

Cyclists' *viality* as an oppressed behaviour. Or: Cyclists' way to interact with public space as an oppressed behaviour

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We cyclists know the way to make the way –how we move along public space, how we interpret urban elements and how we interact with other moving agents. I call this practice *cyclists' viality*: an inherent practice which is based in a know-how taken from our own experience as cyclists and which is the consequence of the logical use of that human invention called bicycle. It is the intelligent way to ride that vehicle, the way to get the best out of it, the way to take all its potential. And it is the result of a process of adaptation to the urban context. As it is developed through experience, it is the most effective way to ride. It becomes a feature of cycling culture at the most immediate level: it is incorporated in our bodies and thoughts, and applied equally by all of us –often as a reflex and even sometimes unconsciously- as a response to given situations. It is a common behaviour shared by all cyclists.

Many social researchers have discussed and characterized cyclists' viality, even if they used other names for it. Besides Lefebvre's analysis of the social construction of space and his contributions on agency and structure constitutes an invaluable theoretical frame where the dialectic relationship among *cyclists' moves* and their *surrounding space* can be applied. Lefebvre points out that the personal practice is an alternative of the conception of space made by the power and its agents (law-makers, politicians, town-planners, architects...) and an effective method of transforming space from a pre-determined and inert dimension in an alive and dynamic one.

If we analyse cyclists' viality and its appliance to urban layout and traffic laws, we'll come to the same conclusions: their vehicle's characteristics and the logical way to use it do not fix to the established conditions. Rules and roads are made for cars. They were thinking of cars when designing those roads and when writing those rules. For cyclists, a strict and uncritical appliance of rules would be not only illogical, uncomfortable, time-consuming or energy-wasting, but even risky and dangerous (for both rider and third parties). To solve this inconsistency, city planners, journalists, mayors, traffic police and law makers usually apply repressing mechanisms: cyclists must adapt to the city's conditions. Our analysis denounces this unfair deal and propose the opposite: the adaptation of the city to the cyclists' viality.

Considering cycling contributes with positive benefits for the general population, we can state that as long as cyclists' viality is spontaneously and generally applied because of elemental logic in a context that does not respect its specific characteristics, such behaviour is legitimate no matter if it contradicts (unfair) laws. Cyclists are pushed onto the edges, both physical and symbolic, of the city. Let's gain our own space in those both levels.

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Do we cyclists move in a special way? Yes, we ride bikes. But, besides that... have we developed a specific way of moving along the streets of our cities? While riding bikes, do we make the same calculations about space? Do we occupy public space and transit along it in a way which makes us different from others and our activity different from other activities? Do we react in a similar way when dealing with distances, urban obstacles, by-passers, traffic, limits among roads and pavements, corners, paths, zebra crossings, speed, hurry, risks, challenges, traffic signs, laws, itineraries and city landscapes? Can we say we have our own way of *being traffic* in our cities? If we answer 'yes', we can say we have a specific cyclists' *viality*, that is: the way cyclists use and move around urban public space.

I use the neologism '*viality*' -something like a vehicular equivalent to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* – as the manner in which a given form of locomotion or its users transit shared urban space. It has to do with moving, modal share, transport, traffic, but it is not exactly any of those concepts. It is the behavior developed in relation to a given instrument or machine while using it for advancing in the context of our cities, taking out the best of it. In our case that “instrument” is the bicycle, and the “behaviour” is the result of a knowledge we have developed through learning to use it, getting used to riding it and experiencing it for hours and hours during our lives. We incorporate its mechanism into our tempo and to our physical movements, even to our instincts and reflexes. Cyclists' *viality* is how we position ourselves and get our body forward. It is how we go through roads, paths, lanes, pavements or city gaps. It is a way to use our bodies and our minds around the bicycle and the way the bicycle advances along the way. *Viality is the way we make the way.*

Cyclists' *viality* encompasses elements like relation with space, spontaneity in moving along, poetic license we apply to traffic laws, application of a specific logic in regards to transit interaction with pedestrians, interaction with motorised vehicles, interaction with other bicycles, acquisition of good practice, transformation of our own habits when a new regulation or infrastructure appears... In other words, we refer to the existence of

shared rules in our common distinctive way of proceeding provided that we constitute a sort of locomotion. Our viality is a result of a process of adaptation to the urban context and its elements. It implies the application of logic to the device called bicycle; such logic is acquired by use and improved by long term use.

Many authors talk about viality even if they refer to it with other words. For instance, Kidder¹ points at the relation between cyclists and the urban space, its physical limits (pavements, roads, traffic) and its laws (traffic regulations, codes, traffic flows) as a common distinctive way of moving which is individual but common at the same time, because it is shared with the rest of cyclists –as we cyclists experience peculiarities mutually recognisable. We therefore share some kind of our own traffic behaviour, our own traffic ethics, and our own traffic logic. In other words, we can express this by stating that when we talk about this, we know what we mean; while someone who is not a cyclist doesn't.

Fincham² considers specific sub-cultural features shared by cyclists such as the love for bicycles, the similar familiarity to some forms of leisure, and the common experience of risks towards motorised traffic.

