The Early Years: Cycling in Search of an Identity, 1869–1891

France during the 1870s and 1880s was a country undergoing social, political and economic transformation. The end of the Second Empire (1848–70) in ignominious defeat at the hands of Germany in the Franco-Prussian war led to a change of political regime with the institution of the Third Republic in 1871, after the bloody and divisive interlude of the Paris Commune (1870–71). After what Roger Magraw has described as the ‘modernizing dictatorship’ of the Second Empire (1983: 149), the Third Republic continued France’s measured move towards modernity, as the economy industrialized and society became increasingly stratified into an industrial working class as well as the traditional rural peasantry, dominated by an increasingly well-educated and prosperous bourgeoisie (Charle, 1991). Between the workers and the upper classes lay a swelling social grouping of clerical and administrative workers, essential for the changing nature of the economy, whose support was courted by the Republic as it gradually established its legitimacy during the 1870s and then flourished in the later decades of the century, and whose growing affluence and cultural assertiveness partly found expression in leisure and sport (Zeldin, 1980: 331–48).

During this period of change and transition for France, sporting activities were in many ways a marker and indicator of the transformations occurring in society, culture and the economy, as well as in politics (Holt, 1981). Traditionally associated with the aristocracy, the concept of sport and the practice of sports of varying and novel natures became increasingly widespread among other classes in society from the 1860s onwards, and sport grew in its social and cultural significance, as well as in terms of its commercial and industrial importance for France. The social and cultural significance of the adoption of so-called ‘English’ or ‘athletic’ sports such as running or football by the French upper classes in the later nineteenth century has been much documented, stressing how these new sports – added to the traditional elite sporting activities of riding, horse racing, hunting, and so on – accorded distinction to those who practised
them. Initially the preserve of social elites, English sports gradually became popularized (the French term closest to this is the rather slippery démocratisé), reaching a wider range of social classes and eventually becoming—in the case of football especially—a clearly ‘mass’ pastime.

Cycling, like other sports during the period, both accompanied and facilitated the modernization of society and politics and of the economy and technology. By virtue of its nature as technology—the bicycle itself, whose cost initially set it beyond the reach of anyone outside the social elite—and also because of its novelty, cycling was originally the preserve of France’s moneyed and therefore leisured classes (Gaboriau, 1991). But, as the importance of professional racing grew and as bicycles gradually became more affordable, cycling became increasingly, towards the end of the century, an activity of the lower-middle and working classes: Fourastié (1963: 199) has shown how the price of (new) bicycles progressively declined in relation to hourly wage-rates, and second-hand bicycles were proportionately even more affordable. Technologically and industrially, the bicycle and its manufacture represented an opportunity for the modernization of the French economy through new processes and techniques (Hubscher, 1997).

In this chapter, we shall consider a selected range of features of cycling during this early period, and discuss what cycling in these decades reveals about French society, culture, economics and politics. Firstly, we will examine the ways in which the institutionalization of cycling as a sporting pastime through the setting up of clubs and associations devoted to the activity reflected current political and social values, and typified developing models of sociability. Secondly, we will consider just what cycling was during this period, discussing how different kinds of cycling—leisure, touring, racing and so on—were practised and by whom. Thirdly, because one of the most significant dimensions of cycling in this period—and arguably throughout the whole subsequent history of cycling in France—was sport, we shall analyse how sport and racing, and the champions and media coverage they stimulated, reflected developing values. And fourthly, we consider how cycling was experienced by women, looking at the social, cultural and medical controversies that surrounded the female use of bicycles.

Cycling clubs and associations: institutions and sociability

Cycling clubs were a key driver of the rise of sports in late nineteenth-century France: as cycling developed initially as a leisure and sporting
activity that interested the leisured and moneyed classes, aristocratic and bourgeois clubs were set up, which helped to anchor the pastime socially, as well as contributing to the development of rules and regulations. Alongside other sporting clubs concerned with rowing or swimming, the developing passion for cycling – frequently referred to at the time as vélo-manie – and the requirement for sports clubs to be legally set up and approved by the authorities meant that cycling clubs led the way in developing models of organizing such associations. Progressive, the direct regulatory function of clubs over their members and sporting activities was taken over by regional and national federations, and as cycling democratized, clubs became progressively less socially restrictive (with some notable exceptions, such as the Parisian Omnium club) and more numerous.

Creating structures for sport and sociability: when and where?
The years from 1867 until the end of the 1880s essentially represent a period during which cycling as a social sporting activity undertaken in company with others was invented. Following the detailed work of the French sports historian Alex Poyer (2003a), three phases can be identified within this twenty-year span: an initial phase of enthusiasm (1868–70), a phase of neglect (1871–79) and a renewal of interest (the 1880s). The first French cycling clubs were set up in 1868, when a total of five clubs vélocipédiques were created. The oldest club is deemed to be the Véloce-club de Valence, which sought official approval for its activities in March 1868, closely followed by the Véloce-club de Paris (May), the Société des vélocipèdes du Tarn (September), the Parisian Société pratique du vélocipède (November) and the Cercle des vélocipédistes de Carpentras (November). These five pioneer clubs were followed in 1869 by another 13 whose founding can be dated with reasonable certainty, such as the Véloce-club rouennais and the Véloce-club rennais, but in the early months of 1870, before the disruption to society caused by the Franco-Prussian war, only three clubs seem to have been set up (Poyer, 2003a: 21). The war and defeat, the Commune and the change of regime dealt a severe blow to the development of cycling clubs during the 1870s, so much so that although 1868–70 had seen the creation of about 40 clubs overall (those whose official approval is still to be found in the municipal, departmental and other archives where such material is preserved, plus other clubs whose existence is confirmed by other sources), in the period 1871–79 only six clubs were founded. New clubs began to flourish again during the early 1880s (16 clubs created in 1880–82) when some 52 clubs appear to have been in operational exis-
tence, and enthusiasm for club cycling continued to grow in the later part of the decade, allowing the first Union Vélocipédique de France (UVF) register of clubs to record 70 adherents. Including with the UVF statistics all the other clubs that must have existed, by the late 1880s France could boast at least a hundred cycling clubs (Poyer, 2003a: 22).

Geographically, cycling clubs in this early period were to be found in a wide range of departments, but by no means was the whole of France covered by the phenomenon. No more than a third of departments possessed a véloce-club in 1870, and no more than half by the end of the 1880s. As the number of clubs grew, so generally did the overall coverage of the country, but the absence of clubs in many departments meant that some clubs were isolated from others, and many individual cyclists found themselves far from a local, departmental or even regional club. The spatial irregularity of the distribution of clubs was compounded by the clustering of many principal early clubs in three main concentrations: Paris and its eastern and western approaches; the Atlantic coastline and hinterland from Bordeaux in the south-west to Vannes on the border of Brittany; and the Rhône valley from Lyon to the south coast. Over the years, other geographical groupings of clubs formed bridges between these main areas of cycling strength, themselves developing into recognized centres, and so by the late 1880s the cycling map of France was marked by a range of club concentrations: Paris–Amiens–Reims–Rouen; Angers–Vannes–Bordeaux; Bordeaux–Agen–Pau–Biarritz–Toulouse; Toulouse–Castres–Carcassonne; Lyon–Saint-Etienne–Grenoble–Nice. What is interesting is that, unlike in so many fields, Paris does not dominate the space of French club cycling. The reasons behind the springing up of clubs in particular locations are many and varied but, in essence, they concern such factors as the availability of cycles themselves (the sales network of the famous Michaux firm influenced regional interest in cycling, and the presence of local independent frame or cycle manufacturers gave a great boost to clubs in towns such as Angers); proximity to an existing cycling centre; a cosmopolitan and modern-minded outlook (cities such as Bordeaux with a tradition of trade and openness to new ideas seem to have embraced new sporting ideas more quickly than others); and, finally, linked to cosmopolitanism, the influence of British inhabitants keen on sport. In summary, the most favourable location, theoretically, for the early founding of a véloce-club would be a major urban centre possessing cycle shops, not distant from other towns or cities interested in cycling, open to new ideas by virtue of history or trade, and possessing a British expatriate community. Bordeaux, as we will see below, offers an interesting case-study.
The nature of clubs and associations: sociability and democracy

