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Book review

Bicycle Utopias: Imagining fast and slow cycling futures, by Cosmin Popan. 2019. Oxon. Routledge. £77.98 (hardback). 978-0-429-42411-3

Many cycling books have a utopian bent. Bikes are a 'multiple satisfier' (Horton et al., 2007:7): they boost health, improve environmental quality, and increase social connectedness. All of which promote a degree of least partly deserved evangelism that results in modest trade titles like 'How cycling can save the world' (Walker, 2017) or 'Biketopia' (Blue, 2017). Rather than eschewing this tendency, Popan's *Bicycle Utopias: Imagining fast and slow futures* argues for a deeper and more critical engagement with utopia as represented (and dissected) within contemporary social theory. Calling upon Levitas' positioning of utopia as a generative prompt or 'method', rather than a goal, he sets about reinvigorating debate about what role cycling could play in creating better, post-capitalist futures. Popan argues that we currently find ourselves juggling competing 'bike utopias': *fast biketopias* that mimic the competitive, productivist rhythms and priorities of neoliberal automobility, and *slow biketopias* that protect and provide for cycling as a leisurely, sensuous, sociable form of movement and connection.

Popan contends that our efforts to sell cycling as a viable transport mode have ceded too much territory to car-like visions of cycling: as fast, efficient, direct, competitive and economically productive. In *Bicycle Utopias* he argues that the trend towards promoting fast cycling: speeding bikes up using electrification, the construction of cycle highways etc., is not only mimicking the worst, disassociative effects of fast automobility culture, but that it is stripping cycling of its key pleasures and possibilities: namely greater opportunities for sensory engagement and social connection - in a world where both are in decline. *Bicycle Utopias* is at its finest in its efforts to highlight what deeper engagement with social theory can bring to efforts to elucidate these aspects of cycling experience. Popan includes chapters on the cycling sensorium, and a fantastic piece on how using Goffman's theory of interaction order can help us to understand diverse group cycling forms and their associated sociabilities: the carnival, swarms, chain gangs, and accordians amongst them.

Cycling is now a minority movement experience that most people no longer have direct embodied experience of. In their paper 'Urban design: Is there a distinctive view from the bicycle?' Forsyth and Krizek (2011) argue that as cycling mode share has declined it is apparent that urban designers and planners have increasingly lost the ability to imagine what the world looks and feels like to a cyclist. They remark, for instance, that while a pedestrian view of landscape is increasingly represented in progressive urban design sketches, the view of the rider is absent. Bicycle Utopias joins a growing body of work that is devoted to documenting, interrogating, and revalorising the fading 'view from the saddle' (Jungnickel and Aldred, 2014; Larsen, 2017; Spinney, 2006, 2007, 2011).

Popan's vision of the contribution that cycling could make to post-capitalist societies is less compelling. Here he advocates cycling as sort of voluntary 'self-limitation' on consumption and materialism, based on embracing Gorz's norm of 'sufficiency' (p. 193). This eco-asceticism feels slightly at odds with Popan's entreaties to celebrate the sensorial and 'convivial' invitations of cycling. In their contribution to 'Culture of the Slow', '*Alternative hedonism: The world by bicycle*' Ryle and Soper (2013) make similar arguments about the potential for cycling to join the growing 'slow futures' movement. But they do a better job at identifying more pleasure-positive Marxist theorists such as Marcuse who could help us to understand cycling as an enjoyable form of everyday resistance to capitalism and ecological decline.

It is also unclear if there is such a dramatic need to choose between slow or fast cycling futures. This dichotomy perhaps slightly undervalues how much a wide range of cyclists (not just cycle couriers, who receive a mention) report enjoying opportunities for periods of higher speed (including downhill descents) as an integral part of their cycling enjoyment. One of the most under-theorised aspects of cycling experience is the extraordinary opportunity bikes provide to control, and switch speed (A well-geared bike can move at the pace of a slow pedestrian or reach 40 km/h all in one commute). Geographer Justin Spinney, who has produced a series of cycling ethnographies, highlights the ways that different types of cycling tend to facilitate different types of sensory experience: with slower cycling, often on more upright bikes, promoting greater visual engagement; and faster cycling producing a "kinaesthetic world of greater speed, exhilaration and reduced visibility" (Spinney, 2007:35). Spinney also highlights the centrality of 'sensory switching' to cycling experience, with cyclists reporting enjoying varying their speed and effort in order to keep levels of stimulation high. It is worth acknowledging that new fast bike technologies like e-bikes, and their associated 'fast' infrastructure (i.e. bike highways) are democratising access to some of these kinaesthetic joys of faster cycling and sensory 'switching' or 'adjustability', especially for women, and people with disability and lower levels of fitness. They are also making it viable for people who live in more distant lower-income suburbs to experience commuter cycling at all.

These critiques withstanding, Popan's *Bicycle Utopias* provides a compelling account of the pleasure-draining consequences of effectively choosing to speed bikes up, rather than slow cars down. He makes a considered and convincing case for the need to protect and promote the possibility for slow cycling, and he joins other cycling sociologists such as Aldred (2015) in encouraging us to resist the 'rebranding' of cycling as a form of competitive, productivity-focused automobility-lite. With its broader engagement with social theory, *Bicycle Utopias* will likely particularly appeal to post-graduate students and academic researchers at the more 'mobilities' end of the transport spectrum, including sociologists, anthropologists and geographers of transport.

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