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12. How culture shapes – and is shaped by – mobility: cycling transitions in The Netherlands

Marco te Brömmelstroet, Willem Boterman and Giselinde Kuipers

INTRODUCTION

Mobility is culture. Every society and social group has preferred means of transportation: horses or cars, boats or metros, skateboards, feet, bikes or a combination of those. Members of a group learn to use the dominant means of transportation, *and* learn to take them for granted. These means of transportation, in turn, spawn and foster habits, institutions, material and spatial arrangements. Car cultures differ from cultures where people rely on public transportation, bikes or horsepower (Illich and Lang 1973, Illich 1974). Cityscapes and spatial arrangements are adapted to accommodate transportation practices (Hanson and Giuliano 2004). For instance, old European cities were built for non-motorized transportation. Until today, they have compact centers with clustered amenities and lively street cultures. Car cultures, in contrast, favor big roads, big parking lots and spread-out amenities. Thus, every human habitat favors some mobilities and discourages others. In the process, specific lifestyles are promoted, others are discouraged. Eventually, social conventions and public life acquire a specific flavor because of their mobility culture (Klinger et al. 2013).

This chapter focuses on the relation between culture and mobility: how does culture shape mobility, and vice versa? We investigate this by looking at the Dutch cycling culture. In the Netherlands, often cycling is the default mode for going to school, work or shopping. Like all forms of mobility, cycling has to be learned, but at some point becomes a habitual, almost unconscious activity (Te Brömmelstroet 2016). The making of mobility habits is never individual. In order to use the bike on a day-to-day basis, cyclists needs to be embedded in a web of people who cycle, institutions recognizing cycling and spatial and material arrangements that allow for cycling (Kuipers 2013, Nello-Deakin and Nikolaeva 2020, Vivanco 2013).

Surging concerns over unsustainable mobility patterns around the world have sparked a growing interest in cycling as a relatively simple solution for a range of complex problems (Fishman 2016). Often, people have turned for inspiration to established cycling cultures, such as the Netherlands (Glaser et al. 2019). However, history shows that cycling cultures cannot be simply transplanted. Dutch cycling culture is rooted in long-standing cultural patterns. Cycling has in turn shaped Dutch habits, lifestyles, institutions and spatial arrangements. Such deeply engrained cultural patterns are not easily exported or recreated in another setting. This limits lessons that can be learned and transferred. However, we *can* dissect the 'cultural logics' of a cycling culture, and thus identify elements that promote or hamper cycling. How come so many Dutch prefer bicycles over cars, although cars are faster, more comfortable and also a great way to flaunt your wealth and taste? What mechanisms or cultural elements make cycling possible, practical and normal?

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That Dutch cycling is central to Dutch culture does not mean that it is stable or unchanging. Since the introduction of the bicycle in the late 1800s, Dutch cycling culture witnessed several transformations. By the 1970s, Dutch cycling culture was in decline, as it was in all industrialized countries (Oldenziel and Bruheze 2011), However, it re-emerged, and now is more vibrant than ever. Over the past decades, Dutch bike culture has diversified. As we will show, cycling is such a central element of Dutch culture that it has become the arena for struggles over social identity and urban space, pitting different types of cyclists against each other (Boterman 2018). Most recently, Dutch cycling culture is moving from a culture of ownership towards a culture of sharing. We see this development around the world in different forms, notably cars, but in the Dutch bike-saturated context, it plays out most visibly in cycling. Thus, Dutch cycling is marked by continuity and change. This allows us to unravel the elements that make up and sustain a mobility culture. What keeps Dutch cycling culture going? How does it persist? How have setbacks for cycling been overcome? How are transformations in cycling related to wider social, cultural and economic transformations?

To illustrate these intricate connections between cycling and Dutch culture, we discuss three distinct transitions: cycling's persistent 'normalcy' during increasing welfare; its recent breakdown into distinct cycling types; and the current rise of sharing and renting bike fleets. Through these illustrations we aim to offer insights into how transitions to more sustainable forms of mobility cannot – and should not – be seen in isolation of the cultures in which they are embedded. On the contrary, they are both a cause and an effect of them.

