

Public Spheres on the Move: Studying Democratic Embodied Practices through Biking

Abstract

Los Angeles has long symbolized car culture. However, things may be changing. After the recent explosion of mass bike events, food truck festivals, and art walks, Mayor Garcetti and the City Council have passed measures emphasizing active transportation. While these institutional initiatives are of traditional interest to political scientists studying democratic politics, we suggest that such ‘mobility events’ are politically significant in themselves. Using participant observation and theories of performativity, we argue that these shared mobility practices create embodied public spheres, and that interpretivist methods help political science make sense of public spheres that are, physically and conceptually, on the move.

Introduction

I'm biking down Santa Monica Blvd, and even without a helmet on it's stinking hot. I've never gone more than a couple of miles, so why am I biking 17 miles to go to an admittedly cool-sounding - but random - bike event in downtown L.A.? Partly it's because of the food... Mostly, though, it's because, well, why not?

The visceral experience of biking in Los Angeles, as described above in one of our field notes, defies the city's car-centred reputation. On the one hand, L.A. is represented as a tangle of freeways where drivers ensnared in endless traffic are, like Michael Douglas' character in the 1993 movie *Falling Down*, frustrated to the brink of murderous rampage. On the other hand, the city is a Beach Boys vision of a breezy, sun-filled drive along the Pacific Coast Highway. Central to both these images is the car. Its role is not simply imagined, but a fact of life for Angelenos across and beyond city limits. In 2014, the average Angeleno was condemned to spend an additional 80 hours per year delayed by traffic (Texas A&M Transportation Institute, 2015). Los Angeles' sprawled infrastructure makes most walk and bike commutes unfeasible, and the city's poor public transit network makes travel by bus or rail extremely time-consuming. Of course, L.A. shares this car dependency with many metropolises, which may be why events based on car-free mobility – primarily biking and walking – are attracting growing attention. Across Los Angeles, mass bike events have exploded in popularity and regularly stop cars to allow thousands of bodies to move together through the city; similarly, food truck festivals pop up in different neighbourhoods, filling parking lots with smorgasbords of food, and pedestrian-centred art walks and fairs bring people out of their private spaces into shared sidewalks and streets. Our paper joins previous studies of such 'mobility events' (Lugo, 2013; Stehlin, 2014) by exploring their political meaning and how political scientists can study them.

The academic study of mobilities has emerged as an interdisciplinary field in the past two decades. Disciplines such as sociology and geography were quick to adopt mobility as a

discursive paradigm. In sociology, John Urry (2000) suggested that the discipline should shift focus from ‘the “social as society” into the “social as mobility”’ (p. 3), including the corporeal aspects of mobility practices and their effects on citizenship. In geography, the discussion has in part moved beyond the dichotomy of sedentary versus nomadic to a ‘relational understanding of place’ (Jensen, 2009, p. 143), where the city is constituted by everyday movements through its arterial infrastructure, i.e., its public space. The mobilities literature directs our attention to the relational flows between people and places - how such flows constitute sites of meaningful interaction and produce political meanings through everyday movements and practices (Jensen, 2009; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Methodologically, it also strives to capture the interplay between subjective experiences and built infrastructure (Manderscheid 2011).

In contrast, political science has been slow to participate in these interdisciplinary discussions (Hannam, Shelly, & Urry, 2006), despite their shared concerns regarding issues of citizenship and the public sphere. In analysing formal institutions and ‘traditional’ forms of participation, political science has to its loss engaged little with people’s everyday lives and the politics found in quotidian practices (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Hacking, 2004). But, communities of practice do emerge, constituting banal public spaces where politics can and does occur (Sharp & Paddison, 2007).

We argue that these mobility events create public spheres through embodied practices such as biking, eating, and walking. These multiple public spheres are neither discursive nor institutional, but rather are ‘on the move’, both concretely and conceptually. We employ as empirical evidence our own embodied experiences from participant observation in Los Angeles bicycling events, which we present throughout the text in the form of autoethnographic field note ‘snippets’. Theoretically, we make sense of our evidence through theories of the public sphere

(Arendt, 1998; Fraser, 1990; Fraser, 1997; Habermas, 1993), particularly as they connect with theories of performativity (Butler 2015, McThomas 2016). We follow Marres and Lezaun (2011) in ‘challeng[ing] a vision of public action centred on discursive or deliberative processes’ (p. 492), but instead of taking their ‘materiality’ turn to objects as political, we examine how embodied practices of mobility are political and create public space. Though we also share with them a Foucauldian attention to the capillary levels of power (p. 494), our practice-oriented approach seeks to understand this power in everyday settings (Hacking, 2004).

