

A Strong Presence, but a Weak History

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A STRONG PRESENCE, BUT A WEAK HISTORY. THE BICYCLE IN DUTCH HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Our interest in Dutch bicycle history was triggered by a paradox – a paradox that we will elaborate on in this article.¹ While the Netherlands has a long-standing and well-deserved reputation as a bicycling nation, historical interest in the bicycle and bicycling, in particular at the academic level, is not well-developed. The growing international interest in bicycle history in the past few decades has not reverberated in the Netherlands.

There are good reasons for the image of the Netherlands as a bicycling country. Probably there is no nation in the Western world where bicycling is so ingrained in daily life. Whereas after the Second World War the use of bicycles strongly declined in all Western countries, this decline was checked at a comparatively high level in the Netherlands. The country developed the highest bicycle density in the world, with at the moment more bicycles (about 18 million) than inhabitants (over 16 million). The bicycle's annual 'transport performance', the cumulative distance travelled by all cyclists together, was surpassed in the Netherlands by the automobile only in 1960, and it continued to be comparatively high afterwards, until 1990 even higher than that of the train. In the last decades the distance covered by bicycling is increasing again, not only as a reaction to increasing traffic congestion in urbanized areas, but also because of the growing popularity of recreational bicycling. Although the use of cars has increased since the 1950s, cyclists have always been considered as normal traffic participants. In contrast to many other western countries, in the Netherlands the bicycle did not get a low social status and Dutch government policy in general was rather bicycle-friendly. In the Netherlands there are nearly 30.000 kilometers of separated bicycle paths including bridges, tunnels and ferries. In city-planning there is always a built-in bike lane plan.²

However, the special position of the bicycle as a crucial means of everyday transportation, also in Dutch traffic policies, is hardly reflected in Dutch mobility historiography, in which shipping, railroads and especially the automobile are center-stage.³ Also more generally, Dutch scholars show little interest in bicycle history. The number of Dutch contributions to the *International Cycling History Conferences* is not impressive: from over 370 during the past twenty years only fifteen have come from Dutch authors, of whom only two had an academic background. Until recently it

¹ This article is based on the overview of the historiography of bicycling in the Netherlands as well as abroad that we published in 2009: Manuel Stoffers and Harry Oosterhuis, 'Ons populairste vervoermiddel': De Nederlandse fietshistoriografie in internationaal perspectief, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden/The Low Countries Historical Review* 124/3, 390-418. We also launched an online international Cycling History Bibliography, already containing more than 1500 titles from many different countries (<http://www.fasos-research.nl/sts/cyclinghistory/>). If you have any titles to add, please visit the website and send us a mail: harry.oosterhuis@maastrichtuniversity.nl; m.stoffers@maastrichtuniversity.nl.

² See data in *Cycling in the Netherlands* (The Hague: Ministerie van Verkeer en Waterstaat 2009), and, for an impression of Dutch bicycle culture: Shirley Agudo, *Bicycle Mania* (The Hague and Schiedam s.a.).

³ See e.g. Gijs Mom and Ruud Filarski, *De mobiliteitsexplosie, 1895-2005. Van transport naar mobiliteit 2* (Zutphen 2008).

was impossible to find the ICHC proceedings in any major Dutch library, while the same holds true for many other international publications on the subject. While in countries such as France, Germany, Great-Britain, the United States and Canada there is academic involvement in the history of bicycling, the subject appears hardly of interest to Dutch historians, although it would fit in well with the increased attention for national history and heritage as well as for *lieux de mémoire*. The Velorama ‘national bicycling museum’ in Nijmegen, set up in 1981 and which organized the ICHC conference in 1990, is a private initiative that is little known in the Netherlands, receives no government funding like other museums, and is hardly recognized within Dutch academic circles, although the museum has an important and representative collection of historic bicycles as well as a rich documentation center.

Bicycles, it seems, are too everyday and too uncontested in the Netherlands to serve as a topic of academic historical research. While in other countries academics have shown interest in bicycles and bicycling from both a scholarly and political-ideological perspective⁴, to Dutch intellectuals the self-evident nature of bicycles has basically rendered them into a *non-issue*. After all, in the Dutch context there is no need for the promotion of the bicycle’s practical usefulness through historical examples or political-ideological arguments. In general the Dutch ride bicycles routinely, as a matter of course. It is characteristic of the pragmatic and utilitarian Dutch attitude regarding bicycling that the research in this field is dominated here by engineers and mobility experts, who are mainly interested in traffic policies and infrastructural issues, and show little regard for the divergent cultural and historical dimensions of bicycling.

