

## Understanding São Paulo’s Bicycle Wars

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*In São Paulo, Brazil, bike lanes are a new phenomenon in a city historically dominated by automobiles. In the context of public-sector efforts to increase and diversify urban mobility, they are also at the center of furious political and social debate about who has a right to the city’s streets and, by extension, who counts as a citizen.*

Every week, a new viral video about São Paulo’s city center circulates on social media, depicting conflict in the streets and hateful slurs hurled at cyclists. A recent post<sup>1</sup> describes a scene in which a motorist punctuates an epithet with: “This ain’t Amsterdam.” Bike paths, or *ciclovias*, are a microcosm of the tension felt in Brazil’s largest city and in the country as a whole – tensions about whom the government is serving and who counts as a citizen. Mainstream media outlets regularly publish screeds against São Paulo mayor Fernando Haddad’s<sup>2</sup> promotion of urban mobility projects, including new *ciclovias*; they cite these moves as evidence that his administration is guilty of reckless mismanagement and maverick socialism. The bitter fight over *ciclovias* in São Paulo shows us that citizenship embodies strong spatial dimensions and that, by the same token, urban policies are often cultural battles.

Figure 1. “Printing error or an error of interpretation”?



“London: In the last trimester, bike use increased 10%; Amsterdam: 50% of the population have traded in their car for a bike; Berlin: Sales of electric bikes have increased by 45% each year; São Paulo: Residents of elite neighborhoods claim cycling is useless!”

Source: <http://www.almeidasportsweb.com.br/blog/erro-de-impressao-ou-impressao-de-erro>.

<sup>1</sup> See (in Portuguese): [www.pragmatismopolitico.com.br/2015/08/vagabunda-aqui-nao-e-amsterda-grita-motorista-para-ciclista-em-sao-paulo.html](http://www.pragmatismopolitico.com.br/2015/08/vagabunda-aqui-nao-e-amsterda-grita-motorista-para-ciclista-em-sao-paulo.html).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example (in Portuguese): <http://g1.globo.com/sao-paulo/eleicoes/2014/noticia/2014/09/vice-de-aecio-diz-que-novas-ciclovias-sao-delirio-autoritario-de-haddad.html>.

São Paulo is a city in Brazil where I have lived on and off for the past 20 years. I currently live in Aarhus, Denmark, and the two places could not be more different. Danish cities, such as Aarhus and Copenhagen, fit nicely into the European mold represented in the cartoon in Figure 1, with established policies and mindsets about bikes and city planning. 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,<sup>3</sup> as in most Western European countries, as witnessed by a marked turn to the right in the recent general elections held in June 2015). By contrast, Brazilian citizenship (due to repressive state agencies and neoliberal policies) historically has meant a combination of limited mobility and, for some, exaggerated privileges. The mix of corporatist government and “open” markets under prior regimes has had detrimental effects on Brazilian urban landscapes and people’s sense of place. With the growth of the population to roughly 20 million in the greater metro area, São Paulo’s public space has historically been eroded for the benefit of the automobile, gated communities and insidious alliances between public security agents and organized crime syndicates.

However, over the past decade, with the election of more progressive governments, the idea that citizenship is an asset to be exercised rather than a burden to be tolerated has become an increasingly common notion among Brazilians. People have embraced a stake in citizenship because they see it as a vehicle through which to express themselves and effect change rather than as a series of duties and obligations beholden to a distant, authoritarian state. Urban citizenship has become increasingly defined in terms of the “right to the city”.<sup>4</sup> The present time is marked by tension simply because there are more Brazilians with an attitude of entitlement looking to participate in how city space is used and resources allocated. These struggles are often refracted through debates about transportation and mobility. It is worth noting that the massive protests that began in June 2013 and lasted until the 2014 World Cup were initiated in São Paulo as a call to change transportation fares.

### **The Brazilian bicycle in the popular mindset: a vehicle for the destitute or the leisurely bourgeois**

According to the IPEA (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada – Institute of Applied Economic Research), 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. This motorist demographic includes not only traditional middle- and upper-class Brazilians but also the so-called “C class”, made up of millions who, since 2004, have benefited from targeted state economic policies and lifted themselves out of poverty. 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, “*São Paulo não pode parar*” (“São Paulo can’t stop”), has lost its punch. The motorist demographic’s hostility to today’s traffic tie-ups is often directed toward cyclists, and toward those who are looking to create a place for bikes on the streets.

