French Cycling

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Cycling of all kinds in France during the 2000s has been the subject of increased interest from citizens and the state. The cycle industry has benefited from a growing uptake of cycling as recreational sport, transport/personal mobility and recreational leisure. And professional cycle sport, in the form of the Tour de France, has maintained its hold on the popular imagination, despite frequent suspicions that the endemic drug-taking of the 1990s that culminated in the ‘Tour of Shame’ in 1998 could sound the death-knell of the event. In 2003 no less official an institution than the august Bibliothèque nationale de France at Tolbiac hosted a conference to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Tour.¹ The new-found popularity of the Tour was in part due to the heavy mediation – by L’Equipe and by most other French newspapers as well as other media – of the phenomenal success of the US rider and cancer survivor Lance Armstrong, whose seven wins in the event inspired admiration, suspicion and resentment in equal measure among sports commentators, fans and the general public. The French public avidly consumed books by or about Armstrong (Armstrong, Jenkins and Renaudo, 2000; Armstrong, Jenkins and Girard, 2003; Ballester and Walsh, 2006; Laborde, 2006; Ducoin, 2009; Ledanff, 2010). If the ambivalence over Armstrong’s domination of pro-racing’s flagship event reflected the enduring French love–hate relationship with the United States since 1945 and before, it was also driven by misgivings about his often-alleged but never-proven use of performance-enhancing ‘preparation’ (something of a new concern, historically, given the long history of doping in pro-cycling) and by a distaste for his business-like method of winning, deemed by some to be cynical and disrespectful to the traditions and ethics of sport. Thus what we can call the ‘Armstrong Affair’ of the 2000s mobilized concerns around the ‘purity’ of sport similar to those which in the 1880s and 1890s had exercised defenders of amateurism against professionalism, of pacing against individual riding or other principles of fair competition. Although there had been little awareness in the
founding decades of cycling in France of the need to protect the environment (although similar issues could perhaps be found in inchoate form in the defence of recreational tourism or the philosophy of long-distance riding developed by Vélocio), developing concerns in the 2000s over urban and rural cycling as a sustainable form of personal mobility nevertheless echo ongoing linkages throughout the decades between the bicycle and freedom, independence and solidarity.

In this chapter, we shall first consider how the bicycle has contributed to and facilitated environmentalism in France through government recognition of public interest in cycling and its importance in reducing the externalities of poor health among French citizens and traffic-congested urban centres. We shall look at the state’s Monsieur Vélo appointed in 2004 to champion cycling throughout government, and then, building on the brief evocation of La Rochelle’s urban-cycle scheme of the late 1970s and 1980s in the previous chapter, consider the major self-service cycle systems implemented in Strasbourg, Lyon and Paris. Secondly, we will discuss the new forms of cycling recreation in sport and leisure that have arisen in the 2000s, as well as the more militant urban activism represented by the Vélorution movement. Thirdly, because the Tour de France is still important in contributing to French debates about the identity of France and the nature of sport, we shall look at the ‘Armstrong Affair’; and we shall conclude with a survey of the current state – at the end of the 2000s – of cycling in France, as revealed by a comprehensive recent official survey and weighty report.

The bicycle and ‘environmentalism’

From the 1990s, but especially in the early years of the new millennium, there was rising interest in France in environmental issues and in the ways in which lifestyles could be adapted to reduce society’s impact on ecology. Cycling was one of the major strands in France’s renewed concern with balancing the demands of modern life with more sustainable approaches to the environment. Although France is in many ways one of the lanternes rouges of cycling in Europe in terms of transport – only 3 per cent of trips are made by bike in France, compared with 10 per cent in Belgium and Germany, and 27 per cent in Holland – citizens and government and a whole range of stakeholders in cycling coalesced around the need to promote cycling as an environmentally friendly (and healthy) mode of transport. Following the initiative of La Rochelle, which instituted a modest free cycle system in the mid- and late 1970s that progressively
became integrated during the 1980s and 1990s into a more ambitious plan to encourage alternative means of transport in the town, in the 2000s major cities such as Strasbourg, Lyon and Paris also embraced cycling as part of the solution to urban transport congestion.

**Monsieur Vélo: government planning for cycling**
Attempts to create a coordinated government approach to cycling as a non-polluting means of transport and thus a way of protecting the environment date essentially from 1994 and the creation of a *Comité de suivi de la politique du vélo* (CSPV), and, during the latter part of the 1990s, government requests to the Ministry of Transport to consider the feasibility of cycling infrastructures in new transport systems. With increasing awareness of the gravity of pollution, the 1996 *Loi sur l’air et l’utilisation rationnelle de l’énergie* (LAURE) further underlined the importance of cycle transport, as did the 2000 *Loi sur la solidarité et le renouvellement urbain* (SRU), which helped to join up the thinking of transport policy and urban planning and compel towns and cities to include proper provision for cycle travel in their transport plans. State support for cycling and the cultural and social importance of cycling as an everyday practice has thus come essentially from growing concerns about climate change, pollution and congestion. The practical work of the CSPV – modifying the Highway Code in favour of cycling in 1998 and 2003, launching the national mission for *véloroutes et voies vertes* in 2003, organizing the international conference ‘Vélocity’ in Paris in 2003 – as well as its role in coordinating the interaction of the numerous stakeholders in French cycle policy – government ministries, regional/departmental authorities, user associations, the SNCF and RATP and other organizations – prepared the ground for serious initiatives in 2004 and 2006 in favour of cycling for commuting, leisure and tourism.³

In March 2004 the Raffarin government considered the Le Brethon report (Le Brethon, 2004) on how cycling could be encouraged in France, which came from the work undertaken by the CSPV. One of the first practical suggestions of this report was that overall government policy should be coordinated by a ‘cycling Czar’ – a *Monsieur Vélo* – who would have general oversight of all policy issues pertaining to the use of bicycles in urban transport. This 2004 report on the state of cycling in France – *Propositions pour encourager le développement de la bicyclette en France* – set out how important cycling was considered to be in terms of a wide range of public-policy fields: urban planning, quality of life, health, solidarity and *cohésion territoriale* (the linking of different areas by tourist cycle routes / *voies vertes*, for example). The report concluded,
in a rather typically *dirigiste* fashion, that although various initiatives had been launched during the previous decade, there was a certain amount of confusion around planning for cycling, and that a clear policy could best be achieved firstly by strengthening the cross-departmental coordination of decision-making and secondly by defining a single clear objective. *Monsieur Vélo* was charged with improving coordination, and the concrete target suggested by the report was that of increasing the percentage of daily trips made on bikes in towns.

The current *Monsieur Vélo*, Hubert Peigné, was appointed in April 2006, and was previously in charge of the *Comité de suivi de la politique du vélo*, and thus has significant experience of the sector; he is helped in his task by other *messieurs Vélo* in each French *département*, whose job is to ensure that cycling is considered in any new transport infrastructures. The three-year promotional plan for cycling that Peigné was charged with preparing appeared in summer 2007, entitled *Développer l’usage du vélo dans notre vie quotidienne*, and set out a number of areas in which progress was needed to move France from the bottom range of European countries ranked by use of cycling (0.2 km/day on average, and only 3% of transport by bicycle). This was a situation that had obviously concerned Le Brethon in her 2004 report, and from 2007 onwards, once a budget had been allocated to his activities, Peigné’s team managed to work quite effectively in favour of cycling, carrying out numerous studies of the strengths and weaknesses of French cycling and identifying how transport infrastructures in both urban and rural environments could be improved to encourage mobility through cycling. Peigné’s responsibility as cycling Czar was renewed for another three-year term in late 2009 and he continued his coordinating and analytical activities. In July 2011 a further working party on the development of cycling as leisure and transport was set up, with the brief of drawing up a *Plan national vélo*, and in January 2012 the plan (Goujon, 2012) was submitted to the minister for transport, Thierry Mariani.

