French Cycling
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1

French Cycling: Issues and Themes

*French Cycling: A Social and Cultural History* aims to provide a balanced and detailed analytical survey of the complex leisure activity, sport and industry that is cycling in France. Identifying key events, practices, stakeholders and institutions in the history of French cycling, the volume presents an interdisciplinary analysis of how cycling has been significant in French society and culture since the late nineteenth century.

Structuring and writing this book has been rather challenging, principally because of the potentially vast scope of material and debate, given the multi-faceted nature of ‘cycling’, and indeed, the chronological range of the period during which cycling has been significant, in whatever ways and in whatever forms to individuals or groups of any kind, in France. It could be argued that providing a fully comprehensive and fully balanced treatment of cycling in France since, say, the 1870s would require a team of researchers, a multi-volume series and the best part of an academic lifetime! Based on the view that few publishers would accept such a project, the approach in this treatment has thus been necessarily selective. In the paragraphs that follow we explain the approach of the book, starting with the question: ‘What to do with the Tour de France?’

The Tour is cycling, but cycling is not just the Tour

A significant and recurring problem in planning and writing this book has been a cycling-related phenomenon that most people – if asked to say one thing they knew about cycling in France – would readily suggest as the obvious topic: the Tour de France. Everyone, in France and outside, knows about the Tour de France. This simple fact reflects its dominant centrality to, arguably, almost all French understandings of what cycling is, and is not. There is perhaps a tendency among some British and American experts on the sociology and socioeconomics of cycling to consider the Tour de France as – just – a race, and as one example among many of the specialized activity of cycling as competition, and professional, elite, commercialized competition at that. To the Anglo-American
observer, it is perhaps too easy to see only the garish lycra clothing and the shameless cheating of a hundred or so professional riders advertising credit companies, flooring surfaces or hearing aids, and to miss, given that the UK and US have never had their own national tour, the wider sociocultural significance of the phenomenon not just as a race but as a shared experience for most French citizens that signifies much more than just spectatorship. Indeed, the Tour is sometimes seen as one of the keys to understanding French identity.

In a previous volume, co-edited with Geoff Hare in 2003 in celebration of the Tour’s centenary, we attempted to provide a balanced overview of the history and meanings of the Tour de France, illustrating how this event is every year, and has been through the decades, much more than just a race (Dauncey and Hare, 2003). The Tour has provided a space and forum for the working out of debates over the nature of sport and competition; of professionalism and amateurism; of the nature of ‘work’ and relations between employers and employees; of the use and abuse by individuals of their own bodies; of the nature of business and organizations; of the creation of French and foreign heroes, champions and stars; and of the definition of the physical boundaries of France and the exploration of wider European relations. Overall, as the celebrated French cultural historian Georges Vigarello has so definitively demonstrated, it has become a ‘national institution’. To quote just two excerpts from Vigarello in further support of the importance of the Tour de France to French society and culture and, by extension, to any study of cycling and society in France: in the introduction to his essay, ‘Le Tour de France’, Vigarello suggests that:

le Tour de France s’est enraciné dans les rituels nationaux. Une institution devenue si légitime, même, qu’elle semble être sans âge: un spectacle aux origines oubliées. C’est que l’épreuve est peut-être plus qu’une course, elle s’adresse à la conscience collective, aux références communautaires, autant qu’à la curiosité sportive. Elle joue avec la géographie, les provinces, les frontières. Elle met en scène un espace-nation, un décor fait du territoire lui-même. (1997: 3801)

And in his concluding flourish, he reminds the reader that:


This excerpt only refers to the geographical symbolism and what might be termed the ‘performativity’ of the Tour in terms of ‘beating the
bounds’ (Campos, 2003) of the French national territory. The rest of Vigarello’s analysis (first published in French in 1986) considers how the Tour has reflected and accompanied developments of all kinds in French society, culture and politics. Vigarello’s treatment has seemed so comprehensive that it has arguably discouraged others from producing further analyses of the Tour.

