

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Book Review: Popan, C. (2019). *Bicycle Utopias: Imagining Fast and Slow Cycling Futures*. 1st Edition. Oxford: Routledge. (ISBN: 978-0-367-58224-1)

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Cosmin's book '*Bicycle Utopias: Imagining Fast and Slow Cycling Futures*' invites us to imagine a different world where predominantly bikes are used (at least) for short-distance travel within cities and claims that the domination of cars is unsustainable and certainly not inevitable. It also discusses the merits of slow cycling and warns that the needs for speed and eternal economic growth are not sustainable. He uses utopia as one of the methods to examine our commonly held beliefs and practices, along with auto-ethnography and other methods. This book will certainly make the reader think, question their practices and priorities, realize that today's actions can shape the future, and that a car-centric world is not sustainable. A city dominated by slow cycling could encourage the development of the local economy and small coops for cycle repairs, deliveries, and generally helps create a virtuous cycle of sustainable, sociable and healthy living.

Keywords: Cycling; Active travel; Sociology; Utopia

Book Review

It is a truth (almost) universally acknowledged that there is a man-made climate emergency. Cities are congested with and polluted by cars. Recently, a coroner concluded for the first time that pollution 'made a material contribution' to the death in 2013 of a nine-year-old girl who lived in London and suffered from severe asthma, Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah. Her mother, Rosamund, noted 'We all need to drive less, all of us. This is about emissions, particulate matter, which is from diesel' (Marshall, 2021). What would Ella's life have been like if the majority of short distance travel in cities was done by bicycle instead of car?

Popan's book *Bicycle Utopias: Imagining Fast and Slow Cycling Futures* invites us to imagine a different world where predominantly bikes are used for short-distance travel within cities. The merits of slow cycling are discussed, and the author suggests that the need for speed and eternal economic growth are not sustainable and that the domination of cars is

unsustainable and certainly not inevitable. He uses utopia as one of the methods to examine our commonly held beliefs and practices, along with auto-ethnography and other methods. Using utopia allows the researcher to step away from the current discourses and imagine a different future. The book is a vivid example of the remarkable ability of social science to hold a mirror to society and encourage a fresh and close examination of long-held attitudes and commonly held beliefs that might have otherwise been implicitly accepted without question.

The book starts as a diary entry with the author imagining that it is 2050 and he is giving a conference speech in which he reflects on policy and societal changes in relation to cycling in cities from 2017 onwards. He describes a utopian future where more people adopt cycling instead of driving in cities. After an overview of the book in Chapter 2, Popan discusses the methods he used, including utopia and auto-ethnography in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, Popan criticizes the fast car system, and in Chapter 5 he discusses attitudes towards slow and fast cycling from a historical perspective. In Chapters 6 and 7 he discusses the idea that cycling involves all the senses and allows the cyclist to connect with the environment and with others. Chapter 8 discusses the positives of slow cycling for society; slow cycling is seen as an antidote to capitalist outlook of growth, which is unsustainable and bad for the environment.

The car allows us to overcome some of the limitations of our body and go faster for longer distances, without being rained on, but at what cost to ourselves and the environment? Popan makes it clear that all travel choices influence how we live our lives. Maintaining a car is certainly not cheap for the owner or for the environment. The comfort of the car could further be questioned for individuals (like me) that suffer from carsickness. Furthermore, the car does not always allow us to go places fast; main roads in major cities from 7 to 9 a.m. are typically full of cars travelling at very low speeds due to heavy traffic. The council makes more and more roads, and then keeps making them wider, but then more cars appear and there is still congestion, as well as a “destruction of public spaces”, as Popan notes (p 59).

On the other hand, travelling by bike allows individuals to engage with the environment and others around them. Furthermore, according to Popan, the bike represents a resistance to the capitalist urge for growth and speed. A city dominated by slow cycling could encourage the development of the local economy and small co-ops for cycle repairs and deliveries, and it generally helps create a virtuous cycle (as it were) of sustainable, sociable and healthy living.

Now, I once happened to see Popan cycling in Manchester; he was sitting back on the bike seat as if it was the comfiest sofa, no hands. What about individuals that do not have good coordination skills? What about individuals with disabilities? The author does suggest that different versions of the bicycle can be used to accommodate different needs, such as cargo bikes, tricycles and so on. I think this is an important point: more diverse versions of the vehicle should become widely available, so that individuals with diverse needs and abilities can integrate cycling into their everyday lives.

I often found myself nodding furiously and agreeing with Popan, apart from a couple of minor issues, informed mainly by my experience as a cyclist and a pedestrian; I was not convinced that it is acceptable for cyclists to ignore red lights or that shared spaces work well. Overall, however, I consider the slow-cycling-cities proposition reasonable and realistic. Popan is a sociologist passionate about cycling and about changing the world for the better. He is one of those millennials that want to find more sustainable and meaningful ways of living, instead of always focusing on personal happiness and comfort. This ethos permeates the book.

Something that Popan did not predict in his imaginary 2050 diary was the emergence of a pandemic that would result in lockdowns and the huge disruption in many aspects of our lives, and which has confounded and exacerbated issues with the climate crisis. During the Covid-19 lockdowns there were pop-up cycle-lanes and an increase in the number cyclists

(Kraus & Koch, 2021); the BBC suggests that there were large increases in cycling (Bernhard, 2020). That said, there is also some evidence that people tend to use more private cars as opposed to public transport (Abdullah et al., 2020). It is difficult to predict the long-term effects of the Covid-19 crisis on cycling, but one can only hope that Popan's proposal will prevail, and future cities will not be dominated by cars.

This book will certainly make the reader think, question their practices and priorities, realize that today's actions can shape the future and that a car-centric world is not sustainable. It is a book that is well-documented and well-argued. And Popan is not on his own in the quest to improve the world, one bike at a time; there is a strong partnership with other scholars that co-organize the yearly Cycling and Society meeting that Popan referred to in the book. To misquote the anthropologist Margaret Mead, never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed scholars can change the world. In any case, it is unsustainable to continue as we are; bicycles (tricycles, cargo-bikes and so on) could be catalysts for change. If nothing else, we owe it to Ella and Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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