*Urban commuter cycling: Strasbourg and Lyon*

Various cities and towns in France have taken measures to increase the use of bicycles by citizens in order to decrease traffic congestion and inner-city pollution. In Rennes, 200 bicycles were supplied for use by residents and tourists in June 1998; the cycles were garaged at a variety of ‘stations’ throughout the town and their borrowing was administered via an intelligent card system. Whereas in Rennes the scheme was relatively small-scale and run by the advertising hoarding company Adshel, Bordeaux implemented a more ambitious system, run by the city author-
ities. There the council launched a scheme in June 2001 by which 2,000 bicycles were made freely available to local inhabitants. Cycles were lent out to individuals for periods of between one week and one month, at no cost to their users, all maintenance and repair being undertaken by the municipality. Also in June 2001 the home of the French cycle industry, Clermont-Ferrand, introduced a system whereby holders of city travel-passes could make use of 50 normal bicycles or 50 electric cycles, available from two hire points in the town. Although Paris has also endeavoured to improve facilities for city cyclists, the two major urban centres that have made the most significant efforts to encourage the take-up of cycling have been Strasbourg and Lyon.

In Strasbourg, the first *Plan vélo* was instituted as early as 1978, being rejuvenated in the 1994 by the new socialist mayor, Catherine Trautmann, when the radial pattern of cycle paths developed since the late 1970s began to be transformed into a proper network of routes covering the whole city and adjoining areas, and when a *Charte du vélo* was drawn up setting out the principles of the municipality’s support for urban cycle transport. Strasbourg’s efforts to encourage healthy, pollution- and congestion-free commuting and leisure transport have been supported by the adjoining Bas-Rhin *département* (which has a strong system of rural cycle paths), and in 2001 studies of commuting patterns in the city centre revealed that between 2,000 and 5,000 bikes passed through key points such as the Pont d’Austerlitz or the Quai Pasteur (Hauser, 2001). In addition to these achievements, in the early-to-mid-2000s Strasbourg’s commitment to cycling gained new vigour, supported by the new legisatory framework of the LAURE and the SRU and redynamized by the new mayoral team of Fabienne Keller and Robert Grossman, who gained control of the city in 2004. Whereas in 1978 there had been only 53 km of cycle paths in the city, rising to 150 km in 1993, by 2006 Strasbourg’s extended metropolitan area (the *Communauté urbaine de Strasbourg*) boasted 483 km of cycle paths, over 3,000 short-term cycle park-points in city-centre streets, and almost 1,000 secure cycle-storage areas in car parks and transport nodes. Strasbourg’s slogan is ‘*La ville de France qui a un vélo d’avance*’ – municipal spending on cycle-related issues amounts to about €10 per inhabitant per year – but the key word in the town’s policy is ‘ecomobility’ or the promotion of all means of transport that reduce reliance on the car. In this scheme, cycling has a major role to play, especially in terms of the interrelation between cycle trips and public transport: a significant detail of Strasbourg’s innovations has been the facilitating of links between cycles and trams and trains. In some ways, Strasbourg’s strategy has been a
‘classic’ case of encouraging eco-friendly transport through infrastructures – cycle paths and parking areas – with uptake of these facilities being supported by strong political/municipal communication, provision of hire bikes and some reviews of legislation. In Lyon, which developed its substantive policy towards cycling considerably later than Strasbourg, the approach has been somewhat different, blending attention to the infrastructural needs of cyclists with an innovative partnership with private industry to provide hireable cycles. Strasbourg has always provided bikes for hire at strategic city-centre points (1,500 pickup points and 20,000 bikes planned for end-2007), but Lyon (and also Paris) were prominent in the mid-2000s for their collaboration with the advertising hoarding firm JC Decaux (Jérôme, 2007; Girard, 2007). The facilities for cyclists in central Lyon were much criticized in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and Lyon was indeed seen as being much too dependent on car transport, despite the creation of tramways in the late 1990s (Lamy, 2002). In March 2001 the Verts party in Lyon produced a report lobbying for greater support for cycling and as thinking in the town hall gradually turned towards the opportunity of reducing Lyon’s lag in environmentally friendly transport, a Plan Vélo was eventually set out in 2003, forming part of the conurbation’s overall Plan modes doux (or means of sustainable transport) (Massin, 2005). Part of the Plan Vélo included the construction of 200 extra kilometres of cycle paths, and also the implementation of a system of bikes for hire, providing citizens with ready-to-hand cycles for short-distance travel within the city. The Vélo’V facility was subsequently launched in May 2005, as a partnership between the Greater Lyon council and JC Decaux. In exchange for the contract to provide Lyon’s needs in ‘street furniture’ over a period of years, JC Decaux promised to run a network of bikes from a large number of pick-up and drop-off points, providing and maintaining the bikes free-of-charge to Greater Lyon, and allowing free use of the facility for users needing bikes for less than half an hour (or an hour for users holding a Lyon public transport travel-pass). For longer periods of hire, costs were set at low sums – €1 or €2 per hour – so the network was actually not particularly profitable for JC Decaux, in the face of what transpired to be quite heavy maintenance costs, being financed mainly from the advertising returns from the company’s hoardings in Lyon. With over 2,000 bikes available from 250 stations located approximately every 300 metres in Lyon and Villeurbanne, the network was sufficiently dense and reliable – despite various complaints about the quality of the cycles, broken machines, the need to register to use the facility or use a bank card, and the increase in
advertising surfaces – to be deemed successful after a year of operation (Landrin, 2006). Lyon’s experience of Vélo’V encouraged Brussels to introduce the facility in 2006 under the name Cyclocity, and Paris implemented a similar system in 2007. The public–private partnership between municipal councils and JC Decaux is seen as a convenient mechanism by which city authorities can encourage citizens to use sustainable transport whose provision and upkeep is guaranteed by external franchising, thus allowing the public sector to concentrate more on infrastructure. For some cycling/transport pressure groups, however, JC Decaux’s increased involvement in public space through the advertising allowed on the cycle stations, and even the minor costs entailed by users, represent an unacceptable compromise from what should, in their view, be a totally free, public-sector managed scheme.

Vélib’ in Paris
The Vélib’ system of urban cycles was introduced to central Paris in July 2007. Following the example of Lyon, rather than Rennes – which in June 1998 had partnered the Clear Channel street furniture/outdoor advertising company in the provision of the Vélo à la carte facility – Paris chose JC Decaux to manage its bicycle-sharing project. Initially proposed by the media-savvy socialist mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, who was known for his high-profile but sometimes kitschy initiatives to effect change in Parisian society and politics, the project was initially viewed with some scepticism, but it has in fact proved to be remarkably successful, albeit with various problems and criticism from some quarters. Initially set up with 750 hire-stations and 7,500 bicycles, the scheme has expanded to provide more than 20,000 bicycles and 1,200 stations. In terms of its finances and the numbers of bicycles hired, Vélib’ was sufficiently successful during its first year of operation for the Paris council authorities to decide that the scheme should be extended outside central Paris into the surrounding suburbs of the petite couronne. Legal wrangling between Clear Channel and the Ville de Paris over the automatic extension of JC Decaux’s contract for central Paris to cover the petite couronne delayed the implementation of the suburban scheme until 2009.

Although 26 million hires were made in the first year of operation and 200,000 subscribers signed up, the number of subscribers has since gradually declined to approximately 180,000 in July 2011, as users have seemed to prefer a more ‘opportunistic’ use of the system. The fall in subscriptions is perhaps influenced by the practical rather than legal problems suffered by Vélib’, some of which are due to the topography
of Paris, some caused by social issues outside the control of JC Decaux and the city council, and some resulting from operational mistakes. The hilly nature of some areas of Paris has resulted in uneven patterns of return to the docking stations, with elevated areas such as Montmartre suffering scarcity of bicycles; added to the general problems of the computerized system that ensures satisfactory matching of supply and demand, this has frequently discouraged potential users. The system has also suffered from substantial vandalism and theft as well as from broken-down bicycles: the third generation of improved bicycles is currently in use, and an astonishing 80 per cent of the nearly 21,000 machines have suffered from theft or vandalism (at one stage in late 2009 only some 14,000 machines were fit for hire). In addition to the sometimes uneven availability of Vélib’s, the hire-stations could not be located at railway stations until late 2010, initially because advertising on SNCF property was contracted to Clear Channel rather than JC Decaux (until 2008) and subsequently because JC Decaux and the SNCF could not agree on terms.