There are some general and local as well as antiquarian Dutch bicycle histories, but these publications rarely start from systematic research or a critical processing of insights from international scholarship. Nor does most of this work show much critical analysis and attention for the socio-cultural and political context of bicycling – the perspective from which we would like to approach the subject. Although some of the existing Dutch works on bicycle history are informative⁵, nearly all of them are marked by a journalistic, popular and anecdotal approach and the absence of source references. Their quality is generally lower than that of many foreign studies that do cover the social, cultural and political meanings of bicycles and bicycling.

In contrast to many foreign studies that appeared from the 1960s and 1970s, Dutch bicycle histories were less inspired by bicycle activism, promoting the bike as an energy- and environmentally-conscious and ‘human’ means of transportation. It is telling of the Dutch pragmatism regarding bicycles that Dutch bicycle history was advanced not so much by bicycle activists, but by the manufacture sector that for instance hired authors J.M Fuchs and W.J. Simons to write about Dutch bicycle history. Still, in contrast to some sophisticated international, in particular British and American, historical scholarship on the bicycle industry and trade⁶, there is no solid

⁴ See e.g. Andrew Ritchie, *King of the road: an illustrated history of cycling* (London 1975); Jim McGurn, *On your bicycle: an illustrated history of cycling* (London 1987); Pryor Dodge, *The bicycle* (Paris 1996); D. Horton, P. Rosen and P. Cox, (eds.), *Cycling and Society* (Aldershot 2007).

⁵ See e.g. J.M. Fuchs and W.J. Simons, *Voort in 't zadel kameraden! Een eeuw fietsen in Nederland* (Amsterdam 1968). Also the magazine *Het Rijwiel* and other publications by the Dutch veteran bicycle club ‘De oude fiets’ provides essential information - especially about technical issues.

⁶ See R. Lloyd-Jones, M.J. Lewis and M. Eason, *Raleigh and the British bicycle industry: an economic and business history, 1870-1960* (Aldershot etc. 2000); P. Rosen, *Framing production: technology, culture, and change in the British bicycle industry* (Cambridge, Mass. 2002); T. Burr, *The Cycle of*

historical study of a major Dutch bicycle producer like Gazelle and Batavus, nor is there one of the Dutch bicycle sector in general.

The absence of a strong industrial tradition and of technology museums in the Netherlands probably has impeded historical interest in the development of the bicycle, the more so because the Dutch have played no significant role in the invention and innovation of the bicycle: the draisine came from Germany, the velocipede from France, the high-wheeler from France and England and the safety bicycle from England.⁷ Also, in later innovations such as the racing, touring, recumbent and mountain bike, Dutch bicycle producers have been followers rather than trendsetters – perhaps with the exception of various new types of carrier bicycles, which have become popular in recent years. It is striking, however, that partly as an effect of the prolonged protection of the Dutch bicycle industry from foreign competition, a specific bicycle design could become dominant, one that was adjusted to the flat landscape, wet climate, daily use and dominant standards of decency. The *Hollandrad*, as the Germans call it, is marked by the vertical and unsportsmanlike posture of the rider, by its sturdiness and heavy weight, its black color and by its standard package of accessories such as luggage carriers, chain- and dress-guards and lighting. We will come back to the typical Dutch bicycle when we address the popularity of bicycling in the Netherlands from a socio-cultural and political perspective.

Whereas in countries like France, Italy, Germany, and Belgium interesting works on the history of cycle-racing, including its social, cultural and political implications, have appeared, in the Netherlands little similar work has been done, although Dutch cyclists have been fairly successful from the very beginnings of cycle-racing and there are plenty of source materials.⁸ Almost without exception the many Dutch publications on cycle-racing are of a journalistic or popular nature and they pay no attention to themes that render it into a major topic of historical study also outside the circle of cycle racing devotees. In the Netherlands, unlike in France, Italy and Flanders, a connection between cycle racing and national identity never materialized. While in the first half of the twentieth century road races such as the Tour de France, the Giro d'Italia and the Tour of Flanders acquired their classic popular status, such a tradition never developed in the Netherlands. One of the reasons is that up to the Second World War the number of road cycling races remained quite limited as a result of prohibitive rules in the 1905 Motor and Bicycle Act. Also, the specific social and cultural character of bicycling in the Netherlands, which we will discuss further down, might explain the lack of a strong Dutch cycle-racing tradition.

To be true, there was some academic interest in bicycles and bicycling in the Netherlands from the 1990s on. The work on the history of the ‘social construction’ of

Commerce: Producers and Consumers in the French and U.S. Bicycle Markets, 1875-1910 (PhD Dissertation, University of California 2005).

⁷ See the overview by D.V. Herlihy, *Bicycle: the history* (New Haven, CT etc. 2004).

