

Cars Crush Cycling: How hegemonic motor culture prevents rational choice in urban transport.

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Context of the fuel tax crisis

The autumn of this year 2000 has seen widespread disruption as angry farmers, hauliers and motorists have brought chaos and anxiety to the roads of Britain. One of the most curious features of the recent wave of protest and debate about fuel taxation in the UK is that the environmental arguments in favour of high prices, have not been deployed by government or in the media and the possibilities of a major shift away from car dependency to "greener" modes of transport have scarcely been discussed. The New Labour government has tended to argue with the protesters in terms of the irresponsibility of creating social disruption by fuel depot blockades, and the need to maintain a reasonable level of fuel duty in order to maintain and improve, health, education and pensions. The political reality may well be that it is necessary for the government to present their policy with this particular spin, in the context of findings of opinion polls and focus groups in a pre-election climate, which suggest high levels of support for the protesters and low levels of willingness to make sacrificial commitments or lifestyle changes for the sake of the environment.

However it is the purpose of this article to suggest that a deeper cultural bondage to the motor car is at work, which makes it almost impossible to articulate in public a more rational case for environmental transport. I will first of all outline the rational case which I believe should be sufficient to persuade most able-bodied urban adults to take up cycling as a regular mode of transport for short journeys (up to say 10km). Over against this I will discuss the almost religious opposition that this evokes from the acolytes of the car culture in terms of three sets of arguments, firstly direct opposition to cycling, secondly the promotion of car dependency, and finally the issues and elements of the case against cars which are conveniently ignored or forgotten.

Theoretical framework

In terms of sociological theory this can be seen as a failure of rational choice theory to explain social behaviour in a society where hegemonic cultural discourse is taken for granted and deeply embedded. Rational choice theory, which has strong intellectual links with individualistic free market economics, predicts that individuals in considering options in their daily life, will seek to maximise the utility of their decisions, in terms of a profit and loss accounting of their actions. The sum total of individual decisions will produce the overall pattern of social behaviour in a community. The complexities of patterns of choice derive from the different value individuals, or one individual in different times and places, put on such aspects as money, time or social costs, and the extent to which they opt for immediate or deferred gratification. In general terms Rational Choice theory is well outlined by Laver (1997) and as been applied in many fields including such seemingly irrational and culturally constrained ones as faith affiliation. (Iannacone 1991).

An alternative perspective is based around the notion of cultural hegemony, the idea that "commonsense" presuppositions are deeply embedded in the vocabulary, symbols and discourse applied to particular topics, and that the people and classes who initiate, control or manipulate the definitions and terminology are those who have power to dominate society. Ordinary people tend to accept and internalise hegemonic definitions and norms as the way things are, or simple "commonsense". These ideas originate from Marxist thought and are well developed by such social theorists as Foucault (1967, 1977) who applied them to areas such as the crime and punishment and mental illness. More recently they have been popular among sociologists engaged in struggles

against racism, sexism and other oppressions. Without the growth of critical analysis of terminology and political consciousness among the dominated or oppressed, there is little chance of overturning the status quo. (Freire 1972)

Cycling in the UK: some facts

How then does cycling fare as a means of urban transport in the UK? Overall it is not very popular. According to government statistics cycling accounts for less than 2% of all trips in the UK, compared to 10% in Sweden, 11% in Germany, 15% in Switzerland and 18% in Denmark while in China the urban rush hour produces huge flows and jams of cyclists. In Britain cycle commuting rates are about 4% according to the 1991 Census. Cycle use in the UK has been declining as a form of transport in recent years" (Dept of Transport, National Cycling Strategy, 1996). Within the UK rates vary considerably in different cities and seem to be highest in relative flat areas where there are high proportions of students. In Cambridge for example according to 1991 Census figures around 25% of people (over 30% in some wards) cycle to work, in York it is 18%, and in the more industrial working class city of Hull the figure is 13.6%. In London no more than 3% cycle to work and the rates are highest in inner boroughs such as Hackney where travel to work by bike reaches 8% in two wards. East London has favourable terrain but outer boroughs such as Havering have only 1 or 2% who cycle compared with much larger numbers of rail or car commuters.

