

# Environmentalism and the Bicycle

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**ABSTRACT** *In the United Kingdom, the bicycle has played a role in the oppositional cultures of various social movements; feminism and socialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, post-1960s anarchism and, most recently, environmentalism. This article discusses the significance of the bicycle to the discourse and practice of the contemporary environmental movement. At the level of discourse, the bicycle is mobilised routinely in constructing the green visions to which environmentalism aspires; and in practice, use of the bicycle organises and helps to sustain the distinctive 'green lifestyles' of environmental activists. Thus, as an object both utilised discursively in green talk and texts, and actually ridden by green practitioners, the bicycle powerfully enables the articulation of an alternative society, a green vision of sustainability. The case of the bicycle demonstrates how 'ordinary' materialities can contribute to the development and performance of antagonistic cultural and political identities.*

## Introduction

Environmentalism is a politics full of materiality. What we might call 'green materialities' are central to the development of green visions within environmentalist discourse. Such materialities of a future sustainable society are generally contrasted to the materialities which dominate and contaminate today. So, for example, solar panels and wind turbines are opposed to a sinister nuclear iconography; organic foods, allotments and compost bins occupy a different world to potentially dangerous chemical and genetic technologies. As materialisations of ecological concern, this set of green materialities tends to be invoked whenever 'the way forward' is articulated, every time an attempt is made to speak of 'solutions' to the world's social and environmental 'problems'.

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At the mundane level of the everyday, some green materialities contribute directly to distinctively green lifestyles. Typically, these materialities not only articulate and symbolise alternative values, but also facilitate the development and living out of a politically contentious way of life. Conversely, other materialities are perceived as pollutants which frustrate the development of green lifestyles and visions. Neither the car nor the television, for example, generally figure in green visions of the future, and are typically denigrated in green politics, and marginalised within green lifestyles (Horton, 2003a). Conversely, the personal computer is increasingly central to both the pursuit of environmental politics and the development of a green lifestyle (Horton, 2004).

This article describes and analyses the significance to contemporary environmentalism of one particular green materiality, the bicycle.<sup>1</sup> It argues that the bicycle is a vehicle mobilised in the construction of a political and green way of life, and in two ways: first, as an object of environmental discourse, the bicycle is mobilised into the articulation of green visions; and second, as an object used in the everyday lives of environmental activists, the bicycle mobilises those activists' distinctively green lifestyles. The bicycle is both symbolic, an iconic object of green discourse, and practical, an object in daily use, and furthermore one which lends distinctive form to the everyday lives of environmental activists, contributing to their green lifestyles and to the wider shaping of green culture.

### **The Greening of the Bicycle**

Environmentalism continues a tradition of the bicycle playing an important role in social movements. During the 1890s the bicycle became symbolic of women's push for greater freedoms (Holt, 1989: 121–4); it enabled an escape from gendered norms in styles of dress, patterns of mobility and types of leisure, such that 'the movement it set in motion for re-evaluating social conventions of dress, manners, status and roles was irreversible' (Carse, 1994: 112). Falling prices between the late nineteenth century and the outbreak of the First World War produced a democratic expansion in the accessibility of bicycles (Lloyd-Jones & Lewis, 2000: Ch. 2), which became an important aspect of the cultural and political worlds of socialists throughout north-western Europe and north America (McGurn, 1999: 138–47). In Britain cycling was a key part of the Clarion movement (Pye, 2004), which 'provided cultural support for socialists', and which 'was very much part of the socialist offensive in the Edwardian period' (Jones, 1988: 34). Each weekend urban cyclists took to bicycles and rode into the countryside to spread what Stephen Yeo calls the new 'religion of socialism' (in Jones, 1988: 27).

Feminists and socialists utilised a relatively novel technology to change their everyday lives and construct wider demands, for release from patriarchal constraints for women and for a socialist society to liberate the working class. Thus in its early days the bicycle was caught up in the pursuit of greater

freedoms; as an object of independent mobility it powerfully enabled the expansion of real and imaginative horizons. But by the 1960s, British society was accelerating towards mass motorisation, and other modes of mobility were consequently being marginalised. A new critique of the negative side-effects of processes of modernisation, and growing environmental awareness, began to take hold. An important issue for post-1960s progressive politics is the growing dominance of the system of motorised mobility and its effects; ever-increasing speed, distance and dispersal alongside the erosion of 'local community', conviviality and 'nature'. Mass automobility had already been a target of Situationist critiques (Debord, 1959; Vaneigem, 2000). This tradition of thinking, in which the car symbolises an inauthentic and alienated life, informs a contemporary anarchism which celebrates the bicycle as the car's other (Ferrell, 2001: Ch. 3; Carlsson, 2002).

