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'No bicycle lanes!' Shouted the cyclists. A controversial bicycle project in Curitiba, Brazil



Fábio Duarte*, Mario Procopiuck, Kelli Fujioka

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná, Rua Imaculada Conceição 1155, Curitiba-PR 80215-901, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

After many years without any substantial improvement in bicycle infrastructure in Curitiba, a 4-km Leisure Bicycle Lane was implemented in the central area of the city in 2011. The project was one of several that City Hall hurriedly implemented following pressure from bike activists. On the Sunday the project was launched, more than three thousand cyclists are estimated to have used the bicycle lane; of these, 300 cycled alongside the lane, outside it, against it. They made the front pages of newspapers, disrupted the sociotechnical framework of bicycle policy in the city and put bicycles on the political agenda of the municipal elections. This paper discusses why, in a city renowned worldwide for its public transportation system and for having more than a 100 km of bicycle lanes, a bicycle project failed after being sabotaged by cyclists and was definitively abandoned in February 2013. Based on interviews with key actors, including public officials, journalists, and bicycle activists, this paper concludes that the failed bicycle lane unveils the profound and urgent social and political dimensions embedded in what had been presented by municipal authorities as a neutral technical solution.

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1. Introduction

Curitiba is an example of a city based on transit oriented development (TOD). Since the 1970s, buses have run in segregated corridors along 6 axes: North, South, East, West, Boqueirão and Green Line (under construction). Along the corridors, a four-block zone of high-density, high-rise buildings completes the bus-based TOD scheme.

Complementing the bus system, in 1977 the first bicycle path was implemented, partially linking Curitiba with a growing neighboring city to the east, and in 1980 new bicycle paths were implemented in the Industrial District. At this point, the main strategy was to use areas where there were restrictions on building, such as areas alongside urban rivers and abandoned or operating railways, to expand the incipient bicycle network. During the 1980s and 1990s, many urban parks were built in wetlands, with ponds being used for flood containment and control. Part of the bicycle network, which was built along rivers, links these parks. From this point on, the City of Curitiba considered and promoted bicycle lanes mainly as a network for leisure and well-being.

After many years without any substantial improvements in the infrastructure for bicycles in Curitiba, a 4-km Leisure Bicycle Lane

was implemented in the central area of the city in 2011. On the Sunday the project was launched, more than three thousand cyclists were estimated to have used the bicycle lane; among them were 300 who cycled alongside it, outside it, against it. In February 2013 the bicycle lane was deactivated. This paper investigates why cyclists came together to object to this bicycle infrastructure, deepening a sociotechnical controversy, and strengthening their influence on the reformulation of bicycle policy in Curitiba.

2. Conceptual principles to help in the understanding of controversy

Scientific and technological controversies rarely overrun the boundaries of discussions between experts to reach a broad public realm. On some occasions, however, such controversies involve political issues, as pressure groups, institutions, NGOs and even individuals come together for specific purposes and become actants of a sociotechnical framework along with traditional scientific and technological objects and their respective experts (Latour, 1999). As Venturini (2010, p. 262) puts, "controversies emerge when things and ideas that were taken for granted start to be questioned and discussed", and when involved actors cannot ignore each other any longer.

When it comes to urban policy and urban technologies and infrastructure, technical discourse tends to prevail, and intense public discussions and conflicts between different groups are still

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: duarte.fabio@pucpr.br (F. Duarte).

very rare—at least in Brazil. There are two possible reasons for this: first, during the decades under military dictatorship there was no space for controversy and, second, the generalized lack of basic infrastructure means that there is no polemics surrounding the need for sewage, urban drainage, paved roads and other infrastructure. In this scenario of a lack of basic infrastructure, technical controversies are anomalies, and when they do arise they are commonly dealt with in an “uncontroversial way” (Brante, 1993).

Nowadays, however, technological controversies are gaining political space. Technical objects are considered only part of a sociotechnical framework involving ideologies, social and economic pressures and personal preferences. These elements, which were previously considered to be separate from technology, became central actants in the search for socially constructed technical solutions rather than solutions that were merely the result of strict, bureaucratic technological procedures (Collins and Pinch, 1993). This would seem to reinforce the idea that “technology, as well as science, can [only] be understood as a social construct” (Pinch and Bijker, 2012, p. 19).

In actor-network theory, Latour et al. (1992) proposed that there is a heterogeneity and variability of associations between humans and non-humans that must be taken into account to understand society, especially its sociotechnical framework. Therefore, to comprehend the trajectory of changes in specific socio-technical frameworks it is important to bear in mind that technical artifacts themselves exert as much influence as scientists, engineers and social groups. This understanding leads us away from a hypothetical final optimum technical solution and opens up the possibility of finding a mix of possible solutions to satisfy technical and social purposes (Latour, 2007).