As a response to low levels of mobility in São Paulo, the current administration of Mayor Fernando Haddad resurrected the *ciclovía* from the ashes of abandoned initiatives by former city administrations in 1980, 1992 and 2006, and made it a primary goal of the *Plano Diretor* (Urban Master Plan) approved in July of 2014. The mayor’s sweeping implementation of 100 kilometers (60 miles) of bicycle paths in various areas of the city between June and October of 2014 (with a goal of 400km in total by the end of 2015) marks a break with the policies of past mayors, embodying the notion that Brazilians can use bicycles as an alternative to private cars or to public

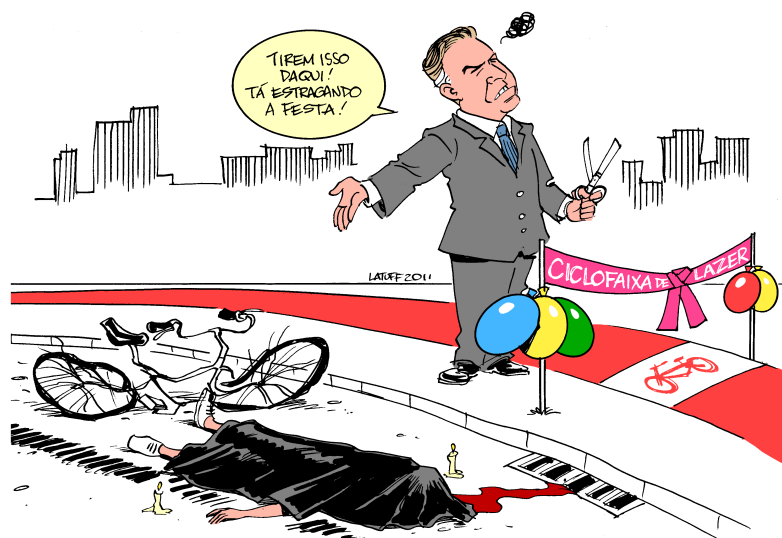
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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: [www.ibtimes.com/copenhagen-warns-syrian-refugees-asylum-denmark-now-harder-come-2086025](http://www.ibtimes.com/copenhagen-warns-syrian-refugees-asylum-denmark-now-harder-come-2086025).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example (in Portuguese): <https://raquelrolnik.wordpress.com/2015/09/21/transporte-agora-e-um-direito>.

transportation. It would seem that São Paulo, by providing the opportunity for people to commute by bicycle, is moving toward the Danes, and a more progressive model of urban mobility.

**Figure 2: “Get this out of here! It’s ruining the party,” as a politician prepares to cut the ribbon on a “Leisure Bike Path”**



Source: <https://bicicletanarua.wordpress.com/2011/10/23/charge-na-inauguracao-da-ciclofaixa-de-lazer>.

However, in Brazil, the bicycle is historically a symbol of idleness, linked both to abject poverty and elite leisure. Most Brazilians, across social divisions, continue to see the bike as something antithetical to real modernity. Instead, it represents either a lack of means, a sign of marginality and backwardness, or a lack of morals, evocative of a playboy out of touch with real life. One stereotypical image is the dark-skinned, shirtless peasant slowly pedaling on a rusty single-speed bike, with numerous passengers precariously posed on handlebars or the rear tire fender. Another is the fit, tanned man, portrayed in a racing pose, or laid back joking with look-alike friends, all properly attired in the latest fashion of colorful tennis shoes and imported sunglasses, soaking up the “nature” of the showcase public park of Ibirapuera. Figure 2 illustrates the conventional mindset, one that the Haddad administration hopes to change. The image refers to a tolerance of the playboy and, moreover, the political capital involved in inaugurating occasional “leisure bike paths,” while simultaneously blaming cyclists, who are injured and killed by motorists, for getting in the way of state largesse. This helps explain why some motorists continue to verbally assault cyclists with shouts of “*vagabundo*” (“lazy good-for-nothing”). The idea that a bike could be part of mainstream life and the economy is simply inconceivable for many Brazilians.