TRANSITION 1: THE PERSISTENCE OF DUTCH CYCLING CULTURE

Dutch Cycling as Habitus

The Netherlands is well-known for its cycling culture. Twenty-five percent of all trips are made by bicycle (Harms et al. 2016). In cities like Amsterdam, Groningen and Utrecht, over 40 percent of trips are by bike. What is most striking to visitors is the ubiquity of bicycles, cycle paths and parking. This is clearly shaped by national culture: beyond the national borders the landscape or climate is not much different but the prevalence of bicycles sharply declines. This cultural pattern is supported not only by individual practices or values. Historically, Dutch cycling culture was reinforced and promoted by a range of institutions, from governments and schools to businesses and civic organizations.

The omnipresence of cycling is what stands out most to newcomers. But Dutch cycling culture has other unique characteristics. First, cycling is practical: facilitated by ubiquitous bicycle paths and bicycle parking, cycling is often the default way to move around. Social life is adapted to it: most children are taken to school by bike, and, when older, cycle themselves. This is safe because urban space is adapted to cycling, and because car drivers are used to cyclists. Schools are designed to accommodate parked bicycles, but not cars, thereby passing cycling habits onto the next generation. As it becomes more self-evident to cycle, it becomes more difficult to live without a bicycle. Similar to how land use and mobility co-evolve (Newman et al. 2016), this produces a reinforcing feedback loop (Barnes 1983): cycling produces more cycling.

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Consequently, cycling in the Netherlands is *normal* ('gewoon'): a routine activity, a habit, something you do not think about; you just do it. It is normal because everybody cycles: young and old, rich and poor, migrant and native, urban and rural, the worker and the schoolchild but also the King and the Prime Minister. In other words, cycling has become part of habitus, as sociologists call it (Bourdieu 1984, Elias 1996): 'our culturally- and socially-shaped "second nature"'. What we learn as members of a society, in a specific social position, is literally embodied – absorbed into our bodies – and becomes our self. We see this incorporation in the ease with which Dutch cyclists move through busy traffic – sitting upright, rather than bent over the handlebar. 'One realizes that this is not self-evident when seeing another person lacking this ease, like the clumsy tourists on their rental bikes in the busy Amsterdam traffic' (Kuipers 2013: 5).

Because of its 'normalcy', cycling in the Netherlands is not 'distinctive': it is not a signal of status, lifestyle or identity, and it most certainly does not carry any stigma. Everybody cycles, from old to young and from worker to professor, mostly on the same type of bicycle: the sturdy Dutch omafiets or 'granny bike'. This includes people that are wealthy enough to afford faster, more comfortable means of transportation. This famously includes the members of the Dutch Royal Family, who for five generations have cycled – and have made sure that they were photographed when doing so.

In contrast with many other societies, Dutch society has a long-standing tradition of aversion to snobbery and ostentation. This egalitarian ethos is typically attributed to the absence of nobility and the cultural dominance of a bourgeois upper layer, combined with a strong presence of Calvinist Protestantism. It is important in Dutch culture to show that you are not placing yourself above others. The bicycle has become an important carrier of this ethos. Cycling, in the Netherlands, is a way of signaling that you are like other people. Thus, it is a form of conspicuous non-consumption (Kuipers 2013, cf. Veblen 2017): you show off your normality.

This 'normality' and lack of distinctiveness have contributed to the persistence of Dutch cycling culture. Cycling was a common means of transportation in most European countries in the middle of the twentieth century. However, more and more people switched to cars (Oldenziel et al. 2016). We saw the same development later in Asia, as for instance Vietnam and China transformed from a cycling to a car culture with increasing prosperity. However, in the Netherlands, cycling levels increased again after the 1970s (Oosterhuis 2016). This was the result of active social movements and policies – but these found fertile ground in existing egalitarian cultures (Feddes and De Lange 2019). This sustained the potential for cycling – and for cycling policies, and cycling activism. What is most noticeable about Dutch cycling, therefore, is not that the Dutch cycle so much – but that they did not stop cycling when they were rich enough to afford alternatives.