But what of the bicycle's relevance to environmentalism? The early 1970s were dominated by concerns over energy crises. In his hugely influential *Small is Beautiful*, published in 1963, the economist E. F. Schumacher (1974:123) had already warned that 'the inroads being made into the world's non-renewable resources, particularly those of fossil fuels, are such that serious bottlenecks and virtual exhaustion loom ahead in the quite foreseeable future'. Over the following decade, a range of influential writers continued to write out of this context, including André Gorz and, most significantly, Ivan Illich. In *Energy and Equity* (1974: 57), however, Illich moves beyond the energy crises to lament what he sees as a more fundamental 'involuntary acceleration of personal rhythms' which motorised traffic imposes.<sup>2</sup>

During this period environmentalist concerns shifted away from the protection of particular sites and species and towards more explicit critique of specific environmentally damaging practices, such as use of the car. Before the 1960s concerns about the car were largely the preserve of transport campaigners, and emphasised the damage cars cause to individual bodies, and especially to pedestrians and cyclists. As automobility accelerated, rising traffic and congestion, alongside the substantial reshaping of urban environments to accommodate the car, provoked widespread concern (Buchanan, 1964; Thompson, 1969; Plowden, 1972; Wistrich, 1983). Like the later anti-road campaigns of the 1990s (Welsh & McLeish, 1996; Seel, 1997), controversies around the destruction of neighbourhoods and communities by rising car use and constant road building contributed to broader processes of the car's politicisation and vilification. So already during the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by new environmentalist discourses, the damage which cars *in general* do to society and the environment *in general* is coming much more into focus.

Aligned with this shift was the incorporation of various 'green' practices into new political repertoires. With regard to transport, what is needed is a vehicle able to negotiate the urban environment without leading to its degradation, suffocation or ceaseless expansion. With cars driving affluent societies towards the environmental apocalypse, bicycles become the route to ecological sanity. As the car becomes increasingly constructed as 'the problem', the car's other,

the bicycle, emerges as 'the solution'. In *Energy and Equity* Illich insists that 'free people must travel the road to productive social relations at the speed of a bicycle' (1974: 24). Illich also provides a set of figures still used by environmental transport campaigners. Based on a series of calculations of the amount of time it takes to pay for and run a car, Illich suggests that 'The model American puts in 1,600 hours to get 7,500 miles: less than five miles per hour' (1974: 31).

If this is the background from which the bicycle's importance to environmentalism emerges, what of the relationship between the bicycle and environmentalism today? This paper explores the centrality of the bicycle to contemporary British environmentalism. It first explores the bicycle in environmentalist discourse, and then considers the bicycle's importance to the actual lifestyles of environmental activists.

### **The Bicycle in Environmentalist Discourse**

Environmentalist texts routinely critique the dominance of car culture and acclaim 'sustainable' alternatives, including the bicycle. Emails, websites, newsletters, campaign posters, protest flyers, magazine articles and books continuously reproduce the powerful green cultural code that the car is bad and the bicycle good. In the words of one slogan popular throughout the 1990s, 'two wheels good, four wheels bad'. Typically, a key means of achieving sustainability requires a social shift from the car to other modes of mobility; public transport, foot and bike (McLaren *et al.*, 1998; Christensen, 2004; Hillman, 2004). John Ryan (1999: Ch. 1) claims that, for all the current interest in vehicles powered by alternative fuels and so-called 'smart cars', the bicycle is the only vehicle that addresses *all* the environmental liabilities of the oil-dependent car. For Lester R. Brown of the Earth Policy Institute (2001: 199), 'The bicycle's attractions are many. It alleviates congestion, lowers pollution, reduces obesity, increases physical fitness, does not emit climate-disrupting carbon dioxide, and is affordable for billions of people who cannot buy an automobile'. In the 'good green society' people will undoubtedly ride bikes. Ryan (1999) considers the bicycle to be one of 'the seven sustainable wonders of the world',<sup>3</sup> and the title of one Worldwatch Institute report sums up environmentalism's general attitude: *The Bicycle: Vehicle for a Small Planet* (Lowe, 1989).

The bicycle is also prominent in the discourses of key environmental organisations. The Green Party of England and Wales' *Manifesto for a Sustainable Society* states that walking and cycling 'will be given the highest priority in transport planning', and that Green Party policy aims 'to make it possible for walking and cycling to account for most short distance journeys made' (2003, policy TR150). For Friends of the Earth, the promotion of cycling is key to 'unlocking the gridlock' (Friends of the Earth, 1997), and to cycle or walk rather than use the car is number 1 in their '20 tips to a greener lifestyle' ([http://www.foe.co.uk/living/poundsavers/20\\_tips.html](http://www.foe.co.uk/living/poundsavers/20_tips.html), accessed

14 July 2005). At the local level, activists affiliated to these environmental groups (and as we will see, whose own lives are powerfully shaped by use of the bicycle) are often involved in and always supportive of the push for better cycling infrastructure and facilities.<sup>4</sup>

Both established and emerging 'green places' also actively promote cycling. The website of 'Europe's leading eco-centre', the Centre for Alternative Technology in mid-Wales, urges the reader to 'Use your bicycle. As much as you can!' in its list of '25 ways to save the planet' (<http://www.cat.org.uk/information>, accessed 14 July 2005). The more recently developed Eden Project in south-west England, meanwhile, wants to encourage more people to visit its site by bike, and offers a £3 discount to anyone arriving by bicycle (<http://www.edenproject.com>, accessed 14 July 2005).

