

**A STRONG PRESENCE, BUT A WEAK HISTORY.
THE BICYCLE IN DUTCH HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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I am presenting this paper also on behalf of my colleague Manuel Stoffers. Both having a background in cultural history, we decided in 2009 to re-direct at least part of our research attention to the history of cycling. To start with, we wanted to create an overview of the historiography of cycling in the Netherlands as well as abroad. One of the results so far was the launch of an online international Cycling History Bibliography, already containing more than 1500 titles from many different countries (<http://www.fasos-research.nl/sts/cyclinghistory/>). If you have any titles to add, please visit the website and send us a mail.

Our interest in Dutch bicycle history was triggered by a paradox – a paradox which we will elaborate on in this paper. The paradox is that while the Netherlands has a long-standing and well-deserved reputation as a bicycling nation, historical interest in the bicycle and bicycling, in particular at the academic level, is not well-developed. The growing international interest in bicycle history in the past few decades has not reverberated in the Netherlands.

There are good reasons for the image of the Netherlands as a bicycling country. Whereas after the Second World War the use of bicycles strongly declined in most Western countries, it continued to be high in the Netherlands: the country even developed the largest bicycle density in the world. The bicycle's annual 'transport performance', the cumulative distance travelled by all cyclists together, was surpassed in the Netherlands by the automobile only in 1960, but it continued to be comparatively high afterward, and until 1990 even higher than that of the train. However, the special position of the bicycle as a crucial everyday means of transportation, also in Dutch traffic policies, is hardly reflected in Dutch mobility history, in which shipping, railroads and the automobile are centre-stage.

Also more generally, Dutch scholars show little interest in bicycle history. The number of Dutch contributions to the *International Cycling History Conferences* is not impressive: from over 370 during the past twenty years only fifteen have come from Dutch authors, of whom only two had an academic background. Until recently it was impossible to find the ICHC proceedings in any Dutch library, while the same holds true for many other international publications on the subject. While in countries such as France, Germany, Britain, the United States and Canada there is academic involvement in the history of bicycling, the subject appears hardly of interest to Dutch historians, although it would fit in well with the increased attention for national history and heritage as well as for *lieux de mémoire*. The Velorama ‘national bicycling museum’ in Nijmegen, set up in 1981 and which organised the ICHC conference in 1990, is a private initiative that is little known in the Netherlands, receives no government funding, and is hardly recognized within Dutch academic circles, although the museum has a large and representative collection of historic bicycles as well as a documentation centre.

Bicycles, it seems, are too everyday and too uncontested in the Netherlands to serve as a topic of academic historical research. While in other countries academics have shown interest in bicycles and bicycling from both a scholarly and political-ideological perspective, to Dutch intellectuals the self-evident nature of bicycles has basically rendered them into a *non-issue*. After all, in the Dutch context there is no need for the promotion of the bicycle’s practical usefulness through historical examples or political-ideological arguments. It is characteristic of the pragmatic and utilitarian Dutch attitude regarding bicycling that the research in this field is dominated here by engineers and mobility experts, who are mainly interested in traffic policies and infrastructural issues, and show little regard for the divergent cultural and historical dimensions of bicycling.

There are some general and local as well as specialized Dutch bicycle histories, but these publications rarely start from specific scholarly concerns, systematic research or a critical processing of insights from international scholarship. Nor does most of this work show much analysis, critical sense and attention for the socio-cultural and political context of bicycling – the perspective from which we would like to approach the subject. In fact, nearly all Dutch publications on bicycle history are marked by a

journalistic or popular history approach and their quality is generally lower than that of many foreign studies that do cover the social, cultural and political meanings of bicycles and bicycling. Although some of the existing Dutch works are informative, most of them are rather amateurish and they are characterized by an anecdotal structure and the absence of source references.

Also, in contrast to many foreign studies that appeared from the 1960s and 1970s, Dutch bicycle histories were neither inspired by bicycle activism, promoting the bike as an energy- and environmentally-conscious and ‘human’ means of transportation. It is telling of the Dutch pragmatism regarding bicycles that Dutch bicycle history was advanced not so much by bicycle activists, but by the manufacture sector. However, in contrast to some sophisticated international, in particular British and American, historical scholarship on the bicycle industry and trade, there is no solid historical study of a major Dutch bicycle producer like Gazelle and Batavus, nor is there one of the Dutch bicycle sector in general.

