



# The marginalisation of bicycling in Modernist urban transport planning



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## ABSTRACT

This article deals with the scientific factors that have contributed to the dominance of motorised transport and the development of theoretical approaches in transport planning. Connections are made to modernism and to the theories within the field of transport planning that have created today's transport systems. Connections are then made to the field of bicycle planning. It is argued that there is a lack of theoretical research in bicycle planning that built on empirical studies. This has contributed to the bicycle often being marginalised in transport systems. Moreover, it is argued that new theoretical research could have a similar effect on bicycle planning as it has had on motorised transport planning. Although there is theoretical research about bicycling, such as véломobility research, such research does not tend to theorise about bicycle planning. The idea put forward in this article is that theoretical knowledge from the field of mobility studies could be a first step in that direction. This article draws on the politics of mobility and research in véломobility and develops a theoretical ground for transport planning that takes bicycling into consideration.

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## 1. Introduction

In many cities cycling receives little attention from transport planners and is a marginalised mode of transport. Motorised modes of transport take much more space in cities and within transport planning. In this article this situation is analysed with the help of critical theory, as put forward by Marcuse (2002) [1964]. This article argues that the theory-free pragmatism of applied research is quite problematic when considering bicycle planning. Thus, new theory for bicycle planning, the politics of véломobility, is developed, which is grounded in Cresswell's (2010) theory of the politics of mobility.

In transport planning, sustainable transport is often connected to increased walking and bicycling and to the increased use of public transport. Walking and bicycling are often seen as self-evident in the discourses of sustainable transport and sustainable urban development. Moreover, both walking and cycling have many health benefits, since these are active modes of transport (Garrard et al., 2012). Thus, research on cycling and an increase in cycling can be seen as both a contribution to a sustainable transport system and to achieving better public health (Haines et al., 2010). However, the analysis of planning for walking and bicycling does not normally go beyond best-practice and policy studies, the road safety aspects of cycling, or the basic idea that cities need to increase bicycling and provide better infrastructure for cyclists (Banister, 2005, 2008; Banister and Hickman, 2006; Kenworthy, 2006; Pucher and Buehler, 2012). Hence, the focus in bicycle research has most often been on the analysis of empirical evidence rather than on theoretical issues.

Although the work by authors such as Pucher and Buehler includes some theoretical considerations, we argue that it does not contribute to a larger theoretical understanding of bicycle planning. Whilst research in the field of mobility and véломobility has contributed to the theoretical understanding of bicycling and thus people's mobility patterns (e.g. Spinney (2007), Aldred (2013) or Pesses (2010)), this can be seen more as theoretical research about understanding cycling and mobility than as a theoretical view on planning for cycling. The existing literature, therefore, does not contribute directly to the theoretical development of the structured activity of planning for cycling.

In this article we seek, in contrast (but also as a complement) to more empirically-informed work to develop a theoretical framework for bicycle planning that builds on applied and empirical research in order to make cycling a more core element of transport planning and therefore a transport mode that is equal to its motorised counterparts. We argue that this lack of theoretical understanding has led to the

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marginalisation of cycling in transport planning. This article is an attempt to fill this gap in order to encourage changes for planning for cyclists.

In general, the definitions of sustainable transport and sustainable development differ (see, for example, the wide range of definitions that have been provided by the following authors: [Banister \(2008\)](#), [Kenworthy \(2006\)](#) and [Koglin \(2009\)](#)). However, walking and bicycling are often included in both concepts as a way to transport people and increase mobility in a sustainable transport system without increasing car use ([Bae, 2004](#); [Rosen, 2001](#)).

Using the bicycle as a mode of transport is often seen as one of the most sustainable parts of a transportation system because bicycles do not pollute or produce noise. In addition, bicycling does not require much space in urban areas and creates few risks for other road users or people in public spaces. All of these are negative effects that are connected with motorised traffic ([Miedema, 2007](#); [Van Wee, 2007](#); [Pucher and Buehler, 2012](#)). Despite this, there is little research into planning theories for cyclists and bicycling, and the theoretical basis for planning for cyclists is poorly developed. [Krizek and Roland \(2005\)](#), for example, research the effects of discontinuities in bicycle networks, which is important, but which has little theoretical bearing on bicycle planning. Likewise, the study by [Minikel \(2012\)](#) on cyclist's safety is another prime example of important but again non-theoretical research. The focus of that study was on whether there is a difference in casualty numbers when cyclists are riding on bicycle boulevards or on parallel arterial roads.