The Tour, as an un-missable feature of contemporary French life, has also been used by French intellectuals not as a site of memory and thus as an instrument for understanding France, but as a prism for thinking about culture and society overall, generally through literature (and we shall touch on some of these interpretations in the following chapters). Most specifically, Roland Barthes’ short study ‘Le Tour de France comme épopée’, in his celebrated *Mythologies* (1957), in which he deconstructs the semiotics of the Tour in the 1950s, can usefully be read alongside the more prosaic treatment of the post-war Tour given in this volume, or, indeed, the account of the love–hate relationship that has obtained between France and Lance Armstrong in the 2000s.¹ Whereas Vigarello deconstructs the meaning of the Tour for French society and culture, Barthes’ perspective is focused more on revealing the intrinsic structures of thinking about the Tour itself:

Ce qui sauve le Tour du malaise de la liberté, c’est qu’il est par définition, le monde des essences caractérielles. […] Le Tour est un conflit incertain d’essences certaines; la nature, les moeurs, la littérature et les règlements mettent successivement ces essences en rapport les unes avec les autres […] le Tour est le meilleur exemple que nous ayons jamais rencontré d’un mythe total, donc ambigu; le Tour est à la fois un mythe d’expression et un mythe de projection, réaliste et utopique tout en même temps. […] Ce qui est vicié dans le Tour, c’est la base, les mobiles économiques, le profit ultime de l’épreuve, générateur d’alibis idéologiques. Ceci n’empêche pas le Tour d’être un fait national fascinant, dans la mesure où l’épopée exprime ce moment fragile de l’Histoire où l’homme, même maladroit, dupé, à travers des fables impures, prévoit tout de même à sa façon une adéquation parfaite entre lui, la communauté et l’univers. (1957: 118–19)

As ‘explanation’ of the internal logics of competition and their discourses, Barthes provides another key to understanding the event; as a case-study of a ‘mere’ sporting event, it demonstrates the prominence of the Tour in French thought.

The Tour de France is thus essentially unavoidable in any study of cycling in France, but discussion of it has been kept to what is hoped will be an acceptable minimum, as the analysis overall examines all the meanings of cycling through the decades. Thus, for example, the Tour is considered in terms of what its creation in 1903 reveals about the role of cycling as a driver of professional sport and about the importance of
cycle sport in developing the French media of the period. Considering the inter-war period, discussion of the Tour will analyse how ongoing debates about the Tour’s conception of labour relations – the infamous treatment of riders as forçats de la route – reflected and informed wider ideological issues in French society. The furore around the role of L’Auto during the Occupation and the celebratory nature of the first post-war Tour run in 1947 by L’Equipe as the purged replacement of L’Auto necessitates study of the Tour in the 1940s and 1950s, as the ‘national institution’ helped define the new France. As another new France was created by Gaullism in the 1960s after the change of Republic in 1958, Tour champions such as Jacques Anquetil reflected predominating social and cultural values and their roles will thus also be discussed, as will the Tour and France’s troubled and ambivalent relationship with the American rider Lance Armstrong in the 2000s, which took on dimensions wider, again, than just sport.

Having, we hope, adequately defended the discussion of the Tour that follows in subsequent chapters, it is also sensible to explain what else will be considered in this analysis of cycling in France, because unlike other sports, such as football or rugby, there are more things that people do with bicycles than they do with balls of whatever shape or size. Cycling is arguably a more complex activity than other sporting and recreational practices that are, in essence, just games or sports. To take rugby, for example: although, as Dine has clearly and elegantly shown (Dine, 2001) that the story of rugby in France is a complex mix of issues involving national and regional identities, class, politics and culture, it remains ‘just’ a sport, played in identifiable locations according to a set of internationally agreed rules. Rugby cannot really be conjugated as a ludo-sporting-utility practice with the same variability as cycling, and it is the continuum or spectrum of all the activities that are intrinsically cycling, undertaken by individuals with very differing interpretations of what they are doing and why, that makes the subject so complex.

