

**Negotiating mobile places between 'leisure' and 'transport': a case study of two group cycle rides**

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***Abstract***

This paper explores how group cycle rides produce particular types of mobile places, involving distinctive forms of public sociability and of re-making local environments. Our paper focuses on weekend group leisure riding, a mobility practice where the main aim of participants may be 'leisure' but most infrastructure used is designated for 'transport', generating distinctive purposes and practices. We discuss two such rides, one from Hull into the East Yorkshire countryside and one in London. Data (field notes, visual and GPS records) is drawn upon to analyse positioning and communication, comparing and contrasting the two rides. External (including motor traffic flow and route type) and internal (including group composition and experience) factors shape the relationship between the riders and their ride, and hence the space that they co-create. Cyclists riding in groups create flexible social spaces, which variously challenge, mimic and adapt to the dominance of motor traffic on such routes.

***Key words: cycling / ethnography / leisure / mobilities / rhythm / transport***

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***1. Introduction***

Cycling may advance our understanding of relationships between place and movement precisely because of its marginalised status within UK contexts. Following the dramatic decline in cycling rates in the postwar decades, cycling remains relatively unusual and 'being a cyclist' problematic (author forthcoming). Condemned to the past by the mainstream of postwar UK planning, the bicycle as 'transport' has recently returned to policy debates; yet cyclists continue to navigate travelscapes designed for motor vehicles. Viewing such travelscapes from the saddle rather than from behind the steering wheel, cyclists may construct 'meanings which are largely hidden when these spaces are experienced through more normative mobilities such as the car.' (Spinney 2007: 42)

Perhaps because of its marginalised status, much work on contemporary cycling practices analyses solitary cycling practices (Spinney 2007; Jones 2007). More group-focused accounts (e.g. Fincham 2008, Kidder 2005) tend to study subcultural groups such as couriers, rather than group cycling practices per se. Where socially-oriented group rides are analysed, the focus tends to be upon Critical Mass (e.g. Furness 2010), yet as politicised events these differ from more traditional leisure-oriented group rides. Our paper concentrates on weekend group leisure riding, a mobility practice where the main aim of participants may be 'leisure' but most infrastructure used is designated for 'transport'. This contradicts the 'proper' use of street space in a motorised society, helping to shape both the perception and the experience of group rides as particular types of flexible and mobile social spaces.

In analysing two examples of group rides, the paper draws upon Lefebvrian concepts of space and rhythm to explore the embodied and negotiated use of road space. For example the 'convoy formation' described below adapts to the 'abstract space' of a multi-lane road by mimicking a large motor vehicle. At other times more leisurely formations generate alternative rhythms fluidly interweaving motion and conversation; at least until the 'real purpose' of road space reasserts itself. Norms underlying and generated by different uses of street space are discussed, particularly with reference to Highway Code Rule 66, which seeks to govern cyclists' on-road behaviour. The paper outlines spatial imaginaries generated through group riding, including the contemporary 'escape from the city' as a co-construction of possible alternative cityscapes.

## 2. Place, mobility, rhythm

Current work within the sociology of mobility (e.g. Urry, 2007; Fincham, McGuinness and Murray, eds. 2010) has deconstructed the apparent opposition of 'place' to 'movement'. Reacting against Augé's (1995) concept of 'non-place' as produced through (motorised) movement, mobilities theorists have considered ways in which movement may *constitute* place. The construction of place is embodied and kinaesthetic; how we feel and sense different sorts of mobile places helps to shape what they mean to us (Gartman 2004; Jones 2005; see also Freund and Martin 1994; Wickham 2006).

The relationship of places to mobility practices may be approached through the core themes of place, space and (more recently) rhythm. In a foundational text Lefebvre (1991) describes three ways in which space is socially produced; through spatial practices, through spatial representations, and through 'representational space'. These are associated respectively with practice, perception, and imagination (Tonkiss 2005). Separating these moments allows us to consider the representation of practice both to what is perceived (for example, the 'invisibility' of the cyclist within motorised space<sup>1</sup>) and what is desired or imagined. The spatial organisation of mobility forms part of a broader 'socio-spatial imaginary and outlook' (Shields 1999: 146), within which group rides struggle for social legitimacy as a practice, while providing participants with a distinctive means of perceiving ('real' and imagined) places.