The cercle or club in nineteenth-century France was an interesting intermediary body between the state and the individual citizen. By bringing together individuals of like passions – political, cultural, or indeed sporting – in associations regulated both by the municipal authorities, the Interior Ministry and their own statutes and regulations, circles and clubs were deemed by the Republican state to exercise a role of democratic education through the creation of social networks based on shared communities of interest and shared rights and responsibilities. Much of the analysis of sporting associations in France in the nineteenth century (Callède, 2000: 421, 431; Arnaud, 1988) is arguably based on the pioneering work of the political and cultural historian Maurice Agulhon, specifically his analyses of political and cultural cercles in the early and mid-1800s (Agulhon, 1977; Agulhon and Bodiguel, 1981): studies of sporting organizations often explore how the mania for associations during the period 1870–1914 linked sport, sociability, democracy and republicanism in search of what the sports historians Hubscher and Durry have neatly described as the dream of ‘une sociabilité sportive une, fraternelle et égalitaire’ (Hubscher and Durry, 1992: 109).

As Agulhon (1977) and others have described, in nineteenth-century France the setting up of clubs or associations was tightly controlled by the authorities within the framework of the Code Pénal. Intended by various regimes and governments since the early 1800s to be a means of stifling political opposition and social dissonance, article 291 of the 1810 Penal Code required any grouping or association of more than twenty members to request approval for its formation from the state (Grange, 1993: 11). The terms of the law itself referred to associations interested in ‘religion, literature, politics or other subjects’, and sporting clubs fell neatly into the catch-all category, having to submit lists of their members, their professions and addresses, as well as their statutes to the municipal and prefectural authorities. Based on reports prepared by the local police on the character and reliability of the members of the proposed clubs and on the aims and organization of the association as set out in the club statutes, prefectural, Interior Ministry and municipal approval was usually a formality. Clubs and associations were seen by government as useful in the civic and communal education of citizens: the young Third Republic was keen to encourage interactions between individuals that created bonds and that, moreover, through the working through of club meetings, rules, procedures, elections, admissions and exclusions, provided a school for understanding Republican democracy. Approval of sporting clubs was thus always considered a positive decision, as they
combined the civic and democratic education of citizens – Grange uses the term ‘démocraties expérimentales’ (1993: 106) – with another pressing concern of government in the years following France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian war: the need for healthy, athletic citoyens-soldats capable of helping French armies eventually reconquer the lost territories of Alsace and Lorraine. The climate of political tolerance towards clubs and societies that culminated in 1901 in a famous law on the founding of associations still valid today (Nourrisson, 1920; Bardout, 2001) meant that approvals were often delivered readily; but putative sporting clubs were aware that success would be favoured by the inclusion of notable local personalities on the list of those founding the club, and that the more the statutes mentioned the moral, social, charitable and military value of, say, cycling, the greater the chances would be of seeing a positive response from the authorities. Statutes that had proved their acceptability were often simply copied by other sporting clubs hopeful of similar approval.

Sports ‘associationnisme’: the example of Véloce-club bordelais

Applying the notion of l’associationnisme to early véloce-clubs, Hubscher and Durry implicitly summarize the issues it raises (1992: 80–91). How did the statutes of cycling clubs and their organization represent the apprentissage démocratique so desired by the Republican state? How did cycling intersect with the notion of the patriotic citoyen-soldat? How did cycling associations create and maintain their identities as groups of like-minded citizens? How did the activities organized by cycling clubs interact with existing patterns of traditional festivities and commemoration? An interesting example of the creation and running of an early cycling club is the Véloce-club bordelais (VCB), founded in Bordeaux in 1878, which we can consider in the light of the questions posed by Hubscher and Durry. Although the lifetime of the club was short (1878–92), in its 1880s hey-day it contributed much to the definition of French cycling overall, and notwithstanding its relative – indeed almost complete – neglect by historians, a result of the lack of primary archives and materials, careful reading of secondary sources allows us to consider it here in some detail, in advance of a more complete study (Dauncey, 2014).² The club was officially authorized by arrêté préfectoral on 13 December 1878, and – among other achievements – its crowning glory was the creation of the Bordeaux–Paris race (discussed in the following chapter), first organized in 1891 and widely recognized today as marking the invention of modern cycle competition.³

Bordeaux in the latter part of the nineteenth century was a typically
‘open’ port city in terms of cultural influences and the national and social make-up of its population. The long-standing British interest and presence in the city and region based on the wine trade (Dupeux, 1974) created a strong British influence in (high) society and in the leisure tastes of the bourgeoisie, and the vie sociétaire in general was very active, with over 500 associations (ten gymnastics societies, five of colombophile, one fencing club and one for sport pédestre, three sociétés nautiques, three sociétés hippiques and six or seven cycling clubs extant in the early 1890s) (Jullian, 1895: 747). Agulhon (1977: 88) suggests that it was just such cities, with their ‘élite de la bourgeoisie commerçante, le négoce des grands ports’, that were the home of new practices and trends in la vie mondaine. Jacques Thibault (1981a: 139) stresses how the sports clubs set up in Bordeaux in the period 1880–1900 reflected the questions inherent in a society that was changing rapidly at a key moment in its development. Desgraves and Dupeux (1969: 444–52) stress how it was originally ‘une minorité d’oisifs fortunés’ in Bordeaux who were interested in the development of sport, but note that the creation of over 80 sports clubs in the city between 1880 and 1914 demonstrated the beginnings of democratization.

The notion of apprentissage démocratique is broadly supported by the VCB. The VCB statutes, as those of a relatively early club, served as a source for other clubs, and clearly set out club organization and administration. The initial statutes of 1878 provided for very highly structured meetings and voting. Minutes and press reports illustrate that discussions were lengthy and formal. But equally, meetings were not always quorate, and members serving on committees – which were often held weekly – frequently resigned because pressure of work made it impossible for them to undertake their club duties.4 In 1888 the statutes of the new VCB as a limited company added greater complexity, representing arguably the possibility of an introduction to capitalism as much as an apprenticeship to democracy.

The link between sport and the citoyen-soldat in the VCB is less clear. The Bordeaux-based Véloce-Sport newspaper, closely linked with the VCB, was a keen advocate of vélocipédie militaire, and club and newspaper organized conferences on the topic. But as Poyer has demonstrated, cycling clubs’ enthusiasm for vélocipédie militaire was more often than not mere lip-service to the Republican ideal of the citoyen-soldat (Poyer, 2005). In Bordeaux, vélocipédie militaire was enthused about by the VCB because of the credit this brought the club in negotiations with the town hall and because of the VCB’s reliance on the military authorities in Bordeaux, who provided security stewards and military band music at
the club’s race meetings.

The creation of club ‘identity’ is also illustrated by the VCB. In theory, shared identity was provided ‘ready-made’ by a passion for cycling, but in practice, different degrees of interest in different kinds of cycling led to fragmented solidarity. The VCB used the standard instruments of place, behaviour and process to foster the identity of the club and to strengthen the sociability of the association and of its members: there were well-appointed club premises in central Bordeaux, there were strong expectations of good conduct by members and there were careful procedures for the admission of prospective members. Club premises in various cafés in central Bordeaux hosted social functions, such as (from 1889) monthly dinners, which in addition to the annual dinners – high points of ‘sporting sociability’ – gave a regular rhythm to the life of the association. But frequent changes of locale and, arguably, competition for members’ social time from the club’s training track, lowered attendance at the ‘clubhouse’. Another – patently non-sporting – locale that competed for the attention of club members was the club’s box at the Grand Théâtre de Bordeaux. The club’s ‘social reproduction’ was protected by careful vetting of prospective members, but there appear to have been problems in ensuring the recruitment of responsible elements and maintaining proper behaviour. In 1886 and 1887 there were laments over bad behaviour, couched in terms that suggested that some members were concerned that a ‘lower-class’ element had entered the club. A letter to the Véloce-Sport newspaper complained: ‘Je ne dis pas que tous les vélocen en France sont de la basse classe, mais la majeure partie; et cela vient de ce que nous payons trop en argent les professionnels qui courent pour les fabricants, au lieu de laisser à leurs maîtres le soin de les payer’ (Le Véloce-Sport, 1 November 1888, 730). One difficulty in building shared identity and sociability was the variety of different memberships: an individual’s place within the VCB was defined in part by his status as either a committee member and club officer, a statutory founder-member shareholder (post-1888), a simple sporting member, a ‘social’ member, or some other (non-official) kind of member. In addition, when the issue of amateurism and professionalism became more and more important towards the end of the 1880s, the admission or rejection of professional riders or the acceptance of riders racing professionally under the colours of the VCB created tensions: in April 1890 the VCB rejected the application of the famous professional racer Henri Loste to become a membre-coureur.

