

**“Bicycle paths as a Death Wish and a Spatial Conquest: Insights into the Politics
of Public Space in Contemporary São Paulo, Brazil”**

Derek Pardue, PhD*

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(*) Derek Pardue, PhD

Assistant Professor, Brazilian Studies

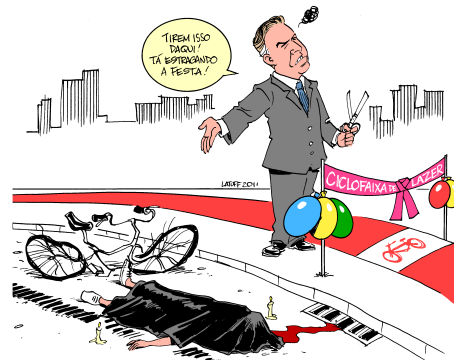
Aarhus University

Personal sites: <http://dppardue.weebly.com> and <http://dppardue.wix.com/derekpardue>

Books: [Brazilian Hip Hop](#) and [Ruminations on Violence](#)

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Erro de Impressão ou Impressão de erro?



Captions: "Publishing error or an error of interpretation" London, In the last trimester bike riding increased 10%, Amsterdam, 50% of the population traded in their car for a bike, Berlin, Sales of electric bikes have risen 45% each year, São Paulo, Residents of elite neighborhoods claim that bike riding is useless / Cartoon 2: 'Get this out of here! It's ruining the party' as politician prepares to cut the ribbon on a 'Leisure Bike Path.' / Cartoon 3: 'More bikes in São Paulo,' a banner displayed during the protests in March of 2015 after an attorney representing the Urbanism and Residence sector of the Public Ministry tried to stop the implementation of bike paths on Paulista Avenue in São Paulo.

Introduction

The 'ideal city' is a never-ending project that seeks to facilitate development in terms of efficiency, opportunity and rights. Management of public space reveals significant aspects of the relationship between the state and civil society, the incursion of private interests and the sense of residents' identification with the city. The implementation, maintenance and use of bike paths in a place like São Paulo, Brazil, one of the largest, most populated cities in the world, forces us to consider the social

dimensions of space and, by the same token, the spatial aspects of socio-political practices such as citizenship.

I am here today to talk about São Paulo Brazil and bikes, however, I currently live in Aarhus, Denmark. The two places could not be farther apart. Danish cities, such as Aarhus and Copenhagen, fit nicely into the European mold represented in the first cartoon with established policies and mindsets about bikes and city planning. While, in Denmark, citizenship implies a collective spirit of facilitating mobility and promoting shared beliefs in the public sphere (of course, this is problematic if one is a certain kind of migrant, again in concert with most Western European countries, as witnessed by a marked turn to the right in the recent general elections held two months ago in June), Brazilian citizenship historically has meant a variable combination of limited mobility due to repressive state agencies and reinforced privileges due to neoliberal policies after the so-called democratic ‘opening’ during the 1980s. The mix of corporatist government and ‘open’ markets has had detrimental effects on Brazilian urban landscapes and people’s sense of place. With a population of roughly 20 million residents in its greater metro area, São Paulo is a palimpsest of imported urban planning and myopic schemes fueled by clientelism and classism. Public space has historically been eroded for the benefit of the automobile, the gated community and the mischievous alliances between public security agents and organized crime syndicates.

However, over the past decade the idea of exercising rather than tolerating citizenship has become an increasingly common sense notion among Brazilians and Latin Americans more generally. This has affected the psychological and political definition of the city often summarized as the ‘right to the city.’ The present moment is one of tension precisely because there are simply more Brazilians with an attitude of entitlement that they can participate in how city space is used and resources allocated.¹ It is worth noting that the massive protests beginning in June of 2013 and lasting until the World Cup of 2014 started in São Paulo as a call to change transportation fares. With this brief introduction the saliency of *ciclovias* or exclusive bike paths as a pragmatic and theoretical issue comes more into focus.