Methodologically, we use an interpretivist approach where questions of embodied meaning and concrete power concerns are central (Lynch, 2014; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2014). In doing so, we aim to connect our theoretical and methodological claims. In other words, just as we claim bodies create public spheres ‘beyond’ their verbal message, our own interpretation of their political effects goes ‘beyond’ whatever intentions participants in such events may have. Our intention in doing so is not to disregard other interpretations but simply to position ourselves alongside them. This approach follows the interpretivist and feminist points that the researcher is her own key instrument for sense-making and formulating knowledge claims, and it also situates our knowledges as borne from our particular positionalities (Haraway 1988). Our hope is that this method renders us more accountable and better able to take part in a conversation about our knowledge claims.

Thus we contribute to a growing body of interpretivist research in the common subfields of political science (for International Relations, e.g., Epstein, 2008; Fierke, 2014; Lynch, 1999; for comparativist, e.g., Fujii, 2011; Wedeen, 2007; for American, e.g. Hawkesworth, 2012; Pachirat 2013) and related fields (e.g., in public policy, Flyvberg, 2003; Yanow, 2002). In using

theories of performativity, we also add to the ‘turn to practice’ which has recently permeated political science, mainly through the field of international relations (Adler & Pouliot, 2011).

Below, we sketch a study of what meanings the growing popularity of ‘mobility events’ might have for their participants and to the city more broadly. In the first section, we argue that the community created by shared practices is central to participants, and that an effect for the city is the creation of public spheres ‘on the move’. By temporarily closing down city streets, such events embody a challenge to a car-dominated L.A., creating community based on embodied practices and making visible negotiations of power at the capillary level: who has the right to be on the streets? In the second section, we problematize these communities created by taking into account the power relations between participants’ different bodies. A preliminary study, we end by suggesting some avenues for future research.

I. Embodied practices, shared communities

We’re turning left at some intersection in Beverly Hills - I don’t remember where because we’re cycling en masse and I’m focused on making sure no one drives (or bikes) into me - when some angry guy in a BMW convertible honks loud and long, maybe about 10 seconds continuously. He’s angry. I brace myself in case he plows into us anyway, deciding that he as a driver has the right of way. Luckily he doesn’t. After we’re safely through the intersection, some guy and I look at each other and laugh, commiserating about angry drivers. It’s a light exchange, and we don’t meet again or even share names, but facing off together against the ‘common enemy’ makes me feel, for a second, tied to him in some loose, inarticulate way.

Vulnerable bodies on bikes, facing off against a honking car driver, can create a sense of community, as described in the above field note. We understand that bike events bring together bodies and orient them around a particular activity. What does it mean for politics that bodies be and do together? Does this quality reflect or imply the presence of some kind of public sphere - of a common, shared world between participants? To answer, we turn to theories of the public

sphere. One general shortcoming, however, is that they are focused on institutional and discursive processes and thus are unable to account for the politics of everyday practices. Politics is not simply what happens at the ballot box or in town hall meetings. Common cultural practices are also sites of everyday contestation, and often where politics is most keenly felt for the average person. This section thus proposes that public spheres can be oriented around the shared, embodied practice of cycling through Los Angeles.

To ground our experiences of community in these cycling events, we start with two key theories that have shaped the contours of discussion: Jurgen Habermas' public sphere (1993) and Hannah Arendt's space of appearance (1998), though we ultimately take Judith Butler's (2015) performative approach. For Habermas, the public sphere is a discursive space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs through rational-critical discourse. Rooted in an ethos of bourgeois deliberative practices found in discussion-oriented public spaces such as salons and coffee houses, such a sphere is normatively distinct from the realm of economics as well as institutional state politics.

