

Paris on Two Wheels: Leading the Race?

Article by Luis Nicolas Jachmann

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Since the first lockdown, Paris has become the test site for an ambitious cycling project, rolling out new infrastructure and remapping its transport routes. It is not the only European city where pop-up cycle paths have appeared, almost overnight, but in some cases they have not remained in place for long. Prospects for the changes to become permanent features are threatened by competing interests, however, calling into question whether the city will succeed in generating a long-term shift in transport habits.

There was a time when cycling was considered an adventure sport in Paris. Cyclists meandered through gaps in between cars, past stinking exhaust pipes, crowded against the narrow pavement until the next traffic light.

Leo, 23, had long scorned the bicycle in Paris. The young professional lives in a suburb. For his first job, he cycles daily across the French capital. He manages the 30 kilometer route in 45 minutes.

For many years, Leo only used his bike during holidays. On two wheels he toured from Paris to Amsterdam and the Atlantic. For a good two years now, he has also completely renounced the train and the car in Paris. On the first few kilometers of his daily route, in the south of Paris, he is still one of the few on a bicycle: "At the city limits, the bicycle lane disappears for a while. The *Coronapiste* starts at the Luxembourg Garden. This is what we call the new cycle track in Paris".

Paris is unrecognisable. Those who still leave home for work during lockdown these days meet commuters everywhere in their jackets on two wheels. The urban rental bikes in striking green mingle with silver city bikes.

650 kilometres of new cycleways

After the lockdown, in the city centre, 16 000 people used bicycles daily in both directions. Within a year, the number of cyclists in Paris has risen by two thirds. It was only in March and April that these new cycle paths were created. They also run along the main metro axes. In many cases, a bicycle lane was simply laid on the asphalt. Since mid-August, the whole city has been subject to strict obligation to wear masks in the streets. The only exception is cyclists.

The mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, re-elected for a second term last year, promoted the bicycle as a means of transport to work or university following lockdown. Hidalgo heads a coalition consisting of representatives from the Socialist and other left-wing parties, in which the French Greens (Europe Ecologie – Les Verts) also participate with 24 councillors.

No other city in Europe is as densely populated as Paris. At rush hour, commuters clog the wide boulevards with cars for several hours every day. Now the traffic jams at the traffic lights are even longer. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Hidalgo has redivided the space in many places, reallocating car lanes to cyclists. On some streets, cars have completely disappeared. And the city continues to invest: 50 million euros have been earmarked for new cycle paths.

A long overdue reform

The plans for new cycle lanes had been on the table for a long time. Implementation has so far failed due to fierce political opposition. Leo is enthusiastic about the so-called *Coronapistes*: "During the shutdown the paths were completed and existing routes were made wider for cyclists. The prefecture had always vehemently blocked this. Because in each section a different mayor decides. That is really crazy. Suddenly the decision-makers have all given the go-ahead to new cycle paths – even where it previously seemed impossible". Some sections were created overnight: "I was totally perplexed. In just a few hours they created a wide bicycle lane".

Thanks to the new routes, more people in Paris now dare to cycle: "There are many who were afraid of the traffic. Now I even see many children riding bikes – even without their parents. That is definitely new. For me, this is the best proof that the *Coronapistes* are a success".

Mayor Hidalgo has extended the cycle paths until next year and has already sent signals that the paths could become a permanent solution in many places.

Maximilian Gawlik, an urban planner who has been conducting research on cycling mobility, is not surprised that the new cycle paths are so well received: "There are many public transport users who now use bicycles because they did not want to expose themselves to the risk of infection on buses and trains. Of course, you don't know what will remain of the pop-up cycle paths at the end of the day". The outlook is promising. Hidalgo has extended the cycle paths until next year and has already sent signals that the paths could become a permanent solution in many places.

Dilemmas for cycling policies

The facts are clear: 50 kilometres of roads in Paris now have permanent new, wide cycle paths. The car lobby in Paris has criticised these changes as unnecessary and argued that traffic jams have increased dramatically as a result. Francois Vallin, the president of the motorists' association *Rouler libre*, accuses the city of Paris of arbitrariness: "This was a unilateral decision by the city. We, the commuters, and the local residents were not consulted."

