

**Re/Cycling Histories:
Users and the Paths to Sustainability
in Everyday Life**

Rachel
Carson
Center

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Sponsors: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC), Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)

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The idea behind the workshop *Re/Cycling Histories* was a bold one. At a first and even second glance, it seems like a strange undertaking to trying to combine the history of recycling and waste treatment with the history of bicycling and mobility. What common denominators can be found between these fields of technology and social practice—except perhaps the notion that both of them are somehow environmentally benevolent? Or, as the conveners put it in their background paper: “What lessons can we learn from the re/cycling histories for current sustainability research and development when we use a user/consumer centered approach?” From the viewpoint of the classical history of technology, waste treatment and bicycle production might have (had) little to do with each other. But if we approach these areas from the perspective of users and consumers, we might very well “find interrelated concepts, practices, changes.” If our goal is a sustainable economy, then we are well advised to investigate the (historical) practices of daily life and the meanings that various social groups (have) assign(ed) to these practices and the relevant technologies. Thus, it did not come as a surprise that the concept of “sustainability” figured prominently in the concluding discussion of this highly stimulating workshop.

The Recycling Strand

The workshop was organized in an innovative fashion with parallel sessions on each strand—recycling and cycling. This part of the conference report will comment on the presentations which dealt with waste, reusing, and recovery; the cycling sessions are covered in the second half of the report.

One of the threads running through the recycling strand was the question of definition. “Recycling” is a fairly novel term that only achieved prominence in the last third of the twentieth century. However, as the first paper by **REINHOLD REITH** and **GEORG STRÖGER** on the Early Modern period made clear, this fact does not mean that such practices are new. In a subsistence economy characterized by poverty and limited resources it is hardly surprising that commodities and materials are “reused, resold, and repaired” as long as possible. Given the economic necessity of such practices, they were mostly carried out by persons on the lower end of the social ladder: beggars, women, children, disabled, and Jews. As **SYLVIA KUNITZ**’s paper documented, the overrepresentation of Jews in the scrap trade continued well into the twentieth century. (One may compare this with the situation of Coptic Christian pig owners who were active in recycling food waste in contemporary Egypt.) Dealing with the Second World War, **PETER THORSHEIM** (on Britain) and Kunitz (on Germany) emphasized the sudden discovery of “salvage and recovery” by the political and military elite; they also illustrated the conscious connection of these activities with morally-loaded concepts like “thrift and frugality” (quote from a British journal, 1940). And today, interestingly, recovery programs reappear in various European Commission Directives (**KATJA**

BIEDENKOPF); commercial salvage practices have also been reinstalled under the heading of “urban mining” (**DJAHANE SALEHEBADI**).

To a large extent, the question of definition overlaps with the question of periodization. In her presentation of a paper she had written with **MILENA VEENIS, RUTH OLDENZIEL** made the point that the throw-away mentality that developed in the 1950s and 1960s is probably unique in history. One phenomenon in dire need of historical explanation—as opposed to understanding why people reuse and recycle—is how people in the postwar period developed an idea of “convenience” (**ROBERT FRIEDEL**) that allowed for an unprecedented level of resource annihilation. Friedel discussed the strength of the notion of convenience for the introduction of metal cans for soft drinks and beer in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. In their case study on glass recycling in the Netherlands, Veenis and Oldenziel illustrated how a group of women in circa 1970 rallied against the ramifications of the cult of comfort and convenience, especially with regards to single use bottles and jars. When arguing for the implementation of recycling bins, these activists made explicit recourse to traditional, also Protestant, notions of “thrift and frugality.” Paradoxically, at the same time, they reinstalled a practice of waste separation that the German occupying forces had introduced into the Netherlands during the war. As **ANDREA WESTERMANN** showed in her paper on the Federal Republic of the 1970s, German citizens also expressed a critical attitude toward waste and littering on the basis of ethical concerns.

At the end of the day, the workshop participants seemed to agree that historians have to distinguish, on the one hand, between periods of affluence, governed by a convenience mentality, and periods of poverty, war, and environmental consciousness on the other. Not surprisingly, there was a consensus about establishing the beginning of environmentalism and resource awareness in the 1970s, or in some cases, the 1980s. As **M. WILLIAM STEELE** showed in his inspiring keynote address on cycling and recycling in Japan, this rough periodization also largely works for this country. In Japan, as in Europe, historical values are still mobilized today to convince consumers to save resources and prevent wasteful behavior.

