The return of the old? The contrast and confluence of 1970’s and present day Dutch cycling advocacy and policy

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Over the last decade, researchers, planners and the media have suggested that we are currently witnessing a resurgence in bicycle use.\(^{1}\) This so-called bike renaissance is often compared with the increase in cycling popularity that occurred in the 1970’s when many cities built new cycling infrastructure after years of auto-oriented planning.\(^{2}\) This renewed attention for cycling is often framed as a hopeful sign for the possibility that the bicycle will become a key component in the development of a sustainable transportation system.\(^{3}\) The increase in ridership in the 1970’s is one of the examples used to demonstrate that a sustainability transition based on a return to high cycling levels is possible.\(^{4}\)

As Elizabeth Shove has noted, however, a sustainability transition based on cycling is not a typical transitions narrative. In her article “The Shadowy Side of Innovation,” she remarks that transitions theory was developed around analyzing the integration of the new rather than the return of the old. While new technologies such as dockless bike sharing and e-bikes continue to develop, the majority of people continue to ride bicycles that are nearly identical to the safety bicycles first manufactured over a hundred years ago. In her article, Shove sets out a research agenda for studying a sustainability transition based on existing sustainable practices. This includes the question of how the resurgence of a

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practice with a long history would differ from the emergence of an entirely new practice. What influence would the history of the practice and its subtle changes over time have over its re-emergence?5

This paper aims to answer that question by examining both the re-emergence of attention for cycling over the last decade and the resurgence of cycling in the 1970’s. The paper will compare the two periods and analyze their differences but also look at how the growth of cycling in the Netherlands in the 1970’s has influenced the dynamics of the current plans for a transition to a sustainable transportation system with cycling as a key component.

With research still in progress, our key finding has been that a difference in the central policy focus between the 1970’s and now has resulted in key differences in the formulation and implementation of cycling plans.

In the 1970’s, the rapid growth of automobility within Dutch cities led the formation of citizen groups concerned about the increasingly dangerous situations that were being created by unrestricted automobile use in their neighborhoods. The groups demanded safer conditions for cyclists, particularly children. Under the banner of Stop the Child Murder, these groups organized die-ins across city streets, took part in protest marches, and confronted local politicians, demanding change. In the mid-1970s, local cycling activists came together to create what is now the Cyclists’ Union.6 Their primary goal was to improve conditions for ‘captive cyclists’: people who had no other mobility options than the bicycle such as children, who were also not coincidentally most at risk in urban traffic. Finally, action groups like The Hague’s Dooievaar were motivated by a concern with the architecture and liveability of the built environment and promoted the bicycle as more suited to the city than the car.7 These action groups used bottom-up forms of protest and expertise in a favourable political and institutional climate to enact changes in the Dutch urban cycling environment.8

In the last decade, the driving element behind renewed interest in cycling has been the promise it holds for reducing congestion and meeting CO2 reduction goals. With the Netherlands currently having one of the most extensive networks of bicycle infrastructure in the world, both within and between cities, the pressure from local groups has greatly diminished. This is compounded by a substantial reduction in, as well as strong professionalization of, activism in general since the 1970’s. Over the last decade, the pressure for investment in and attention to cycling has come from politicians themselves in their search for ways to reduce the externalities of car use without upsetting their large constituency of car users.

This change in political pressure has resulted in a change in the goal formulation and implementation of cycling policy. Politicians and planners that had to contend with angry citizens demanding safer neighborhoods were willing to make difficult choices, including giving space to pedestrians and cyclists at the cost of auto accessibility. When people who cycle, however, are not demanding change, politicians see little benefit in upsetting the large number of people who drive. This leads to the

8 Oldenziel et al., *Cycling Cities: The European Experience*. 
construction of cycling infrastructure in areas where available space does not lead to conflicts between different modes (namely between cities) and to an approach that does not put any direct pressure on people who drive to switch to cycling (through the pricing of auto-externalities, lane reductions, or limits on the auto accessibility of destinations). The cycling infrastructure becomes an extension of car infrastructure, built not for existing cyclists but for people who drive as a promise to them of reducing existing congestion and therefore travel times and without any difficult choices or additional costs for the people who still choose to drive. This infrastructure is therefore built around the areas where people who drive are the most inconvenienced, rather than, as in the 1970’s, where people who cycle express concern.

While both the 1970’s and the last decade saw an increase in the attention given to cycling, this increase in attention has come from different places in each time period. This difference has implications for a transportation sustainability transition where cycling plays a key role. If the growth in cycling rates in the 1970’s can be attributed to difficult choices made within cities that took space away from cars and gave it back to pedestrians and people cycling, the current push to increase cycling rates might have success with this same model. However, the very success of these difficult choices made in past may have lessened the political pressure necessary to further these practices in the present.

The resurgence of cycling in the 1970’s was not built around policy designed to convince car drivers to start cycling, but rather around the demand by residents for cities that offered safe options for active mobility. Many people in the Netherlands believe those safe options are already in place. Whether or not an increase in cycling can be built around infrastructure oriented towards people who currently drive remains to be seen.

In this sense, the resurgence of interest in cycling policy in the Netherlands in the 1970’s does not parallel the resurgence in interest in cycling policy over the last decade. Rather the events of the 1970’s continue to actively shape the form of cycling policy today, demonstrating, as posited by Shove, that the return of an old technology differs substantially from the introduction of a new one.

**Methodology**

This article will be written by talking with the activists, engineers, policymakers and politicians that have shaped Dutch cycling policy, both in the 1970’s and over the last decade using transitions theory as a guiding framework. We will use a semi-structured interview format that draws out the motivations and perspectives of the various stakeholders involved in decision-making both in the 1970s and over the past decade. The interview subjects were chosen based on a stakeholder analysis and literature review. Combining this with social media and snowballing in the early stages of interviewing we arrived at a list of potential interview subjects who were active in the 1970s, and still maintained an interest in cycling policy. The same methodology was used to arrive at a list of contemporary actors but with a focus on their role in policymaking over the last ten years.

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Interviews have already been conducted with the following individuals who were active in bicycle activism and planning in the 1970s:

- André Pettinga (January 8, 2019) – worked in the Delft traffic department in the 1970’s and 80’s.
- Members of the activist group Dooievaar (February 5, 2019) – student group that formed in The Hague in the early 1970’s to protest auto oriented transportation planning
- Hugo van der Steenhoven (January 17, 2019) – head of the Dutch Cyclist’s Union from 2006 – 2015 and former alderman of Utrecht during the introduction of the first bicycle street.
- Peter Plantinga (January 15, 2019) – early member of Eindhoven’s cycling advocacy group.
- Jan Ploeger (December 12, 2018) – studied engineering in Delft in the 1970’s and later became one of the key project members of the national bicycle master plan.

Interviews have already been conducted with the following contemporary policymakers:

- Nathan Hooghof (December 21, 2018) – current bicycle policy project leader for the province of North Brabant.

Next steps

We plan on conducting further interviews in the coming months with a focus on contemporary policymakers. Specifically, we look to interviewing leading figures within the Fietsersbond and national government (ministry of Infrastructure and Environment, Tour de Force group).

Additionally, we aim to interview a few more key figures from the 1970s. These interviews will be supplemented with archival research methods about political movements, plans and policies from the 1970’s and policy documents from the past decade. Specifically, archival research into the following activist groups of the 1970s will be conducted:

- Archive of Cyclists’ Union (ENWB/Fietsersbond) (International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam)
- Archive of activist group Dooievaar (City archives The Hague)
- Archives of other traffic-related action groups (International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam)
- Newspaper articles about activism in the 1970s (online newspaper database Delpher)