### **Another take on bikes: *ciclovias* and the production of urban space**

One of the advances in urban studies towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to link space with the development of capitalism.<sup>5</sup> The value of space, from real estate to parking meters to sidewalk commerce, is speculative, and there is always a struggle when denominations of space are changed. For example, in March of 2015, thousands of cyclists, urban mobility enthusiasts, and politicians across the spectrum turned their attention to a court decision over whether it was legal to implement *ciclovias* on Avenida Paulista, the prestigious avenue at the heart of the city’s financial district. The image below (Figure 3) refers to this moment.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the foundational work of Henri Lefebvre (1972), *La Pensee marxiste et la Ville*, Paris: Casterman, and Milton Santos (1979), *Economia Espacial: Críticas e alternativas*, São Paulo: HUCITEC.

**Figure 3: “More bikes in São Paulo”**



A banner displayed during protests in March 2015 after an attorney representing the Housing and Urban Planning Department of the Public Prosecutor’s Office (Ministério Público) tried to stop the implementation of bike paths on Avenida Paulista in São Paulo.

Source: <http://g1.globo.com/sao-paulo/noticia/2015/03/presidente-do-tj-derruba-liminar-que-vetava-obras-de-ciclovias-em-sp.html>.

In the judge’s ruling,<sup>6</sup> the cycle paths could go ahead; they were not a “work of engineering” subject to multiple studies and approvals, but rather a simple “lane orientation of traffic”. The verdict was a defeat for those who are against the bike paths. Many store owners complained about this ruling using an oft-cited argument about the ill effects of such redistribution of urban space on their businesses. Despite claims that *ciclovias* hinder local commerce because they reduce street parking, researchers from several cities have reported the contrary.<sup>7</sup> Some São Paulo entrepreneurs have already observed similar trends and have tried to market catchphrases such as “Cyclists are consumers too.”<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that the potential of the bike path as a site for advertising was not lost on the state. Indeed, the city government negotiated with a number of companies and individual mural artists to create commercialized signage along the bike paths that run parallel to a stretch of the Radial Leste, the main artery that links the expansive East Side with the downtown area. This was particularly visible during the soccer World Cup: the stadium used for the inaugural match between Brazil and Croatia, as well as for the dozens of games of the Corinthians soccer team since then, is located at the end of the Radial.

### **Cycling to citizenship**

In most of Europe, the bike, the rider and the path are commonplace images of work and mobility. Many Brazilians resist this view and continue to attach dangerous stigmas of race, class and gender<sup>9</sup> to bikes, cyclists and those irksome bike lanes. While the political, economic and ideological lobby of the automobile controls most discussions, the policies of Mayor Haddad and

<sup>6</sup> See (in Portuguese): <http://g1.globo.com/sao-paulo/noticia/2015/03/justica-determina-paralisacao-de-obras-em-ciclovias-em-sp.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example (in Portuguese): <http://zh.clicrbs.com.br/rs/porto-alegre/noticia/2014/10/numeros-mostram-os-beneficios-economicos-das-ciclovias-ao-comercio-4625401.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See (in Portuguese): <http://vadebike.org/2015/02/comercio-aumento-vendas-ciclistas-sao-paulo>.

other city administrations have, at the very least, introduced a new paradigm of the city, portraying cyclists commuting to work (alongside motorists) as people with a legitimate claim on urban space.

The debate and movement around *ciclovias* teaches us that narrow strips of public space, a mere meter (3' 3") in width, can be a touchstone for civic debate about the most essential aspects of citizenship. *Ciclovias* demonstrate the need to consider the economic, political and sociological dimensions of public space in order to understand both policy and the sparks of discontent in urban development. In the end, the *ciclovía* controversy does not only represent a struggle about the logistics of daily life in São Paulo; it is also about the value residents attribute to public space and the legitimacy they grant to people who wish to occupy that space with something other than cars. In a way, the question of whether cyclists deserve to use São Paulo streets is the question of whether this group possesses a right to the city more generally, and of whether they deserve to be counted as citizens of Brazil.

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<sup>9</sup> See [http://www.ciclocidade.org.br/phocadownload/Relatorio\\_Contagem\\_EliseuDeAlmeida\\_Maio2015.pdf](http://www.ciclocidade.org.br/phocadownload/Relatorio_Contagem_EliseuDeAlmeida_Maio2015.pdf), for example (in Portuguese).