Based on this conceptual understanding of the sociotechnical framework, we propose to discuss the controversy surrounding the implementation of a bicycle lane project in Curitiba. To understand this controversy we gathered evidence of how different actors see the same object, mainly through interviews with actors directly involved in the controversy.

The controversy surrounding the bicycle lane project would suggest that a specific bicycle policy in a city known for its high-quality urban planning and transportation has little more to offer. This controversy may be seen as a turning point for the city, for it has shown that a bicycle infrastructure proposal had less to do with a technical solution than with conflicting political intentionalities of different groups.

In order to understand this controversy, we followed Venturini's (2010, p. 269) advice: “the cartography of controversies invites scholars to use every observation tool at hand, as well as mixing them without restraint”. We were at the bicycle lane inauguration; we took part in public meetings where bicycle policies were discussed, with the presence of public officials, activists, and academics; we followed closely all news published in the local newspapers. But mainly, while the controversy was still in its boiling temperature, we conducted interviews with the some of the most actors. We considered municipal politicians and technicians, bike activists and journalists as actors, and bicycles and bicycle infrastructure as actants.

The actors were chosen among those considered responsible for the project and for the protest. We have interviewed representatives of public authorities responsible for the project (IPPUC, SMELJ, described below), two activists of *CicloGuaçu* (a civil cyclists' association), and a city councilman. Opinions of others actors (from the Mayor to cyclists and academics) published by *Gazeta do Povo*, the most read newspaper, were also considered, as they gave us the context within which the controversy took place. As put Latour et al. (1991, p. 424), discussing controversies must consider simultaneously “the production of a ‘text’ and a ‘context’”; and “any division we make between

society on the one hand and scientific or technical content on the other is necessarily arbitrary”.

3. The sociotechnical framework of the bicycle in Curitiba

Even though the total length of bicycle paths in Brazil is not known with any certainty, the Ministry of Cities estimates, based on an Internet survey of 400 cities, that there are 2500 km of bicycle paths in the country. If only the 12 cities with more than one million inhabitants are considered, the corresponding figure is 483 km (Cidades, 2007, p. 37). In this scenario, Curitiba, with 114 km of off-street bicycle paths that are either completely segregated or shared with pedestrians, is considered an example of a bicycle-friendly city.

According to the Curitiba Institute of Research and Urban Planning (IPPUC), only 2% of Curitiba's 1.8 million inhabitants are frequent bicycle users, and of these, 90% use a bicycle for commuting. However, despite the worldwide recognition given to Curitiba's public transportation system – referred to by experts as a full BRT, or Bus Rapid Transit, system (Lindau et al., 2010) – bicycles are poorly integrated with it. Only two out of the 22 bus terminals have bicycle racks, and the bicycle network reaches only six terminals (Duarte and Rojas, 2012). This partly explains why non-motorized modes are under-developed in Curitiba even though the city is considered a benchmark in sustainable urban mobility (Miranda and Silva, 2012).

Fig. 1 shows the lack of connections between the BRT corridors and bicycle network in Curitiba.

In the last 10 years, the number of private cars in Curitiba has grown by 68%, or eight times the population growth in the same period (Denatran, 2013). Cycling on the streets has become dangerous, and reflecting the worldwide renewal in the popularity of bicycles, cyclists in Curitiba have started to ask for more infrastructure. These demands have attracted the attention of the local media, urban planners and City Hall. Seminars have been organized, the main newspaper has created a specific blog for bicycle-related issues and cyclists have taken part in technical meetings with the municipal technical committee for mobility.

4. The origins of a desperate project

As the municipal elections for mayor were being held that year, 2012 was a crucial one for bicycles in Curitiba. Promises to improve the bicycle infrastructure were included in all the candidates' proposals.

In 2011, pressed by bike activists, the media and experts, the mayor, who was running for reelection, decided to act promptly. On October 2011 the Leisure Bicycle Lane project was ready. IPPUC, the municipal planning authority, was responsible for the project. According to IPPUC's official interviewed for this paper, the bicycle lane would be 15 km long, would link various parks and would cross the city center. The first phase, implemented in the city center, consisted of 4 km of lanes closed to motorized traffic. The total cost to implement and operate this phase was nearly US 65,000.

Three municipal departments were involved in the initiative: IPPUC planned the route, SETRAN (the Municipal Traffic Department) was responsible for managing the traffic and SMELJ (the Municipal Department of Sport, Recreation and Youth) was responsible for operating the whole project.

The intention in implementing the bicycle lane in the heart of the city was clear: to show that City Hall was working to improve the infrastructure for cyclists. In the beginning, the Leisure Bicycle Lane opened only one Sunday a month, from 8 am to 4 pm. This was a very limited response to bicyclists' complaints and could hardly be deemed to address the need for improved cycling

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