

## **Cycling case closed? A situated response to Samuel Nello-Deakin's "Environmental determinants of cycling: Not seeing the forest for the trees?"**

### **Abstract**

This paper responds to Samuel Nello-Deakin's (2020) recent viewpoint, where he provocatively states that we already know enough of what is necessary to get more people to cycle: taking road space away from motor vehicles and ceding it to cyclists is a simple formula applicable in most cities around the world, provided there is political will. Further research, he claims, is unlikely to deliver new policy insights. This paper cautions against universalising the experiences of European "cycling cities" and suggests that turning to cities of the global South can animate cycling research in promising new directions. Fundamentally, it argues that it is necessary to situate cycling research and proposes worlding cycling research as a strategy to move away from Eurocentric visions of cycling cities. In doing so, it proposes avenues for further enquiry that take seriously the complex political challenges faced by cities of the global South, as well as the particular desires, aspirations and innovations of their inhabitants.

**Keywords:** cycling; worlding; Global South; knowledge production

### **1. Introduction**

In a recent viewpoint, Samuel Nello-Deakin (2020) argues that sufficient research into the built environment–cycling rate nexus has been undertaken. The volume of evidence demonstrating a positive correlation between infrastructure and cycling rates is such that any additional studies are unlikely to deliver new, policy-relevant insights. He argues that what we know about how to make cities cycle-friendly –provision of road space for cyclists at the cost of motorised traffic– is applicable in "the vast majority of urban contexts", provided there is the political will to do so. To continue to investigate how to increase cycling rates, he claims, is to miss the forest for the trees. Instead, he suggests researchers turn to traffic evaporation to meet the practical and political challenges of promoting cycling.

It is true that a significant number of studies have established a positive correlation between cycling infrastructure and increased cycling rates, and we should heed this evidence. Similarly, Nello-Deakin offers compelling reasons to investigate traffic evaporation which could, indeed, play an instrumental role on future cycling policy. I am, however, less convinced by the argument that we should cease to "[continue] to devote our research resources to trying to find out ever more precisely why and where people do (or do not) cycle" (Nello-Deakin, 2020). In particular, it is troubling to see that Nello-Deakin's argument rests on a body of literature overwhelmingly informed by the experience of Europe and North America (with an occasional reference to Chinese cities); and while the temperate forests of the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany (Pucher & Buehler, 2017 cited in Nello-Deakin, 2020) have indeed yielded a wealth of knowledge about cycling, research from and about Africa, Asia, and Latin America complicates the vision whereby these three north-European countries "[contain] essentially everything most cities need to know in order to promote urban cycling" (Nello-Deakin, 2020). I argue that in cities of the global South<sup>1</sup> and among some communities in North America, experiences of cycling (im)mobilities suggest that "enough" research may not be enough after all (Jennings et al., 2017; Sagaris, 2015).

Here, I wish to respond to Nello-Deakin's intervention and propose that shifting our attention to a different forest might reveal a distinctive set of trees and insights. Crucially, this is more than about diversifying research sites – it is about encouraging critical engagement with the geographies of transport knowledge production. Thus, I want to argue in favour of situating cycling research (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997) and embracing the kinds of worlding practices advanced by postcolonial urban geographers (Roy, 2008; Roy & Ong, 2011), two important steps towards decolonising transport research (Schwanen, 2018; see also the special issue of this journal edited by Wood et al., 2020).

I signpost some steps in this direction: first, I encourage cycling researchers to interrogate their disciplinary practices and epistemological assumptions through the practice of situating knowledge. Then, I propose three possibilities for *worlding* cycling research: (1) create new standards and frames of reference for cycling cities; (2) critically evaluate the effects of cycling best-practices on already uneven urban landscapes; (3) elevate the technical and grassroots innovations produced by people in cities of the South. I contend that turning to the cities of the global South can provide us with a broader understanding of the kinds of politics implicated in the promotion of cycling, beyond issues of political will.