Beyond the problems of definition and periodization, presenters did their best to differentiate between various forms of recycling, as well as to isolate various kinds of regulatory regimes. **FINN ARNE JØRGENSEN** noted that it is necessary to discuss food waste, paper, rags, glass, and metals separately. His perspective not only makes sense from the point of view of city authorities, business, and technology, but also from the perspective of users and consumers. Whereas ordinary people could compost their own foodstuffs and reuse textiles themselves, they could not easily turn metal scrap into usable products. When cities grew and the population became more urban, other

systems therefore developed. Jørgensen mentioned that many Scandinavian municipalities maintained their own pig farms to take care of food waste all the way into the early postwar period, whereas rags and scrap metal were left for private entrepreneurs to take care of. Only after littering and resource use took on devastating dimensions and organized citizens began to petition and protest did central governments and ministries act. In her insightful, comparative paper **HEIKE WEBER** discussed how the French and West German governments developed different plans to take care of compostable materials in the 1970s. As **KATJA BIEDENKOPF** and **DJAHANE SALEHEBADI** showed in their studies, both the EU and industry have developed an interest in recycling metals in recent years—for example from electronic gadgets. The difference: whereas governments act on part of the environment, companies are interested in getting hold of precious and rare metals.

Most participants probably expected the EU to be a progressive regulatory force in the area of recycling and waste management; it thus came as a surprise when **ZSUZSA GILLE** argued that the situation in some cases can look very different from an Eastern European perspective. Based on an analysis of the 2010 red mud calamity in Hungary, she explained that the rules in this area of chemical waste actually became more lax after Hungary joined the EU in 2004. The reason: until that date, the red mud (resulting from aluminum production) had been defined as toxic waste.

In an interesting turn, most presenters did not analyze users and everyday life in depth. There were exceptions—as in the papers by Weber, Westermann, and Veenis and Oldenziel—but often users (or, if you like, “re-users”) only appeared as hypothetical, anonymous persons or as consumers who “vote” with their wallets. Therefore, in her concluding remarks, **SUSAN STRASSER** asked the participants to consider the topics of class, gender, and generation more seriously. She noted that race had only come up in the case of Jewish scavengers, and argued for more detailed analyses of practices and constraints that govern individual action. A prerequisite for a functioning recycling system is that someone takes on the hard task of separating the valuable from the invaluable and recyclable goods from such materials that are more suited to burning or landfills. As today as in the Early Modern period—we usually find this “someone” from the lower strata of the social hierarchy: unpaid housewives in front of their waste bins, badly paid workers at conveyor belts, or poor slum inhabitants searching for valuables in landfills in Third World countries. While both waste treatment and bicycling are usually environmentally benevolent, most users would only associate bicycling—and not recycling—with pleasure.

-- Mikael Hård

The Bicycle Strand

In my report I have chosen not to discuss individual papers from the sessions on cycling, but to highlight common elements and issues that, in my opinion, should be discussed further. In preparing this report, my main epistemological problem involved the choice of academic discipline—I decided not to use the perspective of the history of mobility (my field of expertise) but to find a new viewpoint which I, for lack of a better word, would like to call New Mobility History.

The reason for this is twofold. On the one hand, bicycle history up to now does not seem to fit properly within traditional mobility history—in which the train and recently the car are center stage, and the bicycle is dealt with as a mere ‘predecessor.’ The bicycle does not have an autonomous place in the historiography of mobility. Conversely, bicycle historians seem to reject the car as a viable topic for integration, exposing one of the characteristics of this new subfield of bicycle history: its (perhaps natural) bias towards the bicycle. Although emancipatory emerging fields seem to need some partisanship (which makes bicycle studies sound a bit like gender studies), this element can also block important insights. In this case, a blinkered view of bicycle history would obscure the history of the moped and the motorcycle, the latter of which was of course a much greater polluter per vehicle (in its two-stroke version) than the car.

On the other hand, bicycle history reveals the potential of an environmental history of mobility, an approach that finds surprisingly little resonance within traditional mobility history. In June 2010, the Rachel Carson Center organized a workshop on Mobility and the Environment, and in a way this Re/cycling workshop can be seen as an extension. I would like to compliment RCC for its pivotal role in this development: the two workshops really promise to push mobility studies into a more environmentally-conscious direction.

Having said this, I wish to comment on several of the striking points observed during this workshop. Firstly, I would like to question the easy connection often made between bicycling and sustainability. For several participants at this workshop, sustainability seemed to be excluded from serious discussion as a matter of course. For instance, this point of view is present in **IAIN BOAL’S** contribution to the workshop, and it also shines through the contributions of both **MANUEL STOFFERS** and **PETER COX**. The paper by **M. WILLIAM STEELE** on Japan clarifies that such a conclusion is certainly not justified as far as the waste issue is concerned. But more to the point is **HANS PETER HAHN’S** characterization of the sustainability issue as a “moral metaphor” leading to questionable shortcuts. This is for instance the case when Manuel Stoffers, in his contribution to the discussion during the workshop, argues that the bicycle is inherently sustainable, independent of its users. This is very questionable, to say the least, and supports my conclusion on this topic that sus-

tainability should be problematized, not accepted as given. It should be used as explanandum, not (or not merely) as explanans.

