* London: Davis-Poynter 1972 p.14

<sup>18</sup> Crowther: *Preface to Traffic in Towns: the specially shortened edition of the Buchanan Report* Penguin 1964 pp.14-15

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Transport, *Roads for the Future: The New Inter-Urban Plan for Transport*, Cmnd. 4369, May 1970 pp. 6-7.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Wall *Earth First! and the anti-Roads movement* London: Routledge 1999 p.28; Rivers, *Restless Generation* p.80



“The Traffic’s Roar” (pp.191-197) in a section entitled “The Assaults on our Senses”. He argued that “The cycle of ever-increasing reliance on the motor car with consequent reduction in quality and quantity of public transport must be broken”. Alternatives offered however, reached little further than ensuring more responsible car use or, “better still take the train, bus bicycle or walk”.

The first round of explicitly pro-cycling demonstrations in this opposition came with the formation of “Commitment” a group (initially related to the Young Liberals) in late 1971. Unlike the mass meetings and patient procedural lobbying of the 1930s tactics reflected much more strongly the newly legitimised ( at least in some eyes) direct action tactics that had become visible during protests in the previous decade. The editorial in the October/November issue of *Cycletouring*, the bi-monthly member’s magazine of the CTC, carried an extensive review of this new wave of activism for its readers’ assessment.

“Commitment is the name of a new group whose activities have gained press recognition in the past few months as a result of ‘bike-in’ demonstrations in London in the past few months. One newspaper described how supporters had ‘swept down Oxford street, wearing slogans like bike power’, and had delivered a letter to the Greater London council demanding a network of car free cycleways.

‘We will concentrate on bikeways for commuters, not only within central London but through arterial routes to the suburbs’, says a Commitment spokesman. ‘bikeways for pleasure, linking parks, theatres, concert halls and railways stations, are also planned. We believe we are fighting not only cars on the road, but cars in the head.’<sup>21</sup>

The CTC was initially deeply conflicted with respect to this new wave of activism. Whilst realising that there might be a degree of common cause in shared concern for cycling, the CTC, approaching its centenary year in 1978, expressed doubt as to the effectiveness of direct action tactics. It suggested that the “steady negotiation and reasoned persuasion” employed through its long history is more effective in the long run. Fears were also expressed that there would be a return to the sterile debates of the 1930s. It was also clear, however that the CTCs record in affecting government policy relating to cycling had become minimal at best.

For some CTC members, the actions of Commitment came as a welcome wake up call. They connected cycling to other forms of activism such in the anti-apartheid movement and for Shelter (Action on homelessness), both major, high-profile public causes at the time. The traditional role of the CTC working within existing institutions was foreseen as “increasingly redundant”.<sup>22</sup> For others, more numerous to judge by the four to one ratio of printed replies, CTC should have nothing to do with this wave of protest: publicity was not to be seen as an end in itself and that was all that direct action was deemed capable of achieving. However, far from being a growing organisation as it had been in the 1930s, CTCs membership was at its lowest since 1925, and its remaining resources were sorely stretched by recent changes in countryside access legislation following the 1968 Countryside Act.

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<sup>21</sup> *Cycletouring* October November 1972, p. 150

<sup>22</sup> Russel King “Direct Action Pays” *Cycletouring* December 1972/ January 1973 p15

What emerged as a wave of Bicycle activism occurred outside of the established campaigning and lobbying organisations, although these remained active. Indeed June 1972 saw the launch of the British Cycling Bureau, “a PR body run by Planned Public Relations of London and funded by the British bicycle industry via a levy on all bicycles sold.”<sup>23</sup> It launched a National Plan for Cycling was launched in June 1972, after the appointment of Eric Claxton. Claxton had been the Chief engineer for Stevenage and was responsible for the extensive cycleway network which, at the time was acknowledged as a world class example of parallel infrastructure.<sup>24</sup>

In its March 1973 AGM the CTC reflected that

“The year 1972 was a year of bicycle demonstrations, inspired and organised by groups completely independent of the recognized cycling bodies. We would appear to be no longer the only voice in the wilderness!

Encouraging though these signs may be, however, it has again been evident during the year that cycling still gains little favour in the eyes of the highway authorities.”<sup>25</sup>

Significant among the emergent cycle activism was a strongly transnational influence and one which notably expanded concern beyond an interest purely in cycling and contextualised it within broader concerns for energy, pollution and social futures. These factors were recognised by the CTC:

“It is, in fact, interesting to conjecture whether the club’s own happier membership picture is to some extent a reflection of what is happening on the other side of the Atlantic. There the new enthusiasm appears to be compounded of a number of elements – part fashion, part related to a concern for what is nowadays generally known as ‘the environment’ - and in this latter connection the past year has revealed among the many bodies now directly”engaged in environmental problems in this country a growing interest in the usefulness and value of the pedal cycle.”<sup>26</sup>