In addition to these practical difficulties, the Vélib’ scheme has suffered criticisms that might be deemed more ‘ideological’, emanating principally from the essentially left-wing cycling organizations and also from trades unions concerned at the apparent exploitation of Vélib’ workers by JC Decaux. Vélorution, for instance, has been dismissive of what it sees as an unholy alliance between the socialist mayor of Paris and the commercial advertising empire in charge of what should rather be – in their view – a collectively provided, publicly run and free-to-the-user service. For Vélorution and other ‘militant’ cycling associations, JC Decaux slogans such as ‘Le Vélib’ est à vous – protégez-le!’ disingenuously distract Parisians from the fact that the Vélib’ system is merely the price/bribe paid by JC Decaux for its previous long-term contract for street-furniture advertising to be renewed in 2007, as well as being a cash cow for the city council, rather than the philanthropic and personally liberating revolution in personal urban mobility that it should be.7 Attacking the perceived ‘neo-liberal’ take-over of individual utility cycling from a more traditional direction is the trades union and communist denunciation of the low wages, long hours and generally poor working conditions suffered by many Vélib’ employees (Laske and Petitdemange, 2008; Chaignon, 2008). And conversely, the right-wing newspaper Le Figaro has been consistently critical of the Vélib’ scheme, denouncing its costs, inefficiencies and technical problems in order to undermine the socialist-led Paris council (Tabet, 2008).

In May 2010 a study conducted for the Commissariat général du
développement durable concluded that, in socioeconomic terms, France’s self-service bicycle facilities were essentially breaking even, but that it was mostly in the larger cities such as Lyon and Paris, where the facilities could be used most intensively, that real benefits could be gained (Cabanne, 2010). It is interesting to note that it is not state-backed national projects but rather ‘local’ big-city systems of self-service cycling that have succeeded, suggesting that for the promotion of cycling, as for other initiatives such as the encouragemant of football and football clubs, it has proved to be governance at city/region level which is currently most responsive in France.

New forms of cycling: sport, activism, leisure/tourism

During the 2000s amateur recreational sport developed in ways that reflected the huge importance of the Tour de France to practising cyclists as well as the population as a whole: thousands of riders regularly signed up to events that mirrored the routes taken by Tour stages. The passion of more urban and everyday cyclists was also evident in the (counterculture) activism of those who swelled the ranks of organizations that lobbied in favour of better cycling infrastructures and policies in French towns and cities, and in rural France, tourism on country cycle paths and tracks.

L’Etape du Tour, L’Etape de Légende and ‘cyclosportives’

L’Etape du Tour, an annual event in which thousands of highly prepared sports-leisure cyclists cover the route of one of the Tour’s more mountainous stages, was first run in 1993. It has now become a major national sporting fixture that reflects the passionate attachment of high-performing leisure cyclists to the Tour de France and to the competitive genre of the cyclosportive. In 2007 a similar event was inaugurated – the Etape de Légende – that likewise draws on the enthusiasm of cylosportif cyclists to compete on the routes of the Tour de France. Participation in both of these races is international (although strongly dominated by French riders) and represents a lucrative commercial exploitation of the Tour’s enduring popularity and sporting heritage. The Etape du Tour was originally run and sponsored by the monthly cycling magazine Vélo-Magazine (part of the Amaury media group), which organized the event between 1993 and 2007 in conjunction with the Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO), which owns and runs the Tour de France itself. Since 2007 the Etape du Tour has been run in partnership between ASO
and the Mondovélo cycle-sales subsidiary of the consortium Groupe Sport 2000.8

The Etape du Tour (EdT) and more recently the Etape de Légende (EdL) arguably form a special category of cyclosportives, both because of their predominantly ‘national’ and international nature (in contrast with the majority of cyclosportives, whose identity is generally linked to famous regional riders or specific areas of rural France, and which are run by local cycling clubs) and because of their linkage to the Tour, as a national sporting event. Because of their scale (several thousands of riders), and the desire on the part of their organizers to commercialize their running to the highest degree, they represent a significant financial stake. Not only do the two races bring thousands of competitors and their families to stay in the area of the races, thus considerably stimulating tourism, but various sporting holiday/tour operators work in partnership with the race organizers to provide packaged travel and accommodation for foreign participants. Numerous industrial interests sponsor these races in order to gain publicity; for example, the Taiwanese company Giant was ‘official partner’ of the EdT in 2005–07 (Le Cycle, 2006).9 The events represent a highly successful commercial exploitation of the ‘back-catalogue’ of the Tour de France, managed through the same organizational techniques (negotiation with villes-étapes and local police, for example). The first Etape de Légende was run on 23 September 2007 along the route of Stage 8 from the 1967 Tour de France: Strasbourg–Ballon d’Alsace. The Ballon d’Alsace was the first mountain stage included in the Tour, in 1905, and so the Etape de Légende was contributing doubly to the construction of the ‘memory’ of the Tour as a national sporting event. Not only was the race an opportunity to review the early years of the invention of the Tour, but it also evoked the glory days for French cycling of 1967, when the stage was won by French champion Lucien Aimar.

The intrinsic rationale of both the EdT and the EdL is that participants follow the same route as the professional riders of the true Tour de France. For the EdT, the route is taken by the amateurs only a week or so before the Tour peloton, whereas the ‘heritage’ dimension of the EdL means that the relationship between contemporary competition and ‘legend’ is more historical. Both the EdT and the EdL are competitive, highly so for the top riders especially, but to a lesser degree for almost all the participants. More so than the majority of French cyclosportives, these two most prestigious races in the ‘mass’ amateur calendar provide an opportunity for aspiring riders to make their name (hoping for interest from a professional team) or for retired/returning professionals to
demonstrate their prowess, as well as for others to simply enjoy the moment. The sociologist Paul Yonnet has proposed an interpretation of sporting activity that suggests that all sporting competitions function through an interaction of ‘uncertainty’ (competitors have equal or unequal chances of winning) and ‘identification’ (a sense of shared identity or difference), and has applied this approach to the analysis of mass sporting events such as the marathons of New York and Paris (Yonnet, 1998). Yonnet’s conclusions can help in understanding the function and meaning of cyclosportives such as the EdT and the EdL: for Yonnet, the popular international marathons are examples of mass sport in which individual non-elite competitors assert their diversity within the context of a sociability based on difference and inequality. In these marathons, Yonnet highlights the inequalities of gender (men and women running together), of ability (runners of all fitness and experience compete en masse), and even of appearance (different kit, even disguises and fancy dress), and underlines how ‘obsessive’ measurement of time, pulse, distance and other aspects of the race serve to underline ‘difference’ through hierarchies of performance. The EdT and the EdL are unarguably ‘mass’ events (some 8,500 competitors of all nationalities take part annually in the EdT), and there is undeniably a ‘festive’ dimension to their running (groups of friends ride together, sponsorship of individuals and groups raises money for charities, social events before and after the races create convivial links between participants of all nationalities), but in contrast to the international marathons of Paris, New York or London, for example, taking part is arguably more predicated on a desire to emulate the performance of professional champions. Although supported by the strong general interest in competitive amateur riding in France, these cyclosportives remain strongly anchored to the myths of the Tour de France and the commercial sports empire of ASO.

Another significant but more ‘cultural’ dimension of the EdT and EdL, and indeed of many cyclosportive events, which warrants further discussion is their nature as ‘heritage’. By allowing everyday cyclists to compete on the legendary routes of the Tour, the EdT and the EdL create linkages between contemporary mass practice and current elite competition, as well as serving to celebrate and commemorate the heritage of professional cycling. When in 2004 cyclosportive events were officially recognized by the Sports Ministry and Interior Ministry as an officially accepted sporting discipline, it became clear to the FFC that the variety of competitive cycling practices warranted the creation of an umbrella body to liaise between the range of cycling federations. The Commission permanente interfédérations du cyclisme was created to manage the

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policy of Cyclisme pour tous (or at least ‘competitive’ cycling, for all). Part of the brief of the Cyclisme pour tous campaign has been, since the mid-2000s, to identify what are termed ‘itinéraires de référence du cyclisme français’ and to facilitate the use of these routes by cycle-sport riders and leisure/tourist cyclists alike. Whereas many cyclosportives run by cycling clubs label their races with reference to famous local professional cyclists (e.g. ‘la Raymond Poulidor’, ‘la Bernard Thévenet’ or ‘la Laurent Fignon’) or to the geographical area of the route (e.g. la Cyclo du Morbihan or la Ronde Châtelleraudaise) and thus link indirectly to an intangible cultural heritage, the listing of classic routes of the Tour and other races such as Paris–Roubaix as certified elements of France’s sporting identity reflects even more strongly the closeness of links between cycle sport and everyday cycling in France.