My second remark relates to the type of history the bicycle needs. I think this should be a political history, or a history of the politics of cycling, aimed at answering the question of power relations. Who has the power to “plan the bicycle off the street,” as **MARTIN EMANUEL** put it in his paper on Swedish traffic engineering? **PAUL ROSEN** also pointed at the issue of how planners “construct cyclists” and how these constructions achieve policy outcomes.

My third remark is about the type of bicycle use that historians and scholars of bicycle studies tend to focus upon. Here, as in mainstream mobility history, the struggle is between proponents of the pleasurable aspects of the bicycle, and those that emphasize its utilitarian aspects. Here, too, partisanship plays its destructive role, as in fact this dichotomy means nothing else than reproducing historical differences of opinions. It means that historians and social scientists take the stand of one group of historical actors, and continue their struggle.

My fourth remark relates to the issue of modernity, and the bicycle’s role in modernization. Like the car, the bicycle has been treated as the harbinger of modernity, not least because it enabled individual (if not individualistic) consumption. Several contributions to the workshop emphasized this aspect, more or less unreflexively. In reality the bicycle was part of a “movement” from the very beginning, and its blossoming was unthinkable without the role of bicycle and touring clubs, as **ANNE-KATRIN EBERT** and **CATHERINE BERTHO LAVENIR** show in their respective contributions. Conversely, coupling modernity so closely with vehicles as individual possessions prevent us from seeing that “collective” forms of travel (such as the motor bus, or the train) were also under the spell of modernity. This oversight becomes especially acute when we bring non-Western mobility cultures into the equation, such as rickshaws or the use of trucks as passenger transport vehicles. Edward Rhoads’s paper makes this abundantly clear. Modernity and mobility, in other words, should be rethought.

My fifth remark is about what we take as a unit of analysis when “doing” mobility studies. Bicycle studies more or less enforce us to take up the “vehicle perspective” again, at the very moment when New Mobility Studies would have us “decenter” the vehicle, and focus our attention on the vehicle’s “functions”: bicycles were (and are) used for commuting, for touring, racing, and for courting (as **TIINA MÄNNISTÖ** shows for Finland) and all those functions need their proper analysis. Viewing the bicycle from this perspective opens the possibility for a comparison with other vehicles such as the car (because cars were (and are) also used for commuting, touring, racing and courting).

RUTH OLDENZIEL'S and **ADRIE de la BRUHÈZE'S** papers on the role of infrastructure belong to this research perspective.

My sixth remark relates to the seeming (and unquestioned) linearity of mobility history. It seems as if the bicycle in many countries was succeeded by the car, but by the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, the car again seems to be in the process of being succeeded by the bicycle, at least in large cities. Are we dealing with a pattern here? Are there different trajectories in history, in other cultures? The Netherlands seem a (partial) exception, as this remained a “bicycle country” (in “passenger-kilometers”) at least up until World War II.

My last remark is about the Euro- and Americocentrism of much of bicycle scholarship. This workshop was a very welcome exception in this respect, because of its contributions on China (**EDWARD RHOADS**), Indonesia (**LAURA LAPINSKIENE**) and Japan (**M. WILLIAM STEELE**). In non-western countries, where bicycle paths have not disciplined the cyclists into a flow parallel to the one formed by cars, cyclists are responsible for the “chaos” of traffic. This questions the role of traffic engineering, both in the West and in the “Rest,” where municipal authorities are eager to discipline road users into neat streams. Do we really need this in other cultures? Doesn't the *woonerf* experience in the Netherlands (and the subsequent diffusion of “traffic calming” measures) teach us another lesson, namely that the so-called “chaos” of non-Western traffic would potentially be less lethal than the disciplined, high-speed flows, because people tend to be more attentive if they have to deal with vehicles of different speeds?

Looking back on a successful workshop, I am pleased about the decision of several participants to submit their paper to *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies*, of which I happen to be the editor. I hope that we will be able, the peer reviewers permitting, to make a nice special issue reflecting the eagerness with which scholars have lately rediscovered the bicycle—an issue which reflects these scholars' willingness to perform a truly interdisciplinary approach, giving the environment its proper place in the analysis.

-- Gijs Mom