Not mentioned at the AGM was the demonstration in Paris on April 23rd, the largest of a number of other “bike-in” actions in London Rome and New York.<sup>27</sup> Organised in large part by Amis de la Terre (founded 1970), the Paris bike-in had its roots in opposition to the proposal for a four lane highway along the left bank of the Seine echoing the events that had crystallised and galvanised protest in London.<sup>28</sup> Most famously it is usually credited as the occasion of the coining of the term “velorution” to connect radical politics to cycling. Richard Ballantine’s account of the day, formed an important

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<sup>23</sup> Carlton Reid 2014 *Roads were Not built for Cars* 2014 see also Reid, Carlton 2013 ‘Routes without riders’ *Get Britain Cycling* #2 summer 2013 pp.30-33 <http://getbritaincycling.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/GBC2013.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Jones, Tim (2008) 'The Role of National Cycle Network Traffic-Free Paths in Creating a Cycling Culture'. Oxford Brookes University, Unpublished Thesis.

<sup>25</sup> CTC AGM special report 1973

<sup>26</sup> CTC AGM special report 1973

<sup>27</sup> David Dickson, *Alternative Technology* London, Fontana 1974. Note that the Bike-in predates the Critical Mass, and better describes the specific mass assembly or demonstration. See Chris Carlson *Critical Mass: Bicycling’s Defiant Demonstration* AK Press 2002

<sup>28</sup> Michael Bess *The Light Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2003 pp.85-6. See also Pierre Samuel (2006) *Histoire des Amis de la Terre 1970-1989: Vingt ans au Coeur de l’Ecologie* [[http://www.amisdelaterre.org/IMG/pdf/Histoire\\_des\\_AT\\_1970-1989.pdf](http://www.amisdelaterre.org/IMG/pdf/Histoire_des_AT_1970-1989.pdf)]

part of the chapter on “The Dream” in numerous editions of his bestselling *Richard’s Bicycle Book* first published in the US in 1972.<sup>29</sup> He described an assembly of “10,000 bicycles of every conceivable type and condition” proceeding in festival mode until broken up by the CRS with tear gas and about 50 arrests, as a way of framing the need for direct action and involvement as a vital part of reclaiming spaces for cyclists.

“The power of vested interests in maintaining a motor age is such that there will probably be a long drawn out struggle and concessions will not be won without a fight.

So don’t be surprised if you are beamed at a bike-in by a club-swinging cop who calls you a dirty communist, and don’t back off because of it. *You have a right to live*. Arguments which present the roller skate or bicycle as more economical, efficient etc are all well and good, but the situation is extremely simple: present transportation systems are filling the air with deadly fumes and noise and recklessly wasting a dwindling supply of natural resources. *They are killing and injuring people*. You have a right to live – it is your birthright – but you will have to fight for it. Do it”<sup>30</sup>

*Richard’s Bicycle Book* was a publishing sensation, selling in the millions and going through numerous editions and revisions to reflect changing times, technologies and agendas in advocacy.<sup>31</sup> Alongside practical advice on choosing and maintaining a bicycle, information on riding techniques and history, was a chapter in which he laid out a virtual manifesto for a revolutionary cycling politics.

When the British edition came out in 1975 (after the author’s relocation to London) some of the strongest rhetoric was toned down although it reappeared in later editions. Instead he suggested possibilities for practical action, listing addresses of organisations and campaigns to join, alongside advice on how to start one’s own independent local action.<sup>32</sup>

“Do what you have to do. There are many fronts and strategies. Each moment of opportunity is a matter of individual assessment and decision. It might be fun, it might be hard. It might be little, it might be great – the only rule I think, is to honestly do it for yourself. Do it because you want to because you must, not because you think you should. Sometimes the moment is right to move, other times there’s something else to do. Life is dynamic; we develop, change, and grow every day. We move according to our best understanding of the moment, act as we are best able, and are responsible for the consequences – that’s how we earn. Right and wrong are relative, the important thing is, if a chance to move comes your way, take it.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Richard’s Bicycle Book: A manual of maintenance and enjoyment* New York: Ballantine Books 1972, UK Edition London: Pan 1975. Copies of the US edition appear to have circulated relatively widely amongst British activists judging by the frequency that they could be found in second-hand bookshops in later years.

<sup>30</sup> *Richard’s Bicycle Book* 1972 p. 246.

<sup>31</sup> Significant changes in layout came in with *Richard’s New Bicycle Book* [fully revised] London, Pan 1990 and *Richard’s 21st century Bicycle Book* 2000

<sup>32</sup> Ballantine’s politics reflected his family background in politics and radical publishing and he was clearly an enthusiastic reader of his great aunt Emma Goldman’s works.

<sup>33</sup> Version from *Richard’s New Bicycle Book* [fully revised] London, Pan 1990 p.351 - text slightly adapted from original US edition 1972

Both advocacy of civil disobedience and linking cycling and to the rapidly growing ecology movement was explicit in Ballantine's writing.