Nor is there much evidence to suggest that the fuel crisis, compounded by public transport difficulties has made much difference to rates of cycling. There have been some anecdotal reports of increased sales of cycles and accessories but the major rush at stores like Halfords appears to have been for petrol cans. Even in the more medium term cycling does not appear to be taking off, despite investment in cycle routes. Indeed the national cycling strategy does not appear to be achieving its rather modest targets to increase bike usage.

The rational case for cycling

For individuals the rational case for cycling as a means of urban transport centres on benefits around cost, time and flexibility and personal health. At the community or social responsibility level one can add the environmental benefits. Cycling is obviously cheaper than car or public transport, for an investment of, say £200, one can cover all local transport for a year or more, with almost negligible marginal costs, while even a modest second hand car might cost £1000 and incur recurrent and marginal costs in the order of 30p a mile. Public transport especially in London has high immediate and marginal costs with rush hour journeys costing as much as 50p to £1 per mile.

In terms of speed, flexibility and convenience cycling at least holds its own for short urban journeys, especially at times and places where there is serious traffic congestion, or where destinations are not close to direct public transport connections. It is easier to predict journey times, and possible to use routes, and gain close access to destinations, which are closed to car traffic. There are almost no parking restrictions or charges which apply to cycles. Repeatedly in the commuter challenge races set up by the [London Cycling Campaign](#) it is the cyclist (or motorcyclist) that wins.

The personal health benefits of cycling both as a means of urban travel, and as a leisure activity are immense. It provides good aerobic exercise, which can be indulged with low expenditure of time and resources. Cycling can reduce stress, build muscles and strengthen the cardio-vascular system. It is estimated that a regular cyclist doing as little as 20-30 miles a week can increase life expectancy by several years. For every year lost through cycle accidents, there is 20 years gained through increased health and fitness. (Source: Cycling and the Promotion of Health, 1992.)

The environmental case for cycling is also beyond dispute. The bicycle is the most efficient machine ever invented for transforming energy into motion. It produces negligible air or noise pollution and if

widely used could help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the threat from global warming. So is the social case in terms of potential benefits to community life, if safe independent local mobility for children could be developed (Hillman 1993).

In a rational calculation of the decision to cycle or not to cycle, it is necessary to admit that there are some disincentives. Cycling does require some physical effort, occasionally in inclement weather conditions. While this may not put off the lone adult, the equation becomes somewhat less favourable when family, shopping and luggage have to be transported, or the distance and time variable increases beyond a certain threshold. There are, to be fair, some personal safety concerns mostly in the form of risks from badly driven motor vehicles, while in urban areas many women feel more vulnerable when travelling outside a car after dark. However most of the arguments against cycling are not so much rational as cultural, not so much cool calculations as myths, prejudices and stereotypes as we shall now discover.

The cultural onslaught against cycling

The common antipathy to cycling as a serious means of transport begins with the sentiment that "It's OK for kids" Fundamentally bikes are seen as children's toys. Boys in particular are expected to zoom about on human powered two wheelers, but only as a preparation and interim stage before the initiation into adulthood, (and sometimes adultery) which comes with the pulling power of a motor vehicle. In many circles and numerous senses people say emphatically that the cycle is "not cool" People, especially those who have never ridden, are put off by the fear of arriving hot and sweaty at their destination. Yet in our postmodern multimedia world it is image, rather than heat or smelly armpits that is the real problem. In the dominant culture of the media, in the business world and in popular culture there are several stereotypical images of the adult cyclist. They include:

- the working man with cycle clips and cloth cap
- the spinster with a wicker basket full of library books
- the black urban youth on a mountain bike in fluorescent lycra clothing and face mask
- the olympic gold medallist or stage winner in the Tour de France
- the muddy mountain biker lifting a machine from the racks on a four wheel drive motor vehicle.

None of these images is contemporary or everyday, and only the first two have any relationship with cycling as a means of transport.