So what gives the bicycle its particular prominence in environmentalist discourse? Why is this vehicle regularly and routinely invoked in green texts and green visions? As a technological assemblage, it powerfully embodies many of the values central to the contemporary environmental movement, including in the following ways:

- The bicycle contests the dominant rhythms of societies seemingly obsessed with ever greater speed (Virilio, 1997) and mobility (Urry, 2000). As a relatively slow vehicle with a short distance range, the bicycle fits with environmentalist commitments to the slowing down of the 'excessive' speed of contemporary everyday life (see Illich, 1974), and to the local.
- The bicycle is not the car; indeed, in environmentalist discourse it is opposed to the car, despite their sharing key characteristics: like the car, but unlike the bus and train, the bicycle affords flexible, individual and 'private' travel.
- Related to the above, by enabling an individualised demonstration of responsibility to the planet, the bicycle affords the embodied performance of an individualistic green political identity, one which contrasts with other progressive political identities, such as socialism, which are more clearly orientated towards collective practices.
- The bicycle within environmentalism is seen as neither especially classed nor gendered; it is a vehicle 'open to all'. No doubt this perception is enabled by there being – unusually for a cycling culture – little variation in attitudes to and especially use of the bicycle between male and female environmentalists.<sup>5</sup>
- The bicycle is perceived as democratic and equitable. Almost anyone can afford some kind of machine, and it is cheap to both run and maintain.
- As a relatively transparent and understandable technological assemblage, the bicycle is perceived as 'appropriate technology', in which the user can participate.
- The bicycle in contemporary Britain has retained its particular resonance, produced in the early- to mid-twentieth century as city dwellers escaped on

bikes to ‘the country’, of a close, benign and wholesome relationship to ‘the natural world’.

- Riding a bicycle necessitates encounters with others; although a form of ‘private’ transport, the bicycle arguably embodies a much stronger ‘public’ orientation than the car. By cycling, one is ‘re-peopling’ and ‘re-humanising’ the cityscape.
- The bicycle demands involvement of ‘the body’, and both produces and performs health and fitness. The physical effort required demonstrates ethical and political commitment to the environment; by cycling one parades not only the taking of personal responsibility for one’s own body, but also for the inter-connected bodies of ‘the community’ and planet.
- So visibly on display, the bicycle enables the public performance of a morally exemplary identity. Cycling is an embodied performance of green politics; a personal action which demonstrates consistency with green values, and which prefigures the kind of society to which environmentalism aspires. Riding a bicycle directly performs ‘the personal as political’.
- Unlike other contemporary materialities, the bicycle has not been problematised and politicised by the environmental movement.<sup>6</sup> Despite the possibility of such (Boal, 2002), no ‘negative’ history of the bicycle has penetrated environmentalist discourse.<sup>7</sup> A zero-emission vehicle which does not contribute to congestion and rarely maims other creatures, the bicycle seems to have no adverse consequences.

This absence of problematisation and politicisation results precisely from (and contributes to) the bicycle’s iconic status within contemporary British environmentalism. The bicycle symbolises the alternative society towards which environmentalism strives. In contrast, more recent technologies such as the computer and internet, although similarly important in constructing and organising green lifestyles, are regarded as merely useful. The bicycle is thus immune from eco-criticism; its elevated place within environmentalism requires its taken-for-granted, unequivocal endorsement.

With much in its favour and little to say against it, this vehicle takes centre stage in the virtuous materialities of environmentalism and, among environmental activists, cycling as a practice clearly embodies and performs environmental concern and commitment. It is no accident that symbolic green journeys, what we might call ‘green pilgrimages’, are frequently made by bicycle; for instance, various ‘cycle caravans’ rode to the G8 summit in Scotland in July 2005. A flyer advertising one of the rides states ‘Two wheels good! Travelling by bicycle – the healthiest and most environmentally friendly form of transport, a practical demonstration of our commitment to an ecologically sustainable future’ (for more details of this particular ride, see [www.g8bikeride.org.uk](http://www.g8bikeride.org.uk), accessed 14 July 2005). Although not all activists are committed riders and outspoken advocates of the bicycle, they invariably recognise and respect this object as unambiguously good. It occupies a central role in the environmentalist imaginary even when absent from the mundane

practices of everyday life. But as the next section explores, the bicycle effectively enables the enactment of a green politics in everyday life, and thus lends green colour to that life. Bicycle riding contributes to a green lifestyle at the individual level, and a green culture at the collective level.

### **The Bicycle in Environmentalists' Lifestyles**

Environmentalism is a hugely embodied politics (Lichterman, 1996). In other words, activists incorporate environmental concern and commitment into their everyday cultural practice; they seek consistency between their 'political' positions and 'personal' preferences, pursuing practices compatible with the visions they strive to create (Melucci, 1989). So not only is the bicycle a significant green materiality, it is also a key green mobility which is central to the everyday lives of environmentalists. Beyond the obvious point that environmental activists use bicycles to travel around, this section explores how the bicycle importantly structures the everyday lives of those activists, and thus contributes to the construction of their distinctively green lifestyles.