**The complexity of cycling**

Recent academic studies of cycling in its social and cultural dimensions have drawn attention both to the complex and intriguing nature of the activity of cycling and to the surprising lack of detailed academic analysis of what cycling is and is about. To take just one example:

We are surrounded by cycling, and people seem to like talking about it, often from their own direct experiences. Many people have cycling anecdotes,
stories, fears and theories. But cycling’s universality is also one reason for its very complexity, diversity, and therefore, mystery. We live in societies where bicycles and cycling are ubiquitous, yet – from social science perspectives – remarkably un-thought. (Horton, Rosen and Cox, 2007: 1)

Cycling in France, in the richness and complexity all its variants and dimensions – arguably even more than its equivalents in the Anglophone world – remains a phenomenon that has escaped systematic academic scrutiny. It is now a commonplace to point out that it was American and British researchers such as Eugen Weber in the 1970s and Richard Holt in the 1980s (Weber, 1970; Holt, 1981) who first began to draw proper attention to French sport and leisure (including, notably, cycling), thus encouraging French academia to consider topics hitherto deemed too ‘popular’ and lacking in intellectual seriousness. The subsequent rise in French sports studies has not really yet provided any comprehensive investigation of cycling’s universality, complexity, diversity and mystery. Part of the problem here may be, quite simply, cycling’s diversity and the historical range that requires to be studied, and, related to this, the difficulty for French researchers often trapped within relatively rigid disciplinary boundaries to produce analyses of cycling as an overall phenomenon. Another explanation of the lack of an overall perspective is, as we have suggested above, that the Tour de France – through its dominant position in cycle sport and in the popular imagination of cycling – has dominated what academic analyses there have been. But even academic analyses of the Tour have been relatively few, leaving room as late as the mid-2000s for wider-ranging interdisciplinary studies of France’s pre-eminent sporting event led by British and American researchers such as Dauncey and Hare or, notably, Christopher Thompson (Dauncey and Hare, 2003; Thompson, 2006), which complemented a surprisingly small number of analyses brought out by French academics around the centenary of the Tour, such as Lagrue (2004) and Boeuf and Léonard (2003). French sports historians and sociologists are now increasingly producing social and cultural histories of individual sports and leisure activities, as are British academics located within the more contemporary areas of French studies research, such as Philip Dine’s history of French rugby (Dine, 2001) and Geoff Hare’s study of French football (Hare, 2003). However, cycling remains a subject that seems to have so far eluded its synthetic critical biographer, either in French or English.

This volume aims to reflect the universality, complexity and diversity – to borrow the terminology of Horton, Rosen and Cox – of cycling in France since the late nineteenth century, and to help, in some small
way, to dispel its ‘mystery’ through the analysis of a carefully chosen selection of topics representative of the principal social, cultural, economic, sporting and political dimensions of the activity. Because the study is intended as a history, rather than an exploration of separate themes with their own complex chronologies, the topics are grouped chronologically in chapters that bring together different themes in an overview of the significant meanings of cycling at different periods in France’s sociocultural and socioeconomic development. Different themes therefore recur in differing time periods: consideration of women, emancipation and femininity arises both in the study of the adoption of cycling by women as leisure in the later decades of the nineteenth century and in consideration of France’s greatest female sporting icon of the 1980s and 1990s, Jeannie Longo, or the creation of the women’s Tour de France in the mid-1980s. Other themes such as technology/innovation/industry or sport/media/spectacle are evoked in diachronic contrast in a similar fashion, allowing maximum coverage of the major events and debates of French cycling and the most extensive possible discussion of their significance.

