

The Social Impact of the Bicycle

Citation for published version (APA):

Oosterhuis, H. (2020). The Social Impact of the Bicycle. *Modern History Review*, 22(4), 28-29.

Document status and date:

Published: 01/04/2020

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:

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The social impact of the bicycle

From pioneering daredevils to suburban workers, we explore the rise of bicycle power

The first cyclists in the late nineteenth century distinguished themselves as modern, progressive and, above all, sporting. Riding the crude bicycles of the time, including the penny farthing, was risky and required agility and courage, so it was considered by definition as a sport. Cycle racing, on special tracks and on public roads, was one of the first mass-spectator sports.

Health and recreation

With the advent of the safety bicycle, which was easier and more comfortable to ride, bicycles were also used for recreational purposes. The riders, members of the affluent class who could afford this expensive item, experienced it as a 'freedom machine', enabling flexible mobility at an unprecedented speed. The bike became popular for touring in the countryside and enjoying nature. Already by around 1900 some daring cyclists made long trips in Europe and America and even world journeys.

Although in medical debates the possible drawbacks of cycling, especially for women, were mentioned, in general its health benefits were highlighted. Cycling was viewed as a counterbalance to the supposedly harmful and unhealthy aspects of industrial towns: stress, pollution, noise and the standardised rhythms and sedentary routines of office and factory labour.

Cycling and nationalism

However, at the same time the pioneers had to fight for social acceptance. Authorities often tried to impede their freedom of movement, there were complaints from pedestrians and coachmen about their riding style and rural folk viewed tourists as arrogant intruders. In order to defend their interests, cyclists organised themselves in local clubs as well as national associations.

The activities of cycling organisations in many countries reflected not only the values of bourgeois respectability and liberal citizenship, but also nationalist aspirations. Bicycle touring, facilitating the discovery of national landscapes and heritage, and bringing town and countryside closer together, was imbued with nationalist self-esteem.

Early twentieth century

In the first decades of the twentieth century, when the bicycle became affordable for the lower classes, it was increasingly used on a massive scale for daily practical purposes. It was a cost-effective substitute for the horse and it was introduced in postal and telegram services, police and fire departments, and the army. The bike enabled workers to cover a longer distance between home and work, and thus contributed to suburbanisation. Traders, shopkeepers

Utilitarian cycling in The Netherlands





Elsewhere in Europe, there is a rich tradition of cycling as a sport

and artisans used it to transport goods or offer their services. In the countryside, the bicycle advanced the opening up of isolated settlements. Schooling and dating opportunities broadened, distant relatives and friends came within reach.

Although women cyclists sometimes incited controversy and were pressured to develop a riding style that met the prevailing gender standards of decency, the bicycle contributed to women's emancipation. The bike significantly enlarged women's independence and habit of going out, thus breaking down their social isolation. Also, engaging in this activity loosened constrictive dress codes and enabled physical activity in public.

The car

The upsurge of utilitarian cycling by the working class soon gave the bicycle a lower social status. The bourgeoisie and aristocracy increasingly turned to the motorcycle and the car in order to distinguish themselves from the pedalling masses. The image of the bicycle as the embodiment of speed, innovation and progressiveness was eclipsed by motoring even though the volume of cycle traffic was greater than ever between the First World War and the 1950s. In the USA, where driving a car became part of national identity, the bicycle was a vehicle for losers and eccentrics, or for youngsters and students.

Europe and the bike

During the twentieth century, The Netherlands and Denmark, generally regarded as cycling nations par excellence, saw a development that markedly differed from most Western countries. The lasting popularity of cycling in these countries was not only related to favourable conditions, such as lack of hills, extensive urbanisation, compact towns and short distances. It was associated with supposedly typical Dutch and Danish national virtues, such as independence, self-control, modesty and stability.

These Dutch values were reflected in the typical Dutch utilitarian, solid and sturdy type of bike for everyday use and was, and remains,

related to an egalitarian social ethos and distaste for showing off. Commercial cycle racing was presented as vulgar and as contrary to the status of cyclists as respectable and responsible road users. On the other hand, in France, Belgium, Italy and Spain cycle racing became a source of national pride, embodied for example in the Tour de France inaugurated in 1903.

Today

The English-speaking world and European countries such as Germany and France display a contrasting picture. In the UK, pro-bicycle policies are often contested and do not elicit broad support. The two-wheeler is more frequently used for recreational and sporting than for utilitarian purposes. Younger men are strongly overrepresented among cyclists, while women and the elderly are underrepresented.

Nevertheless, nowadays the bicycle is celebrated as a clean, sustainable, healthy, flexible, inexpensive and humane means of personal transport and as a remedy for traffic congestion, environmental pollution, depleting energy resources, the climate crisis, welfare diseases and social exclusion. All over the Western world, governments have launched programmes for promoting cycling. However, the widely diverging national cycling levels have hardly changed during the last two decades. The share of biking as a percentage of the total number of traffic movements amounted to:

- 27% in The Netherlands
- 20% in Denmark
- around 10% in other Nordic countries and Germany
- around 5% in France and Italy
- between 1% and 3% in the UK, North America and Australia

It is questionable whether bicycling, as a historically and culturally shaped practice, can be substantially increased through policies.

Harry Oosterhuis is a professor in the department of history at the University of Maastricht, The Netherlands.