São Paulo

Let us imagine the following scenario. For those who live in the Americas, it is not a difficult task. In São Paulo, according to the IPEA (Institute of Applied Economic

Research),² 80% of street space in Brazilian cities is dedicated to cars and other private vehicles, while only 30% of people use this mode of transportation for daily mobility. We have an obvious discrepancy in spatial distribution. The result is stifling traffic throughout the day and evening and an exacerbated level of general stress among virtually all residents. The famous phrase, which once captured the rise of São Paulo as a ‘modern’ industrial and economic juggernaut in the early and mid-20th century, ‘São Paulo não pode parar’ (SP can’t stop), has lost its punch.

As a response to the shamefully low levels of mobility and as part of a general platform focused on sustainability, the current administration of Mayor Fernando Haddad from the PT (Worker’s Party) resurrected the *ciclovía*, an emblem of urban planning outlined in the *Plano Diretor* (Master Urban Plan) passed in July of 2014.³ Haddad quickly seized the moment of his legislative victory to expand a project initiated by his predecessor, Gilberto Kassab (2006-2014). The sweeping implementation of 100 kilometers of bicycle paths in various areas of the city from June to October of 2014 (with a goal of 400km in total by the end of 2015 represents a jump in production and potentially a shift in the idea of urban development from past mayors. In a complementary fashion, the Haddad administration has announced the plan to renovate urban promenades and more than 1 million square meters of sidewalks until 2016. Moreover, the *paulistano* has observed more and more exclusive bus lanes on the city’s major avenues and cross-town arteries. It would seem that São Paulo is moving toward the Danes, the Dutch and a more progressive model of urban mobility.

It is worth remembering the correlation between the maintenance of public spaces and social tolerance. Jane Jacobs, in her famous essay of the early 1960s, espoused the need of sidewalks (and other public, social vias) to facilitate organic vibrancy of social relations and everyday mobility. While the debate regarding current urbanization policies in Brazil is certainly a political one, it would be dangerously simplistic to think in strictly party terms, i.e., this is a cohesive platform of the Worker’s Party. In fact, the charismatic Labor Party president Lula (2003-2011), if anything, only spiked the punch of automobilia with populist rhetoric that championed the small, poor man’s right to buy his own car. It is undeniable that the meteoric rise of the so-called Class C, a new working middle class numbering in the millions, during Lula’s administration, was, in part, a result of car sales and increased air travel, both historic symbols of affluency.

From a perspective of urbanism, one can conclude that the continuity from (neo)liberal to labor party political hegemony defined by wealth management through consumerism has done little for urban sustainability.

So, what *is* going on in São Paulo? What do the *ciclovias* mean for Brazil? This style of mobility development has provoked residents to reassess the role of public space in the city and the notion of being *paulistano*. The result has been both corporate capitalization of paths and grassroots graffiti mobilization. In addition, the bike paths acted as a forum for public opinion and, at times, testy confrontation in the weeks leading up to the polemical presidential elections of late 2014. Such heated encounters continue as *ciclovias* gain popularity (in polls conducted in 2013 and 2014, 86% and 88% of those polled approved of the implementation of *ciclovias*⁴) and vocal car enthusiasts clash with bikepath advocates in the courtroom and on the streets.⁵ I argue that the meaning of these narrow strips of public space is more complex than just one more layer of Brazilian political populism etched into the urban landscape.⁶ The *ciclovía* has become a major stage for public debate over the future of Brazilian citizenship and the notion of the modern city.