Lefebvre sees space as constantly contested, with dominant and subordinate groups seeking to represent, use, and imagine spaces in contrasting and clashing ways. Hence, struggles for space are simultaneously struggles for identity and recognition. Groups and classes 'can not constitute themselves, or recognize one another, as 'subjects' unless they generate ... a space' (Lefebvre 1991: 416). We might link this to distinctive properties of mobility objects in use. Freund and Martin (2007:41) describe cars as 'mobile gated communities' generating hostility towards outsiders as potential threats or obstacles. While there are other modalities of car use, this prominent trope is reinforced by advertisements (Paterson 2007). As a form of automobility (Böhm et al 2006) cycling, like driving, can generate competitiveness and disregard for others. However, this is to some extent limited by the greater open-ness (and vulnerability) of the cyclist to her environment and others within it (author 2010).

Lefebvre (1991) categorises ways of ordering of space through their congruence or otherwise with unequal social relations and the operation of power and resistance. He makes a distinction between concrete and abstract space; the latter tied to absolutist renderings of space by architects and planners, frequently in the service of capital. Concrete space is space-as-lived, with the body as a potential site of resistance to abstract space (frequently made manifest violently through the bulldozer). Road violence could similarly be seen as the violent imposition of abstract space upon recalcitrant bodies. Through subordinated practices such as cycling (or walking, or skateboarding) we might find people calling up different representations of space, and different visions of possible public spaces (Khan 2009). These different visions may be connected to 'making space' for different actual or potential social identities.

Mobility and place are co-produced through rhythm (Lefebvre 2004, Edensor 2010). '[A] mobile sense of place is shaped by the mode and style of travel' (Edensor 2010: 6), varying depending on the context of the mobility practice. For car travel, one might contrast the individual drive with the family drive; interactions with one's environment would be structured differently over time in different cases (Barker 2009). Or one might look to British popular music culture in the 1990s and consider the convoy approaching a 'rave'. Although car occupants may not be able to speak directly to fellow participants, the convoy – unlike the everyday queue – has a coherent identity and rhythmic motion as it makes its way into the rural unknown, communication and a sense of shared excitement binding it together.

Through bodily discipline and training, rhythms (whether the tiny regular movements of the driving body, or the more energetic rhythms of the cyclist) may become 'second nature' for regular practitioners. During research, the demands placed on the researcher's body can highlight the skill required to produce 'natural rhythms' (c.f. Hensley 2010). Riding tandem with the Hull and East Riding Institute for the Blind was for us such an experience as we became painfully aware of the fragility of balance. For the novice tandem rider approaching traffic lights, the sight of the amber causes dread as the slowing bicycle begins to sway.

This experience then enabled a more empathetic understanding of the experience of novice *bicycle* riders, observed during later fieldwork.

Rhythms may be linear or cyclical, with journeys constituted by different rhythmic patterns. Regular journeys by foot or by bicycle may create sensory connections to changing seasons, through sight, smell, feel, and sounds as leaves drop, ice forms, flowers bloom, and birdsong changes. Yet the route and the stopping and turning points along the way may remain 'the same' year-round. Spinney (2007) argues that cyclists' experience of place is one in which vision plays a relatively equal role alongside hearing, smell, and feel, whereas on a bus, for example, vision becomes far more primary and observing takes place in a more leisured, less directional manner. The design of the bicycle and the type of journey combine with other person- or place-related factors to produce place as experienced by the cyclist in motion. On group rides, participants additionally attempt to synchronise riding rhythms while managing other potentially clashing rhythms of the road.

Rhythms are intimately related to power, instantiated and resisted through the clashes and coproduction of rhythm and counter-rhythm (Spinney 2010). There are continually 'overt and tacit struggles ... not only over what counts as legitimate entitlement to public space, but also the conditions of that entitlement' (Brown 2010:11). 'Legitimate' entitlements are frequently unremarked on and normalised; but when spatial codes are transgressed, disciplinary reactions may be evoked. When negotiating road space, users are never far from such conflict, particularly when groups and practices are constructed as already lacking contextual legitimacy. Studying marginalised practices can help develop an understanding of such processes and ways in which dominant rhythms are co-produced and/or contested.

### **3. Researching group rides**

Group rides are diverse. Some are so fast that riders will not converse with each other until the ride has stopped; others (like those discussed here) are leisurely and seek to create a sociable space during the ride itself. Cross-overs (sometimes associated with couriers: Fincham 2008) include alleycats, informal races with light-hearted competition. Cultures and experiences relating to sporting rides are covered within the sport literature, often with a focus on professional events (Dauncey 2003). Yet more leisure-oriented rides are less frequently discussed; a rare example is O'Connor and Brown (2007), who use focus groups to examine the crossover between sport and leisure riding among 'Weekend Warriors'. As Spinney argues, the 'preconception of what cycling should and should not be has resulted in a dearth of research relating to cycling as a form of urban leisure' (2009: 9).

