Panel Proposal

**Set in stone? Path dependencies and a historical perspective on (un)making mobility in Belgium and the Netherlands**

Altered mobility patterns and demands forced upon us by the corona crisis have resulted in many cities implementing bike lanes at a much faster rate than previously. Under conditions of crisis, new possibilities suddenly emerge and the entrenched regime of automobility loses some of its power. The conviction that cars should have a smaller place in the city has been widely shared for decades, yet in reality it has proven difficult to reverse the results of decades of car-centered city planning. The concepts path dependency and obduracy are often invoked to explain this (see Mahoney 2000; Hommels 2005; Emanuel 2016). To an extent, the Netherlands is one exception to the historical pattern. Here a revival of cycling took place from the 1970s onward. The goal of this panel is to discuss some of the historical mechanisms (physical, institutional, cultural) which contribute to, or on the contrary, form obstacles to change in mobility. With two urban case studies from Maastricht and Amsterdam, and two national perspectives on the Netherlands and Belgium, this panel discusses a range of factors to which the time dimension is central. Which path-dependent processes do we observe in the Netherlands and Belgium? What were the cultural, spatial and institutional factors limiting (or allowing for) change? And what is the explanatory value of concepts like path dependency and obduracy for understanding the historical development of mobility and the built environment? Finally, what can those historical patterns tell us about the pathways towards the sustainable city of the future?

Works cited


Organizer: **Henk-Jan Dekker (TU Eindhoven)**
Chair: **Martin Emanuel (Uppsala University)**


**Marc Dijk, Anique Hommels and Manuel Stoffers (Maastricht University)**, ‘Transforming mobility practices in Maastricht (1950-1980)’

**Tim Verlaan and Stephen Weijers (University of Amsterdam)**, ‘Coercing Bicycling Policies in Amsterdam (1950-1990)’

**Eva van Eenoo (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)**, ‘Are you a cyclist or a motorist? Bicycle use among car owners in Flanders (Belgium) through the lens of social practices theory’
Abstracts

Marc Dijk, Anique Hommels and Manuel Stoffers (Maastricht University), ‘Transforming mobility practices in Maastricht (1950-1980)’

This paper reconstructs the historical transformation of mobility in the city of Maastricht in the period 1950-1980, from cycling as the most popular mode of traveling in the 1950s, to car driving by the end of the 1970s. How was the diminishing use of bicycles related to the surging use of the car? Based on an analysis of written sources (i.e. newspaper articles, year books, visual material, travel statistics) and oral history interviews with Maastricht travellers and other citizens who experienced this transition themselves, this paper sheds light on this historical transition, its key actors and main drivers. Combining insights from studies of social practice-based perspectives on mobility, historical socio-technical transitions, and the models of urban obduracy and path dependency, this study seeks to contribute to understanding why and how cities may transform towards unsustainable place despite all efforts to make them more sustainable.

Tim Verlaan and Stephen Weijers (University of Amsterdam), ‘Coercing Bicycling Policies in Amsterdam (1950-1990)’

Key words: Politics, social movements, bicycle policy, local government, governance

In 1979, Amsterdam’s alderman for Traffic and Transport Michael van der Vlis instigated a special committee consisting of city officials and cycling activists. This was a bold move considering Amsterdam’s car-centred policies of the preceding decades, when the city implemented far-reaching redevelopment schemes to make way for growing car ownership and cyclists were mostly seen as a nuisance to car drivers.

Van der Vlis’ decision foreshadowed the institutionalization of bicycle policies in the 1980s and 1990s, which was the result of a hard-fought battle between his predecessors, community action groups and urban social movements. The combined efforts of this wide range of actors eventually led the local planners to adopt a street-by-street, block-by-block approach instead of the organic and comprehensive traffic planning they were used to.

By working with the concept of path dependency and through investigating both primary sources produced by social movements and responses from city officials such as Van der Vlis, as well as the car-friendly policies that led up to the heated debates of the late 1970s, this contribution will demonstrate how bicycle policies and traffic engineering became the focal point of discussions over a more sustainable urban future.
Eva van Eenoo (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), ‘Are you a cyclist or a motorist? Bicycle use among car owners in Flanders (Belgium) through the lens of social practices theory’

Despite the Flemish government’s climate goal to reduce vehicle kilometers travelled by 15% in 2030, car ownership and car use is still increasing in Flanders. Meanwhile, except for some larger cities and some municipalities, bicycle use is stagnating. In order to turn the tide, a more thorough understanding of the driving forces behind high rates of car use is necessary. We carried out a survey in urban areas in Flanders (Belgium), specifically targeting individuals with at least one car in the household. This resulted in a sample of 950 respondents. By means of a cluster analysis, we identified four groups of respondents with similar travel patterns and corresponding answers on statements designed to gauge their self-reported car dependency. Two of the four clusters showed significantly higher bike use than car use, although one group reported a significant higher feeling of car dependency than the other. The findings question the sharp distinction between ‘motorists’ and ‘cyclists’ and illustrate that, as for today, cycling remains a practice predominantly performed by higher income groups and is far less established among the older respondents in the sample and the respondents commuting by car. The results are interpreted through the lens of social practices theory, applying the three-element framework. What elements (materials, competence, meaning) can we consider decisive for mode choice, and based on these conclusions, what are the consequences for cycling policy?


This paper analyses the extent to which the creation of the extensive network of Dutch cycling paths was partly the result of a path dependent process. Based on archival material and trade journals, the role of Dutch engineers and interest groups like ANWB and Fietsersbond is central. In the first half of the twentieth century, a commitment to a system of traffic separation emerged as a result of the lobbying of the ANWB, the unintended consequences of the bicycle tax, and the sheer number of Dutch cyclists. The central argument of this paper is that once this solution was chosen, this system developed a logic of its own. For instance, mopeds were assigned to cycling paths in the 1950s, providing an additional reason to keep constructing cycling paths. Without the prior development of a cycling path network, this would not have been possible, and cycling might have declined in the Netherlands as elsewhere. In many ways, the costs of unmaking this system were higher than those of continuing it. While path dependency is generally seen as an obstacle to change, and therefore something negative, this paper explores how it helped cycling survive in the Dutch context.