

**COMMENTARY**

# Whither Cycling Research? Three Policy-Relevant Research Priorities for the Coming Decade

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Drawing upon a collaborative session conducted at the 2023 Cycling Research Board conference, the present commentary proposes three key policy-relevant research priorities for future cycling research: 1) bicycle parking; 2) backcasting; and 3) the relationship between academic cycling research and policy processes. Improving our understanding of bicycle parking patterns and behaviours (and on-street parking in particular), I suggest, might help municipal administrations develop comprehensive urban bicycle parking policies. Meanwhile, backcasting approaches to cycling might help us better understand what role velomobility could realistically play in a future context of climate crisis and energy scarcity, thereby providing a useful link to emerging discussions on mobility and degrowth. Finally, I argue that cycling researchers would benefit from paying more attention to how academic research has contributed to inform (or not) real-world cycling policies and projects. Empirically examining which types of past research have been most effective in translating their findings into policy impacts, I suggest, might help cycling researchers make more informed choices as to which types of research to prioritise.

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At the 2019 Cycling Research Board (CRB) conference, I suggested that parts of cycling research had reached a point of saturation, periodically restating findings that ultimately hold few novel insights for cycling policy and promotion (Nello-Deakin, 2020). Five years later, it seemed to me like an appropriate time to revisit this statement. To this end, during the 2023 CRB conference I organised a collaborative session to identify and discuss key current policy-relevant priorities for cycling research, which gathered around 20 participants. During the session, each participant was asked to propose a key priority for policy-relevant cycling research, which they then shared and discussed with the rest of the group using the 1-2-4-all method.<sup>1</sup> Participants were all attendees of the CRB conference, i.e. primarily academic researchers working on cycling (mostly based in Europe).

A wide range of topics were mentioned as potential research priorities during the session, from the use of augmented reality to assess cycling experiences, to the inclusion of cycling in the public education curriculum. As I see it, this variety is itself a proof of the consolidation of cycling research over the past five years, both through conferences like CRB, and through the emergence of new journals such as the *Journal of Cycling and Micromobility Research* and the present *Active Travel Studies*. By and large, it seems that we have moved beyond the relatively repetitive research on barriers and incentives to cycling that I complained about in my 2020 commentary (Nello-Deakin, 2020); such questions are still posed at the level of public discussion or in applied projects, but the real academic debate lies elsewhere.

In the present commentary, I do not attempt to comprehensively list the range of topics mentioned during the session, which in any case can hardly be seen as representative of anything beyond the views of session participants. Rather, I seek to draw attention to three topics that stood out to me, in the hope that they will resonate and stimulate further engagement among fellow cycling researchers. While these three topics were among the most discussed during the session, my choice to focus on them is consciously subjective, reflecting my own preoccupations and positionality, and drawing upon broader impressions and discussions from the whole conference. Likewise, my reflections are written primarily with the policy (and research) context of urban cycling in Europe in mind, and may not necessarily be translatable to other geographic settings (see Castañeda, 2021).

The first topic I want to highlight as a worthwhile area for future research is the somewhat prosaic issue of **bicycle parking** (which was itself the focus of a session during the 2023 CRB). Despite being the subject of a comprehensive review by Heinen and Buehler (2019) some years ago, the fact is that most of the key research gaps highlighted by these two authors persist today. Perhaps because of their mundaneness, everyday parking practices are easy to overlook or take for granted. As argued by Valentini, Wangel and Holmgren (2023, p. 13), the focus of much recent cycling research on technological innovations such as e-bikes and bikesharing means that “less attention is paid to more traditional mundane cycling activities, which still have an important transformative role to play...”. In particular, we still have a poor understanding of residential and on-street parking patterns and practices in different urban contexts. In most cases, we simply lack reliable data on on-street parking, and can only make an educated guess as to what extent the lack of secure residential bicycle parking constitutes a serious barrier to urban cycling. Recent research assessing usage patterns of on-street bike parking (Honey-Rosés *et al.*, 2023) and the need for secure bike parking according to cyclist typology (Fournier *et al.*, 2023) provide good examples in this direction, but there remains much to be done on this front. Bicycle parking practices are also highly context-specific, since they depend on a local blend of residential typologies, bicycle types, perceived safety levels, and public space conventions and regulations. This means that key patterns and trends may not be readily comparable across different urban contexts.