More academic attention has focused on a politicised group ride: Critical Mass (CM). CM is a monthly series of mass bicycle rides seeking – among other things – to make cycling visible (Blickstein and Hanson, 2001; Furness, 2010). Masses take place in over a hundred cities and CM has been seen variously as 'a protest, a form of street theater, a method of commuting, a party, and a social space' (Blickstein and Hanson 2001: 352). CM is the subject of intense debate, with some cyclists celebrating its existence (e.g. Carlsson 2002) and others criticising it (Pettinger 2008). Many CM riders believe that they are 'challenging the harassment and violence they ordinarily face alone' (Horton 2006: 55), even bringing an alternative society into view through a temporary transformation of the cityscape.

Compared with sport or political rides, contemporary leisure rides do not figure prominently in the literature on cycling practices. In Furness's (2010) book this type of ride appears in the historical section, separate from his focus upon contemporary political practices. Yet many do still participate in group rides and analyses of the histories of such rides may help to contextualise their practices. Continuities remain: traditions of cycle tourism are updated and reproduced through speaking tours and books such as Cliff Pratt's, a famous Hull cycle tourer and businessman (Pratt 1994). Cycle tourists may now share information on the internet and material including photos, videos, and maps may be shared about group rides through ride reports. As in the past, the meaning of rides and cycle tourism are constructed with reference to this broader flow of information shaping the meaning of the 'gaze' exercised by the group rider.

Furness (2010) describes how early cycle tourists sought a healthful escape from the city, a space constructed as poles apart from crowded city or suburban streets (see e.g. Pratt 1994). While the 'escape from the city' may remain important for contemporary group rides, relationships between the city and the countryside have changed dramatically over the past century. In the UK, motor vehicle traffic is now a major cause of city air pollution and traffic levels in the countryside are high, as motor touring has largely replaced touring by cycle and/or public transport. Sixty years ago British cycle tourists were allocated 'special' train services; now, the lack of cycle space on trains is a common complaint and riders may no longer be assured of a tourist's welcome (BBC 2010). On the other hand, there is a greater acceptance of urban areas (including green space and non-motorised corridors) as touristically 'interesting', so rides may explore potentially more accessible urban areas, particularly when starting within an urban centre. Here the contemporary 'escape from the city' may be about co-constructing alternative cityscapes.

Other writers have analysed cycle tourism as potentially challenging dominant forms of tourism and the tourist gaze. Oddy (2007: 110) argues that the touring cyclist's 'slow pace and freedom of movement in relation to that of even a motorist might predicate against the processed, controlled model that Urry sees because of mass transportation systems and leisure culture of the present day.' Similarly Cox (2008) describes cyclotourism as promoting engagement rather than detachment, by virtue of the multi-sensory involvement of the cyclist with his or her surroundings, creating distinctive phenomenologies of cycling. Here we extend this approach to consider group processes and group rides as a form of collective leisure in a context where tourism has become more usually based around the couple or family. Additionally, Cox's paper focuses upon cyclotourism within a landscape 'other' to the touring cyclist's everyday world; whereas in our cases cycle tourism is relatively local, creating distinctive dynamics of dis/connection.

While informed by historical narratives of cycle tourism, the contemporary group ride exists in a different context. The widespread presence of automobiles in country as well as city reminds rural riders they do not have priority access to the countryside and the perception of 'nature'. Group leisure cycling, despite its long and 'respectable' history, may be perceived as distinctively problematic precisely because riders are not using the road for 'proper' transport purposes. They may be particularly vulnerable to 'pedaling hatred' (Emilson 2010); Midgeley's *Times* article (2009) rails against '[t]he type [of cyclist] that rides three abreast on the road letting no one [i.e., no motorist] get past yet screams at you for being a 'road hog'.' Rule 66 of the UK Highway Code tells cyclists to 'never ride more than two abreast, and ride in single file on narrow or busy roads and when riding round bends' (Department for Transport 2007). While a normative 'should' rather than a legally-backed 'must', Rule 66 expresses widely held views that cyclists should prioritise allowing motorists to pass; hence, taking up as little as possible space on a narrow road, even when there are currently no cars on that road.

Rule 66 lies within an instrumental understanding of road space which positions leisure and sport as inappropriate practices for urban environments. Within this paradigm cycling may be (grudgingly) accepted as a subordinate form of transport (see author 2011); yet practising leisure, play, or sport on a road remains firmly out of place and threatening to an instrumental outlook (see e.g. BBC 2009; Emilson 2010). Playing on the street, in the words of road injury database Stats19, is 'dangerous action' (DfT 2004) in more ways than one. Group rides do not clearly fit established categories of activity and must create paths through the complex, clashing, and shifting rhythms of a motorised streetscape. Individual commuting cyclists may improvise rhythms that mimic as well as subvert motorised city traffic (Spinney 2010). So, what about the rhythms of the group ride, where purposes and practices differ from the normative in such distinctively different manners? How do group rides adapt to, mimic, or challenge the rhythms of the motorised streetscape?