However, this discursive emphasis does not match our experiences at cicLAvia and Critical Mass. Sustained, reasoned deliberation in these events is minimal, and the verbal exchanges that participants do have - like the one described above - are light and passing, ad hoc and reactive. Not only was there little talk while biking, but our experiences of community at these mobility events were grounded in their physicality: our bodies astride bikes, in the middle of streets, within arm's distance from others, able to see, touch, smell, hear and speak with them. In short, seeing the public sphere as discourse as Habermas does ignores the embodied nature of the politics that we experienced in challenging the angry driver's expected right of way. Simply

by biking together, people can and do feel a sense of commonness completely separate from verbal debate.

Further, even if we take the public sphere as primarily discursive, such discourse must take place *somewhere* and is necessarily mediated through the body. Regardless where or the medium through which it takes place, discourse has a physical character - in speech, voices attached to bodies speak and ears attached to bodies listen, in writing, wrists move across the page and fingers type, and even in virtual space bodies sit at their computers or on their phones dialoguing with others. Ignoring the physical qualities of the public sphere in favour of an 'ideal type' of deliberative democracy also ignores the fact that different bodies experience and exert power differently, as we discuss in the next section. Thus, the Habermasian public sphere provides a starting language for making sense of our experiences, but does not capture the qualities we noted: cyclists claiming streets reserved for cars roots a physical public sphere, and moving and doing together is a kind of political community *performed* rather than *spoken*:

Even though we've never met before and we'll never meet again, on the few blocks closed to traffic [at cicLAvia] we're all just having fun together, joking around, shooting the shit with strangers. It's fun (people watching, bike envying, children avoiding), but it's also more than that: the same kind of feeling I get when I'm in a mass of people who all believe or care about the same thing. I know we come from different lives, but I feel like we're building something new and novel just by being and doing together - for me, this is community. I wonder if others feel the same way.

Dissatisfied with Habermas' public sphere, we turn to Arendt to see if there is room for the performed community we experienced. Arendt describes the space of appearance as a potential, fleeting space that emerges from men's collective words and collective deeds. Insofar as it is concerned with collective deeds, her notion of the public better captures the practical realities of events like cicLAvia and Critical Mass. Hundreds of cyclists collectively acting - pedalling, weaving through the streets, countering aggressive drivers, together - who may or may

not have explicitly political intentions: these mobility events compose a loose, evanescent Arendtian public. Arendt's statement that the 'living together of people' is 'the only indispensable material factor in the generation of power' (1998, p. 201) evinces the physical dimensions of collective action. Spatial proximity is essential for acting together: the true space of politics is relational, between shared deeds and words. Because proximity is necessarily mediated through the body, however, this acting together must be embodied.

However, Arendt's space of appearance and public realm are defined by their freedom from the body, which is relegated to the private sphere of bodily care. This strict separation fails to make sense of our on-the-ground experiences. While participants in cicLAvia, for example, emerge from their private realms and appear in the common world of Los Angeles' streets, they do not necessarily speak to or even engage with others, and few verbal 'political' messages or slogans are ever articulated. The sheer fact of their bodies appearing, however, *says* something beyond public and private and disrupts those categories. By discussing the importance of physical proximity for the realization of collective deeds, Arendt's space of appearance bring us closer to articulating the public sphere that we experienced in cicLAvia and Critical Mass. However, her binary distinctions between public and private cannot capture the embodied dimension of public life and politics we witnessed.

While neither Habermas nor Arendt's theory of the public captures the sense of public sphere we experienced as participants in Los Angeles' mobility events, we draw from them one core point in crafting our own claim: the public sphere involves people acting together, whether in discourse or collective deeds. Shared practices create common worlds. We want to return to this baseline understanding of public sphere to bring *everyday* and *embodied* interactions back into politics.