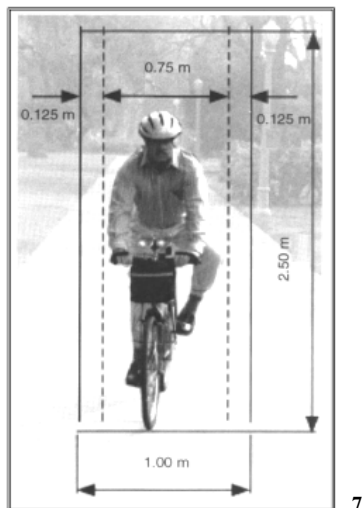
The Bike in Brazil

As André Geraldo Soares points out in his recent essay, the bike is both a *material* and an *ideological* vehicle (2015, 10). It is a logistical practice and political discourse. This conceptual framework is essential for the present discussion, because the bicycle conjures both spatial and citizenship management. Until recently, the semiotics of the bike in Brazil were skewed towards simplistic identity judgment. For most Brazilians, the bicycle is a symbol of either poverty or elite leisure. The following descriptions are hegemonic. The dark-skinned, shirtless peasant slowly pedaling on a single-gear, rusted bike with frequent passengers (co-workers or sons or daughters) precariously posed on handlebars or the rear tire fender and the sun-tanned, fit man flexed in a racing pose or laid back joking with look-alike friends, all properly attired in the latest fashion colorful tennis shoes and imported sunglasses soaking up the “nature” of the hallmark public park of Ibirapuera. Interestingly, the first proposed *ciclovía* in São Paulo from 1980 was a link between the leisure park of Ibirapuera to the elite university of USP. Roughly 8 kilometers of exercise for the future economists and sociologists of Brazil. Nice, but the project never sat the light of day, even when it was revisited in 1992. One of the

principles of bike path policy, emphasized by the current administration, is that paths should link to other hubs of public transportation, e.e, a metro station or bus terminal, in order to make the paths more efficient and integrated. After numerous “green” events regarding urban pollution in Latin America and continuous pressure from civic groups in the early 2000s, the city government formed the Department of Cycle Path Planning in 2009.

Documents, such as official city publications regarding urban mobility (e.g., 2012) and political party internet columns, often retell these stories of identity and reinforce such stereotypes as a manner of introducing a new initiative or a remarkable distinction. Regardless of one’s politics, what is striking about these descriptions of bicycles and people is the emphasis on the type of person who normally uses a bike. The continuity of biker as male remains a problem, as, even among activists reports, the percentage of women riders hovers around 10. Safety and security thus play a significant role in the assessment of boike paths in São Paulo. Be that as it may, what is absent from these policy reports is the idea that the bicycle could be first and foremost a spatial claim not a declaration (even if by default in the case of the impoverished laborer) of identity. What does it mean to the organization and production of urban space when there is an increased presence of bike lanes and bikers? It is this pivot that is implicit in the Haddad administration’s expansion of Kassab’s initiative.

Ciclovias and the Production of Urban Space



One of the advances made in urban studies towards the end of the 20th century was methodologically and theoretically to link space with the development of capitalism.⁸

Researchers and theorists from around the world and in cross-cultural partnerships invested great efforts to analyze the interdependent relationship between, for example, labor exploitation and peripheralization as fundamental factors in “urban extortion.”⁹ That is to say, the management of space has always been a negotiation between the state as arbiter of citizenship and corporations as stewards of market-based urban development. The value of space from real estate to parking meters to sidewalk commerce is speculative and there is always an argumentative struggle when denominations of space are changed. For example, in March of 2015 the battle over the legality to implement *ciclovias* on Paulista Avenue, a showcase avenue and heart of the city’s financial district was an anxiously observed moment of public policy. The judge’s decision to overrule the petition by the prosecutor representing the Public Ministry of São Paulo was essentially based on the category of the paths. In the judge’s opinion, the paths are not a ‘work of engineering’ but rather a simple ‘lane orientation of traffic.’¹⁰ This decision was a defeat for those who not only are ideologically against the paths but also those who benefit from the bureaucracy of spatial management, e.g., engineers and policy researchers who are paid to study the logistics of a public project.

Independent of legal battles, many *paulistanos* believe that the bikers are in the way [of supposed the real modernity] and thus simply out of place. It is important to note that the bike path as a potential site of capital marketing was not lost on the state and some local entrepreneurs. In fact, the city government did negotiate with a few companies and individual mural artists and commercialized the bike paths that parallel one stretch of the Radial Leste, the main artery that link the expansive East Side with the downtown area. This was particularly visible during the World Cup as the stadium used for the inaugural match between Brazil and Croatia, not to mention the dozens of matches of Corinthians since, is located at the end of the Radial.