Horton³ sees in cycling a lifestyle which can be said to be ecological in both senses of the word: symbolically (icon of environmental ideology) and practical (sustainable object of daily use). He also perceives a collective conception of “local” and a shared spatial field: the ‘cycling distance’, which is not only physical but also psychological, with expanded limits in which cyclists –even unconsciously- plan and decide their habits, their activities and their agenda. That is, our way of locomotion might be

¹ Kidder, Jeffrey L. (2009). *Appropriating the city: space, theory, and bike messengers*. Theory and Society, vol.38, n°3, pgs. 307-328

² Fincham, Ben (2007). ‘*Generally speaking people are in it for the cycling and the beer*’: *Bicycle couriers, subculture and enjoyment*. The Sociological Review, vol. 55, n°2, pgs. 189-202

³ Horton, Dave (2006). *Environmentalism and the bicycle*, Environmental Politics, vol. 15, n°1, pgs. 41-58

determining our tasks, commitments, visits and social life. Torres Elizburu⁴ and many other authors set this distance range in 7.5 kilometers as an average maximum.

Lefebvre⁵ is maybe the social scientist who has developed the most interesting contributions to a theory on social construction of space, as well as making proposals for the liberation of the individual from the constraining conceptions of space. According to Lefebvre, there is a tension among *agency* and *structure* and this constitutes a challenge, a possibility to re-create the public space through an exchange of symbols; as well as a negotiation of its meaning among space users, in which the personal way of living the space and moving along it -with all the inherent interpretations of this personal experience on space- involves a change. Therefore, the personal practice and observation of common space is an alternative to the conception of space according to power and its agents (law-makers, politicians, town-planners, architects, experts in urbanism...) and an effective method of *defetishising* space, transforming it from a pre-determined and inert dimension into an alive and dynamic one. We can assume that this contrast could be even stronger and meaningful in those cases in which human transportation is carried out in an alternative way or by means chosen by a minority. Moreover, if these ways of moving through common space are made from political premises –and by this we mean a conscious and deliberate activity of opposition to mainstream– the *agency* is intensifying its dialectic function on structure.

So according to this, cyclists are, just by riding their bikes, practicing a sort of dialectic relationship with space, *re-understanding* such space and re-inventing it, applying their creativity on a limited field, or, we could say, preparing their next move on the board while moving along the urban surface. This makes cyclists remarkable agents of social change in the field of social (re)construction of space. And we can say a committed cyclist –an activist of the bicycle (in all the senses of that word)- will underline those roles of cycling as an important aspect of that social change. Besides laws and infrastructure, social space is defined also by common use, habits and social custom and expectations, and in most countries this aspect is also hostile to cycling. We can add that

⁴ Torres Elizburu, Roberto (2003). *La bicicleta dentro de la movilidad urbana. El caso de Vitoria-Gasteiz*. Lurralde: Investigación y espacio, vol.26, pgs. 103-121

⁵ Lefebvre, Henri (1974). *La production de l'espace*, Paris: Anthropos.

this cyclist will also have to count with the rest of players (pedestrians, car drivers, other cyclists, etc.) and their own *agencies* on the common structure. So the cyclist's dialectics have to be applied onto several aspects, each of which is specific to one type of confrontation, and is different for space and agents -it is even different for each type of agent. This interaction re-defines the use of public space and conform patterns of coexistence.

Infrastructures modify common space and have effects on agents and the relationship among them. In Seville –city in which I currently focus my research on urban cycling– the successful bike-lane network has demarcated bicycles from motorised traffic. A measure which gives safety and legitimacy to cyclists, but provokes at the same time a narrower competition for space among cyclists and pedestrians (while surprisingly car drivers are the ones who protest louder). Nevertheless, the effects of such a bike-lane system also include a loss of space and privileges for cars: thousands of car parking spaces and even road lanes for motorised traffic have been partially converted into bike-lanes. It's not just a question of square meters: the dramatic increase of cyclists has meant car drivers in Seville now have to slow down their pace, give way to cyclists in most junctions, look at both sides in crossings where they only had to look at one... that is, they have to transfer some of their traditional prerogatives in traffic. Every one is now negotiating space and viality. Competition in those situations is happening while advancing physically along the city, while negotiating way of passing with other sort of vehicles and agents, while dodging flows passers-by or while avoiding public spaces taken up by parked cars.

Redistribution of space and redefinition of its use can be developed by spatial negotiation, verbal negotiation, spatial conflict, social conflict, media campaigns, new urban infrastructures, new urban layouts, modification of the law... Competition for space has also had a reflection in social groups, associations or lobbies opposing some changes in viality –especially those related to cycling. In my case study in Seville we can find examples of parents' associations campaigning against bike-paths located near school gates; shopkeepers or taxi-drivers opposing new cycling infrastructures and services as they perceived they were losing clients; or offices in charge of preservation of historical heritage vetoing bike stands or public bike share stations in monumental areas because of aesthetic reasons. In all these cases, and many other similar examples,

competition for space is not directly related to on-going vitality, but it represents also a specific level of competition for space.