Hubscher and Durry suggest that novel activities organized by cycling clubs tended to interact with traditional festivities and commemorations
in a way that simultaneously reflected the importance of tradition while hinting at its replacement by modern forms of popular entertainment: ‘Rien d’étonnant alors, que les nouvelles activités sportives trouvent leur place dans l’expression festive et commémorative d’une culture locale et nationale […] les nouvelles structures n’éliminent pas l’ordre ancien, mais en se juxtaposant à lui, semblent en accompagner le déclin’ (1992: 107). This seems indeed to have been the case for the VCB. The revised statutes of the club in 1888 suggested that it saw its role in organizing race-days as a partnership with more traditional events run by the town hall. Approval for major race meetings was always sought, and the calendar of competitions was always designed to complement rather than replace existing events. However successful cycle racing was becoming as a spectacle in its own right, it was not sufficiently popular to compete with traditional festivities such as the Bordeaux Fair for the participation of the average Bordeaux citizen, nor sufficiently distinguished a passion to draw the bourgeois elite from their devotion to the customary leisured distractions of horse racing or yachting regattas. Indeed, Hubscher and Durry (1992: 109) establish a contrast between cycling clubs, which worked with traditional calendars of festivity, and sports associations of ‘social distinction’ such as yachting, golf and tennis, whose organization of events paid less heed to communal calendars of celebration and commemoration.

Cycling and society: who and what?

Cycling, as we have suggested above, is a multiple and multi-faceted activity. Here we attempt to provide some pointers as to what ‘cycling’ represented in French society and culture during the late nineteenth century.

Clubs and class

The founding of a large number of cycling clubs in the 1870s and 1880s has already been touched upon, as have the relationships between cycling clubs and civil society. But who actually were cyclists in the 1870s and 1880s, when cycling was a new, dangerous and exciting activity? Looking at the cycling population through the prism of clubs means necessarily that numbers of cyclists (however defined) whose enthusiasm fell short of joining a sporting association are excluded. Particularly in this early period, however, it is perhaps fair to say that those who chose to ride bicycles were by definition passionate about the new sport and
technology and were therefore more likely than not to be members of a *véloce-club*. Some categories of cyclist were also, of course, generally excluded from joining clubs, such as those below the age of 18 or women, so reliance on the – in themselves incomplete – archival records of *véloce-clubs* produces a number of distortions.

The point at issue in all discussions of almost any sport and class, and particularly cycling, during the late nineteenth century is always whether the new activity was adopted primarily by the upper groupings of the social hierarchy or whether its uptake was more democratic than elitist. Studies tend to differentiate between indigenous French sports such as gymnastics that tended, generally, to be patronized by the lower classes, and imported British sports such as rugby and football that were monopolized by the bourgeoisie and elite in search of social distinction. As a *sport mécanique* like motorcycling, motor racing and flying, which followed in its wake, cycling in the early decades is generally implicitly understood as an elite pursuit, because only the rich could afford to indulge in it. As well as being considered as a sport of the social elite, cycling is also often apparently considered as essentially a British import, another factor that suggests that it was or should have been a pastime of the upper classes. But analyses of the cost of cycling tend to disagree (Fourastié, 1963; Fourastié and Fourastié, 1977): yes, the prices of good early bicycles made by the main manufacturers were unaffordably high for those without money to burn, yet there was relatively quickly a flourishing second-hand market for machines, local frame-builders could produce less sophisticated mounts for reasonable sums, workers in the cycle industry could build their own machines, and so on. And cycling was absolutely not a British sport imported by the upper classes to mark their difference from the workers: although the majority of bicycles in the 1870s and 1880s were imported from the UK because of the collapse of the French industry during the Franco-Prussian war and its aftermath, the initial French tradition of cycling from 1867 was strong and Gallic.

Part of the difficulty in deciding to what extent cycling was an elite pastime is caused by the very definition of ‘the elite’. Discussions of French sport in the late nineteenth century tend often to refer to the model of sporting behaviour provided for emerging sports by horse racing, a sport dominated by the richest and most aristocratic elements of French society. This, however, is not an elite that jumped on the bicycle as a mark of technological modernity and social distinction. The elite public from which cycling was ‘democratized’ – along with other sports – in the 1890s and 1900s was essentially that of the *couches nouvelles*, or the new socioeconomic groups born of France’s industrial and commercial
transformation. The most detailed study of the membership of cycling clubs suggests that in 1868–70, 35 per cent of club cyclists were notables, 36 per cent bourgeoisie populaire and 28 per cent employés, and that during the 1880s there was little real change in the social make-up of the cycling population (Poyer, 2003a: 120–44).

Different kinds of cycling: leisure, pleasure, touring (and sport)
Cycling in the early decades of its development covered a variety of activities. As far as committed cyclists – members of véloce-clubs, for example – were concerned, there were two kinds of cycling: on the one hand, there was the highly visible and spectacular racing and, on the other, there was the quieter and less mediatized activity of touring and general pleasure riding. To these two kinds of cycling must arguably also be added the cycling undertaken by individuals who were not interested in racing or touring, and who were not sufficiently enthusiastic to belong to a cycling club, but who still indulged in cycling as pure recreation or as gentle exercise. In this last category should perhaps be included women, who, although sometimes interested in racing and touring, were generally excluded from cycling clubs and therefore practised the activity on a more personal and individual level.5

The racing of the period, as will be demonstrated in detail in the following section, was a sport that was trying to find its feet. It was only in the 1890s that cycling as a sport became a proper commercial spectacle, with road and track races attracting huge audiences and involving considerable financial stakes for riders, managers, trainers, promoters, manufacturers and newspapers. Although cycle races of the 1870s and 1880s were reported in the general press as well as in the nascent specialized cycling press (see Seidler, 1964), public interest in what was generally held to be a pastime for the privileged few was far from what it would become in the hey-day of racing during the 1890s, and from the creation of the Tour de France in 1903. Even if some racers in the 1880s – such as Charles Terront – were of a modest background and tempted into professional riding by the rewards on offer, for the general population cycling still seemed an activity reserved for the well-off, and despite the interest of its speed and mechanical modernity, something of only tangential interest to the masses.

Touring was a form of cycling that interested many members of the early véloce-clubs, but it was not an activity that raised passions in the same way as racing. Although touring did not elicit quite the same fanatical attachment to the bicycle as an instrument of speed, efficiency and progress, nevertheless divisions arose in cycling clubs between members
expecting the club’s efforts to be principally directed towards the staging of race meetings, training and racing, and those members who saw cycling less as competition and more as leisurely enjoyment of physical activity and the discovery of nature. Richard Holt (1985; 1988) has detailed how the use of the bicycle in cycle touring helped the urban bourgeoisie ‘discover’ the countryside in an invention of almost contemporary modes of consuming leisure and nature, but the slow enjoyment of fresh air was very different to racing and records.

