

How lockdown converted the world to cycling, and the speedbumps that lie ahead

Cycling ticks lots of good policy boxes, but cars aren't over yet

"ARE SALES up?" asks Enrico Lepore in disbelief. "Did you see the queue outside the door?" Mr Lepore, co-owner of ProBike, a shop in a Florence suburb, estimates that his turnover is almost twice as high as at the same time last year. At least he still has bikes to sell. A shop down the road ran out of stock long ago.

It's the same story in bike shops around the world. Whereas the coronavirus has been disastrous for most forms of human endeavour, cyclists have never had it so good. Lockdowns have brought blissfully empty roads, which have been a boon to even the most reluctant pedaller. Residents of big cities have been feverishly reimagining their lives on a saddle, rather than behind the wheel. This is cycling's moment, and it could have profound long-term implications for transport policy.



Where statistics are available, they show huge rises in bicycle use across Europe and America. In Switzerland, the number of kilometres cycled since early March has risen by 175% (and fallen by 11% for trams). In Philadelphia cycling is up by 151%; usage of New York's bike-share scheme rose by 67% in March, year-on-year. Even in Copenhagen, the two-wheel capital of the world, Jens Rubin, of Omnium Bikes, says his shop has been "busier than ever"; sales doubled in April and May compared with the same months in 2019. In March sales of bikes in America increased by about 50% year-on-year, according to NPD, a market-research firm. Cycling is one industry that probably won't need any bail-outs; the share price of Halfords, a big British bike-seller, has risen from 81p (\$0.99) on March 17th to 183p on May 29th, while the FTSE 100 index has risen by just 15% over the same period.

Early in the pandemic governments latched on to cycling as a healthy way for people to move around safely, exercise and keep reasonably sane. Thus in most American states, for instance, cycle-repair shops were allowed to stay open as essential businesses. Italy's government offers 60% reimbursements, up to a maximum of €500 (\$545), to any city-dweller buying a bicycle, or indeed any sort of motorised two-wheeler. City leaders, from Bogotá to Berlin, have helped by turning over their tarmac, or bits of it at least, exclusively to bikes. Milan converted 35km of its roads into cycle lanes and the Big Apple 100 miles (160km) for the use of both pedestrians and cyclists. Oakland, California, closed 119km of road to cars. Cycling has thus become easier, and safer.

Now Western governments are seizing on cycling's big moment to try to make such temporary measures permanent. Because social distancing is likely to endure for months, or even years, public transport won't return to normal soon; it may never do so. So the bike will remain an essential tool in many countries' strategies to taper their lockdowns. As the French environment minister, Elisabeth Borne, put it, "the bicycle is the little queen of deconfinement"; poetry in motion. Paris has been preparing 650km of cycleways to help the city gradually open up.

Politicians hope to persuade people of the virtues of cycling beyond the end of this particular crisis. Cycling has well-advertised, longer-term gains: less pollution and a healthier population. The gains from having fewer cars and lorries on the road are already evident. Global carbon-dioxide emissions in early April fell by 17% compared with the mean 2019 levels, according to a study in Nature Climate Change, and "changes to surface transport" made the largest contribution to the reduction.

National and city governments are fizzing with new, or revamped, schemes. Grant Shapps, Britain's transport minister, in a speech on May 9th, promised to make "a 'once in a generation' change to the way people travel in Britain." He announced a £2bn investment in more cycling infrastructure and better pavements. Manchester has plans for the country's "most comprehensive" integrated walking and cycling network. France wants to spend €20m to subsidise cycle training and more parking spaces for bikes. Bologna is bringing forward its plan for a Bicipolitana, 493km of cycle lanes, from 2030 to later this year, when 60% of it should be finished. Seattle plans to shut 20 miles of streets to most cars permanently.

But a two-wheel revolution cannot be taken for granted. Cycling novices in the northern hemisphere have been lucky to enjoy most of the lockdown in fine spring weather; just wait for winter. And some evidence indicates that many people are yearning to get back in their cars, also handy as lockdowns end but social-distancing rules remain. In China, for instance, one survey concluded that the proportion of people who want to use a car would surge from 34% to 66% after lockdown ends; the same survey showed that more Chinese were now keen on buying a car. Other surveys suggest huge drop-offs in enthusiasm for trains and buses.

Thus the challenge will be to create incentives for those who abandon their buses to mount up rather than strap in. Technology may help. Electricity-assisted cycles allow commuters to venture farther without fear of running out of puff. Deloitte, a consultancy, is expecting e-cycle sales to take off, topping 130m by 2023. Germany's Bosch has been leading the market in motors and batteries that can be installed on regular bikes. Venture capital is also pouring into e-cycle startups such as VanMoof (which recently raised \$13.5m from Balderton Capital). Sales of e-bikes in America soared by 85% in March compared with the same month a year earlier.

But as Morten Kabell, head of the European Cycling Federation, a lobby group, argues, "physical infrastructure is the key", particularly "separated, protected cycle tracks". The hope is that today's flimsy pop-up cycle lanes will be tomorrow's dedicated, secure cycle tracks. Statistics on safety show that the more cyclists a city has, the safer it is: motorists change their behaviour accordingly. And in the near future, at least, cyclists may need all the protection they can get. Eerily quiet streets have been an invitation not only for cyclists to pedal, but also for drivers to step on the gas. In London the number of speeding drivers increased eight-fold during one week of the lockdown in April, compared with the same period in 2019; one speedster was clocked at 163mph in a 70mph zone.

More parking spaces for bikes should also help. The city of Utrecht in the Netherlands is building the largest vertical bike park in the world at the railway station; there is room for 33,000 two-wheelers and counting. (It is also building "fast lanes" for e-bikes.)

A country's legal framework can encourage cycling too. Most European countries, with the notable exceptions of Britain and Ireland, have presumed-liability laws, under which the burden of proof in any collision between a motorist and a cyclist is borne by the driver. Proponents, such as Road Share, a British lobby group, argue that countries with these laws, like Denmark and Germany, enjoy much more, and much safer, cycling than those without, because they encourage motorists to be more cautious.

But turning cities like London or New York into so many Copenhagens will be less of a sprint, more several *Tours de France*. In the Danish capital over 60% of commuters cycle to work (or study). The figure is in the low single digits in most American cities. But at least for now cyclists around the world can demand more of their governments, knowing they have a tailwind of public goodwill.