Vélorution and ‘critical mass’: counterculture urban cycling
The sociologist of cycling and technology Paul Rosen has suggested that some appropriations of cycling can be considered essentially as ‘countercultures’, adopting and adapting cycling and its technology in ways that subvert established patterns and meanings (Rosen, 2002). In France, the Vélorution movement seems interestingly to fit into such a framework of analysis. Vélorution is a term created from the conflation of vélo and révolution, and is in many ways the French equivalent of the American Critical Mass movement (born in the early 1990s), which lobbies in favour of the use of non-polluting, ecologically sustainable forms of personal transport. It has developed into a loosely organized grouping of individuals and associations whose major aim has become protest against contemporary Western capitalist society’s reliance on the car, and government support for the automobile industry (Carlsson, 2003). Although the ‘grouping’ includes rollerbladers, skateboarders and other practitioners of environmentally acceptable forms of urban transport, the principal alternative to the car suggested by Vélorution is naturally the bicycle, and the pressure group contributed much in the late 1990s and 2000s to the developing debate in France over urban congestion, transport pollution and road safety, encouraging city councils to consider the introduction of cycle paths and cycle-hire schemes. Behind the grouping’s relatively weak national coordination there lies a score or so of local associations of militant cyclists in most of France’s major towns and cities, which organize frequent and regular events to publicize the cause of the bicycle and to highlight the dangers of over-reliance on motorized individual transport. Although the term véloration was hijacked both by the mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, as early as 2002
(Webster, 2002) to describe the municipal bike-hire scheme introduced in 2007, and by cycle retailers, the pressure group remains essentially independent, ‘alternative’, left-wing in inspiration and critical of the conventional free-market organization of transport and work. The local branches of the grouping (in Angers, Cherbourg, Montpellier or wherever) often claim that they are politically and religiously neutral and independent of trades union influence, but the rejection of the car and of the industrial and social complex that a culture dependent on the automobile reflects remains nevertheless essentially ‘revolutionary’ in inspiration.

As with most French environmentalism, Vélorution draws much, historically, from the ecological concerns of the 1970s, when the anarchistic, libertarian and questioning spirit of May ’68 merged with concerns over nuclear power (the demonstrations at the Plogoff power station in Brittany, for example), the armed forces’ damage to the Larzac plateau or more widely the perceived drawbacks to growth, industrialization, urbanization and reliance on individual transport in the form of the car. The candidature of the ecologist René Dumont for the presidential elections of 1974 and the notable success of ecology candidates in the 1977 municipal elections focused attention on cycling as one possible answer to the problems identified by the rising environmental movement in France, and in 1977 the Amis de la Terre published a Manifeste Vélorutionnaire as part of a critique of transport policy (Amis de la Terre, 1977). The actual origin of the term vélorution is uncertain, but a strong claim is that of Aguigui Mouna (otherwise known as André Dupont) who undertook his non-campaign as a non-candidate in the 1974 presidential election on his bicycle, proclaiming to all and sundry: ‘Je suis un cyclodidacte; la vélorution est en marche!’

The concept of masse critique gained currency in France during the late 1990s and especially during the 2000s, giving rise to a range of campaigning bodies and movements. Critical Mass in the US describes itself as ‘an idea and an event, not an organization’ and the idea/event both in the US and in France is loth to consider itself as something that has leaders or organizers of any kind, the idea of a critical mass of cyclists being derived initially from the chance coming-together of numbers of cyclists at crossroads in China, thus allowing them to actually move through the traffic. This reluctance to be formally organized is reminiscent of French left-wing protest movements and parties of the 1970s and 1980s and the personnel and general tenor of Vélorution is substantially left-leaning, anti-capitalist, ecological and radical/anarchist. There is a significant – but slightly disorganized – web-presence of sites (some
personal, some belonging to ‘associations’) that provide a basic exchange of information, but the movement remains spontaneous and eclectic. Because there is no central, national coordination of the French Vélorution and because, in principle, the movement declines to set fixed objectives or themes beyond the general promotion of cycling, the local groupings in the provinces tend to prosecute a variety of agendas, all centred around the rights of cyclists to equal use of the roads and the contribution of cycling to a cleaner fairer world, but often including issues of wider scope.

In practice, the local vélorutions tend to organize monthly or weekly cycle rides in their respective towns and cities, monopolizing the roads for short periods, distributing leaflets and haranguing passing cars and pedestrians. Beyond the more local and practical aspects of their campaigning, French Vélorution movements have shared a variety of left-wing, anti-capitalist, alternative globalization (altermondialisme) objectives. Some common themes that have mobilized French vélorutions have been the Paris–Dakar car and motorcycle rally; anti-advertising campaigns; décroissance (or degrowth/sustainability); nuclear power; and the development of the Code de la rue. The left-wing perspectives of the movement are also reflected by the link of a number of the local branches with the organization Chiche!

Analysis of the history of the various Vélorution ‘chapels’ that have appeared across France suggests that it was essentially in 2004 and 2005 that the movement became a significant force. The Vélo-cité movement in Montpellier was active from 1999 onwards, and an event was organized in Paris in 2003, but in 2004 critical-mass style meetings of cyclists occurred in Grenoble (April), Angers (September) and Toulouse (October) and in 2005 the activism reached Rennes (April), Saint-Etienne (July), Tours (November), Nancy and Avignon (December). Bordeaux (January 2006) and Lyon (April 2006) were major cities whose cyclists reacted slightly more slowly to the growing activist interest in ‘reclaiming’ urban roads from motorized transport and town councils’ overly car-centred urban development plans. The movement is continuing to develop: in early July 2011 the three-day international Vélorution universelle occurred in Paris and Vélorution is in many ways the central node of a growing network of militant cycling groups. The press release for Vélorution universelle 2011 summarized the ethos and objectives of the event, and in an explicit swipe at the Tour de France (starting that weekend) explained in answer to the ironic question: ‘Alors, c’est comme le Tour de France?’ that ‘L’esprit de compétition, les intérêts commerciaux ou l’acceptation passive des dopants sont des valeurs que la
Vélorution Universelle ne véhiculera pas’. Examples given of how Vélorution (universelle) was the antithesis of the Tour de France were its participant organizations: L’Alter-Tour (a supportive, sharing journey of cyclists travelling in solidarity with each other),\textsuperscript{14} the CycloTrans-Européenne (riding to develop the transnational network of voies vertes cyclables),\textsuperscript{15} and the Heureux-cyclage network of bicycle workshops providing free technical assistance to all and sundry.\textsuperscript{16}

**Véloroutes and voies vertes: rural leisure cycling**

In contrast to the new forms of competitive cycling that have arisen in the 2000s either around the Tour de France in the form of L’Etape du Tour, or around the cycling community and manufacturers in the form of various cyclosportives, there has also been a resurgence of interest in leisure cycling and touring, linked to new concerns about environmental issues. Unlike the major concerns of ‘militant’ cycling represented by Vélorution, the major focus of leisure cycling is essentially rural.