Do environmentalists really ride bicycles as much as their popular caricatures suggest? If those studied as part of a wider project exploring the cultural practices of environmental activists are typical, the answer is undoubtedly 'yes'. Participant-observation, together with individual interviews and a set of focus groups, formed part of an ethnography of everyday life among environmental activists in Lancaster, a northern English city, between 1998 and 2002 (Horton, 2003b). Overall rates of cycling in the Lancaster district are above the national average of 1% of all trips, but far below cycling levels in other university towns such as Cambridge, York and Oxford, where at least 10% of all trips are made by bike. Yet among Lancaster's environmental activists, cycling is the most important means of intra-urban mobility. Almost all activists own and regularly use a bicycle in the normal course of their everyday lives.

This does not mean that environmental activists are 'cycling enthusiasts'. Among activists the bicycle and cycling form only part of an alternative green lifestyle, so that their elective identities are not defined exclusively, or even predominantly, by cycling. Rather, activists are 'environmentalists' who cycle as one part of their green practice. Unlike many cycling enthusiasts, environmental activists do not generally wear a great deal of clothing designed specifically for cyclists; they cycle in their ordinary 'green clothes' and remain 'environmentalists', rather than change out of 'normal clothing' into 'cycling gear' to become 'cyclists'. But some accessories are important to this maintenance of cycling as an ordinary part of everyday life: such as panniers, waterproof jackets, child seats and trailers for carrying children or other loads.

How specifically do activists use bicycles? Primarily, as a significant form of intra-urban mobility. The bicycle is used for moving around town in order to attend meetings, access places of paid employment, go shopping, tend allotments and visit friends. From Monday to Friday one activist, Karen,

cycles 4 miles daily each way between home and work; she also rides to a range of evening meetings and to visit friends living in different parts of the city. Among Lancaster's seven Green Party city councillors, the bicycle is the main means of travelling to meetings at either Lancaster or Morecambe Town Halls; if the cycle racks outside these buildings are full, other environmental activists passing by know that, inside, Green Party business is inevitably in progress.

What are the main effects, from a sociological point of view, of activists' cycling?<sup>8</sup> Perhaps most significant, use of the bicycle tends to keep everyday life within 'cycling distance' (and a cultural preference among environmental activists for compact urban living makes the bicycle, like walking, a much more viable means of mobility). The irony here is that the bicycle historically led to an expansion in the geographical range of people's everyday lives.<sup>9</sup> But growing car ownership and use has accelerated the stretched-out and sprawling character of different parts of daily life initiated by the bicycle (Carley & Spapens, 1998: 21). Distances between homes, schools, workplaces, shops, friends and sites of leisure have grown. John Urry (2003) notes how automobility has irreversibly set in train a whole series of new and more dispersed socialities which are now routinised parts of ordinary life for a majority of people in high consumption societies such as the United Kingdom. The many negative consequences of such sprawling cities are increasingly apparent (Putnam, 2000; Brown, 2001: Ch. 9). Urban sprawl contributes to, among other things, increased air pollution, traffic congestion, 'wasted' time, obesity, falling public involvement, declining social interaction and deteriorating quality of life.

So if originally cycling extended people's everyday geographies, today it constricts them; where the car encourages sprawl, the way in which environmental activists use the bicycle tends to produce the opposite effect, squeezing the different aspects of everyday life into a more compact geographical area. This is not merely the 'making of short journeys by bike' widely recommended by 'pro-cycling' government policy and environmental organisations alike.<sup>10</sup> In such calls for people to replace their shorter-distance trips by car with trips by bike, there is (arguably) little conception of actually shifting the geographical range of people's everyday mobilities, only their modes of mobility for specific – shorter – journeys. In contrast, the use by environmental activists of cycling as the main mode of intra-urban mobility is centrally implicated in the very making of 'the local', and in the establishment of spatially more restricted boundaries around the meanings of 'everyday travel'.

Activists' use of the bicycle also renders their lives more 'public'. The car is a 'privatised' capsule inhabiting 'public' space.<sup>11</sup> Thus, as the city has been colonised increasingly by roads, cars, parked cars and car parks, automobilised society has effectively privatised vast expanses of urban space which, for the contemporary car dweller, consists of an increasingly distant and unfamiliar 'outside environment' and an intimately familiar cocoon-like 'inside environment'. The bicycle is also, of course, a 'private' vehicle, and perhaps more so

than the car, in that most carry a single individual.<sup>12</sup> But the cyclist is far from isolated; the bicycle is also an intensely 'public' mode of mobility. There are two different aspects to cycling as a public act.