Admittedly, the physical nimbleness of bicycles means that bicycle parking will never be as central to velomobility as car parking is to automobility. Nevertheless, the increasing prominence of e-bikes and cargo bikes in the urban landscape, for which the lack of appropriate parking is likely to constitute a more significant barrier than for conventional bikes (Rérat, 2021; Carracedo and Mostofi, 2022), reinforces the need to take bicycle parking seriously. Recent accounts that highlight the centrality of car parking to automobility and draw attention to how bike parking has been overlooked as a key policy issue (Shoup, 2018; Grabar, 2023), I suggest, might provide helpful inspiration to develop an analogous research agenda around bike parking. In turn, this might help spur policy efforts to develop comprehensive urban bicycle parking policies, which in most contexts are either non-existent or just getting off the ground. What would cities look like if they treated bicycle parking as seriously as car parking? Critically, we need to look at bicycle parking not as an isolated topic, but

as part of a holistic understanding of on-street parking (and street space as a whole) that acknowledges the relationship between car and bicycle parking. As various authors have noted (Nikolaeva *et al.*, 2019; Nello-Deakin, 2019; Petzer, Wiczorek and Verbong, 2021), the perceived lack of space for active travel infrastructure in urban contexts is largely the product of a constructed rather than a natural scarcity, which can be traced to the privileging of automobility in public space. From this perspective, there is a case for research that explicitly explores opportunities to convert car parking into bicycle parking (e.g. Lee and March, 2010; Kirschner and Lanzendorf, 2020). This applies not only to on-street, but also to off-street parking. Particularly in the context of future mobility innovations such as autonomous vehicles and Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS), gains in car parking efficiency (Rosenblum, Hudson and Ben-Joseph, 2020) may provide an opportunity to radically rethink urban parking as a whole, and the role of cycling in it.

This brings me to the second research area, which emerged as a potential priority for future research during the CRB session: the use of **backcasting** approaches to cycling and urban mobility futures. While the use of backcasting a tool to develop future transport policy is not new (e.g. Banister and Hickman, 2013; Soria-Lara and Banister, 2017, 2018), little research has focused explicitly on the role that cycling might play as a crucial component in helping to achieve desired policy scenarios. Put briefly, to what extent can a dramatically expanded velomobility regime contribute to transform urban mobility on the scale needed to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of the rolling climate and energy crises?

A key benefit of such backcasting and related scenario-based approaches is that they can accommodate research that varies widely in character, from “realistic” proposals for modest short-term change, to more radical degrowth-oriented approaches that envisage a decided break with the status quo. These two approaches are not necessarily opposed: both can be useful in feeding into policy discussions, albeit at different levels and different time horizons. On the one hand, empirically grounded models that assess the degree to which cycling may substitute motorised travel can provide much-needed estimates of prospective energy reduction and decarbonisation for policymakers (e.g. Philips, Anable and Chatterton, 2022). This is true for not only true for daily passenger mobility, but also for urban freight delivery (e.g. Melo and Baptista, 2017), and perhaps even for “slow travel” and tourism practices centred around cycling (Dickinson and Lumsdon, 2011). A good example of such an approach is the ongoing *E-Bike City* project developed by researchers at ETH Zürich, which seeks to assess the implications of a hypothetical reallocation of half of Zürich’s road space from cars to (e-)bikes and other forms of micromobility.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, more far-out conceptual visions of alternative cycling futures can provide “prefigurative imaginaries” which over time may permeate into cycling activism and policy (Cox, 2023; Silonsaari, 2024). Popan’s *Cycling Utopias* (2018), for instance, provides a notable example of a slow cycling utopia based on principles of conviviality and sociality, which is well aligned with recent efforts to envisage future urban mobility through the theoretical lens of degrowth (Cattaneo *et al.*, 2022; Schönfeld and Ferreira, 2023). While these efforts remain rather fuzzy and conceptual at present, there is an opportunity for research that tries to operationalise these visions in more concrete terms, linking them to emerging discussions on degrowth-based urban planning (Xue, 2022). Although this is easier said than done, it certainly offers exciting unexplored territory for scholars who enjoy such intellectual challenges.

The final—and perhaps most relevant—priority I want to propose for further research and reflection refers to **the relationship between academic cycling research and policy processes**. As a participant pointed out during the discussion at the CRB conference, it is ironic that although most cycling researchers are largely animated by a desire to produce “policy-relevant” research that helps to improve real-world conditions for cycling (Spinney, 2016), their attention to issues of policy process and diffusion has generally been quite limited. More

broadly, one might argue that most cycling researchers—myself confessedly among them—lack a well-articulated theory of social change that provides a solid basis for envisaging how we might go transitioning towards a regime of “velomobility”.

Admittedly, recent research has begun to focus more closely on unpacking the “nuts and bolts” of cycling policy development, learning and transfer across different geographic contexts (Sheldrick, Evans and Schliwa, 2017; Bidordinova, 2021; Blake *et al.*, 2021; Glaser and te Brömmelstroet, 2022). However, most of this research has centred on knowledge transfer between cities or practice-oriented forums (e.g. conferences, EU projects, third-sector organisations), rather than from *academia* to policy. Instead, what I am suggesting is that *we lack a systematic understanding of how academic research has contributed to inform (or not) actual cycling policies and projects*. In other words, which types of academic research have led to real-world impacts, and of what kind? What types of discipline are most influential? What are the most—and least—effective research strategies for academics seeking to influence local cycling (and broader urban mobility) policy? How do collaborative projects with local municipalities, for example, compare to critical action research projects in terms of creating long-standing impacts on the ground?