⁸ See e.g. Richard Holt, *Sport and society in modern France* (London and Oxford 1981); C.S. Thompson, *The Tour de France: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA 2006); D. Marchesini, *L'Italia del Giro d'Italia* (Bologna 1996); R. Rabenstein, *Radspport und Gesellschaft: ihre sozialgeschichtlichen Zusammenhänge in der Zeit von 1867 bis 1914* (Hildesheim, Munich and Zurich, 2nd ed. 1995); D. Vanyacker, ‘Le cyclisme en Wallonie jusqu’à la Seconde Guerre mondiale: une histoire sociale comparable à celle des Flandriens (1860-1945)’, in: L. Courtois et al. (eds.), *Images et paysages mentaux des 19e et 20e siècles, de la Wallonie à l’outre-mer* (Louvain-la-Neuve 2007) 147-172. The best Dutch historical study on (international) cycle-racing is: Benjo Maso, *Het zweet der goden. Legende van de wielersport* (Amsterdam 1990, revised edition 2003).

the bicycle as a technological artifact by the Maastricht sociologist Wiebe Bijker, whose main concern pertained to the design of a sociological model for technology development, is well-known, though not uncontested.⁹ We would also like to draw attention to Adri Albert de la Bruhèze's and Frank Veraart's important comparative study of the development of bicycle use and policy during the twentieth century in nine European cities (including four Dutch) published in 1999.¹⁰ They looked at the interrelations between developments in utilitarian bicycle use on the one hand and local and national traffic policies on the other. This original contribution to bicycle historiography slightly modifies the image of exceptional high Dutch bicycle use, not only by pointing to large local differences within the country, but also by arguing that before the Second World War some foreign cities had a similar high bicycle density. After the 1950s a sharp decline in bicycle use would ensue in all countries, followed by stabilization or an increase from the 1970s. A striking conclusion was that differences in bicycle use in the late twentieth century could largely be traced back to the effects of local traffic circulation policies implemented decades earlier. Moreover, the authors also noted a strong interrelationship between long-term policies and local public images of bicycling. This project, although carried out by academic researchers, did not so much arise from an intrinsic academic interest, but it was prompted by the Dutch Ministry of Transportation, which in the 1990s launched a sizable bicycle stimulation program, the so-called *Masterplan Fiets*.¹¹ The study's policy-oriented, social-science character was reflected not only in the many statistical sources used by the authors, but also in their presentation of a general explanatory model of bicycle use.

As indicated earlier on, the Netherlands is lagging behind other countries when it comes to pursuing the social and political history of bicycle culture. In many recent international historical works on bicycling the emphasis is on its social, cultural and political aspects.¹² In this historiography the bicycle is presented as both product and instrument of modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The subjects treated from this perspective cover the important contribution of the bicycle to technological innovation; a new experience of time and space; individual mobility, traffic-regulation and -infrastructure; mass tourism, the changing dynamic between city and countryside and suburbanization; nature and environmental awareness; body culture and mass sports; democratization, the development of individual freedom, citizenship and women's emancipation; and the formation of national unity and identity. At the same time bicycling was also viewed as a compensation or counterbalance of the supposedly harmful and unhealthy effects of high-paced modern life, as a way to control modernity.

The perspective of democracy and national identity has been adopted by the German historian Anne-Katrin Ebert, who wrote a dissertation about the history of bicycling in the period between 1870 and 1940 in Germany and the Netherlands. Her comparative study, which has been published under the title *Radelnde Nationen*

⁹ Wiebe E. Bijker, *Of bicycles, bakelites and bulbs: towards a theory of sociotechnical change* (London 1995), notably 19-100.

¹⁰ Adri A. Albert de la Bruhèze and Frank C.A. Veraart, *Fietsverkeer in praktijk en beleid in de twintigste eeuw* (The Hague 1999). See also: Adri A. Albert de la Bruhèze and Frank C.A. Veraart, 'Fietsen en verkeersbeleid. Het fietsgebruik in negen West-Europese steden in de twintigste eeuw', *NEHA-jaarboek voor economische, bedrijfs- en techniekgeschiedenis* 62 (1999) 138-170.

¹¹ See T. Welleman, *The Dutch bicycle master plan: description and evaluation in an historical context* (The Hague 1999).

¹² See e.g. G. Norcliffe, *The ride to modernity: the bicycle in Canada, 1869-1900* (Toronto etc. 2001); Rabenstein, *Radsport und Gesellschaft*; Thompson, *The Tour de France*.

(*Cycling Nations*), is, in our view, the most interesting study published on Dutch bicycle culture so far.¹³ She offers a surprising explanation for the Dutch status as a typical bicycling country. The common sense view holds that the high number of bicycles has been stimulated by favorable geographical and spatial conditions: the virtual absence of differences in altitude, the short distances and the high level of urbanization. Also, the popularity of bicycling in the Netherlands has been viewed as a reflection of the supposedly typical Dutch mentality of practicality and thriftiness. Ebert, however, shifts the accent towards a socio-political perspective: she argues that the popularity of the bicycle can to a large extent be explained by the specific ways in which the bicycle was constructed and promoted as a vehicle of Dutch national identity. She points out that already in the interwar period the Netherlands was considered as the bicycle country par excellence by Dutch and foreigners alike, even though at that time large-scale bicycle use was common in more European countries.