How Cycling Shaped Dutch Society

This practical, non-distinctive, habitual, normal cycling has left its mark on Dutch society. It shaped institutions, habits and Dutch life. This is visible in spatial arrangements, such as the spatial organization of urban amenities, with smallish shopping centers scattered around towns and cities; and nightlife organized around bikeable distances. Cycling culture also shows in the relative underdevelopment of short-distance public transportation. Taxis are expensive. In Dutch urban areas, cycling minutes are the standard unit of time/distance measurement. 'Ten minutes from the center' in a real estate advertisement means: ten minutes by bicycle. In 1960s

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large-scale land use planning, cycling distance was the norm for spatial planning (in Amsterdam's garden cities, and in the rural Noordoostpolder).

Cycling also shapes society in less direct ways, it creates mental and physical health benefits for a large portion of the population. Furthermore, Te Brömmelstroet et al. (2017) argued that cycling enhances sociability in public life, through enhanced interactions because of the need for eye contact. Hulster et al. (2017) also observed that Dutch children have a relatively large degree of freedom, within a large spatial range, because of their bikes and this in turn might be connected with the reported high levels of happiness among Dutch children.

TRANSITION 2: FROM HABITUAL CYCLING TO LIFESTYLE CYCLING

From Habitual Cycling to Lifestyle Cycling and Cycling Scenes

Although cycling remains a ubiquitous and universal form of mobility, the meaning of cycling as distinction through conspicuous non-consumption is changing. Where for many years the regular granny bike dominated the streetscapes of cities and rural areas alike, recently a plethora of different kinds of bicycles, such as fixed-gear track bikes, racing bikes and cargobikes, appeared. Dutch cycling is increasingly becoming *distinctive*: a means of showing your identity and your social status.

This differentiation in types of bicycles and new cycling practices occurred first in the larger cities like Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht. The diversity of urban populations in terms of migration backgrounds, social class, age, etc. is typically greatest in large and densely populated cities. Subcultures emerging in diverse and dynamics urban contexts are of course nothing new. Music scenes, art scenes, LGBTIQ scenes or food scenes often originated in cities, to proliferate from there (Silver and Clark 2016, Wu et al. 2019). These scenes often have counterparts in other cities and actively influence and be influenced by what happens elsewhere. This is facilitated by (digital) communication and international mobilities (travel, migration). Scenes are therefore an interesting lens for comparing urban mobility cultures (Wu et al. 2019).

The first trend in Amsterdam and other Dutch cities is the advent of urban cycling scenes that resemble international counterparts across the globe. In the hipster lifestyle, the bicycle is part of a broader palette of specific consumption practices and objects, such as well-maintained beards and moustaches, vegan food, craft beers and, indeed, specific kinds of bicycles. This comes together in specialty coffee bars showcasing vintage racing bikes. Amsterdam now has coffee drive-in bars for cyclists, a phenomenon known already in in cities like Barcelona or San Francisco. Many elements of this scene follow the logic of conspicuous non-consumption: hipsters are often educated middle-class people who prefer simple, authentic, craft or 'vintage' commodities. The global hipster scene has a strong interest in 'green consumption'. The Netherlands also has a thriving sport cycling scene. Although cycling for leisure and sport already existed in the Netherlands, sport cycling is on the rise, including a strong focus on gear and equipment. The emergence of these subcultures is related to cultural globalization: we see similar scenes in other global cities. However, they become embedded in locally existing infrastructures and social relations. In the Netherlands, they became part of the existing cycling culture, adding specific scenes to the wider cycling landscape.

