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Book Review



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Aaron Golub, Melody L. Hoffmann, Adonia E. Lugo and Gerardo F. Sandoval (eds.), *Bicycle Justice and Urban Transformation: Biking for All?* London and New York, Routledge, 2016; 270 pp., £36.99, ISBN 978-0815359203.

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Across the western world, the bicycle is being promoted as a sustainable and healthy mode of transport. Cycling may also improve the liveability of cities and, because of its limited cost, raise the mobility of deprived groups. Most cycling activists and policymakers assume that nearly everyone, irrespective of social or cultural background, can decide to use the two-wheeler. Cycling policies are generally marked by instrumental procedures, involving lobby activities, evidence-based data, rational public information and technological solutions, in particular, the building of cycling infrastructure. In the 18 chapters of this edited collection on bicycle justice, American researchers put this common approach into perspective. Such professional methods may seem politically neutral, they argue, yet, opportunities to make use of biking facilities are unequally distributed. Cycling policies in American cities have mainly catered to the wishes of the White middle class while largely ignoring sociocultural diversity and the needs of the underprivileged.

On the basis of a sociocultural perspective and ethnographic research, the authors advocate the linking of cycling activism to the struggle for civil rights and empowerment. This equity turn in bicycle studies was fuelled by protests from Black and Latino communities against the construction of biking infrastructures in their neighbourhoods. Their target was not the bike lanes as such but the underlying gentrification policy. While cycling as part of everyday transport fell out of grace decades ago in the US, gentrification granted it a new status as part of a trendy cosmopolitan lifestyle. City governments have embraced *cycle chic*: their cycling policies are designed to boost sustainability, liveability and economic revenues, while the structural dominance of car traffic remains uncontested. For disadvantaged city residents, pedalling ‘yuppies’ and ‘hipsters’ have meanwhile become a sign that more affluent groups are taking over their neighbourhoods.

Several authors stress that social and ethnic inequality is intrinsic to cycling infrastructure. For one thing, such provisions are not equally distributed within cities, but mostly centred in downtown areas and nearby neighbourhoods. In this way, they are geared to the mobility patterns of more privileged groups, while cycling facilities in peripheral neighbourhoods leave much to be desired.

Cycling policy is mainly grafted onto the lifestyle of middle class *choice riders*, for whom cycling is a preference among other available means of transport. In contrast, for riders with low incomes and ethnic or migration backgrounds, bicycling is the only option, as they cannot afford motorized transport or do not have a valid driver's license. For these *captive riders*, cycling is hardly a positive choice, let alone hip and cool, but part of their poverty. Moreover, in particular, young African-American men and (illegal) immigrants fear police monitoring motivated by racism. Captive riders remain largely beyond the scope of established cycling advocates and policymakers, even though data show them to outnumber choice riders in daily traffic. Because often their residential and work locations are not hooked up to the bike infrastructure, captive riders are more likely to make use of uncommon routes and shortcuts and to ignore traffic rules. The established cycling movement does not appreciate such erratic pedalling, because it would undermine the public image of cycling, which still needs to win mainstream acceptance.

The authors not only criticize what they consider to be exclusionary and imperious cycling policies. Based on concrete practices in several American cities, the Mexican border city of Matamoros and Brussels, they also point to opportunities for more socially just cycling activism by starting from, in the words of Adonia Lugo, a 'human infrastructure'. By linking bicycle promotion to neighbourhood activism, profile-raising cycling parades and *do-it-yourself* projects such as collective repair workshops, deprived groups would be reached better and encouraged. Many authors subscribe to the view that cycling should be more than practical transport based on personal preference: it should also contribute to improving the quality of social life. Some of them, unfortunately, hardly distinguish scholarly analysis from political involvement, while the actual results of some projects described lack clarity. It is doubtful whether the optimism of some authors is justified when it comes to the possibilities of redirecting American bike policies toward social justice. Although protests against the 'white bike lanes of gentrification' (p. 249) gave rise to discussions on the class and racial bias in cycling policies, the underlying socio-economic dynamics of gentrification persisted. It is also unlikely that captive riders can be won over to the ideals of middle-class cycling activists.

The historical and international comparative dimensions remain underexposed in this volume; the chapters on Cape Town, Matamoros and Brussels are rather arbitrary. The debate on bicycle equity is in some ways typically American, rooted as it is in the marginalization of cycling as a poor means of transport for 'losers' in the mid-twentieth century, while in recent years, it was also upgraded as a means of distinction for the better-off. In this way, bicycling continues to be closely linked to either low or high social status, an element reinforced by stark social and racial contrasts, and political-cultural polarization. Also in European cities, gentrification fosters the public image of cycling, but in Europe, perhaps with the exception of Britain, cycling has been and is far less politicized than in the US. This is an effect of the higher density of cyclists and more egalitarian riding patterns in north-western Europe. A more systematic international comparison might have added more historical depth to this volume.