Secondly the disincentives for cycling are exaggerated. Firstly the weather is portrayed as too wet or too cold, or sometimes as too hot. Yet regular commuters in Britain discover that conditions are rarely impossible, and only unpleasantly wet for their regular journeys on average one or two days each month. The dangers too are exaggerated, even though it is true that cyclists per mile traveled cyclists are twelve times as likely as car drivers and passengers to be killed and about 20 times as likely to be seriously injured. Only motor cyclists are at greater risk Gilbert & McCarthy (1994). However it seems curious to measure the risk purely by distance traveled rather than by time spent in the activity so the risks are probably not as great as the perception. Risks could easily be reduced by curbing speed, enforcing traffic law on drivers and by better road engineering including more and better cycle routes. For cyclists themselves, danger can also be reduced by training and with experience, by avoiding particularly dangerous types of road and by the use of high visibility clothing and helmets. The health benefits of cycling, even without a helmet, have been estimated to outweigh the hazards of road accidents by a factor of 20 to 1 (Source: Cycling towards Health & Safety, 1992, British Medical Association)

Cultural prejudice against cyclists emerges with increased frequency in casual conversation and in the press, especially in letters pages of local newspapers. In my locality inconvenience and indignation about the discourtesy of a minority of mainly young people who ride at night without lights, or on pavements in busy streets, has developed into a campaign against "cyclists" as a species. Clearly there are conflicts between different classes of road user, and the pedestrian can be

vulnerable to an inconsiderate bike rider, although serious injuries, and fatalities are rare. But the stereotypical image of the cyclo-terrorist seems to be applied to all. To judge from their talk and behaviour some pedestrians appear to continue the war when they crossed the car park and have undergone metamorphosis into motorists.

The culture of car dependency

More significant perhaps than the widespread hostility towards cycling in British culture is the positive love affair with the motor car. The political rhetoric in favour of cars often concentrates on the notion of individual freedom to move at will, as though the right to drive was enshrined in Magna Carta. Drivers are presented as people who should have totally free choice about where they live, where they work and where they take their leisure, and should enjoy unimpeded progress between destinations irrespective of the costs on other people and the environment. Indeed modern society and the economy has developed in ways that seem to depend on personal mobility by road, as workplaces, retail distribution centres, and new housing estates have been located at long distances from each other and marketed on the basis of rapid access to the motorway system. Economic freedom is also part of the pro-motorist case, as taxation on fuel, excise duty, parking charges and even penalties for illegal acts are portrayed as impositions rather than as reasonable contributions towards the publicly shared cost of an efficient and environmentally safe transport system. There are of course policy alternatives to a car dependent society, built in the long term around a land use planning system which would encourage integrated local urban living and in the shorter run around incentives towards personal journey options which are less damaging to the environment. Yet even discussing these policy options is as it were an uphill journey against a strong headwind.

An even greater barrier to a rational transport policy than economic and social dependence on the car is the status of the car as a cultural icon. This is especially a gender linked issue. There has been an increase in the number of women drivers, who tend to use cars in a functional way for their growing participation in the work force, for ferrying children and transporting shopping and as a relatively safe means of personal mobility. However, it is still the case that a lower proportion of women than men hold driving licenses, and in single car families it is predominantly the male partner who has primary access to and use of the motor vehicle. There seem to be two elements of the male love affair with the car. The first is that of socio-economic status; driving an expensive and up to date model speaks more about a man's success than almost anything else, and informal "league table" social comparisons between men are often based on ownership of particular vehicles. The second element is clearly linked to sexual potency, in particular a fast sporty car is seen to have "pulling power" with women, and some men at least seem to sublimate their sexual desires into particular aggressive or thrilling forms of driving behaviour. It is surely not without significance that motors are often referred to as "she", that car body design has both curvaceous female and phallic shapes, that motoring imagery and language is often thrusting, or that men's magazines and motor industry marketing make strong associations between the possession of a vehicle and the possession of a decorative young woman oozing with sexuality. Against such primal urges a rational approach to transport has little chance.