#### **4. Methodology**

The data discussed here comes from [details of project deleted]. The project focuses upon practices of 'everyday cycling' while including the study of organised events and groups related to cycling in our case study areas. This article discusses two examples of group rides from two case study areas: Hull and Hackney. We have attended other rides including tandem rides, children's rides, alleycats, and Critical Mass

cycle rides; these experiences inform the discussion here. However, these two rides were selected because they are 'ordinary': relatively gentle rides with no pre-registration, open to all (although aimed primarily at adults) with most of the route on-road. As with O'Connor and Brown's (2007) 'slower bunches' racing is not encouraged; the group travels together and gaps are frowned upon and remedied. In other respects (the terrain, participants' clothing, the age and demographics of the group and its history) the two rides differ.

The paper is informed by a series of interviews: in 2010 approximately 60 with 'everyday cyclists' (most not participants in organised cycling events) and approximately 15 with 'stakeholders' involved in cycling policy or cycling organisations. We also draw upon our own knowledge of the everyday contestation for space involved in cycling in the UK, as do many participants in group rides. Unlike in countries such as the Netherlands, where a different political settlement led to cycling being regulated and provided for alongside other modes of transport, in the UK cycling remains liminal and contested. Despite the promotion of cycling by policy-makers frequent struggles remain over the right to street space and the general legitimacy of cycling (Horton 2007). Rebellious subcultures have resulted: bicycle messengers cultivate a distinctive bicycle subculture exceeding the limits of the working day (Fincham 2008).

Group leisure rides may seem innocuous and far removed from such struggles; and indeed many UK cycle campaigners would see it as self-evident that group rides and political action are if not actually opposed, certainly separate. To some extent this is true (and in Hull, group rides attract different people to those involved in cycle campaigns); but on the roads groups must deal practically with struggles over public space and its purposes, a struggle with which campaigners engage on a more explicit level. Despite this, group rides frequently appear problematic to non-participating cyclists. In our interviews with 'everyday cyclists', a majority said they did not or did not wish to participate in existing group rides, often saying such rides were too long or too fast for them, or that they did not have or did not want to use the specialist equipment (e.g. Lycra clothes) that they felt were required. Yet cycling as play remains seductive: the same interviewees frequently said that they liked the *idea* of sociable and slow group rides.

While practice is fundamental to their existence, we do not view organised group rides as pure improvised practice. Group members regulate the rhythms and conduct of rides using written and unwritten codes including relatively abstract rules. The UK's national cyclists' organisation CTC produces a *Guide to Cycling With a Group* (CTC, undated) with tips including advice on clothing and communication. Group rides can be perceived to be exclusive, and we have encountered people who said that they did not feel welcome on specific rides. However, here we consider the sociability and place-making characteristics of group rides, acknowledging that while rides may represent alternative public spaces these, like more normative public spaces, may not always be inclusive.

### **5. Ride 1: C ride through the Wolds**

This was a Hull and East Riding CTC ride from Hull up through the Yorkshire countryside, starting at Cottingham. With the exception of several short stretches on 'A' roads, the ride stuck to unclassified roads for most of the fifty-mile journey and the terrain was largely flat.

'C' rides (the easiest category) attract a different group of participants to 'A' or 'B' rides; rather than people putting their 'heads down' we were told that the group likes to go slowly and spend time talking. While the rides are advertised as open to all, people were surprised to see us, not just because we were strangers but because we did not fit the group's demographic (mostly over 60) or style:

Everyone is attired in cycling wear and riding high-end touring or audax bikes with various new and traditional touring bags attached. All, bar two, are wearing helmets and everyone is in cycling padded shorts with leggings or full trousers. They all wear waterproof jackets or cycling jerseys. There is a significant amount of hi-vis – two tabards and a few full yellow jackets. (Field notes, Author 2).

While everyone was friendly and welcoming, there was anxiety about whether we would cope, as the group could not easily read our style or bicycles (we were asked whether we cycled regularly). While

the ride turned out to be quite gentle and sociable, something relatively new and challenging was the ongoing communication between riders about the road, obstacles and oncoming motor vehicles.