We propose that a public sphere characterized by shared and embodied practices best makes sense of Los Angeles' mobility events as public spheres on the move. Turning to the performative character of assembly, Judith Butler explains, 'acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political' (2015, p. 9). Cycling *en masse* in lanes designated for vehicular traffic illuminates the tacitly accepted dominance of the car, challenging a city culture oriented around it and the dominance of such existing infrastructure. Positioning cyclists and drivers side-by-side on the streets, such practices make explicit the hierarchical relations between these two groups of actors as well as the direct embodied negotiations over respective rights to the city's literal public space, i.e., the streets. In other words, they seek to 'sever the relation between the public space...and the existing regime' (Butler, 2015, p. 85). Instead of a discursive challenge - perhaps, for example, via citizen arguments in favor of bike lanes - to witness 300 or sometimes, one cyclist told us, up to 1,000 bodies astride bicycles winding together through Los Angeles' surface streets enacts another possible politics. These bodies perform a prefigurative move that makes cycling a reality in Los Angeles' car-dominated infrastructure, even if only temporarily. In Mary McThomas' account of performative citizenship (2016), such an approach 'flips' the logic to begin with practices themselves rather than beginning with a proscribed concept of (in her case citizenship, in ours) the public sphere.

To be clear, the public spheres we are discussing are not simply spaces where people move in their private spheres alongside each other. Physical assembly, the mass gathering of people, creates a sense of community for those participants themselves, one rooted in the shared practice. Strangers introduce themselves to and have conversations with each other. At Critical Mass, for example, a handful of participants introduced themselves to us, and we chatted about

the shared nervousness of our first event, biking outfits, the drive to get there, and other past and upcoming events. This is a sense of community that doesn't exist when, say, walking around in shopping centre or at the grocery store. Casual as such interactions may be, they deepen the sense of community rooted in the actual cycling together and being vulnerable together – the 'understanding that a situation is *shared*' (Butler, 2015, p. 18; original emphasis).

Interpretive approaches, including participating in the event ourselves, enable us to capture a visceral sense of this community and the sense of inclusion created through brief encounters, introductions, and traffic negotiations. They also expose the fact that this negotiation over who can claim a right to the streets is laden with power. Unlike conducting a survey or gathering demographic data, participant observation can grasp the fundamental vulnerability cyclists face in contending with two tons of forceful metal: as we're rushing to turn, passing a driver opposite us waiting to turn left, leaning forward, laying on his horn and edging his car into our lane, looking 'ready to jump out of the car', as a co-rider mockingly described it. Such incidents are not unique, though to be clear our arguments here are borne from our experiences and interpretations thereof.

Here it may be appropriate to make clear that our interpretation of these events as political, public spheres on the move concerns effects rather than intentions. People may be drawn to cicLAVia or downtown Los Angeles' art walk to have fun, to socialize, to be physically active, to get out of the house, to see a little bit more of the city or, citing our field notes, 'well, why not'. It matters more, however, that they come together in public space to *do together* in a political act that creates community. Such an act performs some message to the city more broadly 'in excess of any particular or vocalized account of what they are about' (Butler, 2015, p. 8). Their presence, in such numbers, in public space designated for cars conveys a refusal to

accept Los Angeles' interpellation of each resident and visitor as defined by the car (Lugo, 2013). In this sense, an assembly of bike riders on the streets of L.A. is politically significant in excess of any explicitly stated political aims. While intentions may be political, apolitical or even anti-political, shared practices create a political community for their participants and convey a political message to the city more broadly. These political effects are also visible at the institutional level, as illustrated by recent legislative initiatives such as the City Council's Mobility Plan 2035 and Mayor Garcetti's Vision Zero.

In privileging our interpretations over that of participants' own, we may disturb some interpretivist sensibilities. After all, researchers and interpretivists in particular are expected to treat research participants' own sense-making with respect. However, we think this points to one of the key strengths of interpretivist approaches - the acknowledgement that social science consists of *interpretations*, of which there are necessarily multiple, and not a quest for one absolute 'Truth'. Instead of attempting to convey participants' intentions without 'researcher contamination' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p. 109), we want to think with and alongside them. We see this as practicing reflexivity (ibid, p. 100) to make ourselves available for conversation (Haraway 1988), but a physical rather than the discursive reflexivity that is usually implied. In short, we are inserting our own bodies methodologically in order to practice the performativity that we theorize. As the below field notes suggest, participants themselves experience a multiplicity of interpretations and can create boundaries accordingly:

We've all just stopped at Cheviot Hills Park for the halfway point break. I'm not used to biking without knowing where I'm going and want to ask about our route. I approach one of the half-dozen ride marshals – who's maybe in his 30s, in spandex, rolling a joint, standing with three of his friends – to ask about the route for the rest of our ride. Partway through our conversation we start talking about the logistical difficulties of cycling en masse. The marshal comments that part of the difficulty stems from 'young, inexperienced guys [who] just want to have fun' and don't know about cycling: 'they don't respect the rules, don't stay in their lanes, they just race.'