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A second trend that accompanies the diversification of cycling cultures is the changing *meaning* of cycling. Habitual cycling practices beyond reflection are in decline. Even riding a regular bike is developing as an expression of not participating in distinctive cycling practices such as the hipster fixie. The best example of how bikes do not just carry people but also meaning is the cargobike.

The Cargobike: Carrying Class and Gender

In Dutch cities, until the 1950s the cargobike was a common sight. Milkmen, garbage collectors, greengrocers and others rode around the city for bringing or collecting goods. It was a symbol of working-class professions. Recently, cargobikes have re-emerged, initially in the big cities of Scandinavia (Copenhagen, Stockholm) and the Netherlands as vehicles for urban families. Cargobikes in Amsterdam were initially mainly imported from Denmark, the three-wheeled Christiania bike, named after the anarchist Freetown Christiania. Later, the slimmer two-wheeled Dutch cargobikes became much more popular. Associated at first with the anarchistic squatter movement and symbols of radical left-wing politics, they gradually became mainstream symbols of the urban middle-class families that drove them.

As argued elsewhere (Boterman 2018), the cargobike has become a symbolic marker of a phenomenon described in urban studies literature as family gentrification, a class-based transformation of urban space in which the gentrifiers, middle-class agents that buy or rent housing in formerly lower-status neighborhoods, consist of families rather than single- or dual-person households (Karsten 2003, Boterman et al. 2010, Lilius 2019). These families may be gentrifiers settling down or middle-class families directly moving into urban neighborhoods (Boterman 2012). The greater purchasing power of dual-earner families drives up property values and potentially displaces lower-income families.

The first meaning clearly associated with the cargobike is that of gentrification. Symbolizing urban change and growing worries about affordability and displacement, the cargobike carries the negative connotation of gentrification. It is thus socially constructed as a marker of social class and more specifically the liberal left-leaning urban fractions of the middle classes.

The second meaning associated the cargobike with gender. Cargobikes are primarily used by families with young children. Both fathers and mothers ride them. but these practices and how they are represented are gendered (Boterman 2018). While fathers driving a cargobike are often portrayed as engaged fathers, visibly practicing their fatherhood in public space, mothers doing the same are represented less positively. Fathers reap the symbolic rewards for taking their caring role seriously, although they also sometimes represented as emasculated and weak (Boterman 2020). This negative stereotyping stands in strong contrast to the negative discourses about 'cargobike mothers'. As the late Martin Bril, a famous columnist for national newspaper *De Volkskrant*, wrote in 2006:

> She has great control of her bike. She can handle it with just one hand, using the other to hold an umbrella or make a phone call. That's important because she has a busy life and that requires attention. She is the captain of her own ship. Sometimes she comes across as aggressive: get out of my way, coming through. I have two kids, bags full of groceries, a career, that's why I am on phone, asshole!

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Bril points here to difficulty of juggling responsibilities of having children and a career. This is a common idea in the Netherlands, where part-time work for women with young children is the norm (SCP 2018). The Netherlands has a fairly traditional motherhood ideology which entails spending at least four days a week with the children and working for three days (Le Bihan et al. 2014). 'Cargobike mothers', often highly educated and part of dual-earner urban families in which they may often work the same number of hours or even more than their partner (Boterman and Karsten 2014), therefore challenge Dutch norms around motherhood.

Despite its seemingly friendly face, the cargobike is a contested mobility object and practice. Particularly in conservative media, the cargobike is often used as a shorthand for anything that is despised: assertive mothers, emasculated men, naïve and privileged urban liberals. While embedded in a typical Dutch cycling culture, the cargobike figures in national public debates that clearly resemble international ones: a political polarization between liberal urban and suburban/rural conservative or populist groups.

Thus, the habitual, unreflexive and uncontested practices of cycling in the Netherlands is giving way to more diverse, and therefore more distinctive, uses and meanings of the bicycle, particularly in urban areas. First, global trends in cycling blend with the Dutch cycling culture, creating specific combinations of global hipster culture and leisure trends. These are incorporated without displacing existing cultures. Second, global trends like urban gentrification are played out in the arena of cycling. In other countries we often see cars as symbols of identity, such as Volvo families, SUV users, etc. Thus, while habitual cycling is giving way to identity cycling or 'lifestyle cycling', the cycling culture remains the canvas on which these distinctions are played out and even dramatized.