Local transport in Paris remains heavily used, even though many in the city centre are switching to bicycles. This affects commuters and delivery services from the Paris suburbs, who cannot simply park their car on the outskirts of the city and switch to public transport to enter the city. The new cycle lanes that are taking up space for cars could further increase the disparities between Paris and its suburbs. Already, social and economic inequalities within the metropolitan region are more pronounced than anywhere else in France.

Melody L Hoffmann has conducted research on inequalities stemming from urban policies. In her scientific paper "*Bike Lanes are white lanes*" she writes: "[...] a discussion is warranted about how bicycle infrastructure can reaffirm existing societal inequalities because of the subtle, problematic impacts the bicycle has had on various communities". And long-term empirical studies suggest that only certain population groups in urban areas primarily use the bicycle: "Transportation injustice is also evident in bicycle infrastructure when analysing who utilizes bike lanes and bike paths", says Hoffmann.

"The popularity of cycling can influence the construction of

beautiful paths and trails, but it can also be a signifier of gentrification''. – Melody L Hoffmann

She warns that cycling policy could deepen the differences between urban and suburban areas: "By governments focusing on bicycle infrastructure that will please an already privileged demographic, many marginalised cyclists will inevitably remain in the margins. The popularity of cycling can influence the construction of beautiful paths and trails, but it can also be a signifier of gentrification".

In all their green ideas, urban planners must also keep an eye on social tensions. Most workers who enter Paris to supply the shops in the city centre or because they work there belong to the lower and middle classes. They live in the suburbs of Paris because they cannot afford the rents within the metropolis. They depend on the car for their daily mileage. For them, a change to the bicycle makes no sense in terms of time – in contrast to the young professionals within Paris, who cycle only a few kilometres between home, work, and leisure locations.

A U-turn in Berlin

In Berlin, the critics of pop-up paths have prevailed. At the beginning of September 2020, the administrative court granted an urgent appeal and stopped the bicycle project. In its reasoning, it spoke of "serious doubts about the legality". A heavy blow for Regine Günther, the Green Senator for the Environment, Transport and Climate Protection in Berlin's state government. On 25 March, Günther pledged to build a total of 14 pop-up cycle paths.

In Berlin, many people commute daily: around two thirds of these 320 000 commuters use their cars. This is precisely the target group represented by the Association of Business Associations, an influential lobby in Berlin-Brandenburg. Its chairman, Sven Weickert, has his office on the top floor of an office building in Charlottenburg. From his window, he looks out over a broad traffic axis linking West Berlin with the huge Tiergarten. Cars have several lanes here on both sides. Weickert welcomes these boulevards: "These cycle paths are not justified because the danger situation has not been analysed. The Senate Administration must now make up for this. Cycling must become safe in this city". Weickert calls for a long-term transport policy and advocates extensive data collection: "So far there is no current traffic analysis in Berlin: How many cyclists are there on which roads? Which roads are danger points for road users?"

Weickert warns that commercial traffic was not taken into account when the Senate took short-term political action in spring. The Mobility Act, which is unique in Germany in this form, formulated goals for cycling but considerations about how to simultaneously guarantee the mobility of truck suppliers for supermarkets and craftsmen were not made. "If you restructure traffic and redistribute the road, you must also consider commercial traffic. The Mobility Act is a bicycle law", he argues. "We want to have industry further into the city – everything efficient and low in emissions, but then we also need deliveries by car in the city". Weickert admits, however, that some services can also work on two wheels: "With care services and courier services, you can think about cargo bikes and shorter delivery distances". The case now goes one level higher.

A European trend

In the early days of the pandemic, Berlin and Paris took similar decisions: "In Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg there were also new cycle paths on the main transport axes", says Gawlik. But unlike in Berlin, no court in Paris took possession of the temporary routes at the beginning of September.

