



Proceeding Paper

The Spatial Calibration of Environmental Citizenship: Identity Political Analysis of the Cycling Culture in a Small Provincial City †

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Abstract: This paper discusses the adoption of the urban cycling culture in a northern provincial town of Joensuu by analysing interviews of cyclists and the opinion letters from the local newspaper in the centre/periphery frameworks. It highlights the spatial change of environmental agenda and, thus, the local conditions of environmental citizenship from the identity political perspective.

Keywords: cycling culture; green urbanism; environmental citizenship; spatial sustainability transition; cultural ecosystem of traffic



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1. Introduction

Social and geographical studies on cycling often emphasize infrastructure efficiency and ‘urban access’, revealing important information about social aspects of cycling [1–4]. The cultural transition that occurs with the spread of urban cycling, not only as a practical mode of transportation, but also as an identity structure and social behavior, have been less researched. This paper theoretically discusses the scalar dynamics of environmental citizenship by asking how the urban cycling culture is applied and adopted in a remote provincial town. To answer this, it focuses on the local conditions of the formation of cycling identity, and the related role of active cyclists as agents of change.

The bicycle is one of the main symbols of green urbanism and low carbon ideology. Unlike material devices, the symbolic nature varies contextually [5]. Hence, the identity political approach to spatially changing cycling culture requires separation between ‘sustainability’ as a technical concept and a more culturally constructed symbol [6]. It enables analytical distinction between the rational and emotional aspects of environmental concerns, despite being practically interdependent.

The theoretical framework of the study is based on the culturally tense center/periphery relationship that links the subject with a larger discussion on the spatiality of green transition [7–9]. Green urbanism is based on value-based belief that the urban compact city appears as the location of development and as the solution to many problems—environmental, social, and economic [10]. Conceptually, its counterpart is ‘coal capitalism’ or ‘petroculture’ [11], which provide a platform for arguments against the too rapid spread of cycling culture. Another viewpoint, more common in peripheral areas, claims that green urbanism is not just an import of an ecologically rational way of life, but an import of a foreign cultural influence that does not work in the context of a small-town culture, and may end up hindering the real green transition [12].

2. Materials and Method

The conceptual topography will be applied to an empirical study on the city of Joensuu, a smallish Finnish provincial center in which cycling culture has recently reformed owing

to a relatively young and educated population (universities). At the same time, Joensuu is a place where the urban structure, natural conditions, and political power ratios are different from those of a big city.

The research material is based on fifteen semi-structured interviews of cyclists and cycling experts, and SMS-messages about cycling in the feedback section of the local newspaper (Karjalainen) within five months of 2019. The study uses both conceptual and discursive content analysis in the centre/periphery frameworks. The main themes of the analysis are (1) the rationalization and irrationalization of green lifestyle, (2) the socio-cultural dependencies of traffic, and (3) the peripheral components of the arguments.

3. Discussion

The site-specific analysis builds on the contextually changing competition of hegemony in an environmental agenda between the traditional/conventional thinking and a new formative thinking. Besides the common conflict between cyclists and (private) car drivers within a small town, the analysis shows that cyclists do not form a homogeneous group but a great variety when it comes to the motivation to use the device. A rough division takes place between the committed advocates of a green lifestyle and so-called regular cyclists. Yet, both act as agents of change in their own life-circles and in their own terms. As for all traffic users, different views on the function of cycling seems to be linked to different collective perceptions of human progress. Hence, the forms of daily mobility produce alternative epistemic spaces of cycling such as those where cycling is seen as an indication of socio-economic backwardness (cannot afford a car) or traditional practicality (bicycle only as a means of mobility). In their argumentations, all parties derive from the peripheral location of their home area and their own alleged underdog position in respect of the other traffic users.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The project will follow the principles of good scientific practice and ethical guidelines of the Academy of Finland and the ethical principles of qualitative research. This means respect and confidentiality, safeguarding the anonymity of persons involved in interviews and publications, and openness to scrutiny and possible validation by fellow scientists. The research design, as presented in this plan, does not involve the collection of individual personal data that would enable individuals to be recognised or identified. The interviewees are asked for their permission to use the interviews for research purposes and to digitally record the interviews. The interview material is kept in the possession of the research project and is not passed on except as separately agreed with the interviewees.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The interview material is in the possession of the researcher. The newspaper material can be found in the electronic archive of the local newspaper. <https://digilehti.karjalainen.fi/titles/karjalainen/3544/archive> (accessed on 1 May 2019).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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