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Book review

Understanding Urban Cycling: Exploring the Relationship Between Mobility, Sustainability and Capital, Justin Spinney. Routledge, London, UK (2021).

https://www.routledge.com/Understanding-Urban-Cycling-Exploring-the-Relationship-Between-Mobility/Spinney/p/book/9781138543225.

The book *Understanding Urban Cycling* by Justin Spinney offers a critical and timely exploration into the symbolic and material world of cycling politics in its relation to capitalist systems. The text raises important questions for the future, that require decisions and action today. It contains warnings which we would be apt to heed.

Written in eight chapters, the first chapter is an introduction to cycling and its socio-political context, duly situated and supported by a literature review in the second chapter. Chapters 3–7 present to the reader five case studies from Europe and Asia. Each case study underlines the author's contention that cycling in its current guises is manoeuvring into a commodified co-optation by the capitalist system, and with that into potential obscurity and socio-political discredit. In some more detail, chapter 3 deals with cycling's narrow user range, the fast commuter, in techno-political debates. Chapter 4 discusses (post) modernity's obsession with speed in special relation to transport and cycling and chapters 5–7 with cycling's potential for playfulness, pitfalls of marketisation and dangers of datarisation, respectively. The final chapter, chapter 8, then synthesises the findings, with an outlook also given.

Whilst an academic, I am also one of the cycling advocates Justin alludes to in the first chapter of his book. I will therefore not disappoint the author by questioning his stance. Naturally, academia, the theoretical and advocacy, the practical, are bound to clash on some aspects. Firstly, however, there is a great deal to agree on and congratulate. I share Justin's enthusiasm about cycling and its, often yet unrealised, potential to heal, clean and connect society and political systems. I agree, that transport cycling's sheer inherent humanity often drives its participants and advocates to excess and by doing so can make it unbearable to outsiders. It is often, I note in my research, cycling advocates themselves who narrow down debates on cycling design (Leyendecker, 2020). As Justin suggests, and I concur, for cycling to thrive it requires new scripts to be written, especially in today's onslaught of neoliberal policy landscapes, market fundamentalism and capitalism's constant market expansions. As an engineer myself, I have also noted that design experts often follow rather narrowed scriptures (Leyendecker, 2019). When the potential of cycling has oftentimes lain in its diversity of expression and sheer messiness, not in one narrow focus may that be efficiency, speeding up, or health gains. The real potential for cycling lies in its anarchic nature. The potential is forever there to be harnessed, I would stress.

The book, in places, still suffers from social sciences feeling beleaguered by the strength of technical sciences. This finds expression in Justin's text by complaining about the predominance of design solutions (as opposed to social solutions). However, and here is the crux, research shows that we need the physical reapportioning of road space to cycling through design, in order for cycling to become diverse and harvest its inherent anarchic potential. Moreover, we need the right kind of spatial design. The book does not openly acknowledge, confront or clarify this dilemma between the spatial and the social. To me, a solution would be to put emphasis on getting social science involved in design solutions, through using social science's qualitative research methods such as interviews, usage-satisfaction surveying and so forth. This also means, in turn, that social scientists have to remain up to date on technical subjects. In other words, to overcome silos we should work cross- and interdisciplinary and learn to learn from each other. I write that sentence with great care and compassion, as a late convert to social science originating from an engineering background myself.

Continuing in the critiquing vein, I also take some umbrage with the quasi-linear model the text seemingly purports. When change is mostly messy and happening haphazardly. Often, and only in hindsight, we can make sense of it. To denigrate recent cycling design solutions from the start, rather than seeing these fast-commuter radial routes as a springboard and opportunity for cycling, albeit narrow at first, would show humility towards the fuzziness of transformative processes. The author really does wrestle a vast subject, namely capitalism and its market colonisation of public and private life as well as the more recent addition of the data-collating market. Can we, I ask however, fruitfully blame cycling for participating in this overarching hegemonic system that is ordering our lives and interactions, even if we see its pitfalls and destruction? I am missing the understanding that space ultimately is political. Only then can we harvest cycling's potential in the anglophone and Asian worlds with chronically low cycling levels. I, as one, remain hopeful that capitalism and market forces can be "employed" for mass people movements. The question of solutions remains. Justin highlights cycling's potential to be political and the enabling of citizen participation in political processes. These solutions are not new or innovative, but they remain relevant in a system that has profit not people at its very core.

My last observation relates to the author speaking critically about positioning cycling politics in opposition to automobility. Justin suggests that bikes and cars should make mends. Justin's text supports fusion: to put the car into the bike, so to speak banking on new forms of vehicles re-writing narratives and symbolism. It remains to be seen, if such a merging brings about a shift in political thinking. To me it holds some danger, as it sounds more like the same: cycling's continued subsummation into the car system. It is important to understand why this discussion about dichotomy versus fusion keeps coming back with some regularity - often to haunt, and paralyse, the world of cycling politics. After all, and that is the crux, it's not a meeting of equals with free powers and agencies to negotiate fairly and equitably. The current transport and economic systems are skewed towards the car. It remains

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to be seen if e-bike derivatives provide a sufficiently bridging overlap to the motorised system, as Justin hopes for. There certainly is a promising potential.

The book is a tremendously enjoyable read, that identifies and synthesises many of cycling's hot topics. It will be a thought leader in this area, providing a sound assessment and containing clear warnings. It will be useful to city-planning practitioners and policy makers. However, the language may at times be seen as overly sociological in its expression. Some concepts and abbreviations are explained, either later on in the text (for example agencement) or may remain unexplained (OEM, VC). A glossary of terms would as such be useful so that a wider auditorium, beyond sociology, could be reached more organically and addressed more inclusively.

In summary, I warmly recommend the book. It is an excellent contemporary read. Despite its academic concepts and language the text voices very valid and urgent concerns about cycling's co-optation into the capitalist system and neoliberal politics. Cycling is a radical act. Cycling is spatial. Cycling has been suppressed in many places around the globe. The emergence of cycling as a spatial practice and its subverting anarchic yet authentic expressions may be key to its breaking out of its restraining chains of commercialisation. Just how for cycling to break free and truly self-actualise, remains unwritten. If we continue on the current path, we have certainly been warned, thanks for Justin's forward reflections.

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