According to Ebert, in particular the liberal- and national-minded bourgeois citizens who were in charge of the General Dutch Cyclists Union (ANWB, founded 1883) established the connection between bicycling and national virtues as well as middle-class ideals of civilization and citizenship, which centered on achieving a balance between individual liberty and social egalitarianism on the one hand and self-control, social responsibility and stability on the other. The ANWB also actively associated bicycling with historical traditions like ice-skating and with the interconnectedness of various regions. As special interest organization for bicycle tourists the Union propagated the discovery of the countryside and national landscapes and heritage. It also strongly contributed to the implementation of standardized and uniform traffic rules on a national scale, whereby bicyclists were presented as decent and responsible traffic participants with the same rights as others. The continuing publicity around bicycling Dutch royalty tied in with an already widely spread view of bicycling as a characteristic element of Dutch identity.

Even more important, in particular in comparison with Germany, and probably also with Great-Britain, was that the liberal-bourgeois ANWB promoted the bicycle as a democratic means of transportation that would bring progress for all classes of the population. While in Germany, and also Great-Britain, the labor movement deployed the bicycle as instrument for its socialist cause, in the Netherlands the image of the bicycle as vehicle of national unity prevailed. The ANWB advocated the diffusion of bicycles among workers as a way to elevate them to the level of the respectable middle class and integrate them into nation. This civilizing offensive was in part a reason for the 1905 legal prohibition on road cycling races, which did not fit in with bourgeois respectability, and it might also explain the long predominance of the typical solid and decent *Hollandrad*. Unlike in Germany and Britain, in the Netherlands the workers movement developed no specific ideological bond with bicycles. Consequently, the increasing use of bicycles by the working classes did not lead to a social status decline of bicycling, causing the upper and later also the middle classes to turn their back on this vehicle, which in fact happened in Germany and Britain. Because automobiles could not be conceived as civilizing tool for the masses to the same extent, in the interwar period the ANWB, that had developed from a cyclists into a tourists organization, continued to defend the interests of cyclists and motorists side by side.

¹³ Anne-Katrin Ebert, *Radelnde Nationen: Die Geschichte des Fahrrads in Deutschland und den Niederlanden bis 1940* (Frankfurt and New York 2010). See also: Anne-Katrin Ebert, 'Cycling towards the nation: the use of the bicycle in Germany and the Netherlands, 1880-1940', *European Review of History* 11 (2004) 347-364.

Thus Ebert suggests not only an explanation for the bicycle's public image as national means of transportation and for its sustained dominance vis-à-vis other means of transportation, but also for the remarkably slow diffusion of cars in the Netherlands as well as for the absence of a national cycling mythology. Her study, which suggests that the Dutch bicycling tradition is not a self-evident matter, but the product of a specific historical development, also makes one wonder whether the popularity of the bicycle or the specific style of bicycling in the Netherlands has anything to do with this country's fairly egalitarian social relations and its cultivation of particular middle-class values.

To conclude we would suggest that although Dutch bicycle historiography lags behind British, German, French and American work, it also offers some insights which might be worth while to explore in international comparative research. The first is the importance of long-term infrastructural planning for the image of bicycling and the actual use of the bicycle as a daily means of transportation. The second is the connection, as suggested though not made explicit by Ebert, between the popularity of bicycling and social egalitarianism. The third concerns the perspective on the dynamic between bicycling and motorized traffic. In technology and transportation history and also in many bicycle histories that focus on the late nineteenth en early twentieth century, the bike is often discussed as a precursor of the automobile that in response to the latter's rise naturally lost its historical importance. The argument is that the bicycle paved the way for the automobile, both in terms of production and technology as well as in terms of use and public image. Many historians who draw a connection between the bicycle and modernity do so against the backdrop of the rapid rise of motorized traffic in countries such as the United States, Britain and Germany. But can this development be generalized? The Dutch case shows that the effect of such a finalistic view on the history of mobility is a distortion of historical reality: it suggests that in the course of the twentieth century the bicycle gave way to the automobile more rapidly than in fact happened. Furthermore, Dutch bicycle history shows that bicycles were not simply replaced by cars: regarding bicycles and automobiles there was no straightforward changing of the guard in the Netherlands and, connected to this, the specific qualities of bicycles vis-à-vis autos, such as their being clean, silent, cheap, healthy and faster in cities and suburbanized areas, continued to be valued.