These are not easy questions to answer. For one, the idea of impact is subjective and difficult to measure. For most academics, teaching is probably a more impactful activity than research through its role in shaping the views of future policymakers and planners, but the indirect nature of this impact makes it difficult to assess. Likewise, it is perfectly possible for research to be “impactful” but in a wrong way: research on technological innovations and “smart” cycling, for instance, may attract strong traction in policy and practice circles, but these impacts may not be societally desirable (Valentini, Wangel and Holmgren, 2023; te Brömmelstroet *et al.*, 2020). As pointed out by Cox (2023, p. 13), academics should be aware of their responsibility in this regard: “In the context of cycling research, the academic as actor/agent in late capitalism is in a position not just to observe what velomobility looks like, but also to act and assist in determining its emergent forms”. In a similar vein, Silonsaari (2024, p. 1) has recently argued that “Neither cycling policy nor cycling research is never apolitical or innocent and these issues are reflected in two ways in current critical cycling scholarship”.

In this context, and building on a broader critical turn in transport research that moves away from a depoliticised sustainable mobility framing (Kębłowski, Dobruszkes and Boussauw, 2022), recent efforts to develop a “critical velomobilities” research agenda (Ravensbergen *et al.*, 2021) offer a valuable perspective. By drawing attention to the need for an intersectional analysis on cycling which examines the uneven distribution of velomobility between population groups and takes power relations into account (e.g. Vietinghoff, 2021; Soliz, 2021), such research provides a welcome corrective to the somewhat self-congratulatory tone of much “mainstream” cycling research. Similarly, recent research highlighting the problematic nature of conventional discourses on traffic safety that frame cyclists as hazards (Bonham, Johnson and Haworth, 2020; te Brömmelstroet, 2024) offers another example of the value of such critical perspectives.

However, the extent to which such critical research is able to significantly influence everyday urban mobility policies remains a largely open question. Inevitably, any type of research that aspires to influence policy must choose between different trade-offs (Oliver and Cairney, 2019). Does it make more sense to try and influence the policy through radical research which critiques the status quo, or through collaborative research with attempts to nudge it in the right direction?

As a participant of the CRB session suggested, cycling researchers should explicitly think about which type of role they can use to most effectively contribute to influence policy, and should understand that they cannot occupy all roles at the same time. Is it by being an impartial observer, an honest broker, an advisor, an advocate, or an activist? Making a strategic

choice between these options and consciously reflecting on how our research will be perceived and debated in the public sphere is particularly critical in the current climate of socio-political polarisation, which in recent years has seen active travel policies become an integral part of broader “culture wars” between progressive and conservative politics (Marquet *et al.*, 2024; Gössling *et al.*, 2024). To a large extent, our choice of role will be dictated by our own temperament, expertise and disciplinary background, which after some initial experimentation will eventually lead us to find a “research niche” that we feel comfortable with. As another participant pointed out, however, not everyone has luxury of choosing: based on personal characteristics such as age, gender, race or appearance, some researchers may find themselves pigeonholed into specific roles whether they like them or not.

While acknowledging these constraints, I want to suggest that *examining which types of past research have been most effective in translating their findings into policy impacts might help cycling researchers make better informed choices as to which types of research projects and proposals to prioritise*. Although this type of meta-research runs a certain risk of navel-gazing, I argue that it constitutes a worthwhile and unexplored avenue for future cycling research. A useful starting point for future research in this field is to be found in Oliver and Cairney's (2019) excellent systematic review of “dos and don'ts of influencing policy” for academics. As they note, there exists a lot of “how to” advice for academics who want to influence policy-making, but this advice tends to be vague, generic, and inconsistent. Above all, such advice tends to be based on personal opinions and experience, rather than empirical evidence of which types of research projects have led to observable policy impacts. In their own words:

the existing advice offered to academics on how to create impact is not based on empirical evidence, or on good understandings of key literatures on policymaking or evidence use. This leads to significant misunderstandings, and advice which can have potentially costly repercussions for research, researchers and policy. (Oliver and Cairney, 2019, 7).

From in-depth qualitative interviews with experienced cycling researchers and policymakers, to more structured methods based on questionnaires or the Delphi technique, achieving a better understanding of what works and what doesn't in terms of policy impact might help guide cycling researchers seeking to make a difference in the real world. As argued by Bertolini, te Brömmelstroet, and Pelzer (2019, p. 2) “transport research cannot just assume that it will contribute to making mobility more sustainable, as the knowledge generated could also be irrelevant, or even have a perverse effect, whatever the rigour by which questions are answered”. Since academic research is time-consuming and we only have one (research) life, I believe that we should try and spend it wisely.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The 1-2-4-all method (<https://www.liberatingstructures.com/1-1-2-4-all/>) asks participants to reflect on a specific question first individually, then in pairs, foursomes, and finally as a whole group. In this way, it seeks to engage all participants in the discussion and build gradually towards a shared perspective.
- <sup>2</sup> See <https://www.ebikecity.ch/en.htm> for a description of the project and its goals.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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