There are no competing or similar overall studies of French cycling in English. Even in French (because of the neglect of serious study of sport by French academics until relatively recently) the only studies of cycling that do exist are generally sensationalist, hagiographical, competition/race-centred accounts rather than balanced analyses of the sporting/leisure practice as a social, cultural and economic phenomenon. In fact, the tradition of professional cycle racing in France has been so strong and popular – fuelled from the outset by a specialized press in the form of Le Vélo and L’Auto for example, and other significant but less well-known journals – that it has spawned a whole genre of journalistically inspired sporting literature devoted to cycling stars. For those interested in more serious analysis of the nature of sporting heroism, celebrity or stardom, these essentially hagiographical blow-by-blow accounts of races won and lost and mountains climbed are tantalizingly formulaic, but nevertheless provide some details of greater significance. Another form of literature on cycling is, of course, Literature with a capital ‘L’, and cycling in France has always been a subject of interest for novelists and other writers. The relationship between French literary art and cycling over the past 150 years or so would deserve an entire volume to itself, and Edward Nye’s delicious compendium (2000) is an excellent introduction to the range of writing inspired by the love of cycling in all its forms. Later discussions in this volume will touch on the meanings of cycling evoked by Bernard, Blondin, Bott, Colette, Barthes, Jarry,
Laborde, Londres and other literary figures.

The ethos/rationale of this book is similar to that of Horton, Rosen and Cox in their excellent edited collection of essays *Cycling and Society* (2007), which provides an interdisciplinary and wide-ranging (but ultimately somewhat unavoidably sporadic) sampling of the meanings, debates and themes connected with cycling in a wide variety of periods and national contexts. This present volume on French cycling has at least the advantage of concentrating on a unity of space (metropolitan France), even if it suffers the necessary difficulty of covering a wide time period, and it endeavours to pull together a number of the threads that characterize cycling in French society and culture. In an attempt to address in a structured manner what Horton, Rosen and Cox describe as cycling’s (rich but frustrating) ‘complexity, diversity and mystery’, we concentrate in this volume on five broad and basic themes. These are leisure, recreation and sociability; utility; industry, commerce and technology; sport, competition and media; and ‘identity’. It is very difficult to treat any of these themes and topics in a hermetically self-contained fashion, such is the constant overlap between, say, cycle sport and the development of a specialized sports/cycling media, or cycle sport and its links with the cycle industry. To take another example, cycling as leisure/recreation in the form of mountain-biking – or *le VTT* as it is known in French – is simultaneously leisure/recreation (with a mirror image in *competitive* cycling), industry and technology (in terms of French manufacturers’ attempts in the 1980s to produce French-built MTBs), media and culture (in terms of the burgeoning specialized press that developed, mediating notions of ‘Americanization’ or freedom), and a variety of other crossovers.

**Five major themes: leisure, sport, industry, utility, identity**

As Horton, Rosen and Cox remind us: ‘Pleasure appears to be one of the principal motivations for cycling, and one which remains remarkably durable across time and space’ (2007: 6). It is not surprising therefore that cycling as leisure in France is a theme that is considered in almost all of the chapters of this study. Leisure is, of course, often conjoined with recreation and sociability, so our discussions of the leisure practice of cycling often cross with analysis of modes and meanings of sociability (in clubs and associations, for example, in the late nineteenth century), but leisure is also considered through reference to the adoption of the bicycle as an instrument of tourism, and for the emancipation of women – banned from clubs by the gender relations of the period – in the 1880s,
for example, or by study of the developing vogue in the 1990s and 2000s for long-distance tourist cycle routes. Perhaps the most obvious example of a leisure cycling practice is cycle touring, which in France has had a proud history of independence from more competitive forms of cycling and whose philosophy and rationale was principally theorized by the journalist, bicycle-designer and long-distance tourist Paul de Vivie at the turn of the twentieth century in Saint-Etienne. The term *loisirs* (leisure) in the French context naturally also evokes the celebrated ‘experiment’ of the left-wing Popular Front government elected in 1936, which advanced the cause of citizens’ access to free time both practically, through a legal right to *congés payés* (paid holidays), and by introducing the concept into public policy and state structures. The iconic image of the Popular Front’s invention of *congés payés* was the tandem, symbol of the recreational emancipation of the working class, and so we will consider these topics in discussing cycling in the inter-war years. During the 1950s an early version of mountain-biking was invented in the suburbs of Paris, and although – as so often – there were close links between this pastime and competition, it serves as an interesting example of ‘everyday’ innovation in cycling design and use, in apparent resistance to the impending decline of more usual forms of cycling. VTT and mountain-biking in the 1980s are considered more fully in Chapter 8, and the most recent trends in leisure riding are detailed in Chapter 9.