Respect and Culture

Beyond the economic side of public space, The growing popularity and, at times, tension regarding *ciclovias* reflect a reevaluation of *respect*. In the introduction to the newly released book, *A bicicleta no Brasil*¹¹, the organizers describe the present moment of bicycles in Brazil as a breakthrough in the inclusion of the bicycle as a respected mode of transportation in Brazilian cities” (p.6). The use of the word ‘respect’ is part of a strategy to combat the stereotypical identity politics described briefly above

and connect mode of transportation with the movement of every citizen have unalienable rights to the city. As mentioned previously, the idea of the *ciclovia* emerged in 1980 but it wasn't until the introduction of the City Statute in 2001 that governmental institutions began to take seriously policies of urban mobility such as bike paths. It is important to underscore the legal fact that the CTB, the set of codes regarding traffic produced by the State, included the bicycle as a 'vehicle' only in 1998. In the 2011 version of the City Statute one can finally find the connection between bicycles, sustainability and urban mobility.¹²

Despite this legislative history, cyclists continue to be seen as interlopers in the modern public sphere of Brazilian cities. One reason for this lack of respect is categorical. Just as we saw previously with the debate over the bureaucratic category of *ciclovia* as part of civic engineering or traffic orientation, the integration of bike paths face the categorical challenge of being considered part of 'sports of leisure.' Since sports and, even more so, leisure are understood as separate spheres from transportation and the everyday space of urban life, the underlying logic is that they thus require their own arenas, clubs, fields and stations. Inevitably, until Haddad's initiative, São Paulo budgets for the practical implementation of *ciclovias* were cut or mismanaged and those segments that did reach completion were precariously close to the rough avenues of unaccustomed motorists or left empty, save a few daring cyclists on Sunday. Recent reports on the dozens of new SP *ciclovias* demonstrate that with each passing week bike traffic has increased.

Bike paths and cyclists as respected symbols of urban landscapes is a 'cultural' battle. I use 'culture' to mean not a denominated social group but a mode of interpreting the world. Specifically, then, *ciclovia* as an element of SP urban culture would mean that bike paths would be part of a relatively shared epistemology; *ciclovias* would help *explain* urban mobility. There would be no categorical challenges; they would simply be a possible frame of understanding and actionable response, as they are in much of Europe. Part of such a culture is to think about urban planning and transportation in terms of multiple trajectories corresponding to multiple modes of mobility rather than simply all modes in parallel motion. As Pierre Bourdieu argued long ago related to social class, the production and practice of distinction is a form of identification,¹³ and, if there is to be a culture of cycling, then spatial distinction in the experience of riding

must be evident.¹⁴ As some scholars have described, such distinction does exist in smaller Brazilian cities such as Joinville and Sorocaba due to specific public-private partnerships involving the city government and large factories that employ a significant percentage of the population.

Conclusion

What is happening presently in São Paulo is important not only for Brazilians and Latin Americans but anyone interested in cities. São Paulo is hardly an ideal city in the conventional sense of the word. Riding bikes in the city is dangerous, stigmas involving class and gender¹⁵ remain strong with regard to cyclists and the political, economic and ideological lobby of the automobile is hegemonic. However, as it is with the term ‘utopia’, ‘ideal’ is an unrealized intention rather than an existing place or an achieved state of affairs. The ideal city is a process and in this way is not unlike the frequently bumpy road of social agency. As Raquel Rolnik described in a recent blog, *ciclovias* are one tool to “face the logic of production of the city which [continues to be] focused on automobiles”¹⁶

What the debate and movement around *ciclovias* teaches us is that narrow strips of public space, in this case measuring a mere one meter in width, can be a touchstone for civic debate about the most essential aspects of citizenship. Respect lies at the intersection of individual worth and collective projection. It is not simply a psychological state but a spatial practice. *Ciclovias* are but one manifestation of sustainable democracy and they demonstrate the need to consider the economic, political and sociological dimensions of public space.

¹ The idea of cycling as political activism is apparent in the neologism introduced by the organizers of the book (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada), get full citation.