First is the way in which, by cycling, activists are demonstrating a green lifestyle to themselves and others, and most especially and importantly like-minded others. With no screen mediating the 'public' gaze and rendering them anonymous, cyclists traverse space nakedly, in full view of others (although to some extent the increasing use of helmets tends to mask the cyclist's identity). Engaged in a marginalised, distinctive and distinguishing act, the cyclist unavoidably sends signals to the rest of society. Cycling is a key way in which one's green credentials, and thus standing as an authentic local environmental activist is announced, paraded (or pedalled) and maintained. People using bicycles for the kinds of journeys which might be considered difficult to make by bicycle compound these distinguishing effects. Some activists also pull trailers behind their bicycles, to carry large and/or heavy loads – weekly shopping, tools to and from the allotment, even furniture during the process of moving house. Similarly, activists' children ride in child seats, in bike trailers, on trailer-bikes and tandems. Such examples demonstrate use of the bicycle as a practical, everyday form of transport, and one which can cope with the complexities and demands of contemporary life; they are therefore especially distinctive and status-rich.

Second, the public act of cycling reproduces a local 'green community' not only through the affiliative work of performing an appropriate green identity but also because of an associated increase in chance encounters between cycling and walking environmental activists.<sup>13</sup> Not only is the cyclist more likely to notice and be noticed by like-minded others than the person in a car, but the person on a bicycle finds it relatively easy to slow down and exchange greetings, or to stop and chat. Indeed, on a bicycle it can be (sometimes frustratingly) difficult to ignore the social and moral compulsion to do so. Overall, then, reliance on the bicycle as one's ordinary means of mobility contributes to the reproduction of the socially dense, physically proximate setting within which activists' everyday lives are played out. These compact and vibrant locally occurring social networks to which cycling contributes form the essential backdrop to the production of environmentalists' distinctively green lifestyles (Horton, 2006).

Given growing concern with the body, and specifically with the 'fat' body and 'obesity' as a health issue, another effect of the bicycle is noteworthy. Lester R. Brown (2001: 196) claims that 'obesity – which is concentrated in cities – is reaching epidemic proportions worldwide'. Brown (2001: 196) claims, further, that 'Ninety-five percent of Americans who attempt to achieve a healthy body weight by dieting alone fail, largely because exercise deprivation is also contributing to obesity'. If the car and its systems contribute to the production of fat bodies, the bicycle tends to keep the body slim. 'Unless we can design a life-style that systematically restores exercise to our daily routines, the obesity epidemic – and the health deterioration associated with it – will

continue to spread along with urbanization' (Brown, 2001: 199). In the United Kingdom, the cycle promotion charity 'Life Cycle' organises projects emphasising the health benefits of cycling, and pioneered the concept of cycling on prescription whereby doctors prescribe cycling to patients whose health is likely to benefit from being more physically active (see [www.lifecycleuk.org.uk](http://www.lifecycleuk.org.uk), accessed 14 July 2005).

To summarise, the bicycle's very importance as a mode of mobility among environmental activists facilitates a way of life that is relatively 'local', 'public' and 'healthy'. The centrality of a distinctive and 'public' form of mobility in a spatially compact everyday life results in a high degree of interconnectedness, keeping local environmentalists in touch with one another and thus contributing to the reproduction of their collective green culture. Environmentalists' use of the bicycle, in other words, actively constructs a local green culture, and the distinctive green lifestyles which that culture tends to reproduce.

### **Discussion: Green Meanings of the Bicycle**

Why do contemporary environmentalists embrace the bicycle so enthusiastically? In order to probe the relationships between environmentalism and the bicycle in more depth, the following discussion considers this question from three different angles, approaching environmentalists' cycling as – in turn – principally about a search for distinction, about the assertion of opposition, and about the achievement of sustainability.

#### *The Bicycle as a Vehicle of Distinction*

Environmental activists certainly want their cycling to be noticed. First of all, they want to be visible to the majority of road users with the potential to kill them; the aim of lights, fluorescent jackets and luminous wrist and ankle bands is to render the cyclist more noticeable to motorists. But, second, activists often talk about their cycling as demonstrating to others the viability of alternatives to the car.<sup>14</sup> Activists, then, are not only contributing to the virtuous green practice of cycling directly; they also see their own cycling as a practice which observers might strive to emulate, and thus as forming part of a virtuous circle and helping to promote still more cycling. And third, the performance of cycling earns distinction within green culture; as an iconic green practice, it builds a specifically green capital. Cycling enables the creation of the sense of oneself as a 'good' or 'authentic' environmentalist, while driving a car sabotages such a sense of oneself and tends to produce feelings of guilt and inadequacy (see Horton, 2003a).

However, among environmental activists is cycling a strategy of distinction of the kind suggested by French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1984)? Is cycling, in other words, part of a class-based attempt to ascend the social hierarchy? It is not. Although clearly a distinction-seeking and distinguishing

practice, activists' cycling cannot simply be explained as a class-based and class-aimed strategy of distinction, directed at producing and reproducing activists' location in the social structure. Activists not only ride bikes; unlike the majority of cyclists they also *actively campaign for more people to ride bikes*, and thus seek to undermine the distinctiveness of their own privileged practice. Of course, unlike many cyclists, activists also enrol the object of the bicycle and the practice of cycling into the assemblage of a distinctive and oppositional lifestyle, but again this is a lifestyle they wish to see more widely emulated for the sake of 'sustainability'. Environmentalists do not advocate the addition of the bicycle to an otherwise 'ordinary' life. Rather, the bicycle is seen as ideally forming one part of a much wider, new, sustainable, green lifestyle. The bicycle is not a mere appendage to 'business as usual', but a vehicle which helps to re-evaluate, restructure and reorganise everyday life in contemporary societies.