Cycling as sport and its attendant dimensions of amateurism versus professionalism, national identity, the body and doping, and other issues are investigated through study of the history of the Tour de France, the track racing organized at the Vélodrome d’hiver in Paris in the inter-war decades, and other emblematic events in racing and competition. As we have suggested above in discussion of the significance and meaning of the Tour de France, our approach to cycle sport is not merely to describe the events, but to relate them – as specific variants of cycling – to the social, cultural and political context in which they occur. This naturally means adopting an interdisciplinary approach, which aims to read events such as the spectacle of the *Six Jours* track festivals organized during the hey-day of the Vélodrome d’hiver in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s in their full interrelatedness as sport, spectacle, media, recreation and commerce. Similarly, the discussion of the iconic early races such as Bordeaux–Paris (raced annually between 1891 and 1988) and Paris–Brest–Paris (staged every ten years from 1891 to 1951) organized by major cycling clubs, sports newspapers and supported by the cycle industry hopes to unpack their full meaning as harbingers of France’s sporting and professional modernity. The staging during the late 1930s of the Paris–Roubaix
travailliste by left-wing sports organizations (what was known as a course alternative) in contradistinction to the ‘normal’ commercial race run by L’Auto-Vélo newspaper is another example of how cycle sport can reveal much about the development of French politics, culture and society.

Cycling as industry and economic activity is considered through an assessment of how cycling firms have contributed to technological innovation at various junctures in France’s economic development. The first discussion of this comes in Chapter 4 with an analysis of the cycle industry during the 1890s and early 1900s and its relationships with dynamic sectors of the economy such as automobile manufacture. In effect, the modernity of bicycle technology and manufacture in the late nineteenth century contributed as much to the modernization of the French economy as the modernity of cycling itself contributed to social change. Industry, technology and the retailing of cycles and cycle components are considered also in the late twentieth century, for the ways in which changes in patterns of bicycle purchase accompanied and reflected changes in society in terms of bicycle use, but also wider trends in the development of the French economy. By looking in detail at the high-tech successes of medium-sized French manufacturers such as Look and Time, for instance, we can better understand how cycling in the 1990s, say, contributed again to a modernization of some areas of France’s industrial production.

Cycling as utility is another theme that recurs throughout the book, often in partnership with other related issues, but it is true that our consideration of the most heavily practical and utilitarian dimensions of cycling are relatively restricted. One of the reasons for this is simply the difficulty of accessing reliable data, both for the contemporary period (when sociologists and transport experts have been actually measuring people’s uptake of cycling for commuting, for instance) and, a fortiori, for periods in the past in which a history of cycling would wish to take a comparative interest. Even where sensible information is available, it has to be said that, in discussing utility cycling, there is a tendency for the material to amount (as one specialized sociological researcher on cycling has recently said on a blog he runs about his own – exceedingly interesting – academic research on cycle-commuting) to little more than ‘statin’ the bleedin’ obvious’, along the lines of ‘people would commute on bikes more if they lived closer to work, the weather were better and cycle-paths were nicer...’ (thinkingaboutcycling, n.d.). Nevertheless, by interpreting practical cycling to mean such things as the use of cycling by the French army in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and
the links between this and, say, long-distance touring and sports federations’ attempts to codify racing distances and speeds, we are able to say interesting things about this kind of cycling. Similarly, in considering how everyday, practical cycling was jeopardized in the 1940s and 1950s by the inexpensive availability of motorized bicycles such as the iconic Vélo-Solex, and by unpacking the cultural significance of this particular vélo moteur, we can shed some light on the meaning of this kind of cycling. Chapter 9 discusses the well-known self-service cycle-hire schemes set up in France (in Strasbourg, Lyon and Paris, in particular) as an example of the adoption of urban cycling as twenty-first-century commuter transport.