Riders keep in a close group. Occasionally a pair or three will get ahead and then we stop at a major intersection and regroup. John generally keeps the core group at an even pace. Riding close to the wheel of the rider in front largely protects us from the minor headwind. It also means information about upcoming road conditions is essential as visibility is limited. To deal with this issue, like a peloton, members use a combination of voice and hand signals. (Fieldnotes, Author 2)

There is communication between the whole group – there are signs for ‘potholes’ – pointing and wiggling one’s hand – while people call out ‘car up’ (car behind) and ‘car down’ (car coming towards us). (Fieldnotes, Author 1)

This communication continued at the same time as verbal conversation in twos or threes. The group was close, long-established and well used to the system. As the country roads were frequently potholed constant communication was important. Passing information back (or sometimes forward) was something others did almost without thinking, but which – as new group members – we found more difficult. People were aware of each other’s preferences and abilities and the ride took account of these.

There seems to be an enormous store of knowledge among the group, keeping the ride going and supporting those who were slower (e.g. Suzy doesn’t like downhill so she will go to the back and people will wait for her at the bottom, not rushing off when she catches up). Tony very kindly tells me when I am flagging that ‘in this group, people don’t mind waiting for you’ and just to say if I want to stop. (Fieldnotes, Author 1)

The knowledge held by the group included in-depth knowledge of the local area. Every ride has a leader, a role that carried the expectation that this person would expertly guide the group to and from their destination, staying at the front. Many Hull ride leaders can guide a ride without the use of maps and improvise where necessary (on a later ride to the York Rally the route was interrupted by construction works on a bridge and the leader proposed a number of alternative routes).

Rhythms changed often, in response to conversations, questions, cars, the road surface and who was managing/leading and following up the group. Movement between the cyclists was fluid and smooth, responsive to external factors. A pair would be talking; someone nearby would overhear and add something and people would swap positions to choreograph a new discussion. Talking with cyclists for 4-6hrs at a time is an intimate experience, which may help explain why the group was at first surprised by our ‘intrusion’. We learnt much about the childhoods, families, travels and future plans of people on the ride. As a result of this entry into the sociality of the group we were welcomed to join future rides.

Generally there were two broad types of formation during the ride; firstly that used on quiet lanes, where people cycled two abreast (unless a car was coming, in which case riders moved out of the way to allow it past), and secondly that used on busier roads, where the ride shifted into a single file formation. The formation adopted on busy roads was more similar to everyday solitary cycling; keeping near the left, out of the way of motor vehicles, silently pedalling. When the volume of motor traffic lessened, the ride became sociable again.

On the quiet roads it mostly does feel like cyclists’ territory and clearly people value the feeling of safety as well as the companionship (sometimes involving ‘shared misery’ as Alan puts it, in the Winter!). Where cars speed along these roads people mutter ‘Eeejit!’ to each other. However on a few stretches of A and fast B roads it’s different; people largely move into single file and cycle quietly and near the kerb. This is car territory and it’s unhappily accepted that the cars zoom past us at 50 mph. On these roads there seems to be much less tolerance of us; although when we all signal and move into a right turning position then it does feel relatively ok. (Fieldnotes, Author 1)

On the quiet and narrow country lanes that made up the majority of the riding time, it was easily possible to ride two abreast. Space is claimed for the sociable ride although on a relatively contingent basis where the space and practices of others allow it; riders move out of the way of cars before then taking up the lane again. The extent to which a space of representation can be carved out remains bounded by representations of space, materialised both in road space itself and in the norms and expectations of what such spaces are for and how particular users should behave within them. However, despite the riders' flexible approach rhythms still clash particularly on major roads: on crossing such a road we were cut up by an impatient motorist.

For reasonably fit people, cycling through a flat landscape at ten or twelve miles per hour allows time to observe the immediate environment. The quiet lanes running alongside fields, copses, and small villages provided tranquil surroundings reminding riders of their youth. Many know this area well and could easily find their way through the Wolds on minor roads. The ride most obviously presented an opportunity to escape the city for the countryside, but also represented access to a lost past. The Hull area has a long cycling history, and the ride reminded participants of a time when cyclists regularly occupied the road in large, sociable groups. This connection is embodied in the group's magazine, *The Woldsmen*, whose title recalls an earlier incarnation from the heroic age of cycle touring. Today's group rides are similarly embedded in local social networks involving cafes and pubs, which provide pre-arranged refreshments and where non-cycling members (for various health reasons) may temporarily re-join the group.