Bicycle activism in the UK in the 1970s rarely took the confrontational forms that Balantine's early editions had advocated, but nevertheless went beyond the recognised forms and processes. Indeed using the previous discussion frameworks we can interpret bicycle activism as part of a much broader set of contentious politics. Whereas cycle use fell throughout the 1960s it stabilised in the 1970s, and from both a cultural and a trade perspective there was a considerable resurgence in all forms of riding.<sup>34</sup> Watson and Grey were confident enough to title the opening chapter of *The Penguin Book of the Bicycle*, "The bicycle in fashion again."<sup>35</sup> At the local level a number of new cycle campaigning groups were formed, often initiated by CTC members. These new campaigning groups linked FoE and CTC members with those of other organisation such as conservation societies. Groups in Sheffield and Leeds in 1977, for example, were followed by the formation of London Cycling campaign in September 1978 and the national organisation of Sustrans in 1979.<sup>36</sup> A broad coalition embraced the bicycle as the centrepiece of ecologically responsible transport policies, a position it was not to relinquish (see Horton).<sup>37</sup>

In the 1970s, protests and direct action became part of the repertoire of action of cycle campaigning and co-existed with institutional means of action. System limits were challenged and breached, but campaigners also sought carefully to engage with existing institutional mechanisms. It would not be inappropriate to refer to a cycling movement of the 1970s (using Melucci's understanding) and to understand the relative success or failure of that mobilization we need to look elsewhere, away from the internal choices of movement participants. Ultimately, while priorities in traffic and transport policies shifted, Britain failed to see the kind of dramatic shifts in policy that became visible in the Netherlands and Denmark during the same period of the 1970s. Again, one may look towards the political structures that enabled the state to diffuse the mobilisations through which it was challenged. Relatively small concessions particularly at local levels diverted attention from a ational strategy. Within the framework of parliamentary politics, however, little inroad was made. The productivist emphasis of Labour and the importance of the motor manufacturing industries in its institutional support (and self-image) did not provide a receptive ground for substantive shifts in transport policy. The structural closure of the parliamentary system to new party challenges, prevented the incursion of any "single issue" or any fundamental challenge to the existing status quo. Tensions and political disagreement can only be voiced in this system as a factor of a bi-polar polity. Arguments and issues that cut across, or do not conform to the traditional bases of economy , industry and workforce, upon which UK political debate is structured have a relatively short political life/. Sustaining a movement over the course of two or more electoral cycles becomes a virtual impossibility. Each major party makes minor concessions to show that they are aware and have a relevant policy framework to deal with it and this process tends to defuse the capacity for any issue to remain alive within political debate. The place of cycling in transport policy is rendered a null issue, and the success of cycle activism in raising the profile and respectability can be used by policy-

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<sup>34</sup> Graeme Fife *Bob Chicken: a Passion for the Bike* Privately Published by Robert J Chicken Snr. 2005: 37  
see also Michael Breckon *A Wheel in Two Worlds: The Ron Kitching Story* privately published 1993

<sup>35</sup> Roderick Watson and Martin Grey *The Penguin Book of the Bicycle* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1978

<sup>36</sup> *Cycletouring* June/July 1977 131

<sup>37</sup> Dave Horton, Environmentalism and the Bicycle *Environmental Politics* 15(1) 2006: 41-58: 41

makers to demonstrate the efficacy of existing policies and that there is no need to make further change.

### **Forty years on again:**

Another 40 years on, the situation today poses an interesting analytical question. Consistent and organised lobbying has placed cycling into a position of relative cultural respectability (in some quarters at least). Within London, it has been embraced as a legitimate part of the transport mix even if only to lessen pressure on a saturated capacity public transport system. Elsewhere in the country, the picture is less positive. Rhetoric, as both Aldred and Horton and Jones argue is plentiful: action is currently minimal.<sup>38</sup> Pressure from and comparison with other nations within the European Union has an ambivalent effect. The UK continues to refuse to draft a national cycling policy and current funding encourages international comparison to be used as contrast not best practice. European design solutions, for example are not thought to be transferable, Britain needs its own unique solutions to reflect its unique cultural and political heritage, it is implicitly argued in a number of recent funding bids to design infrastructure best practice (in conjunction with TfL and the royal commission of 1851). Cycle campaigning, in conjunction with public celebration of sporting success has raised the profile of the bike. However, racing and riding for sport and health is not the same as transport: the links between the two are ambivalent at best.

This leaves cycle campaigning and attempts to create a cycling movement in a quandary. Image and reality do not correspond. Government honours the work of lobbyists and lauds the work they do, but fails to embrace their recommendations. Looking back to previous generations, one might legitimately pose the question whether bicycle transport history in the UK, in relation to cycling policy at least, is at all inseparable from political ideology and vested interests.

### **Author**

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<sup>38</sup> Aldred, *The Role of Advocacy*; Jones, Tim and Dave Horton 2015 *Rhetoric and Reality: understanding the English cycling situation*, in Cox, Peter (ed.) *Cycling Cultures* Chester: University of Chester Press