TRANSITION 3: FROM OWNERSHIP TO SHARING

How Global Innovations Might Influence Dutch Cycling Culture

A key development, in relation to cycling and culture, is the possible shift from the owned bicycle to cycling as consumed service. How does this change cycling culture? Will it lead to new patterns of distinction or new scenes? Does it strengthen the egalitarian culture of conspicuous non-consumption or the use of bicycles as social signifier?

Once developed as a counter-movement against the brutalism of mass motorization and capitalism, bikesharing has been booming around the world (Fishman et al. 2013). In Amsterdam, the (hippie-ish) Provo movement in the 1960s–1970s painted bicycles (among other products) white, signifying them as public goods. 'De Fiets is iets en bijna niets' ('The bicycle is something and almost nothing') was their powerful slogan. Although the original idea failed to become mainstream, the idea of bicycle sharing developed further. First, into docked bicycle stations, often initiated by governments to spark local cycling. Interestingly, the Netherlands was rather late to join this trend, possibly because of an already large cycling culture and massive bike-ownership. More recently, building on smart locks and smartphone applications, many private global players offer dockless bicycles within the Mobility as a Service development (Van Waes et al. 2018). Several of these technologies have sprung up in the Netherlands, where cities have embraced them as possible solutions for the shortage of cycling parking capacity. Thus, we see the outlines of a possible new transformation of Dutch cycling culture. Two distinct Dutch developments illustrate different futures: the OV-Fiets and Swapfiets.

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Different Specific Bike Sharing Products in The Netherlands

The OV-Fiets[1] was launched in the early 2000s and fitted within a specific niche of Dutch cycling. Although most Dutch have at least one bicycle available at home, this is different on the egress side of a train trip. Fifty percent of the 1.2 million daily train travelers arrive at their access station by bicycle, but only 13 percent use the bicycle as the egress mode. OV-Fiets launched in 2004 with 800 bicycles on 70 locations. Now, there are over 20 000 OV-Fiets bicycles available on 300 stations, on which more than 4 million kilometers are cycled annually (Metroniews 2019). The system started as a privately funded start-up, but was acquired by the (semi-public) Dutch Railways in 2008 to become an integral part of their services (Ploeger and Oldenziel 2020).

In contrast with bikesharing in other contexts, often with the policy goal to get more people cycling, the rental price of an OV-Fiets is not related to the rental period. The rental price is €3.80 per day, regardless of when you return it. Also, there is a steep charge for returning the bicycle elsewhere. This makes it unattractive to use in a city you often visit; OV-Fiets is mostly used in third locations, where people go for occasional meetings or visits. The bicycles are highly conspicuous, branded with the Dutch railway bright yellow and blue. Due to the rental model (linked to intercity traveling and A to A service), mainly higher educated and wealthier cohorts use the bikes.

Swapfiets[2] started as a service for rental bicycles for students, including a pick-up service for maintenance and repair. The company was started by four students and got financial support from the PON group (Dutch distributor for Volkswagen, and owner of bicycle brands Gazelle and Union). In the midst of a fierce global competition between (mostly) foreign dockless bikesharing companies, Swapfiets offers a sturdy Dutch 'granny bike', with a distinctive blue front tire, for 16.50 Euro (12 Euro for students) per month. Recently, they added e-bikes (75 Euro/Month) and bicycles with gears (19.50 Euro/Month). Although the overall price of the bicycle is steep, there are now over 120 000 subscribers to the service in the Netherlands, with current startups going in Belgian, Danish and German university cities. The repair and maintenance service is an important selling point.