While in fact country lanes are particularly hazardous for cyclists (as the national speed limit is sixty miles per hour, compared with thirty in built-up areas), the congenial and chatty atmosphere made the ride feel extremely safe. Other riders contrasted it to Anlaby Road in Hull (along which we had cycled to get to the start point), which was described as a 'death trap' by more than one rider. Participants contrasted the ride with what they felt was a negative contemporary experience of cycling in heavy motor traffic, one mentioning a time when you could 'ride the A road from Hull to York and see barely any cars'; whereas now this road would be out of bounds due to its danger and unpleasantness. Reclaiming quiet country roads allowed the cyclists to experience pleasurable group interactions that they do not experience in other forms of cycling, where slowness and sociability are not felt to be possible.

## **6. Ride 2: London ride from Hackney to Barnes**

The second ride was also organised, relatively slow, and uniquely shaped by the specificities of place, riders and rhythm. It was run by members of Hackney Cyclists, a branch of the London Cycling Campaign<sup>ii</sup>. While the terrain was different, again the majority of the ride took place on quiet roads, interspersed with shorter sections on main roads or, on several occasions, river or park paths. This combination was similar to recommended 'everyday cycling' routes in London such as those making up the London Cycle Network (some of which we followed for part of the route).

The group's earlier attempts to organise rides linked to infrastructural problems or improvements – i.e. linking group riding directly to campaigning – had not been well attended. This ride, an attempt to create a more socially-focused outing, attracted twelve people for what was quite an ambitious excursion to the Barnes Wetland Centre (in West London, some fifteen miles away). Knowing some participants, I immediately felt part of the group. There was a mix of clothing; dresses, jeans, shorts, and hi-vis were all present, and the mix of bicycles was eclectic from new hybrids to 'beaters' (old, heavy bikes). The ages were younger and more diverse than in Hull, with most probably in their thirties. Most were not wearing helmets, although several were. This was a slightly different 'cycling culture' to the one in Hull; someone dressed for one ride would look somewhat out of place in the other one.

Despite preparation and mapping by the ride leaders, the ride was challenging; frequently switching between quiet and busy roads, with some short off-road stretches. On leaving Hackney it became apparent that ride members lacked the detailed local knowledge possessed by Hull riders. A new group, we did not all know each other, and we were not practised in the art of non-verbal communication. There were unexpected obstacles. On the way out, Hyde Park cycle paths were closed because of a half marathon, necessitating unplanned use of busy Bayswater Road; on the way back part of the Thames Embankment

was flooded again leading to an on-road detour. Such problems can however generate a group identity – humorous stories told by the more experienced Tower Hamlets contingent over lunch described previous mishaps and the group’s struggle to overcome them.

Like the Hull ride, the Hackney ride was sociable and involved sharing local knowledge. At the morning coffee stop at Regents Park, we chatted and looked at the route plan. Conversations en route sometimes referred to local landmarks. While cycling through Kensington, Joan (who used to live in the area) drew contrasts between Kensington and Hackney. Stopped outside the former Lots Road Power station while waiting for several group members, I talked about its history generating power for London Underground. Such stops were frequent; once we lost several group members for fifteen minutes. At traffic lights, often only some of us would get through, creating a choppier rhythm than on the Hull ride. There was less established communication practice and sometimes we had to shout ahead; ride leader Mairie often looked back to check people were following (more necessary in urban rides with frequent signal controlled crossings), but the rest of us did this less frequently.

Where the group as a whole wasn’t able to cross a road or get through lights together, we stopped and waited, shouting forward to those at the front of the group. Chris, at the back, was checking we were all present; while Mairie at the front was frequently looking back to ensure we were all following her. (Author 1, Fieldnotes)

While waiting we frequently occupied street space and chatted to each other. Despite the choppiness the ride possessed flow, moving together as an object:

The long series of pictures I took between Hackney and Regents Park (one every two seconds) shows the flow of participants cycling singly, in pairs and in threes, moving apart again and back together. As someone new to group rides myself I find it great to be able to cycle along unfamiliar places and not worry about the route. (Author 1, Fieldnotes)

As in Hull, there was a fluid pair formation and a more defensive single formation; particularly on the way back when we were more tired, and on the way there on the busy road next to Hyde Park after we were refused access. While the ride attempted to create an experience differing from everyday London cycling, this was not always successful: as in Hull, A roads occasionally forced a change of rhythm. Sociability was structured into the ride through its relationship to the rhythms of motor traffic, a relationship that was sometimes unanticipated. However, at times the ride managed larger roads in a more pro-active manner, adopting what we call a ‘convoy’ formation. This was sometimes adopted on multi-lane roads, where riders almost seemed to form a human bus – taking up similar amounts of space to a bus within one of the lanes of traffic, and changing lanes where necessary in a group.<sup>iii</sup> This was a distinctively different urban riding experience to either the defensive line or the fluid pairs.