New cycle paths are also a permanent feature in other European cities. In Budapest, the city has already announced that pop-up cycle paths from April will remain after the end of the pandemic. In Rome, 150 km of new cycle paths

are joining the *Urban Mobility Plan*, which aims to make the Italian capital more sustainable. The European Cyclists' Federation in Brussels estimates that 2300 kilometres of new cycle paths have been constructed since the onset of the pandemic, half of which are still in place.

Towards tactical urbanism

The right bank of the Seine has been reserved for cyclists rather than cars for the last three years, after Hidalgo banished the four-wheeled vehicles. It was the first bang of Paris's new cycling policy. While the decision met fierce opposition early on, today the banks of the Seine are widely celebrated as the first step of a major transformation of the centre. "This was a first milestone, a new car-free zone. There used to be roads there. Today there are kilometres of cycle paths along the Seine", says Gawlik.

'This is a bottom-up movement. Better air, better neighbourhoods are things that count.' – Maximilian
Gawlik

Long dismissed in Paris as utopian future painting, the idea of tactical urbanism has set a precedent in some, generally small areas of the city: streets free of traffic, the transformation of motorways into play areas for children, urban city gardens and wide terraces for restaurants, cafés and bars on former car parks next to the often narrow pavements give Parisian city life an unusual, new flair. When the second lockdown ends, they will reopen.

Most district initiatives come from the Parisians themselves: "This is a bottom-up movement. Better air, better neighbourhoods are things that count. In North American cities, this movement has begun", says Gawlik. On Sundays, some areas like the Marais have been completely closed to car traffic for several years now. "This is politically desired in Paris. Mayor Anne Hidalgo is stepping on the gas," says Gawlik.

Leo is optimistic that the new bicycle axes will become the norm, just like car-free Sundays: "Of course, not everything will remain the same. There will still be a few changes. But the cycle paths themselves will remain. Paris cannot sell anything else politically. And that alone is a big step for all cyclists in this cosmopolitan city".

Consensus over opportunism

In the end, the rapid implementation of cycle paths that revolutionise the transport system remains a challenge, as all interests must be represented. And without a joint discussion, a communication problem can arise. This seems to have happened in Paris. There are parties that feel betrayed. The ideas for new cycle paths within the city have long been visible in the five-year cycle plan. However, this transparency makes it necessary, in light of the rapid and unpredictable implementation in spring, to set up new consultations. These talks between all parties are a prerequisite for a consensus about how the road can be divided up both fairly and sustainably.

A more cautious communication of the supporters of temporary cycle paths would certainly have helped: if there had been more communication that this was a test phase with a clearly defined end, the opponents would have been less frightened. After a test phase, new consultations could have been planned and the test phase could have been extended if the response was positive.

The opportunity for a large round table was missed, hosted by the City of Paris, where all parties could voice their concerns and reach consensus decisions. Now it is above all motorised commercial traffic which must adapt to narrower car routes, new urban congestion and longer delivery times, which new cycle paths will inevitably bring

about while commercial traffic within the city will remain important. And yet the question of the future of urban public transport is not even asked: how much space will be given to buses? In Paris, the solution suggests that buses along with taxis will be given exclusive lanes.

On the road to becoming a cycling city

In Paris, the city planners admit that despite significant progress, problems still exist. Bicycle parking is lacking, cycle paths sometimes end abruptly, and traffic jams remain a problem, particularly on bridges. “You also have to make sure that the main traffic routes work for motorists,” says Gawlik. “But overall things look good. In Paris, a cycling culture is on the rise”.

Despite all the obstacles, the search for sustainability remains a primary goal. Paris has staked its claim to becoming a pioneer in Europe. In recent years, much has been announced and not everything has been implemented. City planners look closely at the success of cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen.

”Maybe in five years’ time you’ll look to Paris and say: This is a positive example of what is possible in a few years”, says Gawlik. The city planners will soon be taking part in a master class. The title sounds promising: How Copenhagen is Paris?



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