The Véloce-club bordelais, with its strong interest in cycle sport, was a prime example of this tension between two interpretations of cycling, as the club also contained an influential tourist element grouped around the journalist Maurice Martin. Martin was the author of a celebrated touring guide for the coast around Bordeaux (Martin, 1905) and (in an interesting crossover between touring and racing) an account of the ride from Bordeaux to Paris that he undertook in 1890 (Martin, 1890). The balance of forces between the two factions varied during the 1880s, and although in 1888 it seemed agreed that touring was the ‘plat de résistance’ of cycling and racing (merely) the ‘hors d’oeuvre’ (Martin, 1888), the VCB’s considerable investment in race organization was arguably a main factor in its demise in 1892, when the touring element went on to help found other clubs. As with racing, and cycling in general during this period, the numbers involved in touring were small in comparison with what was to come as the bicycle became more affordable, but the 1880s laid the bases of cycling’s contribution to the (re-)discovery of the countryside and to the (re-)definition of the relationship between ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’ (Holt, 1985; 1988). The foundation of the Touring Club de France (TCF) in January 1890 reflected the existing interest in this aspect of cycling and anticipated its future development in the years before the First World War.

**Cycling and competition**

The 1890s and 1900s were to see the thorough professionalization of cycle sport, despite the best efforts of those who, like de Coubertin, wished to save French sport in general from the shame of commercial influence, as well as those whose ‘Anglomania’ aligned them with French perceptions of British ‘Corinthian values’. The ways in which thinking on sport and cycling itself evolved during the 1870s and 1880s shed some light on why cycling became an exception to the general trends towards the ‘Coubertinization’ of French sport.

What was considered as a ‘sport’ in mid-to-late nineteenth-century France was a matter of some ambiguity; almost anything, from fencing
and horse racing to whist and chess, could be called a sport. Despite this ambient uncertainty over precisely what was, or should be, defined as a sport, from the late 1880s sport was gradually defined more as something that required elements such as effort, discipline, training, competition and performance, and cycling, therefore, became—inherently—a sporting activity. However, it could be argued that cycling would only become a proper sport, rather than a healthy distraction for the moneyed classes, when entrepreneurs such as Henri Desgrange melded the definitions of philosophers with the popular press’s understanding of society’s interest in spectacular sport. In the 1880s cycling was neither really an aristocratic sport nor really a popular one, and it was this intermediate social status that arguably helped it through the grasp of de Coubertin.

It is often suggested that the French upper classes were avid consumers of British sports and sporting values. While maintaining their interests in hunting, horse riding, horse racing and other traditionally prestigious athletic pursuits such as fencing, the old and new aristocracy enthusiastically adopted new sports, particularly those imported from Britain, in an effort to maintain their social difference from the newly influential classes of the French industrial revolution. Despite occasional attempts from its promoters to present cycling as a pastime of the elite and notwithstanding the notion that as a new activity it would automatically interest the upper classes, it seems more likely that cycling was adopted only very transiently as a sport of distinction sociale. Studies of the membership of cycling clubs have demonstrated how it was the ‘new’ socioeconomic groupings that predominated, using what ‘noble’ members there were as a guarantee for the authorities of the good morals and society of their associations (Poyer, 2003a: 125). Cycling differed in many ways from the typical ‘Anglo-Saxon’ sports that were adopted with real enthusiasm, such as rugby and football: it was not a team sport, with rules and codes and an ethos of solidarity as well as competition; it was not a sport taught in schools or played at university; it was not a sport that could be played as a dilettante (except in the form of touring). Cycling as a sport requiring training, effort, discipline, competition and performance was an activity that demanded concessions from those who practised it that were intrinsically ‘professional’ and very different from the adolescent, amateur or dilettante enjoyment of games such as football. Moreover, cycling was a sport mécanique, and as such was of interest through its modernity to the upper classes in search of distinction sociale through early adoption of (expensive) technologies in a display of Veblen-esque conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1912); but
the (noble) distinction of purchasing an expensive bicycle in the 1880s was arguably in a natural tension with the (vulgar) application required to race it. Examples abound of well-off individuals who passed from an enthusiasm for cycling, to motorcycling, to cars and then even to flying: G.P. Mills in Britain and Jiel-Laval in France, both participants and finishers (respectively first and fifth) in the 1891 Bordeaux–Paris race, had such evolving interests. It may be unfair to impute such fickleness of passion to the snobbishness of leaving a sport as it becomes more democratic – perhaps the motivation was simply a love of speed, or advancing age – but it seems the case that, in France at least, the more a sport required training, specialization and professionalism and the more it became the focus of commercial interests, the less it was likely to interest the upper classes, simply because professional sport and commerce were antithetical to bourgeois conceptions of the purity of amateurism.

One other consideration serves to underline the peculiar status of cycling in the 1880s as neither aristocratic nor popular. A common conception in Third Republic France was that sport embodied one of the founding tenets of Republicanism, namely the meritocratic selection of the fittest through competition. Such Republican social Darwinism usually applied through education and competitive exams to the civil service, but the parallels with sport seemed clear. However, although such a theory might hold for a sport such as running or rugby, it could be argued that sports mécaniques, in which costly technological innovations are an inherent part of competition, make sports such as cycling, at least in the rapidly evolving technical context of the 1880s, something less than a level playing field.

**Sport and racing in the early years**

As well as the novelty of a technology of personal mobility and transport, and as an instrument of leisure for the upper classes, cycling was popularized in the early decades through its adoption by individuals and newspapers as a form of competition. Cycle races were the principal means by which the technology and the activity of cycling in general were publicized, and in France in particular, a professionalized racing community was soon established.

*Early races and racing*

As Jean Durry (1973: 19–25), among others, has recounted, the first properly documented races took place in 1868, when now-famous
competitions were staged in Paris at the Parc de Saint-Cloud (31 May 1868), in Toulouse (27 July 1868) and in Bordeaux (2 November 1868). Many other races were organized during 1868 in the Paris region (either at the Paris hippodrome or at La Varenne, Charenton, Pantin, Le Raincy or Enghien) and also in small towns as far removed from the modernity and cosmopolitanism of Paris as Cognac, in the sleepy department of Charente-inférieure. The Saint-Cloud race – run over a distance of 1,200 metres or 2,400 metres (accounts differ) between the fountain and entrance gate of the park – was won by James Moore. The acute nationalism of the period led to some debate over the nationality of the winner, who had beaten the Frenchman Drouet into second place. Although some newspapers laid claim to Moore as a French citizen, he was obliged to declare that he was in fact British, although living and working in Maisons-Laffitte. Setting an example of (unavoidable) crossover between racing and the cycle industry that was to become a pattern (with many variations), the Saint-Cloud race was organized by the cycling business of La Compagnie parisienne de bicycles, run by the Olivier brothers.

Between these first beginnings of cycling competition and the Franco-Prussian war, racing flourished in both Paris and the provinces in 1869 and early 1870, as the Véloce-club de Paris staged frequent races in Paris (including a ‘Tour de Paris’) and other clubs organized competitions in towns such as Angers, Besançon, Carpentras, Chartres, Lille, Lyon and Marseille. An early point-to-point race was organized in January 1870 from Toulouse–Villefranche–Toulouse (63 km), but the most important race of the period was undoubtedly the Paris–Rouen of 7 November 1869, again won by Moore, who had been dominant since his victory at Saint-Cloud, in a time of some ten-and-a-half hours for an overall distance of 123 km. Marking another structural feature of the future organization of cycle sport, Paris–Rouen was sponsored by the recently founded sporting newspaper Le Vélocipède illustré, which was exploiting the popularity of cycling as pastime and spectacular sport. The enthusiasm for racing was reflected in the 300 entries to compete in the race, including some from women, although only 100 competitors actually set off. Paris–Rouen was intended by its originator, the celebrated journalist Richard Lesclide, to demonstrate the practical usefulness of the bicycle as a means of travel between two important cities, and Moore’s demonstration that this was indeed feasible earned him 1,000 francs.