While in the fluid pairs formation, chatting was easy and as on the Hull ride people moved backwards and forwards through the ride, talking to different people. In the convoy formation, attention was more focused upon the road and the need to stick closely together. This formation felt quite safe; we were close together as a group and clearly visible to drivers. The single file was more frightening because we were less visible; squeezed between parked cars and moving cars. During this section one of the other riders was talking to me but I had great difficulty paying attention, caught between the parked cars (which might pull out without seeing me) and the fast moving motor traffic passing close on my right. Rather than either claiming lane space or creating a sociable space, we were pushed to the margins. By contrast residential streets were well suited to riding two abreast and talking, as were the off-road stretches.

In London there was a particularly sharp distinction between the ride back and the ride there. Generally the rhythm of the leisurely group ride involves a mid-morning coffee stop, a lunch stop, and a slightly faster ride back without a substantial afternoon stop. Here the afternoon was spent in the Wetland Centre, with a reasonable amount of walking. When the ride set off, riders were tired and quieter, and dusk fell while we were cycling back. Traffic was heavy by this time and often blocking Advanced Stop Lanes, breaking up the group formation. The sense of safety was reduced, and there was one frightening moment



when motor vehicles seemed to deliberately drive at us as lights changed. Representing the city as a leisurely place within which the cyclist can appreciate quiet streets and 'nature' (squares, parks, riversides) became more difficult as traffic volumes increased. Because of our reduced skill level and the increased environmental challenges, the return ride felt more fragmented and marginal to the streetscape, and more similar to individual riding experiences albeit with the responsibility of remaining part of a group.

The group ride through London produced a different mobile public space to cycling in a group on the Yorkshire lanes. In urban areas rhythms are likely to be choppy and one cannot avoid stretches with high volumes of motor traffic. However, generally traffic speeds are slower, and on quiet Sunday streets one can feel as if cars are few and the bicycle is dominant. Unlike Hull, the London ride did not provide a connection to a collective cycling past, instead offering an alternative way of seeing and exploring the city. Connections to the past were more individual or linked to very specific histories. Some participants said that they usually find cycling unfamiliar routes intimidating, because they cannot 'see' from the map what the route would be like (even for marked cycle routes). This suggested that group city cycling can be a way of making the city legible for cyclists, providing a way to experience new areas without worrying about the route, with space to socialise, chat and enjoy city sights.

Thus, the two rides created distinctive forms of sociality connected to their specific environments (c.f. Spinney 2010a). For the London riders, the chance to observe and experience the city in a leisurely group offered a contrast to regular experiences of hectic and repetitive individual riding (see Spinney 2007) and provided a vision of the cycling as more cycling-friendly. The Hull ride specifically connected riders to the region's past and many riders' personal memories of the area during its bicycling heyday.

### **7. Claiming and ceding space: redrawing places through group cycling**

While individual cycling practices can be sociable and pleasurable (author 2010), individual cyclists are frequently marginalised. Our interview data suggests cyclists feel pressure to get 'out of the way of traffic' even though cycling in the gutter is hazardous and unpleasant (author forthcoming; Trujillo 2010). Part of the attraction of sociable group riding is the distinctiveness of the experience, different both from travelling using another mode of transport and from cycling on one's own. As spatial practices the rides were trying to represent these spaces as sociable and leisurely, while negotiating the roadscape as instrumental space and the contingent spatial practices of others, which militate against this.

Group leisure riding intriguingly combines elements of other travel and leisure practices to produce distinctive experiences and sensibilities. The appreciation of 'nature' or 'landscape' built into many group rides may seem congruent with the middle-class tourist gaze (Cox 2008). On city rides, this might involve appreciating garden squares, river paths, and parks, as a form of countryside within the city. Conversely, one might identify experiential similarities to group excursions on public transport, a more traditionally working-class pastime. The history of leisure rides in the UK includes not only elite organisations but also the Clarion Club, whose founders linked the collective appreciation of nature to the struggle for a socialist future (Pye 1995). Potentially, the group ride may carry a variety of connotations, and this helps to explain the attraction many interviewees felt towards the *idea*, albeit not the actual practice, of group leisure riding (see Section 4 above).

Fundamental to all types of group ride is the effort participants spend actively creating and reinforcing the group. Group rides are characterised by a consistent, collectively agreed rhythm, contrasting with more usual experiences of more atomised riding with less consistent speeds and more frequent overtaking and undertaking. Within the group ride cyclists adapt and adjust their rhythms to match others, creating a sense of elasticity, with conversations co-ordinated with movement. Riders can explore and traverse unfamiliar places without worrying about getting lost, supporting discovery and sociability. These mobile public spaces are fleeting, re-writing roads as spaces not just for transport, but also for socialising and leisure. The group intervenes in and manages multiple rhythms of the road, which shift as the group adapts to factors including cars, traffic lights, weather, skills and fitness of people.