In the context of the points mentioned above, it is important to analyse what happens in cities in relation to planning for cyclists. Moreover, it is also important to analyse how cities deal with issues such as car use and bicycling in urban areas. This analysis should also include research about the extent to which the cities' work is based on any kind of theoretical framework. Theoretical knowledge can often underlie actual planning initiatives but, if it does not – as we argue is the case for bicycle planning – then this could lead to problems when it comes to implementing bicycle-friendly policies (e.g. [Holston, 2002](#)). Cities around the world were developed after the introduction of the car with motorised traffic in mind, and the planning and construction of urban highways and other infrastructures for motorised traffic are still important. This form of development can partly be traced back to the theoretical vision of modernism and other theoretical developments, such as transport modelling. Modelling within transport planning can be seen as both a theoretical underpinning for planning and something that builds on a positivistic approach. It is a way of measuring motorised traffic and its impact ([Holston, 2002](#); [Hagson, 2004](#)). This can be problematic as shown in [Sections 2 and 3](#). If such theoretical knowledge were to exist for bicycling and for planning for cyclists, it could have the same impact on urban and transport planning and could create more sustainable and equitable urban spaces ([Koglin, 2011, 2013, 2014](#)).

Our hypothesis is that theories from other areas, such as the “mobilities turn” introduced by [Urry \(2000, 2007\)](#), can contribute to theories for planning for cyclists. The “mobilities turn” as a theoretical underpinning is analysed and explained in more detail in [Section 4](#). The term refers to the analysis of social and transport phenomena from a mobility perspective and includes aspects such as power relations, social relations and cultural aspects of transport. Thus, the aim of this article is to seek to develop an understanding of the differences, when it comes to theories and models, between transport planning in general and bicycle planning in particular. Moreover, theoretical analysis is used to highlight the complexities and conflicts in urban transport systems. Through the lens of social and critical theory transport modelling and so forth can be criticised. However, the development of key aspects of transport planning as a science has led to a focus on modelling and other rational methods for planning. We examine how, if something similar could be developed for planning for cycling, it could raise the acceptability and status of cycling amongst key stakeholders and politicians. At the same time the rationality within transport planning as a profession and as a science is criticised and a different theory for bicycle planning is proposed.

Cycling as a form of mobility is also very much connected to social relations. While cycling, people can move in cities with relatively minimal impacts on others. Through that they can interact with the public space and other people better than when driving a car for example. Theoretically-informed bicycle planning should take such issues into account. This will be explained more in [Sections 2 and 3](#).

## 2. Power relations in urban transport spaces – the starting point

Spaces in cities often exclude the needs of cyclists and pedestrians ([Risser and Wunsch, 2003](#)). When such needs are taken into consideration, however, significant differences can be found between different countries in terms of how they approach planning and policies regarding bicycling and how they encourage bicycling as an alternative mode of transport ([Buehler and Pucher, 2012](#)). Such differences can also be seen within countries and at the local and city level. One result of different planning initiatives is that more people bicycle in different cities and countries than in others. It also means that people who do bicycle in cities where planning for cyclists is not considered important are at higher risk of involvement in collisions and must cycle in an unsafe and insecure environment. However, the share in the modal split of bicycling is not only determined by planning initiatives. Power relations and representation of bicycling in the public sphere and in transport planning play at least an equal role. This issue is developed further, later in the article.

When it comes to power, planning, and transport, the work of Bent Flyvbjerg is essential reading. In his book *Rationalitet og Magt* (1993) (the English version *Rationality and Power* was published in 1998), Flyvbjerg analysed power relations in planning processes in the Danish town of Aalborg and how power relations affected the planning outcome. The Aalborg project involved major planning processes concerning public transport and urban regeneration and is considered a rather good example of urban planning for social inclusion and ecological sustainability ([Flyvbjerg, 1993, 1998](#)). Flyvbjerg shows that power or power relations play a major role in urban planning partly through the construction of what he terms “imaginary rationality” on the part of urban politicians and policy makers. Those with the power to decide and plan also create their own version of reality and this allows them to rationalise their decisions. This means that power defines reality and that people with power rule over the urban reality and, therefore, over people without power. In their role as experts, urban and transport planners can influence politicians and can encourage people to engage in certain behaviours and actions through appropriate urban design and transport planning. The rationalities in transport planning are closely related, he argues, to the shift within research and social science towards more positivistic and rational research. Social research was supposed to deal more with generalisations. Here, [Marcuse \(2002\)](#) [1964] explains what that shift meant:

Made into a methodological principle, this suspension has a twofold consequence: (a) it strengthened the shift of the theoretical emphasis from the metaphysical “What is...?...” to the functional “How...?”, and (b) it establishes a practical (though by no means

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