² See <http://www.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/cidade/secretarias/transportes/planmob/index.php?p=189299>

³ See <http://g1.globo.com/sao-paulo/noticia/2014/09/pesquisa-aponta-que-88-sao-favor-da-ampliacao-de-ciclovias-em-sp.html>

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izU-iBnGjJA>. In March of 2015 the battle over the legality to implement *ciclovias* on Paulista Avenue, a showcase avenue and heart of the financial district of the city was also an anxiously observed moment of public policy. The judge’s decision to overrule the petition by the prosecutor representing the Public Ministry of São Paulo was essentially based on the

⁵ See, for example, Greenpeace’s article about the democratization of the streets, <http://www.greenpeace.org/brasil/pt/Blog/as-ruas-tambm-so-para-pedalar/blog/51657/> and urbanist Raquel Rolnik’s column, which summarizes briefly the current debate on *ciclovias*: <https://raquelrolnik.wordpress.com/2015/04/06/cidades-bicicletas-e-protestos/>

⁷ This image shows the necessary space of a cyclist, BRASIL, Departamento Nacional de Infraestrutura de Transportes. Instituto de Pesquisas Rodoviárias. Manual de sinalização rodoviária. –3. ed. - Rio de Janeiro, 2010, p. 113

⁸ See, for example, the foundational work of Henri Lefebvre, *Lapensee marxiste et la ville*, Paris: Caster man, 1972 and Milton Santos (1979), *Economia Espacial: Críticas e alternativas*, SP: HUCITEC.

⁹ See, for example, Rolnik and Bonduki 1979 (Periferias: Ocupação do Espaço e Reprodução da Força de Trabalho, *Cadernos de Estudo e Pesquisa 2*, USP, Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo; Kowarick, etc.).

¹⁰ In terms of space, <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2015/06/1641926-com-obra-em-reta-final-ciclovias-da-av-paulista-vai-espremer-pedestre.shtml> - 'wm todosos lugares, a área de espera, em metros quadrados, ficou maior,' Suzana Karagiannidis from the Bike Path Planning Department, part of the CET...

¹¹ *A Bicicleta no Brasil, 2015*, Organizadores: André Geraldo Soares, Daniel Guth, João Paulo Amaral e Marcelo Maciel, São Paulo: Itaú, 2015.

¹² See Renato Boareto, *A Bicicleta e as cidades: Como inserir a bicicleta na política de mobilidade urbana*. São Paulo: Instituto de Energia e Meio Ambiente, 2010. On September 22, 2004 the Programa Brasileiro de Mobilidade por Bicicleta was institutionalized and this helped pave the way for the Caderno de Referencia para Elaboração de Plano de Mobilidade por Bicicletas nas Cidades in 2007. The Caderno is a regulating agency that evaluates municipalities in terms of mobility and in adherence to the guiding principle of the 'social function' required of cities as per the City Statute. See, for example, Nelson Eugênio Pinheiro Montenegro's *Ciclovias nos países Luso e Afros e no Brasil*. Talk given at ConLab XI, 2011. For more technical evaluations of ciclovias in Brazil, see Regina Malaguti and Camila Machalka Jr.'s article 'As Denominadas ciclovias cariocas: uma avaliação à luz da legislação federal e das recomendações técnicas' SIMPGEU, Simpósio de Pós-graduação em Engenharia Urbana, 2012.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

¹⁴ For a case study of urban planners using 'culture' in regeneration projects, <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Nantes-urban-project-putting-the.html>

¹⁵ For example, in a recent poll conducted by members of Ciclocidade, a bicycle activist group in São Paulo, only 10% of the bikers on a major ciclovias on the southwest side of the city were women. In fact, the analysis marked these statistics as a marked increase with implications that the gender stigma may be weakening. Nevertheless, the numbers remain very low. See the report entitled 'Contagem de Ciclistas' (2015) http://www.ciclocidade.org.br/phocadownload/Relatorio_Contagem_EliseuDeAlmeida_Maio2015.pdf.

Accessed on June 15, 2015.

¹⁶ (2015, <https://br.noticias.yahoo.com/blogs/habitat/finalmente-calcadas-para-todos-211250252.html#more-id>)