After the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune, cycling took some years to regain its popularity, and it was only by the mid-1870s that racing recaptured its former momentum. By December 1876 the frequency of race meetings in Paris led to the creation of an early cycling
‘federation’ – the Union vélocipédique parisienne – intended to instil some order into the planning of races. Four years later the desire for a centralizing influence saw the birth of the Union Vélocipédique de France in February 1881, and the first races of the French national championships, held over the distance of 10 km at the Place du Carrousel, Paris. Although the UVF had something of a chequered history during the 1880s and 1890s because of competition for its role as cycling’s federal body from other organizations, the annually organized national championships provided usually stable points of reference in the racing calendar. Racing in the 1880s continued to develop, but seemed to lack the excitement of its founding years in the late 1860s. It appeared that cycle sport was finding athletic, commercial, industrial and media maturity difficult to reach. Commenting on this period, Durry notes:

Cependant, à part les spécialistes, le cyclisme intéresse-t-il le grand public? Rien n’est moins sûr. D’autre part, les victoires changeantes et diverses des uns et des autres en vitesse comme en fond le prouvent, ce sport n’a pas atteint la maturité, sinon la perfection, où chacun se consacre à la forme d’épreuve pour laquelle il présente le plus d’aptitude. (1973: 25)

The first phase of maturity, at least, was to be gained only in the 1890s, as seminal races such as Bordeaux–Paris and Paris–Brest–Paris rewrote the rules of road racing, and the rise of vélodromes fuelled public enthusiasm for track races.

Early cycling champions and heroes

Although the races that mainly caught the attention of the media for the heroism of their exploits in this period were held on the road, such as Paris–Rouen, the blossoming of road racing was properly to come only in the 1890s; most of the racing in the 1870s and 1880s happened on the track, and the heroes of cycling in this period were thus preponderantly track riders rather than road racers. The tracks of these early decades were often not dedicated tracks, but merely public spaces borrowed from town authorities for the staging of races, such as the Place des Quinconces in Bordeaux, whose surface had to be levelled and where ropes were laid out to trace the bends; le Mail in Angers; or simply boulevards of towns where riders rode out and back along a road, turning tightly at halfway. Interestingly, although there was an obvious crossover between the two disciplines of track and road, and some riders were able to excel at both, there seems to have been a difference in social class between those who specialized in track races and those who rode the road. Track champions were middle-class bourgeois, and road racers, such as Terront, often came from less privileged backgrounds. Track racing, on the circuits
described as vélodromes, despite their temporary and unsatisfactory nature, was more easily made spectacular for an urban viewing public (which had ready access to the race) than a long road race where riders might pass a spectator’s vantage point only once. And the viewing public at a vélodrome was more easily controlled and even selected (by price of entry ticket) than on the road. Track racing often initially followed the model provided by horse racing, and attracted a bourgeois following as well as a more ‘popular’ element, as has been suggested by Ehrenberg (1980: 37), who emphasizes that the rising number of vélodromes reflected and accompanied a change in the nature of racing: ‘la compétition change de fonction: de simple moyen d’organiser l’affrontement entre les pratiquants, elle devient un spectacle de masse, destiné essentiellement aux couches ouvrières urbaines’. The Englishman James Moore was arguably the first ‘French’ hero of cycling. It was Moore’s success in the inaugural races of cycle sport such as Saint-Cloud (1868) and Paris–Rouen (1869) that began to catch the public imagination, and his dominance of racing in France until 1877 kept him firmly in the forefront of media coverage. Moore was a veterinarian, and presumably rode at least as much for pleasure as for any financial gain he might accrue.

The first true French rider to earn the reputation of a popular champion was Charles Terront, whose star began to wax as that of Moore was waning in the mid-to-late 1870s. Terront came to attention at the age of 19 in 1876, when he won Paris–Pontoise and came seventh in Angers–Tours. One of Terront’s early major races was organized by the Véloce-club de Toulouse in April 1877 and pitted him against the declining Moore; although Moore just won the race at Toulouse, Terront was henceforward to be France’s leading rider. He shared many honours at all distances during the 1880s and 1890s with riders such as de Civry, Duncan, Gros, Keen, Joguet, Médinger, Rousseau and Viennet (Breyer and Coquelle, 1898). Terront had been a delivery boy in Paris before realizing his potential as a cycling athlete as well as the financial rewards to be won in prizes, and his biography by Baudry de Saunier, an iconic journalist and popularizer of cycling in the Belle Époque, gives a clear view of the professionalism and hardships of his new trade as a professional athlete (Baudry de Saunier, 1893).

Although Terront’s background was typical of many professional riders in the 1880s and 1890s (for example, Constant Huret and Edmond Jacquelin, both apprentice bakers; the butcher’s boy Louis Pothier, later to gain glory in the Tour de France; or the famous Maurice Garin, destined to win the first Tour in 1903), other riders such as Moore were often of a different social standing. This was a period in which, in general,
cycling was ‘la lenteur des riches, et la vitesse des pauvres’ in the formulation coined by sports sociologist and historian Philippe Gaboriau (1991), as the moneyed classes mostly adopted the bicycle for recreation and leisure (with some exceptions who chose to race) while, as bikes became more affordable during the 1890s, the working classes saw it as either a means of transport or as a sporting career offering escape from the drudgery of manual labour. Even by the early 1880s the number of races organized on a regular basis and the prize money on offer was sufficient to encourage some lower-class riders with talent and ambition to attempt a professional career.

Riders such as Terront and Garin contrasted in social origin with two other emblematic racers of the 1880s: the ‘aristocratic’ Frédéric de Civry, whose eight-year career in the 1880s deluged him in victories and honours, and the English gentleman-rider Herbert Oswald (H.O.) Duncan. Duncan was British, but lived and raced in France, and de Civry was much influenced (through a stay in England during his adolescence) by British sporting values and methods. In 1883 de Civry won the British 50-mile time-trial championship at Leicester, and in 1886 Duncan was the French UVF sprint champion. Although both Duncan and de Civry seemed to originate from privileged classes and were therefore, theoretically, not in need of professional cycling success or involvement in the cycle trade to earn a living, the very closeness of their involvement in the developing cycle-sport industry seems to suggest that they too, almost as much as Terront and Garin, were linked to the sport by financial need. On de Civry’s early death from tuberculosis at the age of 32 in 1893, the cycling press emphasized his sporting success (211 victories from 331 races), his rudimentary education (in England), his cunning business acumen (as a cycle salesman for Clément) and the torture of a tantalizing legal battle over his possible entitlement to part of the fortune of his aristocratic relations (Le Vélo, 1893). And although Duncan’s ideal gentleman-rider was ‘a young man of good family in possession of a sizeable income who enjoys participating in racing in several countries’ (Holt, 1981: 83), his own involvement in the cycling press (he founded Le Véloceman in Montpellier in 1885) and in the training and managing of various professional racers suggests almost as much a ‘professional’ as a ‘gentleman-amateur’ relationship to sport, as his writings on cycling tend to suggest.7

Tradition, technology and modernity
Racing during the 1870s and 1880s was a testing ground for the nature of competition: cycling as a competitive and professional sport was
seeking its maturity. Similarly, racing in this early period was – more so than in others, arguably – closely imbricated with the testing of new technologies and designs of bicycle. Overall, the new mechanized sport of cycling was negotiating its place in the rapidly evolving modern world of late nineteenth-century France. In the 1890s the French model of competitive cycling came into bloom, as technology (‘safety’ bicycles and pneumatic tyres), media coverage (the competition between sporting newspapers such as *Le Vélo* and *L’Auto-Vélo*), industry and commerce (an increasingly mass market for bicycles) and social mores combined to create an environment in which the sport could flourish durably.8

Technology was tested in the races of the early period both in terms of the styles of bicycles used and the components. Compared with the 1890s and afterwards, such testing was perhaps less mediatized, and competition between frame-makers and component manufacturers was less intense, because the sport had not yet reached the paroxysm of public interest and commercial significance that it did in later years. Racing helped the search for the most efficient design of bicycle and the most reliable and lightweight equipment by affording direct comparisons over measured distances and between competitors of similar talent, and thus facilitated the gradual evolution from *vélocipède* to *grand-bi* (penny-farthing) to *bicyclette* (‘safety’ bicycle). The competition between frame-makers and providers of components during this period was firmly located within the context of a rivalry between French and British technology in which France looked despairingly at British supremacy. Whereas before the Franco-Prussian war French cycling technology had been at least the equal of what was produced in Britain, during the 1870s and 1880s British machines and equipment were deemed far superior, and French admiration of British sporting values and training methods compounded Gallic competitors’ sense of inferiority. In 1868–70 races in France were mostly undertaken on French machines: Moore won the inaugural Paris–Rouen on a machine built by Tribout at the *Etablissements Suriray* in Melun. But from the mid- and late 1870s (the ‘safety’ was patented in Britain in 1878), riders, commerce and industry were generally convinced of the inferiority of French products.9 By 1889–91, however, a turning point was beginning to appear, as the *grand-bi* was consigned to racing history and French manufacturers asserted the worth of their technologies and products: the September 1889 100 km national championships at Longchamp saw the defeat of talented riders on penny-farthings by a victorious ‘safety’; and in June 1891 the brothers Michelin took out a patent for their improved clincher tyre. The bases for ever-more intense sporting competition (the maturity
of the technology in the form of the ‘safety’) and for increasing industrial competition between the UK and France (the rise of manufacturers such as Michelin, Clément and others) had thus been laid.