In 1998 the French government adopted – as part of the wider planning on bicycle use – a scheme to develop the infrastructures and use of what were termed véloroutes et voies vertes (often conflated to VVV). Although the two terms are almost always used together, they designate slightly different ways of favouring cycle use: véloroutes are best understood as cyclable routes in either urban or rural contexts that are specially signed and designed to protect cycle users from cars, whereas voies vertes are more specifically reserved for non-motorized traffic such as cycles, pedestrians or even horse-riders or rollerbladers. Whereas véloroutes are generally more akin to the kinds of cycle paths linked to road systems developed successfully in Strasbourg and other bike-friendly cities, voies vertes are usually constructed on old railway lines, alongside rivers, canals or lakes, in forests or next to rural roads. The VVV plan fixed the objective of creating a national network of 7,000–8,000 kilometres of cycle routes, with cyclable routes linking urban and rural areas, and at least one voie verte in each region encouraging healthy leisure activities for local inhabitants and incoming tourist revenues. Interestingly, the initial idea to foster VVV came not from government but from the Fédération française de cyclotourisme and the pressure group the Association française de développement des véloroutes et voies vertes (AF3V), whose original lobbying convinced the then Green environment minister Dominique Voynet.

In May 2001 a Mission nationale VVV was set up, associating a large number of government departments that had an interest in the ways in which VVV could promote cycling. The departments concerned were
environment and sustainable development, transport and infrastructures, tourism, youth and sports, and agriculture, reflecting the way in which cycling was seen as an activity that could both benefit from the new enthusiasm for environmental sensitivity and simultaneously promote sustainability and tourism, health and other government priorities. Significantly, the presidency of the Mission nationale was entrusted to the Ministère de l’écologie et du développement durable, in recognition of the government’s ambition to promote cycling both to combat global warming and to encourage tourism and health. The voies vertes in particular have become quite successful. By January 2007 France could boast over 150 VVV, with a total distance of 6,155 km, and official studies were confident that in many departments and regions VVV were rapidly becoming financially self-sustaining innovative tourist attractions (ODIT, 2007). Some of the more eye-catching VVV were the Eurovéloroute des fleuves which links Nantes to Budapest, and the Loire à vélo, which will eventually take riders from Cuffy, near Sancerre (Cher) to Saint-Brévin-les-Pins (Loire-Atlantique). In May 2010, following discussions during 2009/10 between various stakeholders, a revised Schéma national des véloroutes and voies vertes (SN3V) was ratified, as part of an overall long-term plan to create 20,000 km of cycling routes.

The Armstrong Affair: an American ‘Other’ and cycling traditions

From 1999 until 2005 the Tour de France was dominated by the American rider Lance Armstrong. He announced his retirement after winning his seventh consecutive Tour in 2005, but, controversially, returned to participate unsuccessfully in the Tours of 2009 and 2010. Attention was acutely focused on the Texan both as the dominant cycling athlete of his generation and the hoped-for ‘clean’ successor to what were now seen as the tainted heroes of the ‘EPO years’, and as a professional rider whose example could help cycle sport adopt a new model of racing. It might seem strange that a study of the cultural significance of cycling in France should devote space to a consideration of one foreign rider among many others, but even more than was the case with foreign champions before him such as Indurain, Merckx, Coppi and Bartali, the relationship between Armstrong and the Tour has defined the culture of sport in France in the contemporary period. The reaction of the French press, cycling establishment and Tour de France to the previous American multi-yellow jersey, Greg Le Mond (winner in 1986, 1989 and 1990) was far less extreme and antagonistic, despite frequent frictions. The fame –
and notoriety – of Lance Armstrong was based on three aspects of his sporting career: his recovery from a severe form of testicular cancer in the mid- and late 1990s; his seven successive wins in the Tour de France between 1999 and 2005; and his constant denial of accusations of doping. Armstrong’s controversial reign at the Tour and thus at the summit of French, European and world cycling came during a period when the sport was trying to adjust to the trauma and aftershocks of the 1998 ‘Tour of Shame’, and negotiating a modernization of the organization of the professional sport in the form of the UCI-imposed Pro-Tour competition.

Hopes that Armstrong would bring cycle sport into a new era were not fulfilled, since persistent suspicions of doping surrounded him throughout his career, despite the lack of any scientifically incontrovertible or legally unquestionable proof. And as the unchallenged ‘boss’ of the peloton, his approach of turning up to the Tour every year, winning – generally amid bad temper and tension – and then departing again did little to help facilitate changes in the sport. Armstrong’s significance as a hero and anti-hero of French cycling can be considered in terms of French relations with the US, his approach to the profession of cycle racing and his alleged doping. These issues frequently intersect and provide a useful framework for analysis.

**Armstrong and France; France and Armstrong**

The precise nature of the French view of Lance Armstrong is difficult to define, partly because of the variety of groups who hold opinions, mediated through a varying number of filters and at greater or lesser proximity to the subject. Arguably, Armstrong’s ‘star persona’ is more complex than that of other Tour de France champions before him: not only is he the ultimate campionissimo as a seven-times winner, but he is American, a survivor of cancer, a medical charity campaigner known worldwide, a friend of American President George W. Bush, and the partner for some time of the music industry celebrity Sheryl Crow. The story of Greg Le Mond, whose own successful relaunch of his career after a gunshot wound from a hunting accident seemed in the late 1980s to be an improbable fairy-tale, pales in comparison. In summary, however, France seems to entertain a complicated love–hate relationship with Armstrong. The general public is largely admiring, if piqued by the absence of French or European winners; the cycling community admires the achievements of Armstrong as a rider whether drug-enhanced or not, but worries about the possibility that his success is indeed based on medical assistance, and finds that the manner of his success sometimes lacks in style and tact; the
French cycling establishment (in the form of the Amaury Sport Organisation, the Tour de France and *L’Equipe*) is torn between gratitude for the international marketing boost to their product and a nagging suspicion that Armstrong’s dominance is essentially based on a lack of respect for the traditions of cycling as well as on doping. The French Sports Ministry, cycling federation and the UCI have looked on in some helplessness during the Armstrong era as repeated doubts have been raised about the ‘cleanness’ of its champion and claims have been made about the continued existence of a ‘two-speed’ peloton of professional riders.

France has long entertained a love–hate relationship with the US, but in terms of sport in general and cycle sport in particular opportunities have been rare for interaction. It was only during the 1980s that the Tour started properly to internationalize its recruitment of teams and riders, following the successful Europeanization of the post-war races and the variety of European riders involved since the earliest years of the competition. As John Marks has suggested (Marks, 2003), the opening of the Tour in the 1980s and 1990s to riders from the US has been less successful than its early Europeanization or the later involvement of riders from Paraguay, Columbia and even Australia. Le Mond’s approach to riding in the late 1980s offered an early insight into differences of interpretation of the ‘job’ of pro-racing between American and European racers, as he was accused of riding firstly to make money, and only secondly to win. During Le Mond’s period of activity in the Tour, the acute contemporary French concerns about the place of France in a globalized and Americanized world had not yet fully developed, so Armstrong’s difficulties in achieving acceptance in the late 2000s, after two Gulf wars had estranged French public opinion, seem hardly surprising. Armstrong has struggled both as a representation of an America resented by the French public and as an American rider who appears to the French to concentrate too much on money and on an overly business-like approach to sport.

**Armstrong’s approach to the ‘business’ of cycle sport**

Marks has suggested that one of Le Mond’s handicaps in gaining acceptance was that his attitude to racing was born of middle-class social origins that divorced him from the traditional working-class model of the Tour champion: in essence, to the French, he was a bourgeois American, cherry-picking races to win and aiming to earn as much money as possible, but without the legitimacy that would have come from a background of hardship (Marks, 2003: 221–22). From this perspective, Armstrong, as someone raised by a single mother in the small town of
Plano, Texas, and keenly aware of the importance of prize money and of the social advancement possible through elite sport, should have better fitted the expectations of European pro-cycling teams and of the Tour organizers. But both before and after his cancer, Armstrong’s attitude disappointed managers, organizers and commentators. Before 1996 Armstrong seemed talented but lacking in application, but on his return from illness he began to show precisely the single-mindedly business-like approach to riding and winning that had jeopardized Le Mond’s acceptance by the profession ten years earlier. Armstrong’s view was that only the Tour mattered – in itself surely a compliment to ASO – and that riding other races was either foolhardy and a waste of time (one-day classics) or merely a way of training and gauging form (minor stage-races). Champions such as Hinault had shared the view that races such as Paris–Roubaix were dangerous and perhaps a distraction from the more serious matter of the major tours, but Hinault rode – and won – Paris–Roubaix out of respect for tradition and pride in his place in it, and participated in a much wider range of races than Armstrong. Armstrong’s focus almost uniquely on the Tour de France was seen as a slight against the traditions of European pro-cycling, in which the season-long calendar of events amounts to the history of the sport and winners enter the pantheon of past victors. The US Postal team’s obsessive preparation for the Tour while other squads were competing in a wider selection of races seemed somehow disloyal, but Armstrong and his directeur sportif Johan Bruyneel rejected criticisms by saying that the Tour was difficult enough and important enough to warrant a special approach. For Armstrong, the Tour was his annual objective, both financially and as the pinnacle of cycle sport, and training for it to the exclusion of other races was simply a professional choice based on financial as well as sporting criteria.