Using the typical Dutch 'granny bike' models, and the name *fiets* (most, if not all bikesharing companies use the word 'bike') might be an important reason for its quick and wide adoption within Dutch cycling culture. There is a limited number of frame colors, but people add personalized items to improve retrievability and to give the bicycle a personal identity. Swapfiets has been introduced in student cities and caters especially to students and temporary citizens (expats). Although relatively subtle, the blue front tire makes the bicycles conspicuous, and one can easily spot them around university campuses and in bicycle parking at railway stations.

The use of the 'granny bike' model, with black as the default frame color and subtle advertisements, seem to support, or build on, a nostalgic reference to bicycles as part of the overall Dutch egalitarian habitus. On the other hand, the relatively expensive business model, the fully serviced customer and the first target groups point in another direction: the Swapfiets as distinctive signal of a global, footloose consumer lifestyle or scene, with a local twist. Thus, the Swapfiets presents an interesting blend of a global trends – sharing not owning, global lifestyle – and Dutchness – in the form of the bike, but also in the recognition that everybody in the Netherlands, even temporary residents, needs a working bicycle all the time.

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CONCLUSIONS

This chapter focused on the relation between culture and mobility, investigating this by zooming in on Dutch cycling culture. We have shown that Dutch cycling culture underwent major transformations in the past decades, related to broader social and spatial trends in Dutch society. Contrary to most societies, cycling as a central mode of transport survived the rapid proliferation of car possession since the sixties and the corresponding gearing of social and spatial infrastructure to automobility. Although cycling was in serious decline and car-use emerged as dominant commuting modality, the use of bicycles for everyday mobility never disappeared and witnessed a remarkable comeback after the 1970s.

However, the habitual, unreflexive position of the bicycle has been gradually been supplemented – yet not fully replaced – by a more diverse range of lifestyle cycling. Several subcultures around cycling have emerged, with the cargobike emerged as an interesting case for the association of transportation with social positions in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. While still related to habitus or 'second nature', cycling in the context of Dutch cities is now linked to processes of distinction through conspicuous *and* non-conspicuous consumption. In other words: cycling seems to have become less collective and more individual. The most recent trends in sharing bikes through different schemes presents an interesting hybrid in this sense. OV-fiets and Swapfiets bikes are collective in their appearance (all bicycles look similar) but they also express particular lifestyles related to age and social class. Bike schemes like Swapfiets fit into wider trends of an emerging platform economy. These platforms hold the promise of inclusive and collective sharing, but currently it is private companies that offer it as comfortable, but expensive, services.

Dutch cycling culture may appear as a unique case from which little can be learned for other mobility contexts. However, transformations of Dutch cycling culture and their connections to social and spatial transformations contain valuable insights into how mobility more generally could be conceptualized as both cause and effect of culture. The proliferation of new subcultures and new meanings of cycling in the context of a highly normalized and unreflexive mobility culture could probably be applied to other contexts, which are typically dominated by other unreflexive, highly normal mobility cultures, often around automobility.

Thus, Dutch culture has shaped cycling, and cycling has shaped Dutch culture. Beyond a certain point, such cultural patterns become self-reinforcing. As shown, this works for individuals, institutions and entire societies:

- For individuals, cycling becomes a routine, habitual activity: it is just the normal thing to do.
- Institutions become organized around specific habits and patterns, making it increasingly costly and difficult to change. For instance, most Dutch regional and municipal governments have promoted cycling so much that a policy shift towards cars would require huge investments, a destruction of expertise and the need to acquire completely new expertise. Similarly, businesses, nightclubs, schools and universities would need to rethink their locations, buildings and working practices.
- The entire Dutch society is caught up in a feedback loop where the culture that fostered cycling produces a cycling culture, which sustains many dominant elements of Dutch culture. This also explains why a cycling culture like the Dutch one cannot be produced

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from scratch elsewhere. It also explains why this cycling culture has the capacity to absorb and incorporate various transformations.

NOTES

1. www.ov-fiets.nl.
2. www.swapfiets.nl.

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