The simple progress of technology was, however, not the only way in which cycle sport was a marker of modernity. Cycling as an innovative *sport mécanique* was conceived to be about speed and the practicality of the bicycle as a means of transport and communication, and these were intimately linked to its inherent technology; but there were other more subtle ways in which the development of cycle competition helped define a passage from ‘old’ to ‘new’ in French society. In this early period, cycle races were often initially organized along the lines of traditional sporting competitions, and received the imprint of other sports. Cycling’s gradual emancipation from the influence of horse racing, for instance – early races were often arranged by horse-racing clubs, on hippodromes, and riders wore jockey-like attire – demonstrated both the new sport’s debt to the past and its own identity. As grand ‘festyve’ sporting events (along the same lines as major horse-racing festivals), cycling competitions negotiated a space in the festive and commemorative calendars of cities and regions, and as we have seen from the example of the *Véloce-club bordelais*, these new sporting events both accompanied and replaced existing traditions of memory and entertainment. Cycle sport was also obliged to negotiate the use of public space, long before the great days of major road races in the 1890s and the launch of the Tour in 1903, and so early races were forced to ‘borrow’ public facilities – such as la Place des Quinconces in Bordeaux, le Mail in Angers, or the Parc de Saint-Cloud – whose traditional use was clearly not professional sport.

**Women and cycling, 1870s–1890s**

The first recorded women’s cycle race took place in Bordeaux in 1869, and during the 1870s and 1880s women were to be seen participating in racing of various kinds, perhaps more as a spectacle than as a sporting activity considered in its own right. Less energetically, female middle- and upper-class elites gradually adopted cycling as a leisure activity during these early decades of the rise of cycling. Controversies over women’s rights to cycle at all and what kinds of riding they should attempt, and the behaviour and apparel that they should adopt when riding, were, in France, very similar to the debates that arose in Britain, the US and other European countries. What seems clear is that, far from there being a consistent and clear-cut rejection of women’s desires to
participate in the new craze for mobility, exercise and freedom afforded by the bicycle, the terms of the debate were often confused and contradictory, as male and female commentators negotiated discourses that gradually facilitated the acceptability of women’s cycling of all kinds. In comparison with the avowed amateur ethos of most of British cycling during this period, the intrinsic professionalism of much of French cycle sport facilitated the appearance of female ‘racers’ (essentially on the track) who attracted considerable followings for their glamour as much as for their athletic abilities; but female cycling’s major contribution to French society in this period was possibly the facilitating of a range of new sociabilities. The bicycle during the late nineteenth century became in essence ‘the technological partner of the femme nouvelle’ (Silverman, 1992: 67).

Medical, social and cultural prejudices
It has been suggested that cycling was an activity that neatly encapsulated the contradictions in the development of female sports in the way that moral and scientific arguments could be adduced both for and against its growth (Hargreaves, 1994: 94). In a paper presented to the recently founded Touring Club de France in 1895, Dr Léon-Petit summarized how cycling had affected women’s place in society, underlining how theories and public opinion had advanced since the earliest days of pioneering female cyclists: ‘Si la bicyclette est en train d’opérer l’affranchissement social de la femme, plus sûrement et plus vite que les revendications les plus bruyantes, il n’en faut pas moins se rappeler que son entrée dans les moeurs ne s’est pas faite sans une résistance acharnée’ (Léon-Petit, 1904). He summarized opposition to female cycling under two headings, either medical (dangers to women’s health) or ‘patriotic’ (dangers to French birth rates). As he points out, for opponents of female cycling, these fears led to the simplistic slogan ‘Vive la France! A bas la bicyclette!’ Other objections might now be seen – hidden behind medical and moral panics – to be more social and cultural, as we shall discuss later.

In 1869, less than a year after the groundbreaking race in Bordeaux, a founding text of medicine applied to cycling appeared. Perhaps surprisingly, this analysis was relatively favourable to reasonable use of bicycles by women: ‘La plupart des villes de France possédant des gymnases à l’usage des deux sexes, on se demande si le vélocipède doit être défendu aux femmes? Je réponds non, en principe, mais j’admet des restrictions’ (Bellencontre, 1869: 30). The author of these relatively liberal interpretations of female cycling was Dr Bellencontre, respected as the médecin
inspecteur de la société protectrice de l’enfance de Paris, and the medical expert (professeur d’hygiène) commissioned by the prestigious Véloce-club rouennais as its advisor. Bellencontre appeared somewhat of a convert to the craze for cycling, stressing in his preface that the bicycle should no longer be considered as a toy but as an object of utility and a means of locomotion that would have positive moral effects on the masses: ‘J’ai voulu démontrer combien, appliqué à l’hygiène et à la gymnastique, il peut être utile à la santé, quel plaisir il procure et à quel but il conduit en concourant même au progrès de haute moralisation des masses, vers lequel les esprits tendent sans cesse’ (1869: v). Perhaps thus ‘captured’ by the activity he was supposed to regulate, Bellencontre was an early favourable voice, but other experts were both less positive and less consistent in their views.

A major contributor to the ongoing medical, cultural and social debate over women and cycling in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s was the renowned French theorist of medicine and athletic activities, Dr Philippe Tissié.11 In two volumes devoted specifically to cycling (Tissié, 1888; 1893) Tissié gave detailed consideration of the use of bicycles by women, changing his views radically from the earlier treatise to considerably more favourable opinions in 1893. In L’Hygiène du vélocipédiste (1888) he was disapproving of women’s cycling, mainly since the design of the machines (hard saddles, solid tyres, frames ill-adapted to female anatomy) would prove injurious to women’s health through the strains they placed on reproductive organs. But in a rather abrupt apparent volte-face, in 1893 he suggested:

En résumé, j’estime que l’usage du vélocipède peut être conseillé à la femme. La nouvelle fabrication des vélocipèdes a rendu ces machines plus maniables, plus sûres, d’un roulement plus facile et moins pénible; l’adaptation des caoutchoucs pneumatiques aux roues, l’élasticité des selles, d’une construction spéciale pour la femme, ont supprimé les trépidations et les causes de choc violent ou de frottement trop durs sur certaines parties du corps. (1893: 130)

However, Tissié’s conversion to female cycling frequently seems confused and contradictory: a few lines after the endorsement above, he reminds readers that medical opinion should be sought by aspiring female cyclists, given that a woman’s abdomen is made for carrying the fruit of conception and that women are ‘wombs with other organs surrounding them’. Moreover:

Si donc, avec ces nouvelles machines, la femme peut se livrer à l’exercice du vélocipède, elle sera néanmoins considérée comme un objet d’art délicat et précieux que le moindre choc peut briser, auprès duquel devra toujours veiller un gardien prudent et attentionné. En somme, le tandem est l’image
de la vie conjugale. Un voyage à deux par ce moyen de locomotion n’est vraiment délicieux et poétique que par l’union de la force qui actionne et la grâce qui sourit en dirigeant. (1893: 131)

Tackling the vexed issue of the leg movement required in cycling, and whether this action is sufficiently comparable to the dangerous muscular contractions of the uterus believed by various moral and medical panics of the nineteenth century to be produced by the use of sewing machines, Tissié declines to conclude, suggesting only that cycling in moderation, especially by virtue of its practice in the open air, is beneficial to women. By 1897 a certain Dr Fauquez was prepared to reject comparisons between cycling and the deleterious effects of sewing machines, and although still holding reservations about the corset, suggested that ‘A moins de contre-indications très limitées […] on peut donc affirmer que l’exercice de la bicyclette est excellent pour la femme et que, dans de nombreux cas, les organes génitaux s’en trouvent très bien’ (1897: 6–8).