## 2. Situating cycling knowledge

For some time now, scholars across the social sciences have emphasised the need to situate knowledge: to recognise that all knowledge is marked by its origins, is always partial and incomplete, and is acquired and produced by the experiences of being immersed in particular social, cultural, technical and physical environments (Greenhough, 2007). Situating knowledge is also a critique to the notion of universal knowledge. Claims to universality rest on the ambition of disguising one's position and performing a "god-trick": at once being nowhere and encompassing everywhere (Haraway, 1988). The impossibility of this trick, however, elevates the tension between the universal and the particular, and demands that we ask: where is this research coming from and on what basis can generalisations be derived? And while the general and the universal are not the same thing, Nello-Deakin's assertion that *no more research is needed* reflects a disposition towards the latter. This casts the majority of cities as variations on a theme, rather than distinct sites where innovations, practices, aspirations, and standards for cycling are being enacted and which could be written as referents for cycling. Hence, rather than giving up on research, I suggest that we might begin by situating cycling knowledge in order to shed the universalising tendencies and forms of analysis derived from the experience of the iconic cities of the global North (Robinson & Roy, 2016; Vainer, 2014).

This initial move allows us to interrogate how our own disciplinary practices produce the effect of raising the status of some cities while relegating others to the footnotes of urban scholarship. In other words, as postcolonial urban theorists have succinctly framed the issue: the problem of seeing the North as the site of Theory, and the South as the site of ethnography (Robinson, 2006). In this regard, the bicycle has its own knowledge geographies, and scholarly practices, discourses, and imaginaries play a key role in *worlding* cities: where do we draw experiences from, what territories do we elevate, and how do we derive generalisations? As a research orientation, worlding is therefore a call to hold ourselves accountable for the geographies of knowledge we are actively creating; and to unsettle the cartographies of urban knowledge production by foregrounding the cities of the global South (McCann et al., 2013; Roy & Ong, 2011).

### 3. Worlding cycling research

As cycling scholars, how are we to animate worlding practices that elevate a diversity of territories and experiences, rather than re-centring the experiences of Europe and some North American cities? How is the cycling South already being worlded?

First, turning to the cities of the South allows us to cultivate different kinds of worldly ambitions and standards for cycling, and in this way upset the Eurocentrism that has characterised much cycling research and planning. For instance, instead of (or in addition to) “getting more people to cycle”, we might “frame social inclusion as a benchmark for cycling-inclusive transport policy” (Alando & Scheiner, 2016). This is crucially important and not a secondary consideration in the unequal societies of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where transportation is increasingly seen as a matter of social justice (Nixon & Schwanen, 2018; Sagaris et al., 2020). To aspire to transportation and mobility justice foregrounds the need to deliver a more just and equitable distribution of mobility for the working-class urban majority – many of whom have long used the bicycle as their primary means of transport *and labour* in contexts of high economic informality, even in the absence of infrastructure (Bechstein, 2010; Joshi & Joseph, 2015; Navarro et al., 1985; Norcliffe, 2011; Sarmiento Casas, 2018). Worlding cycling research involves paying attention to these value-creating subsistence cycle mobilities, and critically evaluating their absence in the frames of reference of cycling cities. This manoeuvre is not just necessary to leverage working-class cycling in the South, it also compels us to engage with, for instance, indigenous (Jones et al., 2020) and migrant (Bernstein, 2016; Law & Karnilowicz, 2015) cycling practices in the North. It involves, in AbdouMalik Simone’s (2001) terms, *worlding from below* to elevate people’s already-existing cycling practices and work towards co-producing solutions that incorporate these experiences.

Second, critical cycling research has examined the uneven effects of cycling investments, raising questions about what is meant by “cycle friendly” and “world class” in cycling policy and infrastructure. Work focusing on communities of Latinx, Black and Indigenous people of colour in the United States is demonstrating that certain kinds of cycling interventions can produce uneven effects on already-splintered urban landscapes, and have detrimental effects on marginalised communities (Hoffmann, 2016; Hoffmann & Lugo, 2014; Stehlin, 2019). The outcomes are similar to those observed by Whitney and colleagues (2020) with the implementation of Livable Streets (LS) in Mexico City, where a project to take space away from cars for cyclists and pedestrians failed to deliver on its promises of equity. Instead, by prioritising economic corridors and concentrating these developments in “investment-worthy” neighbourhoods, LS reinforced social stratification. The authors’ conclusion captures the tensions between local histories and global designs (Mignolo, 2012) as they intersect in central Mexico City: “In Mexico, socio-spatial segregation is a key tension between ‘*local specificity*’ and ‘*global interconnectedness*’, supporting a reality where equity goals frequently disappear during the implementation of Livable Streets despite policy language that stresses the social potential of such investment” (Whitney et al., 2020, p. 11 emphasis added).