The absence of a strong industrial tradition in the Netherlands and of technology museums probably has impeded historical interest in the development of the bicycle, the more so because the Dutch have played no significant role in the invention and innovation of the bicycle: the dandy horse came from Germany, the velocipede from France and the high-wheeler and safety bicycle from England. Also, in later innovations such as the racing, touring, recumbent and mountain bike, Dutch bicycle producers have been followers rather than trendsetters – perhaps with the exception of various new types of carrier bicycles, which have become very popular in Amsterdam in recent years. It is striking however that partly as an effect of the prolonged protection of the Dutch bicycle industry from foreign competition, a specific bicycle design could become dominant, one that was adjusted to the flat landscape, wet climate, daily use and dominant standards of decency. The *Hollandrad*, as the Germans call it, is marked by the vertical and unsportsmanlike posture of the rider, by its sturdiness and heavy weight, its black colour and by its standard package of accessories such as a luggage carrier, chain guard, dress-guards and lighting. We will come back to the typical Dutch bicycle when we address the need to explain the popularity of bicycling in the Netherlands from a socio-cultural and political perspective.

Whereas in countries like France, Italy, Germany, and Belgium interesting works on the history of cycle-racing, including its social, cultural and political implications, have appeared, in the Netherlands little similar work has been done, although Dutch cyclists have been fairly successful from the very beginnings of cycling as a sport and there are plenty of source materials. Almost without exception the many Dutch publications on cycle-racing are of a journalistic or popular-historical nature and they pay no attention to themes that render it into a major topic of historical study also outside the circle of cycle racing devotees. In the Netherlands, unlike in France, Italy and Flanders, a connection between cycle racing and national pride and identity never materialized. While in the first half of the twentieth century road races such as the Tour de France, Italy's Giro and the Tour of Flanders acquired their classic popular status, such a tradition never developed in the Netherlands because up to the Second World War the number of road cycling races remained quite limited here as a result of prohibitive rules in the 1905 Motor and Bicycle Act. The specific social and cultural character of bicycling in the Netherlands, which we will discuss at the end of this paper, might explain the lack of a strong Dutch cycle-racing tradition.

To be true, there was some academic interest in bicycles and bicycling in the Netherlands from the 1990s on. The work on the history of the 'social construction' of the bicycle as a technological artifact by our colleague Wiebe Bijker, whose main concern pertained to the design of a sociological model for technology development, is well-known (though not uncontested). We would also like to draw attention to Adri Albert de la Bruhèze's and Frank Veraart's comparative study of the development of bicycle use and policy during the twentieth century in nine European cities (including four Dutch) published in 1999. They looked at the interrelations between developments in utilitarian bicycle use on the one hand and local and national traffic policies on the other. This original contribution to bicycle historiography slightly modified the image of exceptional high Dutch bicycle use, not only by pointing to large local differences within the country, but also by arguing that before the Second World War some foreign cities had a similar high bicycle density. After the 1950s a sharp decline in bicycle use would ensue in all countries, followed by stabilization or an increase from the 1970s. A striking conclusion was that differences in bicycle use in the late twentieth century could largely be traced back to the effects of local traffic

circulation policies implemented decades earlier. Moreover, the authors also noted a strong interrelationship between long-term policies and local public images of bicycling. This project, although carried out by academic researchers, did not so much arise from an intrinsic academic interest, but it was prompted by the Dutch Ministry of Transportation, which in the 1990s launched a sizable bicycle stimulation program, the so-called *Masterplan Fiets*. The study's policy-oriented, social-science character was reflected not only in the many statistical sources used by the authors, but also in their presentation of a general explanatory model of bicycle use.

As indicated earlier on, the Netherlands is lagging behind other countries when it comes to pursuing the social and political history of bicycle culture. In many recent international historical works on bicycling the emphasis is on its social, cultural and political aspects. In this historiography the bicycle is presented as both product and instrument of modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The subjects treated from this perspective range from the important contribution of the bicycle to technological innovation; a new experience of time and space; individual mobility, traffic-regulation and -infrastructure; mass tourism, the changing dynamic between city and countryside and suburbanization; nature and environmental awareness; body culture and mass sports; social democratization, the development of individual freedom, citizenship and women's emancipation; and the formation of national unity and identity. At the same time bicycling was also viewed as a compensation or counterbalance of the supposedly harmful and unhealthy effects of high-paced modern life, as a way to control modernity.