Of course, the bicycle itself is not irrelevant to the status attached to cycling within green culture. Activists' expression of pro-cycling sentiment and the practice of cycling, whatever kind of machine it is performed on, take precedence; but activists tend strongly towards and away from particular kinds of machine. Above all, activists ride 'sensible', 'sturdy' bikes, bikes which will 'last'.<sup>15</sup> Another popular machine, due to the flexibility it affords in moving between different modes of transport with minimal friction, is the folding-bike. Other activists obtain second-hand machines, or salvage bikes from skips. Activists also tend to support 'local' specialist bicycle shops. Mass-produced 'cheap' bicycles and the retail outlets which stock them are scorned, and more expensive racing machines, full-suspension mountain bikes and many of the more innovative human powered machines such as recumbents are also generally avoided.

### *The Bicycle as a Vehicle of Opposition*

Another view of material objects is as symbolic of cultural affiliation (Douglas, 1996; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979). Here, material culture communicates a specific worldview; an attachment and belonging to certain ideas and ideals alongside resentment of, and resistance to, others. A person favours particular goods precisely because those goods would not be tolerated in the kind of world to which they feel themselves opposed. As used within both environmentalist discourse and the everyday lives of environmental activists, the bicycle is clearly opposed to another object, the car. In the culture of contemporary British environmentalism at least, the bicycle is constructed continuously as green transport and contrasted to the polluting, ungreen car. Unlike many cycling cultures (where, for example, the car often transports the bicycle to the start of a competitive or leisure ride), cycling and car driving are incompatible practices. Unsurprisingly, attitudes to and use of the car prove crucial to the maintenance of the boundary between environmentalism and dominant culture. Persistently vilified, car ownership contaminates a person's

green identity and lifestyle; where such ownership does occur, then, it is accompanied typically by the performance of guilt, narratives of 'careful' and 'appropriate' use, and strategies to share its benefits across the wider 'green community'.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously there are no simple equations here. Some environmental activists do own and/or use cars, and not every environmental activist owns and/or uses a bicycle. Similarly, many people who ride bicycles no doubt feel little if any identification with environmentalism, while many people who drive cars undoubtedly do. But environmental activists are never 'pro-car'; they are generally 'anti-car' and usually very strongly so. There may be something distinctively British about this. Observations from elsewhere, and especially those northwestern European countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands with relatively high rates of cycling,<sup>17</sup> suggest a less direct link between modes of mobility and morality. The point often made is that people in these countries are neither for nor against particular ways of travelling, but instead choose between them according to context, such as immediate weather conditions, reason for travel, the number of people travelling and the length of journey being made.

For British environmental activists conflict plays an important role in the practice of cycling. Cycling is simultaneously a conflictual practice of resistance to a predominantly and excessively motorised non-green culture and of adherence to another sustainable, green culture. Cycling environmentalists signal their distance and difference from, and disapproval of, dominant culture alongside their affiliation with and belonging to the green alternative. As an important signal of cultural hostility and affiliation, the practice of cycling contributes to an antagonistic collective political identity. Moreover, cycling under the conditions prevailing on Britain's roads tends to foster subjective experiences of resentment, alienation and marginalisation (for example, see [www.ragingbike.co.uk](http://www.ragingbike.co.uk), last accessed 14 July 2005), so that conducting regularly, often daily, the green practice of cycling not only demonstrates but also maintains a politicised everyday life.

### *The Bicycle as a Vehicle of Sustainability*

There are more than 700 million cars in the world (UNEP, 2000). The number of motorised vehicles on the planet's roads has increased 10-fold in the last 40 years, and is set to treble again by 2035 (Carley & Spapens, 1998: 20–3). The carbon dioxide emissions generated through rising car ownership and use are contributing significantly to climate change. With some notable exceptions, in city after city across the globe the bicycle is being driven off the roads, often consciously, as planners and policy-makers make way for increasing levels of car use. There are more bicycles than ever before in the United Kingdom, yet the proportion of all trips made by bike continues to fall. In its 2003 Energy White Paper, the UK Government set a target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60% by 2050 (Department for Trade and

Industry, 2003). Achieving this target will require massive changes, not just to industry but also to the lifestyles of ordinary people. If the goal of sustainability is taken seriously, accelerating car use needs drastically to be curtailed and the bicycle vigorously promoted as an often appropriate alternative.