As Adonia Lugo and Melody Hoffmann assert: “conflating the practice of bicycling with specific urban development projects designed to accommodate it, *limits* what can be seen as ‘bike friendly’ neighbourhoods and manufactures scarcity in what should be a public resource: urban streets” (Hoffmann & Lugo, 2014, p. 45 emphasis added). This signals the need for new imaginings of what “bike friendly” means and encourages us to explore extant community initiatives and desires, before privileging foreign models. Additionally, this work alerts us to the need for a more sophisticated understanding of *cycling politics* than Nello-Deakin’s conflation of politics with political will. That is, paying attention to how cycling investments articulate with broader social and political economic contexts to produce uneven outcomes where some are rendered (im)mobile, or are made invisible

(Lugo, 2018; Torres-Barragan et al., 2020). This is not to say that cycling infrastructure should not be built, but that it is important to question how it becomes embedded within particular milieus.

Finally, worlding cycling research could also foreground the innovations produced in cities of the South. Latin America's cycling city par excellence, Bogotá, is beginning to occupy a place in the cannon of urbanism partly on account of its *Ciclovía* civic programme and extensive cycling infrastructure development (Montero, 2017). Yet, Bogotá is still largely written as a referent *for the global South* (though see: Lugo, 2013). Worlding cycling, then, must consider the direction in which we mobilise cycling knowledge and how this works to produce a distinct geography of cycling. In other words, the experiences and innovations I outline here can also be heralded as exemplary for the majority of the global North – much of which does not resemble the iconic cycling cities of northern Europe. In this regard, there is also opportunity to elevate community cycling initiatives (Espíndola, 2018; Nixon & Schwanen, 2018; Sagaris & Lanfranco, 2019). Such projects include bicycle donation programmes, cycling schools, mechanics courses, bike rides, and territorial interventions that stimulate both cycling and participatory urban politics. Relatedly, the cycling spaces created for and by women ought to be a necessary referent to answer the question of how to get more women cycling – a question that every aspiring cycling-city-maker anywhere must ask themselves. These spaces emerge in contexts where patriarchy and *machismo* circumscribe and limit women's cycling mobility, and attention to their tactics and politics is sure to derive valuable lessons for locales where gender inequality persists (Coyotecatl Contreras & Díaz Alba, 2018; Gamble, 2019; Machado, 2017).

#### 4. Conclusion

In my own work, I have often heard both detractors and pro-cycling activists state “this isn't Amsterdam”. I take this to mean two things: in the case of the former, it is a refusal to accept that a move away from automobility is not only possible in the large cities of the Global South, but indeed necessary. For the latter, “this isn't Amsterdam” is a refusal to be measured against the Eurocentric standards of world-class cycling cities, and a desire to occupy a place in the world of cycling in their own merit. As Jennifer Robinson suggests in her call for treating all cities as ordinary, “...assuming that cities are vital and dynamic sites where citizens are shaping autonomous and inventive futures would offer considerably more scope for creative and relevant interventions than copy-cat policies that aim to reproduce the experiences of cities elsewhere” (2006, p. 7). With this viewpoint, I suggest that rather than declaring the cycling case closed, situating cycling knowledge and worlding cycling in the South are tactics that allow us to see all knowledge as partial and incomplete whilst leveraging the ambitions, lessons, and innovations of diverse sites and people. Hence, we should encourage a plurality of engagements with cycling beyond the usual referents and create a truly global geography of *vélo*mobility.

#### Endnotes

1 The term “Global South” is contested, and concepts like “majority”, “developing”, or “Third” world are employed with diverse political motivations. I refer largely to research and experiences in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, cognisant that there are important variations between cities in these large regions. I also nourish this viewpoint with critical work from the United States.

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