Unmentioned by the media

Any rational assessment of urban transport at the policy level would surely take into account the whole range of costs and benefits of car dependency. While it is the case that many transport experts and government advisers have discussed these policy issues in various publications and report, it does seem that the recent fuel "crisis" has led to a conspiracy of silence about these issues on the part of politicians, their press secretaries and the media. The reasoning behind the "fuel escalator" and high fuel taxation when it was introduced was to discourage car journeys in a noble effort to make some reduction in the level of greenhouse gas emissions, and thereby to reduce the impact of global warming. Short term economic and political considerations appear to have overshadowed the question of environmental costs of road transport dependency. Pollution of course also adds to

health costs, as respiratory disease rates increase in urban areas, while obesity and general lack of fitness in children and adults alike can be attributed to lack of exercise caused by car travel. Costs attributable to road accidents are also immense though scarcely mentioned, as the 20 or so fatal casualties each day, thousands of serious injuries and multi million pound insurance claims are barely noticed in the media. In contrast four deaths in the recent Hatfield train accident, in which over a hundred passengers travelling at over 100mph escaped unscathed, (such is the safety of railway coach design), led to a frenzy of safety checks which crippled the rail system for a month or more.

Car culture irrationality also tends to discount the stress costs of motoring, which has been measured by attaching heart monitors to drivers in heavy traffic. Stress of course can lead to poor mental and physical health, exhaustion and to road rage attacks. The social costs of the car, which encases individuals in hermetically sealed boxes, and militates against sociability between neighbours, and even within families are usually neglected. Many of the social costs are linked to the waste of time involved in car travel, which increases year by year as yet more cars are purchased and yet more inappropriate car journeys are made. Commuting by car for example has an opportunity cost in terms of eating into the hours available for family life or for work itself, if people were able to live close to their work. Alternatively the transport time could be used productively for reading or paperwork on the train, or for pleasant outdoor exercise on a bicycle. In summary the full true costs of car travel are rarely accounted for in the policy world, while the short term economic calculations made by individuals rarely consider the public cost of road building, let alone the wider and long term costs.

The link with industry and capital: vested interests

Finally one is entitled to ask whether the British cult of the car is merely an aspect of relatively naïve popular culture, or whether more sinister vested interests are at work. Clearly international capitalism in the shape of the car manufacturing industry and the huge multinational oil companies have much to gain by promoting widespread car ownership, and usage which maximises the consumption of fuel. Indeed it is no coincidence that the most serious international conflict of recent years, the 1991 Gulf War was largely about who should control some of the most productive oil fields in the world. Of course it is true that the car industry has been a major factor in economic growth throughout the last century and that any sudden move away from the car culture would lead to a painful structural adjustment in places like Dagenham and Birmingham, which depend heavily on the car industry. It is also true that research and publicity departments of the major oil companies are seriously searching for alternatives to the internal combustion engine in an effort to maintain their markets over the medium to long term. However one cannot help but suspect that it is the economic power of the car and oil industries that has shaped and maintained the car dependent culture of the Western world. In face of this hegemony it is scarcely surprising that the rationality of the humble bicycle as the ideal means of urban transport is totally overwhelmed.

Questions for discussion

- Does the writer present a fair and rationally argued case for cycling and against car dependency, or is his argument biased by his personal commitment as a "born-again" cyclist?
- Why do some countries in Europe, and some towns in the UK appear to be more cycle friendly and have higher rates of cycle usage than others?
- Collect some newspaper and magazine articles about cars and cycling and examine the discourse and images. Does your analysis bear out what the writer has said?
- What policies could the government introduce to make an effective change away from car dependency, and how could they persuade the electorate to support such changes?
- Can you think of other issues in transport, or other fields where people behave irrationally because of cultural pressure?

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<http://gargravarr.cc.utexas.edu/chrisj/cycling/health.html>

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THE AUTHOR'S Cycling Web pages:

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He is a keen cycle commuter and tourist, and with his son is involved in a local cycle racing club. He has also been active for many years in the Newham branch of the London Cycling Campaign. For more information on his cycling activities click here web site at <http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/cycling.html>