Women, cycle sport/entertainment, leisure/utility cycling

On 1 November 1868 Bordeaux hosted the first officially organized race between women on bicycles. Over a distance of 500 metres, ‘Mademoiselle Julie’ took first place and a gold watch, beating her competitors Louise, Louisa and Amélie. On frequent subsequent occasions, Les Dames bordelaises would race in carefully staged events combining sport and the emancipation of women, sexual titillation and the objectification of femininity. Female cycle racing was an activity that – even more than leisure cycling – inflamed the passions of moralists and medical experts, but in some ways, because the protagonists were more often than not either foreign or working-class girls making a living through the ‘spectacle’ of women’s racing in the regular velodrome meetings that sprang up all around France in the 1880s and 1890s, the ‘problem’ was circumscribed to the domain of entertainment and commercial sport.

In a famous guide to vélocipédie published in 1869 by the sporting journalist Richard Lesclide under the pseudonym of ‘Le Grand Jacques’ can be found a passage typical of the titillation of female cycle racing:

Si l’on organise des courses de femmes, c’est probablement à cause de l’attrait particulier qu’elles présentent. Que les dames s’habillent en voyous, le but est manqué. Ces courses doivent présenter un caractère de grâce et d’élégance qui dépend surtout du costume féminin, de la souplesse des écuyères, et de leur façon de gouverner leurs montures… (1869: 94)

And in a characteristic flourish of sexist voyeurism, the writer goes on to suggest that whereas pretty women with nice legs should show them off,
others should refrain from doing so! The more serious Tissié, even in his more enlightened phase (1893), was disapproving of female racing. Although – with various caveats and contradictions – he essentially maintained that gentle cycling was acceptable, the crucial aspect of any female cycling activity was precisely ‘moderation’:

l’usage du vélocipède est bon pour la femme. Il va sans dire qu’il sera modéré, en effet, je n’admet pas que la femme fasse des courses de vitesse. Qu’elles se livrent au tourisme en marchant à l’allure de 12 à 15 kilomètres à l’heure; très bien! Mais de la course à 20, 25 kilomètres à l’heure, non! (1893: 124)

The distinction has to be made, of course, between riding/racing by the wives/daughters/sisters of the middle-class males who expressed these restrictive views on how their female companions or relations should behave, and the riding and racing of the demi-mondaines such as the celebrated courtesans la Belle Otero and Emilienne d’Alençon in the Bois de Boulogne discussed by Pasteur (1986) or Mlle Julie and les Dames bordelaises, ‘Miss America’, and the numbers of other women who made a living from cycling either in road races or on velodromes as part of the developing sports-entertainment industry. ‘Miss America’ (in reality a Mrs Turner) took part in the famous Paris–Rouen race of 7 November 1869, taking 29th place in a mixed field of 33 finishers. Pseudonyms were often adopted by female riders either to protect a family identity considered sufficiently bourgeois to be worth concealing (a trend already set by male riders involved in races where money was involved) or in reflection of the novelty/entertainment status of their activities. As the business of racing-entertainment matured and as female emancipation in society and sport progressed, some women began to race under their real identities. One such pioneer was the Belgian racer Hélène Dutrieu (1877–1961) who was a successful track racer and record-holder in France for the Simpson Lever Chain team in the 1890s, as well as a performer of cycling stunt acts in variety shows, before a further career as a celebrated aviator (see Retail, 1911).

The reverse perspective on women and cycle sport should also be considered, namely the concern, prevalent among certain commentators, that bourgeois and upper-class women might effectively be corrupted by exposure as spectators to male cycling champions. Although such champions were often considered to be prime specimens of the virility of the French ‘race’, capable of producing strong new generations for any Revanche on Germany, as menial working-class cogs in the developing sport-spectacle industry of the velodromes they were a threat to bourgeois masculinities. In the 1899 novel Alphonse Marcaux by the future inventor of the Tour de France, Henri Desgrange, the ordre social of the
Third Republic is effectively portrayed as threatened by the sexual attraction felt by female *bourgeoises* for the muscular and sexually potent racing champions.

With regard to women and leisure/utility cycling during this early period, described by historian and sociologist of nineteenth-century cycling Philippe Gaboriau as ‘la vitesse bourgeoise’, it should be noted that cycle *racing* was essentially the preserve – with some exceptions – of male cyclists (Gaboriau, 1991). Too expensive for the masses, unless they were working-class racers making a living from competition, *la vitesse* was masculine and middle class. Male cycling could also be *slow*, of course, in contradistinction to the sweating proletarianism of paid racing stars, but women’s bourgeois cycling was almost obligatorily *leisurely*. Where medical experts authorized female cycling – and we have seen above that this was more often the case than one might expect – it was with the condition that activity should be undertaken in moderation. In practice, this meant that rides should generally be short, should avoid undue exertion (for medical or social/cultural reasons) and should be accompanied by male guardians. Thus, women’s cycling was essentially slow, short-range and social or leisure-orientated. Given the price of machines, only women of means sufficient to obviate the necessity of working could afford bicycles, and true ‘utility’ cycling was therefore rare.

Theories and practice of female cycling were, however, varying and variable, reflecting the difficulties inherent during this period of social, cultural and technological change: although in general, short rides were advised for women, as bicycle equipment improved and women’s claims to independence gained credence, longer rides and even touring became possible. Theoretical advice remained contradictory even during the 1890s, oscillating between encouragement of healthy open-air exercise as a tonic for anaemic, neurotic women, recurrent concerns over the detrimental effects of pedalling on the womb, the advantages of mixed sociability or the dangers of coquetry, and inappropriate dress and ill-advised mixing of social classes. Thus, in 1893, Tissié quoted enthusiastically from a statement by the husband of a woman who had undertaken a lengthy cycling tour carrying heavy photographic equipment:

‘Nous avons voyagé sur de très mauvaises routes, sans abri contre le vent, le soleil, la pluie, et jamais ma femme ne s’est sentie plus forte. Nous traînions un poids épouvantable […]. Quand elle pense à ce temps de labeurs elle le considère comme le plus beau de sa vie et elle a pourtant été élevée au sein de la richesse et du luxe.’ (1893: 121)
But on a following page he suggests that ‘une femme ne doit faire que
des promenades qui lui permettent de rentrer tous les soirs chez elle’
(Tissié, 1893: 25). The advent of the *Touring Club de France* in the early
1890s strengthened the position of members (men and women) of cycling
clubs more interested in leisure riding of all kinds, and gradually helped
to make female cycling more acceptable.

Although ‘sociability’ will be discussed in more detail below, it should
also be mentioned here. Women’s leisure cycling was generally a collect-
ive, group activity, rather than the often individual training/racing
efforts of men. And since women’s leisure riding was invariably in mixed
company, it was also invariably a practical test-case of developing gender
relations. Dr Galtier-Boissière, writing in 1901 but analysing the experi-
ence of previous decades, suggested that:

l’association des deux sexes empêche généralement les excès, en obligeant
l’homme à ménager galamment les forces de sa compagne. Enfin, l’action
sur les moeurs est indéniable: la camaraderie réelle qui s’établit entre les
jeunes filles et jeunes gens à la suite de longues courses de cyclisme a sur tous
un effet bienfaisant. (1901: 54)

Moreover: ‘La sobriété de mise qu’impose le cyclisme supprime la coquet-
terie ou du moins n’en laisse subsister que ce grain imperceptible qui fait
le charme de la femme’ (1901: 57). The series of short stories and plays
entitled ‘Contes modernes, de selle ou de la pédale’, which appeared in
the magazine *La Bicyclette* during 1893–95, set out many of these
male–female gender issues in literary form.