There were clearly different interpretations of what the ride was about: to race and ‘just want to have fun’ or to ‘know about cycling’ and ‘respect the rules’. Shared practices can be ambivalent. Just as haggling over word choice creates tension in discursive public spheres, simply riding differently can have the same effect in public spheres on the move. Therefore, we do not wish to idealize or romanticize the community created by shared practices. Participants may feel connected to each other on the basis of a shared activity, but still draw boundaries around the event and among themselves. Perhaps paradoxically, we experienced that cycling with hundreds of other bodies can encourage a self-centeredness, certainly for us as we wove in and out of different sections of the ride, while trying to avoid collisions with the aggressive ‘young, inexperienced guys’ racing up the margins.

Thus, the public sphere is not singular, unitary or constant. Rather, echoing and extending Fraser’s critique of Habermas (1990), public spheres are multiple and ever-shifting. If public spheres are rooted in shared practices, and there is an infinite permutation of shared practices, then public spheres may be limitless. Mobility events illustrate their multiplicity, not only as independent public spheres, but also as fluid arenas in which Angelenos engage with or challenge other spaces, both hegemonic and otherwise. For example, cicLAVia and Critical Mass *embody* certain public spheres that challenge Los Angeles’ car-centred public. Yet these public spheres we discuss are not quite what Fraser calls subaltern counterpublics (1997), because the model of a politics composed of a dominant public sphere and peripheral subaltern counterpublics no longer reflects today’s decentralized political reality. We also diverge from Fraser in positing that the multiplicity of public spheres is not only rooted in shared practices, but necessarily embodied ones.

In this section, we have attempted to put the public sphere ‘on the move’, in arguing that public spheres need not be intentionally political. Rather, they are performative, emerging through the shared practices of differently situated bodies. While such mobility events embody negotiations of space and power at one level, i.e., a right to the streets vis-à-vis cars, they may at the same time instantiate new structures of power as participants draw lines among their ranks. Emancipatory practices along one dimension can be offset by exclusionary ones along others. We begin to tackle this issue in the following section.

II. Different bodies, different communities?

There are muscular surfer types with board-holders, others in colorful outfits and flower garlands as if on their way to a beach outing, and skinny barebones ones built for speed, but also techies equipped to measure progress and sturdy workhorses carrying heavy loads. The diversity of bikes does not stop there. Several people with disabilities have custom-made vehicles with electric motors, there are kiddie carts, tandems, fixies, mountain bikes, roller-skates; the varieties go on and on.

As the above field observation illustrates, colourful diversity can indeed be one’s immediate impression of a mass bike event. To reiterate, though, orienting public spheres around non-discursive practices does not escape boundary-making. After all, how can a community or a public exist in any meaningful way without boundaries? In the study of formal politics, identity politics have played a central role in such distinctions. Gender, race and ethnicity, ability, class, sexuality, and other imputed categories are constantly interrogated as explanatory factors for political participation or as the object of explanation. Certainly, these issues are also of concern to our mobility events. CicLAvia, for example, boasts that it ‘celebrates diversity’ by connecting Los Angeles’ diverse multicultural communities (FAQ - cicLAvia). Similarly, art walks across the city have been described as diverse, vibrant and ‘wildly divergent’ from each other (Los Angeles Times Editorial, 2011; Vankin, 2010). What - if any - difference does it make that the

public space is defined by these informal, everyday practices rather than by verbal deliberation and formal institutions? Does such a definition make the or a public sphere more accessible, and if so, to whom? How does it affect who has a right to the streets in everyday life? This section aims to address these questions.

Returning to Arendt, the vulnerability of appearing in public space is foundational to her notion of political action. Revealing oneself among one's peers risks a rejection by the other (Arendt, 1998, p. 186). However, as noted previously, Butler points out Arendt's failure to acknowledge that this risk varies between people: vulnerability is distributed across bodies in unequal ways (2015, p. 45). Social expectations regulate how these bodies are expected and able to appear, and whether or not they are 'acceptable' in certain circumstances. If such bodies are deemed extraordinary, they encounter resistance, face erasure, or are simply rendered incomprehensible in the public realm.