Cycling and identity is a theme that is often strongly present in the field of cycle sport, which is why Chapter 9 also includes an iteration, through cycling, of the traditional ambivalence felt by France towards the US. Similar issues are touched on in earlier sections, where we consider how the earliest races often pitted French riders against foreign competitors, thereby allowing French society to compare itself uncertainly with ‘English superiority’ or ‘American efficiency’. Personal rather than national identity is frequently negotiated through sport and leisure choices, of course, and this is another recurrent topic, whether it be the social emancipation of women in the nineteenth century, the masculine sociability of early cycling clubs, the philosophy of life and behaviour propounded by the guru of cycle touring, Paul de Vivie, at the turn of the century, or class and political identities obtaining in professional and amateur sport during the troubled inter-war years.

It will be seen that frequently these major themes of inquiry and analysis coalesce in any given topic, so the choices made in terms of case-studies for the discussion have been difficult. It is hoped that they nevertheless communicate some sensible sense of what cycling in all its multi-dimensional complexity has meant in French society and culture. A final note on the rationale of the analysis here explains how the chronology of the study has been conceived.

The chronology of cycling in France

The period considered by this study is essentially 1870 until 2010, and the discussion thus covers cycling and society in France during four political regimes, two world wars, industrialization and modernity, socioeconomic modernization during the post-war period, de-industrialization, and the ongoing socioeconomic crisis and questioning of
sociocultural values that has existed since the 1980s. Faced with such a range the best chronological structuring of the discussion was not immediately obvious, given the complexity and interrelatedness of the issues, events and concepts under analysis. Although tempting – as so often concerning France – a breakdown of the period into political regimes seemed ultimately unsuitable. Although by the convenience of its durability the Third Republic covers much of cycling’s relationship with industrialization, the business of sport as media and technology, and the modes of sociability contained within cycling as leisure (for instance), seventy years seemed too great a span. The Vichy regime and the Liberation, although significant as a period during which thinking about sport evolved considerably and cycling participated in developing patterns of public policy and social demand for sport, likewise seemed to make better sense in terms of overall analysis if coupled with the Fourth Republic and its aspirations for a new France born out of the troubles of the Occupation. The Fifth Republic, even more so than the previous regimes, can offer itself as an appropriate chronological framework for the analysis of sport and leisure in society, again by virtue of its duration, but also because of its explicit interest in sport and leisure as a strategic concern of the state and public policy.

The compromise solution has been to merge the ‘institutional/Constitutional’ breaks of France’s political regimes with the other natural demarcators of sociocultural and socioeconomic change constituted by the world wars. And overlapping with these divisions, a number of iconic events in cycling itself can also help to define a chronological structure that makes sense of the changes occurring in cycling in all its complex relationship to French society, politics and culture. The eight chapters therefore consider the ‘founding’ period of cycling (1869–1891); a period of initial maturity (1891–1902); a period marked by the rise of the Tour de France and the First World War (1903–1918); the inter-war years, when sport and leisure became increasingly subject to competing political ideologies (1919–1939); the period of the Vichy regime, Liberation and the Fourth Republic, when new policies towards sport and leisure developed, and cycling began to suffer from France’s modernization (1940–1959); the early Fifth Republic, when the nature of cycling reflected the new technocratic organization of society (1960–1980); the later Fifth Republic, when the cycle industry modernized under pressure from international competitors and cycle sport began to give a fuller place to female racing (1980–2000); and, finally, the early 2000s, during which environmental awareness and government initiatives caused a renewal of interest in cycling overall.
A final point that needs to be made concerning our chronology of cycling in France is that the starting point we have chosen – the very late 1860s – is an essentially pragmatic one. More specialist treatments of cycling that focus more specifically on its development as a technology are often interested in the minutiae of technical changes to bicycle design during the nineteenth century, many of which, admittedly, had significant consequences on the uptake of the practice. Here, however, rather than placing too much stress on changes such as the introduction of chain drive, the move from solid to inflated tyres (adopted in the late 1880s), the invention of the ‘safety bicycle’ (1880s) or the use of gearing, we take cycling to mean, essentially, the use of whatever kind of machine was prevalent at the time. In general terms, it is probably fair to say that with the introduction of the ‘safety’ (two equal-sized wheels with rear-wheel pedal-and-chain drive) and Dunlop’s pneumatic tyres in the 1880s, the modern bicycle was born. It was the facility of use of the ‘safety’ by casual riders, women and the less athletic that encouraged the cycling boom of the 1890s, but cycling started in essence in the late 1860s with the appearance of the vélocipède and the races that were quickly staged to publicize its practicality and excitement. It is generally agreed that, although French industry led bicycle design in the 1860s, the French advantage was lost during the Franco-Prussian war and the 1870s, with British engineering taking pride of place in innovations. The leading historian of bicycle racing in the nineteenth century, Andrew Ritchie, provides a clear summary of early commercial bicycle production and vélocipède developments in his evocatively titled Quest for Speed (2011), usefully elucidating the contributions of French manufacturers and French cycling in general, and Althuser (1986) provides a brief treatment of the contribution of the Michaux family to the development of the cycle industry in France.