Another criticism of Armstrong’s interpretation of racing was that his manner of winning was too calculated and that he used his team and his own dominance of the peloton in ways that diminished the entertainment of the race and the profession of cycle sport. Armstrong’s strengths as a time-triallist and as a climber allowed him to challenge for the Tour by performing strongly in the individual and team time trials, and establishing a lead that could then be protected during the rest of the race by a powerful and strictly organized team and, if necessary, by a good personal performance in the Alps or Pyrenees. Such tactics, which led annually to a Tour controlled by US Postal/Discovery, were viewed as boring and – to use the traditional French term – lacking in panache. In defence of Armstrong, who was never shy of pointing out that the
point of riding the race was to win rather than to entertain, it seemed that the Tour organizers repeatedly designed itineraries that suited US Postal strengths. Other champions in the past had shared the opinion that winning with unnecessary effort was senseless: Anquetil had famously declared that victory by more than a second was a waste of energy. But despite his dominance and his technocratic theories about racing, Anquetil was favoured by the peloton and by the cycling press and public, perhaps because his personal duels with Poulidor and other rivals gave him a human dimension and also because of his fondness for high living off the bike. Armstrong, in contrast, had no rivals to help foster a human image of a champion challenged by adversity, and his approach to preparation – based on an obsession with training, diet, weight, power and aerodynamics – was the opposite of the champagne lifestyle espoused by Anquetil.

Armstrong and the doping issue
Speaking on the winning podium for the 2005 Tour on the Champs-Elysées, Armstrong – movingly, or cynically, depending on one’s perspective – hit out at the critics who had consistently denigrated his victories and the integrity of professional cycling, and presented himself, as ever, as an ordinary American who works hard for what he wins and earns:

I’m sorry you don’t believe in miracles. But this is a hell of a race. You should believe in these athletes, and you should believe in these people. I’ll be a fan of the Tour de France for as long as I live. And there are no secrets – this is a hard sporting event and hard work wins it [...] An individual can never dictate their legacy. That’s not my job. It doesn’t matter. Whatever the people decide it is, it is. I’m a kid from Texas that learned how to ride a bike fast and overcame a life-threatening illness to come back and win the hardest sporting event in the world seven times. So I’ll let the other people write on the tombstone. (Wyatt, 2005)

Armstrong’s position on the doping issue is simple: he has consistently denied that he has ever taken performance-enhancing drugs. He has always backed up these denials by pointing out that, despite having been one of the most regularly and frequently tested athletes in the world, he has never failed a drug test. To those who suggest that he must be ‘on something’ to ride the way he has, he has retorted that he is ‘on his bike’, training 365 days a year, when other riders are taking breaks. Armstrong’s other perspective on the doping issue is that he has been consistently the subject of a vendetta by the French press, keen to prove at any costs that he is not a clean rider. Throughout his racing career, Armstrong was certainly treated with suspicion by the French and
European media, who frequently analysed his performances in terms that suggested they were beyond the unaided reach of any rider, however physiologically talented. Apart from such criticisms – which interestingly continue the theme of the cycle racer as a human machine producing a quantifiable output – Armstrong’s victories were consistently presented in newspapers such as Le Monde, Libération and L’Équipe in tones of some reservation, typified by the commentaries of Jean-Louis Le Touzet in Libération (Le Touzet, 2004; 2005; 2008; 2009a; 2009b). Armstrong presents this persecution as ‘sour grapes’ from people who resent his domination – as an American and as a racer who approaches his job differently – of the Tour de France, but the underlying motivation for this press criticism has been frustration that the official bodies responsible for eradicating doping have been unable to unmask someone who ‘must be’ the prime suspect, despite his negative tests.

The role of L’Équipe here has been complex. As part of the ASO group that owns the Société du Tour de France, it has been torn between its roles as guardian of the Tour’s history, keeper of the faith in the idea of a new cleaner Tour post-1998, and publicist of the spectacle of the contemporary Tour. Such schizophrenia doubtless explains the ‘archness’ of much of L’Équipe’s coverage of the Armstrong years, as well as the fact that perhaps the most damning, but still circumstantial, evidence for Armstrong’s use of doping was broken by the paper only some months after his seventh victory and initial retirement in 2005. In 2011 Armstrong became the subject of a federal Grand Jury investigation in Los Angeles into claims by former team-mates that had taken performance-enhancing products. Any conclusion to ‘the did he/didn’t he?’ saga would inevitable trigger a review of how he is thought of in France, and of the Tour itself, but in early 2012 all investigations were dropped. However, yet another twist in the story came in June 2012, as the American Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) launched its own pursuit of Armstrong, despite the shelving of the previous federal investigation. Armstrong’s defence of his record remains as robust as ever, at the time of writing, leaving the ‘Armstrong Myth’ and, for France, the ‘Armstrong Affair’ intact in all its confusion and lack of closure.

Cycling in France: sport, leisure and utility

In 2006 the Crédit Lyonnais bank – one of the major sponsors of the Tour de France since the early 1970s, partly because the bank’s colour-identity is bright yellow, matching the leader’s jersey – commissioned a
substantial opinion poll on cycling in France. The results of this study were published in May 2006 under the title *Les Français et le vélo* (CSA/LCL, 2006). In 2009, interested to gauge better the nature of what was perceived as rising interest in cycling of all kinds during the early and mid-2000s, the French state, in the form of the Direction générale de la compétitivité de l’industrie et des services (DGCIS) and the ATOUT body responsible for promoting French tourism, commissioned a 500-page report on the economic significance of cycling. This was published later in 2009 under the title *L’Economie du vélo en France* (Atout France, 2009). A range of other studies of the development of cycling in France were also undertaken in the 2000s, by industry bodies such as the Conseil national des professions du cycle and by the rising number of pro-cycling organizations that were developing to promote different forms of the everyday practice of cycling.  

Some of the themes and conclusions of these and other studies have been touched on in previous chapters or in other sections of this current chapter. But it is useful to consider the state of cycling in France as it is portrayed statistically and factually in these snapshots of the activity and sector in the 2000s.

*The cycle industry: stronger performance*

As has been discussed in the previous chapter in consideration of the rise of new distributors, retailers and manufacturers of cycles such as Décathlon which filled the space left by declining traditional giants of the bicycle industry typified by Manufrance or Peugeot, the market for large-scale bicycle sales in the 1980s and 1990s was difficult, and dominated by the vogue for mountain bikes. In terms of the specialist market for racing bicycles, high-tech frame or component manufacturers such as Look, Time, Lapierre or Mavic were able to capitalize on their market niches, as did a small number of remaining ‘traditional’ frame/bicycle builders, such as Cycles Follis. In the 2000s, however, the overall picture of a market characterized by demand for a dominant and generally relatively inexpensive product, the mass-produced MTB, with pockets of resistance in high value-added high-tech items for an elite of consumers, has changed substantially. As cycling has become ever more popular under the influence of increased interest in environmental sustainability and healthy living in general and the publicity for bicycle use generated by bike-hire schemes in various towns and cities, the cycle industry has become the focus of attention for its stronger – but still fragile – performances.