An interpretation of green cycling that stops at explanations which prioritise cultural distinction and opposition is therefore unsatisfactory, because partial. From a sustainability perspective, the bicycle is a replacement means of mobility to the socially and ecologically calamitous car. Adopting this view, then, moves us beyond seeing green cycling as only about a search for distinction or ingrained cultural hostility. Adapting the categories developed by Alain Touraine for the study of social movements (Touraine, 1981; see also Castells, 1997: 71), the everyday practice of cycling among environmental activists involves the defence and affirmation of a distinctive identity (environmentalist), and the recognition and reproduction of opposition (to car-centric culture), in the search for an alternative (sustainability). By cycling, activists are literally engaged in an antagonistic social struggle for their vision of sustainability. A society organised by the bicycle would look radically different from the current society ordered by the car. To environmentalists, such a society would be better; more just, ecological, convivial, satisfying and sustainable. The bicycle thus propels a powerful green vision, or ecotopia (Pepper, 2005). An object apparently consigned to the transportation scrapheap by most people in high consumption societies is, within the environmental movement (and increasingly among policy-makers and cultural commentators elsewhere), emblematic of a sustainable future.

## **Conclusion**

We live in material worlds, but the material dimension is often omitted from discussions of green politics. Failing to attend to the material character of both green politics in the present and the alternative futures for which such politics is searching leaves us with curiously immaterial and disembodied conceptions of sustainability. In thinking about social change, which kinds of materialities do we want to privilege? Which do we want to undermine? Obviously, if we are to move closer to sustainability some currently dominant materialities will need to make way for others which are currently unknown, neglected or marginalised. Almost without question the car as we know it must go. Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2003b: 185) describe our current dependence on 'dinosaur cars and fossil fuels, a system that is unsustainable on every conceivable measure and is really a very old-fashioned Fordist technology'. Given contemporary and probable impending conditions, therefore, is the bicycle a mobility of the future as much as, if not more than, of the past? Environmental activists certainly want that to be the case. Clearly, many more people will need to get on their bikes if cycling technologies are to become dominant materialities of future more sustainable societies. No doubt the likelihood of their doing so depends partly on the

changing connotations of the bicycle and cycling. Can the bicycle become less a vehicle of distinction and opposition, and more an ordinary and popular materiality of sustainability?

Objects can become symbolic of the struggles of social movements. The chain of the Jubilee 2000 campaign, for example, symbolises the ongoing search for justice for the world's poorest people; but the bicycle's importance to environmentalism, as to earlier social movements, is not only as a symbol, but also as a concrete materiality with specific cultural and political effects. As the handloom played an important role in the Gandhian struggle for Indian independence, both at the level of symbol and through actual use, so the bicycle is both a symbol of and vehicle for the environmentalist struggle for sustainability.

So the bicycle's importance to contemporary environmentalism is as more than a mode of mobility particularly favoured by environmentalists. Bicycle riding and contemporary environmentalism are mutually constitutive: environmentalist discourse prompts activists to ride bicycles, and that bicycle riding contributes to the making of environmentalism in general and the green lifestyles of environmental activists in particular. Yet if riding a bicycle is, among environmental activists, an act of both distinction and opposition, it is also now a practice which complies with emerging state discourses, which are formed increasingly around the perceived need to shift prevailing mobility practices towards sustainability. Thus, on one hand, environmental activists use the bicycle in the formation of their distinctive and oppositional political identities; on the other hand, the state increasingly sponsors the bicycle as a legitimate and valuable mode of transport.

Under contemporary conditions the object of the bicycle and the practice of cycling seem simultaneously to be caught up in different worlds. Here we can follow Manuel Castells (1997: 6–12), who proposes 'a distinction between three forms and origins of identity building' in the 'network society' (Castells, 1997: 7). First, UK government is now promoting cycling as what Castells calls a 'legitimising identity'. The 1996 National Cycling Strategy, for example, set the highly ambitious target (eventually abandoned in favour of local targets in 2004) to quadruple the number of cycling trips by 2012, from the 1996 baseline (Department of Transport, 1996). In this case, by cycling one is commendably following government policy.<sup>18</sup> But second, the actual practice of cycling tends, among environmental activists and no doubt more widely, to encourage the production of what Castells calls a 'resistance identity'. By cycling one experiences oneself as an outsider, intimidated and endangered by other road users and marginalised by a society reluctant to restrain the 'rights of the car'. Contrary to the apparent intent of much government policy, then, contemporary cyclists often actually feel as though they are being driven from the roads. Yet third, environmental activists struggle not only for improved conditions for cycling and cyclists, but for broader visions of sustainability of which cycling is only part. Through cycling, then, activists are building a 'project identity', which Castells (1997: 8) describes as 'when social actors, on

the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure’.

Bicycle riding activists are simultaneously conforming to emerging government transport policies, opposing and resisting the dominance of car culture, and articulating a broader vision of what society could be like. The bicycle is simultaneously a legitimised, antagonistic and sustainable vehicle; cycling is simultaneously a practice of legitimation, resistance and project-building. This is seen clearly in the case of the cycling protest event, Critical Mass (Carlsson, 2002). Common and widely accepted understandings among participants in Critical Mass rides are: first, by riding their bikes they are doing what politicians want them to do; second, through collectively affirming their ‘right to ride’ they are challenging the harassment and violence they ordinarily face alone, and on a daily basis; third, by taking action which temporarily transforms the cityscape to one dominated by bicycles, pedestrians and the sound of human voices, an alternative, sustainable society is being, however temporarily, brought into existence.