The perspective of democracy and national identity has been adopted by the German historian Anne-Katrin Ebert, who wrote a dissertation about the history of bicycling in the period between 1870 and 1940 in Germany and the Netherlands. Her comparative study, which will be published this year under the title *Radelnde nationen* (by Campus Verlag) is, in our view, the most interesting study published on Dutch bicycle culture so far. She offers a surprising explanation for the status of the Netherlands as a typical bicycling country. The *common sense* view holds that the high number of bicycles has been stimulated by favourable geographical and spatial conditions: the virtual absence of differences in altitude, the short distances and the high level of urbanization. Ebert shifts the accent towards a social-cultural perspective: she argues

that the popularity of the bicycle can to a large extent be explained by the specific ways in which the bicycle was constructed and promoted as a vehicle of Dutch national identity. She points out that the bicycle was already in 1917 characterized as the most popular means of transportation of the Dutch and in the interwar period the Netherlands was seen as the bicycle country par excellence by Dutch and foreigners alike, even though at that time large-scale bicycle use was common in more European countries.

According to Ebert, in particular the liberal- and national-minded bourgeois citizens who were in charge of the National Dutch Bicycle Association (ANWB) established the connection between bicycling and national virtues as well as middle-class ideals of civilization and citizenship, which centred on achieving a balance between individual liberty and social egalitarianism on the one hand and self-control and social responsibility and stability on the other. The ANWB also actively associated bicycling with historical traditions like ice-skating and with the interconnectedness of various regions. As special interest organisation for bicycle tourists the Association propagated the discovery of the countryside and national landscapes and heritage. It also strongly contributed to the implementation of standardized and uniform traffic rules on a national scale, whereby bicyclists were presented as decent traffic participants with the same rights as others. The continuing publicity around bicycling Dutch royalty tied in with an already widely spread view of bicycling as a characteristic element of Dutch identity.

Even more important, in particular in comparison with Germany, and probable also with Britain, was that the liberal-bourgeois ANWB promoted the bicycle as a democratic means of transportation that would bring progress for all classes of the population. While in Germany, and also Britain, the labour movement deployed the bicycle as instrument for its political cause, in the Netherlands the image of the bicycle as vehicle of national unity prevailed. The ANWB advocated the diffusion of the bicycle among workers as a way to elevate them to the level of the respectable middle class and integrate them in the nation. This civilizing offensive was in part a reason for the 1905 legal prohibition on road cycling races, which did not fit in with bourgeois respectability, and it might also explain the long predominance of the typical solid and decent *Hollandrad*. Unlike in Germany and Britain, in the

Netherlands the workers movement developed no specific ideological bond with bicycles. Consequently, the increasing use of bicycles by the working classes did not lead to a social status decline of bicycling, causing the upper and later also the middle classes to turn their back on this vehicle, which in fact happened in Germany and Britain. Because automobiles could not be conceived as civilizing tool for the masses to the same extent, in the interwar period the ANWB continued to defend the interests of cyclists and motorists side by side.

Thus Ebert suggests not only an explanation for the bicycle's public image as national means of transportation and for its sustained dominance vis-à-vis other means of transportation, but also for the remarkably slow diffusion of cars in the Netherlands as well as for the absence of a national cycling mythology. Her study, which suggests that the Dutch bicycling tradition is not a self-evident matter, but the product of a specific historical development, also makes one wonder whether the popularity of the bicycle or the specific style of bicycling in the Netherlands has anything to do with this country's fairly egalitarian social relations and its cultivation of particular middle-class values.

To conclude we would suggest that although Dutch bicycle historiography lags behind British, German, French and American work, it also offers some insights which might be worth while to explore in international comparative research. The first is the importance of long-term infrastructural planning for the image of bicycling and the actual use of the bicycle as a daily means of transportation. The second is the connection suggested by Ebert between the popularity of bicycling and social egalitarianism. The third concerns the perspective on the dynamic between bicycling and motorized traffic. In technology and transportation history and also in many bicycle histories that focus on the late nineteenth en early twentieth century, the bike is often discussed as a precursor of the automobile that in response to the latter's rise naturally lost its historical importance. The argument is that the bicycle paved the way for the automobile, both in terms of production and technology as well as in terms of use and public image. Many historians who draw a connection between the bicycle and modernity do so against the backdrop of the rapid rise of motorized traffic in countries such as the United States, Britain and Germany. But can this development be generalized? The Dutch case shows that the effect of such a finalistic view on the

history of mobility is a distortion of historical reality: it suggests that in the course of the twentieth century the bicycle gave way to the automobile more rapidly than in fact happened. Furthermore, Dutch bicycle history shows the bicycle was not simply replaced by the car: regarding bicycles and automobiles there was no straightforward changing of the guard in the Netherlands and, connected to this, the specific qualities of bicycles vis-à-vis autos, such as their being faster in cities and suburbanized areas, were valued.