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"One needs to be very brave to stand all that": Cycling, rational dress and the struggle for citizenship in late nineteenth century Britain

Katrina Jungnickel

Sociology Department, Goldsmiths College, University of London, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses changing ideas around citizenship through an analysis of first person accounts of women cyclists in Rational Dress in late nineteenth century Britain. A close reading of personal correspondence provides a sense of how it felt to cycle while dressed in new mobility costumes, such as bloomers, in urban and suburban English landscapes. Such attired and independently mobile women affirmed or unsettled onlooker's understandings of how middle and upper class women should look and act in public. Some viewers subjected them to verbal and often physical assault. Others, in awe of their socio-technical sophistication were more supportive. Taking a 'bloomer point of view' provides a unique socio-material way of gaining a deeper understanding of what enabled and also inhibited women's claims to citizenship and freedom of movement, especially at a time when women were not citizens in a legal sense. I argue that through these richly described accounts we gain insightful glimpses into how individual sensory, embodied and political experiences collectively illuminate the becoming of 'citizen' as it relates to mobility, gender and landscape.

1. Freedom of movement

> Minnie says "Oxford is the most begotted place in the ~~world~~ kingdom and the meeting is likely to raise a great protest in the papers which will deter followers". It certainly cannot be worse to ride in Oxford than in London, especially London suburbs. It's awful – one wants nerves of iron. I don't wonder now in the least so many women having given up the R.D [Rational Dress] Costume and returned to skirts. The shouts and yells of the children deafen one, the women shriek with laughter or groan and hiss and all sorts of remarks are shouted at one, occasionally some not fit for publication. One needs to be very brave to stand all that. It makes one feel mad and ones ideas of humanity at large sink to a very low standard. When one gets out into the country there is little trouble beyond an occasional shout, but it takes some time to get away from these miles of suburban dwellings.

This excerpt comes from a letter written on August 23, 1897, by Kitty to Uriah. A few weeks later, on September 13, Kitty writes to Maude in fading hand-penned cursive script about a cycle tour around Chippenham in her cycling costume.

> It was market day on Friday at Chippenham and we created quite an excitement, though I think as many looked on with approval as those who laughed and whooted. Anyway it was a good-natured crowd and nothing to hurt was yelled.

Kitty, Minnie, Uriah and Maude were enthusiastic cyclists and keen supporters of rational dress. The English Rational Dress Movement broadly sought to promote the wearing of *rational* dress for both men and women over what was considered to be *irrational* fashion in the late nineteenth century. Rational dress for women comprised a range of styles but was ostensibly recognised as a bifurcated garment such as bloomers (short full trousers or knickerbockers), looser corsets (or no corset at all) and shorter (or no) skirts (Fig. 1). Members advocated fewer layers and lighter fabric to enable people, and especially women, to embrace a more active lifestyle, including cycling. In these letters we learn that Kitty and her companions cycled around English cities, rural areas and the suburban sprawl in-between in rational dress. In some places they found that "nerves of iron" were required to navigate a path through a hostile public. In others they received a more welcome and supportive response with many who "looked on with approval".

Given these two letters are written just three weeks apart, the contrasting reactions appear to be less a case of temporally changing social attitudes towards independently mobile women and more to do with different kinds of cycling practice, garments and

E-mail address: k.jungnickel@gold.ac.uk

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Fig. 1. An illustrated view of rational and irrational dress in *The Rational Dress Gazette* (1899).

the politics of place. Outside, in public places, dressed differently and moving independently, the women's actions were sometimes in and sometimes out-of-place. In fact, the women sometimes experienced a spectrum of conflicting responses in a single day's journey.

Why did their appearance engender such affective responses? For some onlookers, these attired and physically engaged women were seen to have relinquished their feminine roles and responsibilities in exchange for masculine behaviours. Reactions oscillated from verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse to receiving poor service at cafes and inns. Elsewhere historical accounts suggest when women embrace masculine clothing as an appropriate style to fit their mobility they engender violent reactions. An illustrative example is Cresswell's (1999) study of female tramps in mid-century America who took to the streets and railways for itinerant work. They were treated as less-than-citizen having relinquished their rights to conventional womanhood and all it stood for, evidenced as having embraced male dress and male forms of mobility. As Cresswell argues, these women had effectively 'committed a kind of gender treachery' (1999:186).

In the case of Kitty and her companions, the twin forces of mobility and mobile clothing proved similarly hard to reconcile. The mere fact that they were radically dressed mobile women was anathema. Yet others viewed them as model citizens, with approval and possibly also with envy given they had disposable income to embrace the newest exciting technology and had 'time for leisure and the resources to spend on special outfits' (Gordon, 2009:352). Some have argued that a commitment to fashion and technology by the middle and upper classes imbued cycling with respectability in certain contexts (Mackintosh and Norcliffe, 2006; Gordon, 2009). Mackintosh and Norcliffe (2006) go so far as to argue for the existence of the cycling female flânuerie who, like her more familiar bourgeois male counterpart, took to the streets with her privilege, fashionable body and technological cache and experienced little peripatetic restriction. 'These women...rode their bicycles free of care' (2006:18). Embracing all the new modern Victorian technologies could position female cyclists at this time in the respectable upper echelons of English society.

How can we reconcile these dichotomies? In this article I suggest that we do not. I propose that we resist tidying them up and instead closely examine what emerges in the inconsistencies and tensions. Cycling in rational dress in the late nineteenth century elicited contradictory experiences and responses. As Kitty's letters attest, the movement for women into new forms of public space and social roles was anything but smooth and linear. These women were recognised and ignored, seen as decent and indecent, their presence engendered welcome and less than welcome reactions. These varying responses say much about ideas of gender, society and even the nation-state.

As the editors of this collection note there is a dearth of scholarship on the role of mobility cultures and identities in the construction of citizenship. While much has been written about citizenship in relation to the role of the nation-state, diasporas and large-scale human mobility across borders, there has been less attention focused on the daily practices of sensory and embodied mobility that together form ideas around identity (with the exception of Sheller and Urry, 2006; Chouinard, 2009; Crang, 2010; Favell, 2010). This article explores the idea of citizenship as dynamic and constantly performed, as a subjective practice or process rather than a given. In particular, I attend to the role of specifically clothed bodies in relation to citizenship, as something that varied according to intersections of social identities and how one was mobile.

It is also important to remember that the rational dress movement occurs against a backdrop in which women did not have the right to vote.[1] They were subject to the nation-state without representation. They were citizens without emancipation. How then might we think of these women's claims to citizenship? In this article I consider their relation to the nation-state through other means than the right to vote. Letters by Kitty and her friends invite us to investigate how different kind of citizenship were performed and practiced in everyday encounters in, with and through different costumes and places. These women's claims for citizenship were a shifting accomplishment. It was not universal nor consistently given but rather socio-spatially constructed and uneven, constantly negotiated and on the whole something that was struggled over.

Favell (2010) provides a contemporary example of the value of looking closely at alternative notions of citizenship. He argues that although European citizens on the whole are largely unenthusiastic

[1] Women in Britain over the age of 30 gained the right to vote in 1918. In 1928 women achieved the same rights to vote as men (at 21).