So can, finally, these seemingly incompatible perspectives of the bicycle’s contemporary meaning be reconciled? The answer, it seems obvious, is caught up in wider questions of the greening of the state and society, and the shift to sustainability. Depending on changing perceptions of social and environmental ‘problems’ such as climate change, urban congestion, increasing pollution and ill health, and depending on institutional responses to those ‘problems’ the bicycle and cycling will either retain their currently dominant connotations of distinction and resistance or else become increasingly legitimised. Either way, it seems likely that the bicycle will continue to play a prominent part in individual and collective green projects in search of sustainability.

## Notes

1. Obviously, the bicycle is not always and everywhere political; the importance of specific material artefacts to specific kinds of politics does not make those artefacts political *per se*. Objects cannot be stripped away from their cultural locations, the sites where they are made meaningful, and different cultures attach very different meanings to ‘the same’ kinds of object.
2. For a more recent critique of speed, and a similar call for societies, including cars, to slow down, see Honoré (2004: 97–110).
3. The other six being the condom, ceiling fan, clothes-line, public library, ladybird and pad thai.
4. In Lancaster, for example, beyond the presence of Dynamo, a cycle campaign group, Friends of the Earth activists and Green Party councillors have contributed importantly to improving cycling provision.
5. Research exploring intra-urban mobility in the United Kingdom across the twentieth century finds use of the independent, personalised modes of the bicycle and car to be consistently higher among boys and men (Pooley *et al.*, 2004).
6. Environmentalism not only politicises materialities, such as the car and nuclear power, perceived as wholly antithetical to green visions; it also tends to problematise even those objects such as the computer which are widely recognised as nowadays central to environmental activism and green lifestyles (see Pickerill, 2003; Horton, 2004).

7. Iain Boal (2002: 173) notes that the bicycle 'is thought of as a green mode of transportation, yet it is intimately linked to the history and culture of automobilism and to the development of ecologically destructive roads', and that the bicycle is 'a cause of exploitation (rubber slavery)' (see also Wheatcroft, 2003: 29, 55). Mick Hamer (1987: Ch. 3) elaborates some of the ways in which, at the turn of the twentieth century, advocates of the bicycle played a crucial role in the development of the United Kingdom's road infrastructure.
8. Although not a task for this paper, it would be worth exploring the effects of cycling from other perspectives; medical studies have shown the positive health effects of cycling, but its effects on psychology, or perceptions of the 'local environment' and 'the natural world', for example, remain poorly understood.
9. On, for example, the increased distances between the homes of marriage partners enabled by the bicycle, after 1887, see P. J. Perry (1969). Perry (1969: 133–4) notes: 'Before the coming of the bicycle the countryman generally travelled on foot... Dependence on walking, however, much restricted the area of frequent and everyday contact... It was this situation that the bicycle, *inter alia*, transformed'.
10. In the United Kingdom in 2001, 62% of trips between 1 and 2 miles were made by car (Beecroft *et al.*, 2002: 31). 'Progressive' transport policy tends to see the bicycle as an alternative to the car for such local journeys; indeed, policy literature tends to take 'cycling distance' as potentially anything under 5 miles.
11. On the blurring of boundaries between 'public' and 'private' induced by car dominated mobility, see Sheller and Urry (2003a).
12. Though that is increasingly true of the car (see Putnam, 2000; Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2002).
13. Marcus Jones (2001: 8) notes the related policy-relevant point that 'By getting adults out of cars and out and about in the streets [cycling] also helps to improve the vitality and security of the urban environment'.
14. Cycling as a demonstration to others is particularly well illustrated by the tendency among some activists to go out of their way to pedal past stationary motorised traffic. An environmental activist is also generally happy to be identifiable as a cyclist away from her or his machine; whether carrying panniers, still wearing a fluorescent jacket or helmet, or with trouser clips still in place, it is not embarrassing but good to look as if you have recently arrived by bicycle.
15. Interestingly, this kind of bicycle, which manufacturers term the 'hybrid' or 'city-bike', currently accounts for the fastest growing category of bicycle sales (see <http://www.bikebiz.co.uk/infozone/stats.php>, accessed 14 July 2005).
16. On similar expressions of guilt among car-owning participants in the cycle protest event, Critical Mass, see Blickstein and Hanson (2001: 360).
17. Bicycles are used for 27% of all trips in the Netherlands (Larsen, 2002: 132).
18. However, like environmental activists, pro-cycling policy is going against and attempting to reverse very dominant and well-entrenched mobility orderings and social patterns. Perhaps much more so than other northern European societies such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany, the United Kingdom has become 'locked-in' to systems of automobility (Sheller & Urry, 2003b; Urry, 2003). And despite increasing pro-cycling rhetoric, car ownership and driving continue to grow more popular than ever. But the fact remains that, at least at the level of rhetoric, cycling is today clearly endorsed by government.

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