Butler traces this bracketing of bodily difference to Arendt's separation of the private and the public realms. On the one hand, the private realm is ruled by bodily necessity; on the other hand, the public realm is defined by its separation from the body, despite the fact that political action is embodied. This separation has been amply criticized by feminist and other scholars (e.g., Benhabib, 1993; Honig, 1995; Pitkin, 1981; Zerilli, 1995). Contra Arendt, Butler argues that disrupting this public/private boundary by bringing attention to the body - different bodies - is precisely what constitutes politics (2015, p. 90. If this 'differential allocation of whether and how the body may appear' is how power operates (p. 88), then the appearance of differentially located bodies - whether along axes of race, gender, class, ability, etc. - challenges dominant notions of the body that 'belongs' to *that* public sphere.

Following John Stehlin, we see this differential allocation as part of cycling's 'egalitarian potential' (2014, p. 21). Conceiving a public sphere oriented around embodied practices enables us to see that unexpected bodies enact political change by negotiating an everyday right to the street. If we accept limited understandings of political participation - for example, forming an interest group, articulating opinions or proposing institutional solutions to city council members - we know that certain demographics, for example, white, well-educated, economically privileged citizens, have traditionally had an advantage in enacting policy change. Their bodies are the ones expected in political practice. Biking *en masse*, however, disrupts dominant notions about street use and political action: cyclists lay claim to street space reserved and normalized for cars. If politics can also mean biking in the car lanes where bike lanes are currently missing, slowing down traffic to make streets safer for pedestrians, or by sheer numbers forcing drivers to recognize other bodies as dignified actors rather than pesky nuisances, then maybe other people, with other resources, languages and bodies, are in fact already participating in politics.

Rather than a galvanizing speech at a neighbourhood demonstration or a presentation of ridership statistics, cyclists prefiguratively enact an imagined physical reality. In doing so, they are instantiating another political and human infrastructure independent of their intention (Lugo, 2013). Just as cycling in car-dominated spaces 'signifies marginalization regardless of what the cyclists themselves think they are doing' (ibid, p. 9), we argue that cycling signifies politically because it literally negotiates the right to appear in the public sphere as an unexpected body.

This embodied character enables practice to cut across social cleavages, including those of race, gender, ethnicity and ability. *Because* we biked instead of verbally crafting a statement to the municipal council, we did not have to align our personal politics (perhaps more feminist, more academic) to the slang of teenage guys slapping each others' backs or racing up the sides of

the cycling collective; we were able to unite in our temporary common and non-discursive negotiation for space. Again, participants in these mobility events just want to appear on the streets and bike safely, regardless of other individual or even collective intentions - some do so maybe for fun, others for work, maybe some only for tonight, others for a carbon-free infrastructure. In that moment, that legs can pedal is more important than what is between them, that one rides a single-speed 'fixie' instead of a vintage road bike may be a matter of style rather than class, by exposing one's skin to the street one participates in the embodied message of the mass. This politics says as much as an oral testimony to a municipal council hearing, perhaps even more because it is actively performed instead of verbally defended. But as the below field note describes, though such shared practices are non-discursive, as participants we still had to negotiate not only with cars for space but also within our group of riders:

In the car driving back home from the ride (the irony of that...), we talk about what made us feel awkward: we were the only two women among the first 30-40 people to show up [at a recent Critical Mass], and among the very few white or Asian people there. Hard to keep up at times, aching muscles an hour into the three-hour ride, and the need to concentrate in order to avoid getting biked into by the guys racing through the crowd. But also the fact that we were able to get a bike rack, had a car, and had the flexibility to drive for four hours total to get there and back on a weeknight.

In this 'snippet', we see some of the egalitarian limits of mobility events as porous public spheres. Our interpretivist approach demands that we ask: who are 'we, the people' in this community of practice? While one's immediate impression of cicLAVia may, for example, be that it is an idyllic melting pot, boundary-making occurs within and between the events themselves. This regulation is both implicit, though practice, fast riding, at night, on a weeknight, and explicit. For instance, cicLAVia's 'safety tips' demand helmets be worn by anyone under 18 on 'bikes, skates, scooters', state that 'pedestrians may walk on the street but must move toward the curb if bikes need room', and only allow motors for participants with 'a handicapped placard'

(cicLAvia Safety). Bodies are expected to move in certain ways when interacting, and those who conform are more welcome than others.