Leisure rides are unlike professional cycling pelotons in embracing chatting, riding slowly, not mandating training, and not expecting participants to wear full 'club clothing'. They generally commit to looking after the slowest, prioritising keeping the group together even if some must wait: a collective ethic discouraging competition. Instead of a narrowly functional concept of roadscape, leisure rides propose an alternative spatial logic aiming at the creation of sociable spaces. Neither ride was wholly successful in this; both negotiated spaces on an ad hoc basis and both experienced 'cutting up'. The London ride's return journey almost gave up on sociable space. Attempting to redraw the contemporary urban street as sociable, it came up against space as anti-social and 'abstract' (Lefebvre 1991) in the form of multi-lane roads and hostile motorists. Conversely the Hull ride abandoned the urban to seek refuge in the rural, and in a past where urban cycling was a legitimate and highly visible part of the 'normal' streetscape.

The abstract space of motorisation is imposed upon participants through road infrastructure that prioritises through motor traffic and discourages use of the street system for socialisation, supported by cultural norms represented through discursive infrastructure such as the Highway Code. But abstract space is subject to continual challenge and negotiation. On these two rides, participants sometimes challenged, sometimes adapted to, and sometimes playfully subverted dominant understandings of road space. They did not follow Rule 66, but rather than being Rule-less they constructed their own Counter-rules, with riding three abreast allowed in some circumstances but not others. Riding two abreast was allowed on narrow roads, but participants would allow cars to pass. These in-practice rules made leisure riding fun within the limits imposed by motorised streetscapes; a strict interpretation of Rule 66 would have seen both rides spent most of their time in single file, negating the purpose of the sociable ride.

Many participants, particularly in Hull, felt that group riding allowed access to some pleasures of cycling that are harder to realise within a highly motorised environment. This environment still continually re-imposed itself: on both rides, participants adapted to the rhythms of motor traffic; moving out of the way after encountering traffic on smaller roads, pre-emptively moving out of the way on larger roads. On the second ride, a formation characterised as the 'convoy' mimicked the action of a large motor vehicle within multi-lane roads. This was not a 'sociable' formation – it was not easy to chat in the convoy – but it did provide a subjectively safe way of traversing multi-lane roads. In the context of London traffic where bicycle speeds are often not similar to motor traffic speeds, this provided an alternative way of collectively cycling the city on busy roads; and an impression of what cycling on wide cycle-only lanes might be like. While on one level following the logic of abstract space, in Highway Code terms this behaviour is prohibited (interestingly, it did not seem to meet with particular hostility from drivers).

While the explicitly Critical Mass overtly seeks to create alternative presents and utopian visions of alternative futures, these rides apparently do not. Indeed, the history of UK cycling activism frequently counterposes the 'social' to the 'political', with social riding potentially suspect as both a diversion from political activity and a dangerous focus on the bicycle as leisure rather than transport object, as fetish object rather than pure utility. However, there are some intriguing parallels. For Furness (2007:312) the radicalism of Critical Mass exists in its ability to 'present bicycling as something *other* than an exclusive, competitive activity (professional cycling) or a rationalized, utilitarian choice (commuter cycling)'. But sociable weekend leisure cycling can also be seen as existing within this liminal space: neither sport, exactly, nor *transport* and potentially offering access to alternative public spaces, whether with reference to a lost collective past (as in Hull) or alternative *presents* existing within the city (as in Hackney).

Hence, weekend social rides may call up subversive streetscapes and timescapes (pasts, presents, and futures) as well as providing a distinctive tourist gaze in which the tourist is not only a cyclist (unusual in itself; Cox 2008) but also frequently a 'local' to some extent. While leisure rides do not overtly seek to challenge established road hierarchies, we suggest that they do so implicitly by utilising road spaces for non-motorised flexible group interaction, challenging dominant views about the purpose of road space. These rides represent subtle challenges to a motorised present; not radical rejection, but a way of claiming space and producing places based on rhythms that differ from, and potentially disrupt, the ideal of the rationalised roadscape. But the limitations imposed by existing dominant spatial practices and imaginaries remain. The rationalised roadscape is never far away; perhaps just around the next corner.

## 8. Bibliography

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<sup>i</sup> See e.g. <http://www.stop-smidsy.org.uk/>

<sup>ii</sup> Only Author 1 attended Hackney Cyclists meetings and events, so the section is written in the first person singular.

<sup>iii</sup> This, while unorthodox, did not elicit particular annoyance from drivers.