The structure of the chapters

Within each chapter, there are essentially five sections. An introductory page or two presents the principal issues in French politics, society and culture relating to sport and leisure in general and cycling in particular during the period in question. Following this, four further sections discuss issues or topics that can be deemed to usefully exemplify the significance and evolution of cycling – of all kinds – during the time-frame in question. Depending on the period, these passages of analysis may deal with differing topics and major themes (although as we have
explained above, crossovers are almost ever-present). To take the example of Chapter 4 (roughly 1903–1918) as an illustration of this approach: the introductory discussion presents the state of society, culture and politics in the Belle Epoque as they related to sport and leisure/recreation, leading secondly to an analysis of how the French cycle industry had developed and was providing the context in which cycling technologies and practices and other related industries such as motor manufacture could flourish. Thirdly, since the Tour de France was launched as part of a circulation war between two newspapers that related differently to the industrial–media–sport complex of the period, we consider how the Tour reflected these issues in sport and the sports media and industry. Fourthly, because cycling at this time was also increasingly being considered as a practical means of utility transport (as well as its early primary uses as an instrument of speed and competition, or slow leisure for the rich) discussion centres on what was termed *la vélocipédie utilitaire*. Fifthly, since the Tour de France already had its opponents even in the early decades of its development because of the way in which it monopolized interpretations and representations of cycling, we discuss the alternative views on cycling and society in the early years of the twentieth century proposed by the famous practical proponent and philosopher of cycle touring, Vélocio.

We begin with a discussion of the early years of cycling in France, when the activity itself and its practitioners were in search of an identity, and when many of the founding and central elements of this complex ludo-sporting and utility practice were set in place.

**Notes**

1. We are currently preparing an analysis of Lance Armstrong read using Barthes’ approach, to be published in Y. Gastaut, Ph. Tétart and O. Zanna (eds), *Au Miroir du sport* (Le Mans: Presses Université du Maine, 2013).
2. As we shall later discuss, the term *forçats de la route* comes from Albert Londres and is a key concept linking the significance of the Tour to wider developments in French society, then and now.
3. What might be simply termed the ‘industrial-commercial’ dimension of cycling, in other words the production of varied and technologically developing equipment for cycling practised as a range of linked but separate sports (MTB, road, track, BMX) or as utility/leisure, is surely another clear difference between cycling and other sport/leisure activities.
4. It sometimes seems as though the monopoly of journalistic hagiography over cycle racing has prevented any development of more considered academic analysis. A major figure, worthy of appraisal for his contemporary definition of the field of such journalistic writing on cycling, is Jean-Paul Ollivier, frequent
contributor to the long-running series [name of rider]: la véridique histoire, published by Editions Glénart. See the Bibliography for some of his publications.

Accounts of the genesis of the modern bicycle naturally vary, but there is general agreement that bicycle design was advanced significantly with the invention in the 1860s by the Frenchmen Pierre Michaux and Pierre Lallement of a front-wheel-driven machine with a large crank-driven front wheel. This was the classical vélocipède, which developed, in France and in the UK, as elsewhere, into the penny-farthing/Ordinary bicycle known in France as a grand-bi. For conveniently accessible further details, see Ritchie (2011).