Through this regulatory logic, mobility events position themselves in relation to the dominant infrastructure, either as competitor or collaborator. Stehlin, for example, describes that San Francisco's Critical Mass and its confrontational message, 'Whose Streets? Our Streets!', has been contested by a more formalized 'Bike Party!' that polices participating riders with vigilance (Stehlen, 2014, p. 25). This internal regulation enables 'city governments to understand cyclists as an orderly political constituency whose needs matter' (ibid, p. 26). In mobility events that regulate their participants in order to influence institutional outcomes, advantages open up to activists who look and talk more like the bodies in those institutions, and the events risk their 'egalitarian potential'.

Moreover, as Los Angeles-based bike scholar and activist Adonia E. Lugo describes (2013), movements for cycling equity are not isolated from social divisions. While people of colour routinely cycle down bustling streets and avenues of L.A., their practical knowledge is often valued less than imported European models of mobility based on dissimilar city structures. Institutional efforts to include the public in 'bike planning decisions often rely on voluntary participation from cyclists' and rarely incorporate social equity perspectives and acknowledge that the cyclists with the leisure time to participate in formal politics are likely not those who bike out of necessity (Lugo, 2013, p. 12). Her experiences illustrate that the 'doing' of the shared practices that shape public spheres is ambiguous. There are on-going negotiations about *what* it is we are *doing*, and *who* that *we* is.

What is at stake in these negotiations over the boundaries of public spheres? Politics itself, institutionally as well as in terms of everyday practice. Attempts to gain influence in

formal political processes have, for example, enabled cicLAvia activists to weigh in on L.A.'s bike master plans (Lugo 2013, p. 11) and the event is mentioned as a catalyst for Los Angeles' recent Mobility Plan 2035 in the plan itself (p. 33, 113). On the everyday level, attempts to accommodate disabled participants in mobility events may be insufficient to overcome the physical differences that constrain daily practices. For example, in nearby Santa Barbara, a local weekly reports that a proposal to replace parking space with bike lanes is seen by opponents as 'discrimination against elderly and disabled persons in favour of able-bodied cyclists' (Davi, 2016, p. 5). In other words, the political effects of embodied practices depend on the ways in which communities of practice can develop and are framed.

In our interpretation, at least four distinct kinds of boundaries are drawn and negotiated, each affecting the other three 'types' of boundaries and each worth exploring in future studies. First, the line between bikes and cars, i.e., a political negotiation about cycling bodies' right to appear on the street. Second, the distinction between different bike events, i.e., political strategies that contest the status quo to varying degrees. Third, boundaries between different people in the same event, i.e., who 'we, the cyclists' are. Last, between shifting contexts within the same event, i.e., this 'who' is read differently depending on the audience and situation at hand.

This diversity of participants and the multiple meanings that can be read into these events are best captured by interpretivist methods. A participant may have certain understandings of what her cycling in a group means, while a viewer may draw vastly different conclusions; even within the span of one event, as one author experienced, such meanings change. *En route* to a cycling event, the eight participants of her subgroup identified themselves differently, a SoCal beach-loving native and hoarsely joking Italian-American, to a professorial and self-proclaimed

‘Soviet Union’ immigrant in a linen shirt, to ‘practical’ European academics with backpacks.

However, the author notes that this sense of self as a diverse group shifted throughout the ride, depending on her perception of the context:

As we bike through Watts the neighbourhoods shift slightly, from what looks like regular working-class to more run down. A woman sitting on the street, among her things, hollers ‘good morning bikes!’ We answer a bit more hesitantly - the diversity of our little group is less obvious here, and instead I feel like I’m on an all-white Sunday excursion group, poor-touring. This changes as we catch up with the big - huge - mass of cyclists who are going to bike around Watts and Compton today. There must be 200 of us, and clearly lots of locals, waving to people they know, bringing their kids along...

As described above, identification changes depending on the context in which one finds oneself.

