



Mass culture, subcultures and multiculturalism: how theory can help us understand cycling practice

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Introduction

- “The word “academic” is a synonym for irrelevant” Saul Alinsky (1969: ix)

but not always....

- Academic activist dialogues
- Scholar/activist identities

Demanding change...

“What do we want ?” – “More cycling!”

“When do we want it ?” – “Now! “

“Why do we want it” – errr ...

Culture and Subcultures

- “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”
Raymond Williams (1976)
 - A general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development
 - A particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group
 - The works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity (i.e. signifying practices)
- Rejected fear of masses by ruling elites

Subcultures

- Groups, “that are in some way represented as non-normative or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it” Gelder (2005: 1)

Marginality and non-normativity

- Need to be separated
- Marginality often associated with numerical minority

BUT

- Numerical minorities can and do retain power in terms of class and colonialism
- Shapes role of advocacy – numbers alone are not sufficient

Subcultures

- The further the distance from the norms of society a subculture is, the more important the role of distinctive identity formation and maintenance
- Subcultures, once defined, frequently perpetuate their own continued distance from the mainstream
 - necessary survival strategy

But....

Subcultures

- Perpetuation of distinctiveness serves to maintain marginalisation
 - Can lead to problems when adjusting to new situations especially on gaining power/influence
- Continued marginalisation may enable a greater level of critique to be developed
 - i.e. What is so good about the mainstream that one should want to join it so much? (queer theory)

Impact on cycling studies

- Cycling studies are a new “emancipatory” subfield (Gijs Mom 2011: 20)
- Social movements are “collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in the condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living” (Blumer 1939)

Cycling advocacy in a radical social movement

- Problem: how to build alliances of solidarity between divergent and often conflicting cycling subcultures without denying their differences?
- Solution: What binds diverse and often unconnected experiences together is their shared position of struggle.

Bicycle politics should be understood not as a separate politics designed to pursue the interests of cyclists *as* cyclists, but rather as the pursuit of pro-bicycle goals and aims within the context of a wider articulation of demands. Those goals and aims should consist in the transformation of all the discourses, practices, and social relations where the category 'cycling' is constructed in a way that implies subordination.

(with apologies to Chantal Mouffe)

Sharing visions

“What do we want ?” – “More cycling!”

“When do we want it ?” – “Now! “

“Why do we want it” –

because it is part of a shared struggle for better
world