The ATOUT/DGCIS study underlines how difficult it is to collate
overall statistics on the economy of cycling in France, since the sole item that appears in isolation in national accounting is the production of bicycles.\textsuperscript{21} Much information on the commercial details of cycling comes therefore from the trade body created as early as the 1890s to federate the then rapidly developing industry, and now known as the Conseil national des professions du cycle (CNPC) and its statistical arm, the Observatoire du cycle.\textsuperscript{22} While noting the rise in sales of bicycles that occurred in the early 1990s (essentially MTBs), the CNPC has identified another surge in sales during the period 2000–05, when unit sales varied between 2.5 and 3.5 million per annum. Overall, France has 5.7 bicycles per 100 inhabitants, a level of ownership only beaten by Japan, Holland and the US. This high level of bicycle purchasing is, however, paradoxical, given that in France – as in Britain – the average distance cycled annually per citizen is low in European terms, and the proportion of people undertaking regular cycling activity is equally comparatively low. Whereas in Holland and Denmark the average distance cycled per annum is 1,000 km and 50 per cent of the population cycle every week, in France and the UK only 10–15 per cent of citizens cycle on a weekly basis, and they cover only 80 km each year. France and Britain are thus low users of bicycles compared with the European leaders Holland and Denmark, and with strong performers such as Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Austria and Sweden. Only Spain, Portugal, southern Italy and Greece, where cycling is predominantly concerned more with strong interest in following cycle sport than in utility or leisure riding as practice, perform worse than France and the UK (Atout France, 2009: 137–44).

In terms of the types of bicycles bought in France, the 2000s have seen the continued domination of market share by adult MTBs, measured both in unit sales (c. 30\%) and in terms of sales value (c. 45\%). However, from the peak levels of the 1990s – more than two-thirds of unit sales in 1994, for example – MTB sales are in relative decline, although the models sold tend to be higher-range than in previous decades, as the overall market progressively develops to cover a wider range of styles of product (particularly ‘town bikes’). Whereas children’s bicycles (40\%) and racing bicycles (6\%) remain stable in their share of the market, it is town bikes that have risen in popularity in the 2000s, reaching 7 per cent of sales in 2007. Although sales of electrically assisted bicycles are still relatively low (10,000 in 2007) this niche seems to be developing significantly in the later 2000s (Atout France, 2009: 146–48).

In terms of the structure of the industry, French companies involved in bicycle and component manufacturing have been in difficulty since the 1990s, figures for 2005 suggesting that, from 128 businesses of over 20
employees in 1998, the sector has contracted to only 90 or so, and is heavily concentrated around companies such as Décathlon/Promiles, Look and Time whose success in the 1980s and 1990s has previously been discussed, as well as Lapierre, Mavic/Salomon, Cycleurope Industrie, Planetfun, Quantum International and Zéfal. Whereas the French cycle industry suffered heavy losses during the 1980s in competition with Far Eastern manufacturers, and with some notable exceptions was unable to adapt to the MTB-dominated market, during the late 1990s and 2000s, thanks to its high-tech products, high quality and high value, in balance of trade terms the French exported as much as they imported. The studies suggest that if French companies can continue to compete in the higher end of product ranges, maintain high levels of R&D and capitalize on the rising interest domestically in France in cycling of all kinds, the French cycle industry will be able to maintain its position.

The (relative) strength of the cycle industry in the 2000s is, of course, substantially reliant on the strength of cycling as a practice within France, and it is a consideration of this that now follows.

*Cycling as leisure: recreation, tourism and sport*

During the 2000s leisure cycling of all kinds developed significantly, encouraged by state and municipal campaigns in favour of alternative and sustainable transport solutions for congested cities, healthier lifestyles in general, or sustainable and environmentally friendly holiday activities. The continuing fascination exerted by the Tour de France and by professional cycling overall maintained the interest of more athletic cyclists in cycling competition at all levels and of all kinds, from the most basic of club-organized local races to local/regional cyclosportives and national events such as the *Etape du Tour*, the *Etape de Légend*, the *Ardéchoise* or the *Marmotte*.

Recent studies of the preferred leisure activities of the French indicate that cycling as recreation is practised by median age groups, in contrast to the pastimes of hunting and rambling, for example, which are often dominated by older age groups, or rugby, mainly played by the young. However, cycling is clearly the preferred physical leisure activity of older people (50–59 and above), 25 per cent of whom undertake it on a regular basis. The nature of leisure cycling as a ‘senior’ activity has meant that the state is keen to encourage take-up of riding, especially on the *voies vertes*, which are apparently more attractive to female cyclists, in order to diminish the health problems associated with ageing. Overall, it seems that leisure riding represents perhaps only 15 per cent of riding, and a third of the total annual distance covered by bikes, but that unlike
high-intensity sports cycling (10% of all cyclists) or ‘utility’ riding (33% of cyclists), ‘going for a bike ride’ as leisure is an activity undertaken essentially by all cyclists at some point, and is thus a key target for policies to improve the health of women and older people (Atout France, 2009: 84–87).

Cycling as leisure in the form of tourism, of course, has a history as long as cycling itself, as has been discussed in previous chapters considering institutions such as the Fédération française de cyclotourisme or Vélocio’s theories on the benefits and rules of long-distance tourist riding. During the 2000s, with developing projects such as the national and international voies vertes networks and municipal, departmental and regional initiatives to improve cycle-path systems, there has been much encouragement of leisure/holiday cycle touring by individuals and, increasingly, families. Tourist cycling also encompasses the use of bicycles while on holiday, rather than as the sole means/purpose of transport/enjoyment, either as a means of (local) transport or as a distraction undertaken on holiday. Despite the varying definitions of precisely what holiday/tourist cycling is, studies have demonstrated that cycling is the second most-favoured physical activity of French people on holiday (3.3%) behind rambling/walking (7.3%) but in preference to skiing (2.6%). And holidays classed as ‘cycling’ represent some 5.5 million nights away from home annually (Atout France, 2009: 97–104).

A further significant dimension of cycling as leisure that has arisen particularly during the 2000s is the development of cycling tour packages for foreign tourists (whose cycling holidays overall amount to 1.8 million nights per annum). Many of these cycling tours are run in famous wine-making regions such as Alsace, Bourgogne and the Loire area and focus on cultural heritage and gastronomy, but – linked to the success of Lance Armstrong in the Tour – a considerable number of US tour operators have introduced physically exerting holiday-cycling packages in the Alps, Pyrenees or other areas associated with the Tour de France and including spectating at a stage of the Tour itself.

Sports cycling – road or VTT – as leisure is the final major category of non-professional, non-utility bicycle use for which some summary details are useful. As is discussed in analysis elsewhere of the high-profile cyclosporives of various kinds that have grown up in the 1990s and 2000s, there is a significant demand for competitive, semi-competitive and recreational cycling that is essentially related to cycle sport. Most of this kind of cycling takes place in the context of activities organized by cycling and other sports clubs, overseen by the relevant national sporting federations such as the FFC and the FFCT, or by ‘multi-sport’ federa-
tions whose members ‘do’ cycling alongside other activities (for instance the FFTri or the Fédération sportive et gymnique du travail). It is clear that there are difficulties in defining precisely what constitutes a ‘sporting’ interpretation of cycling as a leisure practice, but looking at statistics for membership of clubs, actual involvement in competition, sales of top-of-the-range racing bikes and VTTs, and even annual distances covered and average speeds allows a general picture to be drawn up. According to these indicators, it seems that 500,000 French citizens are members of cycling clubs of various kinds, two million road cyclists can be described as having a sports approach to their cycling leisure (using a racing bike, covering more than 3,000 km per annum, and undertaking rides of more than 40 km at more than 25 kph), and that the great majority of these riders are male and aged 50–65. In terms of mountain-biking, surveys indicate that 6.6 million French citizens (25% of all cyclists in France) use a VTT for one purpose or another, but only 60,000 are members of clubs and federations, indulging in mountain-biking as a sporting form of leisure such as downhill, cross-country, free-riding, enduro and so on (Atout France, 2009: 91–96).