In spite of how one identifies on a daily basis, different meanings can be read onto one’s body - meanings that do not necessarily resonate with one’s self-definitions. An interpretivist, participant observation approach enables us to account for the fact that meanings change, which is an advantage compared to studies where categories of meaning are predetermined and fixed. This approach helps illuminate the different boundary-makings and politics that such categories signify, that, to different outsiders and the riders themselves, the ‘assembly’ of bikers looks different than it did just a neighbourhood away.

Thus, while we argue that shared practices build community and constitute public spheres, the political meanings of these practices are fluid. Rather than articulating a common platform through words and struggling with predefined languages already constituted by class/race/gender differences, riding a bike IS its own, shifting vocabulary. Understood this way, certain shared practices can themselves cut across cleavages to create non-discursive public spheres. These spheres, however, are ambivalently egalitarian because, while at times cross-cutting, they can also reinforce existing social divides (Stehlin, 2014).

In enabling the researcher to see and study embodied politics, interpretivist methods make visible these capillary negotiations of power. Such approaches help us deconstruct dominant forms of knowledge: bodies do not ‘belong’ in certain spaces and shared practices do not ‘possess’ given, fixed meanings. In fact, when cyclists appear, in an Arendtian sense, on L.A.’s car-dominated streets, they propose new beginnings and enact new political imaginaries.

Conclusion

For two hours, in the baking sun, we snake around the neighbourhoods, where people come out to their doorways and show their kids this mass moving through their streets. Many of the buildings look like low-security prisons to me, low apartment blocks in between the houses, bars on every window, signs with the name of the ‘facility.’ Are we connecting, as we move by, could we stop, could they join? Or are we distant phenomena to each other? Is the moving bike mass creating community with or in contrast to those looking on?

In this article we have argued that mobility events create public spheres constituted by shared practices like cycling and that these practices enact politics in an everyday and embodied rather than formal and deliberative sense. Instead of presenting demographic numbers of actual or potential riders to support the need for bike lane investments, mass bike events show, rather than tell, a different kind of politics. By participating in mobility events, the authors experienced that the ‘we’ in these events is reinforced by shared, if banal, actions: in brief introductions while waiting to start riding, in facing off against cars with testy drivers, and in waving to people on balconies and dogs in windows. The physical vulnerability of appearing together, without the protective shield of the car, makes the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ permeable, offering an invitation to join this public sphere. By hollering ‘good morning bikes’, yelling as you take your prefigurative right of way, or joining just by hopping on their bikes (if they have one!),

people interact with you as you ride by - and you do. The literal practice of movement makes the boundaries permeable, but the invitation is not unconditional.

There are also boundaries within rides themselves. Despite countless calls for inclusion and community on the cicLAVia and Critical Mass websites there are also rules: exclusionary comments about the 'kinds' of cyclists present, speed that needs to be maintained, and often very little room to wobble safely. The more regulated they become, the closer such events approach formalized politics. In turn, the more advantages accrue to those bodies who are normalized and expected in institutional discourses. Rather than comparing or judging whether these practices are good or bad, we argue instead that politics is found in these everyday, cultural events.

Political scientists may overlook these tacit, embodied practices, but interpretivist methods can help resurrect and examine their political meanings. Following Manderscheid's (2014) call to combine structural and subjective elements of mobilities, we see that future research could draw from political science's concern with institutions to interrogate their interplay with quotidian practices. Such research might also examine mobility events more broadly to include art walks and street fairs, in addition to examining the potential of these events as performative modes of citizenship.

While the method of participant observation we have taken here may diverge from some traditional forms of political science research, it recognizes the role that researchers play in shaping political possibilities. The ways in which social scientists generate and interpret data to produce knowledge affects if and how subjugated knowledges can emerge (Whatmore & Landström, 2011). By incorporating methods that take into account embodied politics and the practices of participants themselves, social scientists can move away from models of the

detached intellectual. By using our bodies as our research tools, this project represents a reflexive attempt to bridge the gaps between theory and practice.

There is still much for social scientists in general and political scientists in particular to learn from studying mass bike events and other movement-based practices. These everyday practices have myriad meanings for their participants, the city and politics more broadly - not only within Los Angeles, but also globally as urban infrastructural and civic successes and failures extend beyond city limits. Through this exploration of mobility events in Los Angeles, we find that, conceptually and physically, public spheres are already 'on the move'.

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