**Women and sociability**

‘Sociability’ has been a key theme in the academic study of French cycling
during the late Second Empire and the Third Republic, particularly in
terms of the growth of cycling clubs and how these structures that organ-
ized sport and leisure activities also served to bring individuals together
in ways that fostered shared social, political or cultural values. As the
sports historian Ronald Hubscher points out, however, it is important to
realize that this new sociability was, in essence, ‘une sociabilité au
masculin’ (Hubscher and Durry, 1992: 96). The legal status of sports
clubs as associations whose activities and organization were closely over-
seen by the authorities made them as much political groupings as mere
comings-together of individuals inspired by a new sport/leisure activity.
Within the particular political and social context of the Third Republic,
characterized by concerns over possible atomization and fragmentation
of society in conditions of free-market economic and social liberalism,
sports clubs as associations could be seen as useful *corps intermédiaires*,
fostering models of *vie collective librement consentie* either to provide resistance to a dominant state or to palliate excessive individualism.

But as is clear from the history of cycling clubs themselves during this period, the place of women within this system of sociability and citizenship through sport and leisure was far from strong. Not only were women excluded from full citizenship until female suffrage in 1944, but membership of cycling clubs was often denied to them. As the historian of the early French cycling clubs Alex Poyer suggests (2003a: 36–39), during 1867–87 women were almost totally absent – at least as ‘full’ members – from cycling clubs, with the exception of the rather aristocratic *Véloce-club béarnais* in Pau, which accepted women on condition that they avoid involvement in the running of the club and any other non-sporting activities. After the late 1880s evolving social and cultural thinking on the place of women in society, accompanied by technical developments in bicycle design that led experts such as Tissié to revise their objections to female cycling, meant that clubs and their sociability through cycling became slightly more open to women. However, female memberships generally remained inferior in rights and obligations compared with the standard involvement of men or even junior *sociétaires* (in order to preserve ‘respectability’, women were usually required to be introduced to clubs by husbands, brothers or fathers, and were debarred from taking on administrative roles); and, as Poyer points out, very few cycling clubs created competitions for female members (2003a: 142–44).

However, despite the sociability of cycling during this period being fundamentally male, Hubscher also suggests that cycling functioned for women (and for men) as what he terms ‘sport-prétexte’, in other words as a new practice ostentatiously adopted and allowing new forms of mixing between men and women in a social context facilitated by sport/leisure (Hubscher and Durry, 1992: 93–109). As we have seen above, one of the staple tropes of popular cycling culture was the illustrated short story or sketch on the ‘boy-meets-prettily-attired-girl-cyclist’ theme, and such representations of sociability – despite the ‘structural’ restrictions placed upon female emancipation by the cycling clubs themselves – faithfully portrayed the realities of how cycling could facilitate women’s independence. Indeed, the fact that Albertine is pushing a bicycle when she first appears in *A la Recherche du temps perdu* has allowed literary critic Françoise Gaillard (1998) to imagine that Proust’s *jeunes filles en fleurs* were all similarly equipped, the mobility and freedom of cycling helping not only the emancipation of young women, but also consolidating the creation of the concept of *la jeunesse*. Gaillard’s interpretation stresses how cycling positively influenced female

In this brief consideration of women and cycling during France’s Belle Époque we have not considered in detail either the complexities of medical science’s approaches to cycling, both male and female (Thompson, 1999), or, indeed, the voluminous debate on clothing and apparel (the ‘bloomers or not?’ issue) that forms part of the overall analysis of women’s freedom and mobility in the late nineteenth century. We hope, however, to have given a strong indication of how female cycling was seen as both threatening to established social and cultural values and encouraging to feminine emancipation. If further proof were needed, we should consider that in 1898 the novel Voici des ailes! by Maurice Leblanc (1898) concludes with the two couples who have shared a cycling tour of Normandy swapping their partners, and the women riding topless. Such could be the perceived revolutionary impact of female cycling!

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Cycling during the early decades of its development in France was structured by pre-existing patterns of sociability, current interpretations of sport and leisure, and the prevailing understanding of gender relations. As we have seen, cycling was a varied and fluid activity, but one that captured the attention and the enthusiasm of significant numbers of French citizens, who saw it as a means of transport, entertainment, sport or emancipation. What seems clear in this early period of what might be termed pre-maturity is that both cycling and French culture and society were attempting to negotiate evolving identities: in the case of cycling as leisure, utility and sport, this identity was its initial cultural signification, as its varied forms were adopted, explored and adapted by different groupings. In the case of society overall, the socioeconomic modernization of France and the sociopolitical changes that accompanied the growing assurance of Republicanism were reflected in the ways in which citizens espoused and then developed in their own ways the activities of their new – socially, culturally and technically innovative – pastime.
Notes

1 The Union Vélocipédique de France will be considered in more detail in the following chapter, as an example of how cycling – and its ‘federational institutionalization’ – pioneered the creation of governing bodies for sport on both the national and international levels.

2 There are no remaining archives of the club itself, which dissolved in acrimonious circumstances in the early 1890s, and little administrative documentation survives in the departmental (Gironde) and municipal archives in Bordeaux. The details of the club on which this study is based have been gleaned from close reading of contemporary newspapers and sports journals, and on the scant material available in the city and departmental archives.

3 For the creation of the club, see Archives départementales de la Gironde, IR 112, on whose primary material some of this section is based. Another major cycling club during this period, also located in south-west France, where cycling was developing strongly, was the Véloce-club béarnais in Pau, which, although in many ways a highly significant early example of sporting associationnisme and longer-lived than the VCB, was less typical of the issues attached to the rise of sports clubs and of democracy during the early Third Republic (Dauncey, 2010a).

4 E.g. Le Véloce-Sport, 23 January 1890, p. 60, for a note on the resignation of committee members.

5 In Bordeaux in November 1868 women had taken part in the cycle races staged in the Parc bordelais, but the major club in Bordeaux, the Véloce-club bordelais, never agreed on allowing female members.

6 (H.O.) Duncan and (John) Keen were British. The internationalization of cycling sport was yet to be fully developed, but by the 1890s it was commonplace to see American riders racing in Paris and attracting huge followings as international sports stars. A case in point is the multi-champion and record-holder Augustus Zimmerman (1869–1936), who was a sporting icon in both the US and in France.

7 Duncan authored a well-known training manual (Duncan and Superbie, 1890), a ‘history’ of cycling (Duncan, 1898), and an autobiography (Duncan, 1926).

8 We shall discuss in a following chapter how the intense commercial and ideological rivalry between the newspapers Le Vélo and L’Auto-Vélo led directly to the invention of the Tour de France in 1903.

9 There were obviously debates and exceptions. For example, in the mid-1880s, according to Pierre Naudin (1967: 1486): ‘Tous croyaient à la primauté des engins fabriqués outre-Manche, sauf le bordelais Georges Juzan, qui construisait un safety [...] les essais en furent d’ailleurs si concluants, que profitant de l’organisation du Championnat des 100km le 15 novembre 1885, Juzan voulut tenter un essai sur cette distance. Il la couvrit en 4” 40”, soit douze minutes de moins que le vainqueur Louis Loste.’

10 The vogue for using the term véloce in the names of clubs is a clear indicator of the enthusiasm for speed, as is the mania for average speeds and records. The practicality of the bicycle as transport and communication was demonstrated by Lesclide’s first Paris–Rouen race in 1869, and then by the first attested use of vélocipédie militaire in 1870, when a cyclist apparently brought dispatches to General Faidherbe, who was isolated from all other contact.

11 For discussion of his wider significance, see Thibault (1981b).

12 For a detailed study of the Véloce-club béarnais, see Dauncey (2010a).