Cycling as utility: commuting, class and the Code de la rue
The use of cycling as a means of local, daily transport was in steady decline from the 1950s until the early 2000s. Studies compiling information from various sources have concluded that the utility use of cycling in Lyon fell by two-thirds between 1976 and 1984 and halved in Grenoble (1978–85), Lille (1976–98) and Paris (1976–91). But although data from the most recent study of national transport patterns conducted in 2007–08 is not yet available, partial studies suggest that urban cycle commuting is gathering strength in the 2000s, albeit from low base levels. Thus in Lille, surveys of household behaviour have suggested a 50 per cent rise in utility cycling during 1998–2006 (nine trips per day per 100 inhabitants), and in Lyon/Villeurbanne, commuting/utility cycling increased four-fold between 1995 and 2006 (Atout France, 2009: 48–49). Overall the picture seems to be that of a slackening of decline during the late 1990s and early 2000s, followed by a modest uptake of urban/suburban commuting and other practical cycle use since about 2005. Qualitatively as well as quantitatively, the patterns of utility cycling seem to be evolving as well: rather than being the necessary means of mobility of those unable to afford cars or the cost of public transport, practical cycling is now frequently undertaken by members of households whose socio-professional and financial standing enables them to afford other forms of mobility. Indeed, it seems that frequent utility cycling is
increasingly dominated by cadres (managerial classes) and professions intermédiaires (middle-ranking professional employment) rather than by the traditional categories of manual and white-collar workers, schoolchildren, students, pensioners and the unemployed. Indeed, it seems that in general, and more markedly in cities such as Lyon, the period 1990–2010 has brought evidence of the shift of cycling practice towards the middle classes, in terms of utility cycling and leisure/sports cycling, with some 47 per cent of cadres supérieurs and professions libérales compared with only 28 per cent of ouvriers and 50 per cent of students and schoolchildren cycling regularly in 2006 (Atout France, 2009: 60–61).

Urban commuter cycling in France was facilitated by a range of factors in the 2000s, which taken together created a context favourable to the continuing uptake of cycling as everyday personal mobility. Firstly, long-standing initiatives in favour of cycling in the urban environment such as cycle paths, the integration of cycle routes and cycle parks with other forms of transport, the improvement of cyclists’ road safety through the Code de la route and the Code de la rue and more generally the pressure exerted on municipal authorities across France by associations such as the Club des villes cyclables have much improved the practicalities of urban riding. Secondly, the implementation of self-service cycle-hire systems such as Vélo’V in Lyon and Vélib’ in Paris have publicized the advantages of urban and suburban cycle-mobility, and manufacturers have developed the market for ‘city bikes’ in a diversification of supply intended to attract urban cyclists rather than the VTT enthusiasts who dominated sales during the 1980s and 1990s. Thirdly, rising awareness of environmental problems and increasing aspirations towards healthy living, combined with the desire of the state to maximize the health ‘externalities’ of cycling, have come together to promote cycling of all kinds, but especially urban utility riding.

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The ways in which France and French citizens related to cycling during the 2000s reflected both continuities and innovations in the social and cultural history of the bicycle in France. What can be seen in some ways as the twenty-first century’s ‘boom’ in cycling (cyclosportives, voies vertes, Critical Mass and Vélorution, urban utility cycling and sales of vélos de ville, self-service city-cycling schemes and so on) in many ways mirrors the nineteenth-century vogue for vélocipédie in all its forms that started the whole system of interconnected uses, meanings and repre-
sentations of cycling. The Tour de France, irritatingly to those who resent its overarching position in the ecological system of cycling in France, continues – as professional, commercial sport – to fascinate the French public and serves endurably as an instrument for the negotiation of debates about the identity of France and the nature of sport. What is perhaps more novel in the 2000s is the involvement of the state and of regional and municipal governance in the organization of cycling on a practical level. Although government in the late nineteenth century had been interested enough in the popularity of cycling to slap an annual licence fee on the possession of bicycles, and various fiscal initiatives have periodically been implemented to subsidize cycle production and sales, it is new to see town councils and local government at the level of regions and départements implementing plans and infrastructures in favour of everyday cycling, as well as the state.24 The role of Monsieur Vélo, although needing continued definition and support, seems to represent the state’s recognition of the importance of cycling in general, in all its forms, and a willingness on the part of central government to imitate the ‘reactivity’ of lower levels of governance that have been so successful in accompanying and facilitating the rise in everyday cycling through schemes such as the Parisian Vélib’.

Notes

1 Journée-hommage organisée par la Bibliothèque nationale de France avec Georges Vigarello, directeur d’études à l’EHESS en collaboration avec le Musée national du sport.
3 At least six ministries are involved in discussions on cycling issues: interior, transport, economy, environment, youth and sports, tourism and regional authorities.
4 The official term is Coordonnateur interministériel pour le développement de l’usage du vélo. This post was created for three years, by the décret n°2006-444 of 14 April 2006, and was renewed in November 2009. The budget for the post was only made available in 2007.
5 Compared with 2.3 km/day and 27 per cent in Holland and 0.2 km/day and 2 per cent in the UK. See the brief presentation of this plan at the ministry website http://www.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/Diaporamas-et-presentations,12539.html (accessed 21 August 2011).
6 For example, the CUS has experimented with the Code de la route, notably with cycle counter-flow systems and right-turns at traffic lights, as well as with waived fines for cyclists.
7 See, for example, the page on http://velorution.org devoted to ‘JC Decaux, Vélib’ et Paris’ (accessed 6 June 2011).
8 The report commissioned on the economics of cycling in France by the Direction
générale de la compétitivité de l’industrie et des services, published in 2009, very briefly summarizes the activities of French cyclosportives: approximately 150 races are organized per annum, of which 40 attract more than 1,000 participants and 750 attract more than 500 riders; approximately 128,000 riders take part, all told; the Ardéchoise caters for 12,000–15,000 riders alone. See Atout France/AlterModal (2009: 313–18).

9 A relatively recent but predictable innovation in the 2000s has been the staging of cyclosportive races by major national French cycling manufacturers, such as Time, Look and others. These races – la Look, la Time-Mégève Mont-Blanc – often allow companies to showcase new products by loaning bikes to riders, for example, or simply to publicize their commitment to cycling beyond commercial gain. See Le Cycle (2006).

10 See the website of the Cyclisme pour tous initiative at http://www.cyclosport.info/

11 Vélorution in France has a website (http://velorution.org) that provides a good sense of the movement’s broad interests.

12 For details of the amuseur public and anarchist Aguigui Mouna (1911–99) see the forthcoming article by Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare, “Les Valeurs morales ne sont pas cotées en bourse”: Aguigui Mouna as “amuseur public” in the 1970s’, currently in preparation.

13 For example, to cite just a few, of varying kinds: the Fédération française des usagers de la bicyclette, whose slogan is ‘Le vélo au quotidien’ (and has a useful newsletter entitled Vélocité); the Club des villes et territoires cyclables; the Association française de développement des véloroutes et voies vertes; and the Vélotaf discussion site (slogan: ‘Pédaler mieux, vivre utile’).

14 See http://altertour.net. The 2011 AlterTour had the slogan ‘Vers la sobriété énergétique’ and the AlterTour has run annually since 2008 in stigmatization of the Tour de France’s perceived unholy alliance of doping, competition and individualism.

15 See http://transeuropeenne.free.fr/

16 See http://www.heureux-cyclage.org/

17 For an interesting treatment of the cultural significance of other foreign riders in the Tour de France, see Marks (2003).

18 Just as in football, where a ‘champagne style’ is often desired for the national team, and in rugby, where attractive play is likewise appreciated, cycling sport in general and French cycling in particular, perhaps, place much weight on the manner of winning.

19 See the discussion in a previous chapter of Anquetil’s ‘technocratic’ approach to competing and winning. The parallels between the French national hero in the 1950s and 1960s and the US outsider Armstrong in the 2000s are intriguing.


21 The national French statistics institute INSEE considers bicycles as part of the category E15 ‘cycles, motocycles, matériel de transport divers’; see, for example, INSEE (2009).

22 See the CNPC website at http://www.tousavelo.com

23 The Code de la route is the French equivalent of the British Highway Code, whereas the Code de la rue is essentially a consultation exercise set up in 2006 that aims to introduce greater consideration for pedestrians and cyclists to the motorized concerns of the Code de la route.

24 The annual impôt sur les vélocipèdes was implemented in 1893 and only withdrawn in 1959. The original tax was 10 francs, reduced to 6 francs in 1898 but subsequently raised again to 12 francs in the Fourth Republic.