2. For a characterization of cyclists' *vitality*: what is a bicycle like and how we should ride it.

Bicycles are manoeuvrable, light, agile. This means you can put it away easily, park it easily, move it through the gaps of the city, pass traffic jams by, move along alleys and roads and pavements and hard shoulders, transit door-to-door with it (the real door-to-door transport), and a personal style can be more easily developed on a bike than in a car or a moped. Besides bicycles can be very fast (faster than cars) in the city, at least in distances shorter than a few kilometers. This ability of speed has to do more with spatial skills of the rider than to strict aerobic power: so 'vitality' can be more important than strength for explaining a bicycle's speed. Bicycles can be seen too as a hybrid of pedestrian and vehicle: it is a pedestrian with wheels and a vehicle that almost walks. Bicycles are practical, comfortable, healthy, and environment-friendly. Bicycles usually involve autonomy, joy, freedom and good mood.

Now that we know what a bike is like, let's take a look at traffic laws... well, it seems there is nothing written thinking of this object we have just characterized. And if we observe urban layout, we can come to the same conclusions: they were thinking of cars when planning and designing those roads. The characteristics of the object called bicycle and the intelligent way to use it don't fit with the conditions established by power: laws and urban master plans, as Lefebvre pointed out.

For cyclists, the logic involved in traffic laws and urban layouts is alien. An uncritical and inflexible application of this logic to cycling movement would be dangerous, uncomfortable, time-consuming and energy-wasting. That logic becomes illogical.

These are some examples of things most cyclists do applying 'cycling logic' instead of complying with traffic laws and infrastructure limits: shifting from riding on the road to the pavement to dodge a passer-by, a car or an obstacle; overtaking traffic along the side near the kerb; counter-flowing one-direction streets along the kerb; starting to ride immediately before red light changes, in order to be seen better by the car drivers

behind; ignoring red light; taking the middle of the lane; counterflowing a roundabout if that is shorter than advancing around the whole circle; using zebra crossings as pedestrians; slipping through narrow spaces with creative manoeuvres; combining being traffic with chatting to other rider abreast, with walking the dog or with interacting directly with passers-by, etc. These behaviours are common to many cyclists (no matter how different is their age, gender, social class...): they are not performed by a countercultural minority and they do not mean to be a simple exercise of hooliganism. They are illegal in most cities, but they are usually performed because they are efficient, practical, intelligent and inherent to the operation and working of the vehicle cyclists move with. We are not talking here about aggressive or reckless riding which could endanger the cyclist and others. We are talking about a calculated, mostly harmless self-indulgence performed by many cyclists. The aim of the cyclist's self-indulgence when considering regulations is often making locomotion safer, easier, shorter, or else increasing the enjoyment of it. The characteristics of the bicycle (movement by human power, maneuverability, lightness, fragility, limited volume, lack of barriers with environment, visibility...) involve a number of options when riding it. These options, far from being done on a whim or provocation, respond to a different conception of traffic and social space. When a behavior which is inherent to a group is performed by all or most of its members, this behavior is legitimate. If rulers and technicians do not respect that legitimacy and favour the interests of others (mainly car drivers), then we can talk about a discrimination. And if social custom, infrastructure, layout and laws make that common legitimacy difficult to perform, then we can talk about oppression.

The acquisition of this practice of disobedience comes long with experience. Even if at first many cyclists intend to follow the rules, they soon jump onto an alternative point of view: this could be caused by fear (newcomers often prefer to ride along the pedestrian pavement), acquired practicality, advanced skills, or just a way to avoid "feeling silly" as pointed out by participant in Velo-City 2013 when referring to the first time she decided to counterflow in order to use a shortcut: it was under a heavy rain that caught her in the middle of the street and when ignoring the rules she felt he was doing the right thing.

Public space design and regulations, along with social custom and expectations, do not consider cyclists (in both senses of the word: they do not take us in account and they

disregard us). When we are included in the picture, it is only as a secondary exceptional sort of traffic. When they judge our 'misfit behaviour', our way of being traffic is seldom seen as a symptom that a clear fact (traffic rules and infrastructure should be adapted to our needs) but usually understood as a proof that cyclists' reckless way to use public space is a danger for traffic and for common interest.

Some cycling associations have chosen the strategy of obeying rules and behaving as 'mainstream traffic' as much as possible in order to gain legitimacy. Other cycling associations that don't do this, do however take the current laws and layout as a starting point to push forward our interests, instead of taking our 'viality' as the starting point to which the decision makers should adapt. Actually, we can lobby and demonstrate, but for the purposes of this text, nothing is better than getting policy makers to use bikes. That is the most effective strategy to bring over change.

Our position here is different from gaining legitimacy by adapting to the rules, layouts and social expectations. If the infraction is something feasible, desirable, less difficult and possibly less risky than obeying the rules, and this is also a widespread behavior among cyclists as a heterogeneous whole, we determine that, rather than trying to fit the rider to the standards, we must adapt the standards to a new reality: the growing practice of urban cycling. The social utility of the bicycle –yet unrecognized as it should- also implies the need of a fast adaptation of regulations and urban layout to the bicycle riders' characteristics (and not vice versa).

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