French Cycling
Hugh Dauncey

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A Sense of Cycling in France

At the conclusion of this rapid and necessarily selective overview of cycling and the bicycle in France, it seems sensible to attempt to draw together some tentative general remarks about how this technology of transport and its varied uses can be interpreted to tell us something about French culture and society. Following the framework set out in the Introduction, where we suggested a conceptualization of cycling and the bicycle in France that necessarily had to find appropriate space for the Tour de France while at the same time addressing the wider and deeper complexity of the issues at stake through the themes of leisure, sport, industry, utility, and identity, we shall here briefly revisit these topics. We shall also consider how the chronology of analysis provided in the previous eight chapters fits with the developing story of cycling and the bicycle in French culture and society.

Cycling as leisure, sport, industry, utility

Leisure, in various forms, has been a key theme of the discussions of cycling in the previous chapters. Those who dislike the prominence of the Tour in the mental imagery of French cycling would stress that cycling for most people in France is – albeit against the background of a memorial awareness of the Tour de France – about leisure, recreation and associated forms of sociability. As we have seen in the discussion of cycling during the 1920s and 1930s, the capacity of cycling to afford personal mobility and the opportunity of leisure activities has been a key element of people’s relationship with the bicycle. Writing about the Popular Front, Benigno Cacérès suggests rightly that ‘le tandem est resté l’image de 1936. Il a valeur de symbole. Il incarne le passage à la civilisation de loisirs’ (Cacérès, 1981: 33). Although in a future study it might be interesting to unpack a little more the iconicity of the tandem for the Popular Front’s ‘invention’ of loisirs, cycling has enduringly been associated with leisure and freedom from constraints imposed by established patterns and modes of transport or by social mores. In the later nine-
teenth century, the debates in *véloce-clubs* and within cycling federations over the relative merits and places of *la course* and *le tourisme*, and the consequent divisions between aficionados of touring and partisans of racing, led to the setting up of separate national associations and the development of an institutionalized dual ecology of *cyclosport* and *cyclotourisme* within French cycling.

Until the late 1940s and the subsequent period of socioeconomic modernization and prosperity that redefined France for thirty years after 1945, the uses and meanings of cycling as leisure remained arguably relatively stable: the discovery of rural France by cyclists of all social classes and the ‘emancipation’ of women or of those who were financially unable to avail themselves of other mobilities for the enjoyment of free time. But after the reconstruction of the French economy during the late 1940s, and in step with rising prosperity and the availability of new forms of transport such as *cyclomoteurs* like the *Vélo-Solex* and then increasingly affordable automobiles, it could be suggested that an attachment to cycling became more ‘marked’ as an expression of leisure choices. The examples that we have discussed for the 1950s such as the nostalgic meaning of the bicycle in *Jour de Fête* and the resistance and compromise of practices and technologies such as *vélo-cross* and the *Vélo-Solex* demonstrate the evolving patterns of leisure that obtained around cycling during this period. And in the years after the end of the *Trente glorieuses*, as more widely generalized prosperity and car-ownership further defined cycling as a specific leisure option of ‘resistance’, the strong developing trends of cycle touring through the *véloroutes* and various other *voies vertes* demonstrated the growing linkages between cycle leisure and the environmental movements that had grown in France since 1968. Most recently, however, it could be argued that cycling *qua* leisure in France has also been inflected towards urban rather than the more traditionally rural uses of the bicycle, through the development and uptake for healthy exercise of city-cycle schemes such as *Vélo’V* and *Vélib’, in a crossover between utility and leisure.

Cycling as sport and as competition has consistently been a core element of how cycling has been perceived in France since the earliest years of its development. Compared with Britain, where the official obstacles placed in the way of mass-start road races in the continental style meant that cycle sport was for long periods relegated to the status of a minority-interest athletic activity undertaken almost in secret by time-triallists racing ‘against the clock’ on early morning deserted roads, cycle sport of all kinds in France has been central to public perceptions. As we suggested earlier, current strong public interest in Britain in the
fortunes of the Team Sky cycling squad and its BBC sports personality of the year (2011) Mark Cavendish in the Tour, and delight at Bradley Wiggins’ victories in the 2012 Tour and Olympic time trial, or the popularity of Sir Chris Hoy and other stars of the UK track team such as Victoria Pendleton amount to only a fraction of the impact of cycle racing in general in France throughout the twentieth century or, more specifically, the popularity of multi-Olympic champion Daniel Morelon in the 1960s.

Another concomitant difference between the UK and France in terms of the everyday reality of cycle sport has been the significant lack of media coverage of cycling in Britain, compared with the centrality of the cycling/sporting press initially and then later the audiovisual media in France. Whereas in Britain, information on cycling competition has been purveyed arguably almost single-handedly by the long-running Cycling Weekly, we have seen how in France the media have at all stages of the development of cycle sport been key partners and stakeholders in its initiation and perpetuation. Our discussion of the role of Le Véloce-Sport in creating Bordeaux–Paris in 1891, Giffard’s creation of Paris–Brest–Paris in 1891 for Le Petit Journal, the struggle between Le Vélo and L’Auto-Vélo that created the Tour de France in 1903, and the initiative of Le Populaire in organizing the Paris–Roubaix travailliste in 1935 have suggested how closely media and sport were imbricated in the founding decades of cycling in France. And since 1945, in the contemporary period, the political significance of the change from L’Auto to L’Equipe after the war, the ‘alternative voice’ of Le Miroir du cyclisme in the 1960s, and the interaction between the Tour and new technologies of sports reporting such as live television in the 1960s and 1970s where coverage of cycling was the driver of televisual innovation are further case-studies of the contribution of the media to the sports–media–industrial complex in France that is exemplified by cycling.

The industrial, commercial and technological dimensions of cycling and the bicycle in France have been central features in defining aspects of the meaning of cycling throughout the decades. As we suggested in the brief discussion of the cycle industry during the Belle Epoque, cycle technology was the trigger of industrial success for regions and towns such as Saint-Etienne, but was also an early driver of industrial modernization for the country as a whole: the early years of racing in general (Terront’s use of Michelin tyres, for example, in Paris–Brest–Paris, 1891) and in particular of the Tour de France, when riders and teams were closely identified with the makes of bicycle they used, show how closely industry was linked with competition. We have passed over the long
period during which the French cycle industry managed the long-term
decline in cycle-use and ownership and increasing competition from
abroad – essentially from the late 1940s until the mid-1970s – in favour
of concentrating on contemporary developments since the 1980s, when
the French cycle industry regained a small but significant role in stimu-
lating French technological and industrial development through
high-tech componentry and frames. The case-studies of Look and Time,
as ‘shop windows’ of France’s SME high-tech enterprise and testing
grounds of government innovation policy suggest how, despite a much
less central importance to the economy overall than obtained during the
1890s, cycling still has an industrial significance in contemporary France.

Cycling as utility has in many ways been the most elusive of the
themes considered in this book, partly because of the lack of reliable
information on the issues – particularly for the earlier periods – and also
because of the difficulty mentioned in the Introduction of finding things
to say that are other than stating the obvious. But, principally in the chap-
ters that discussed the most recent trends in French cycling such as the
municipal self-service bicycle schemes (La Rochelle since the 1970s,
Strasbourg, Lyon, Paris in later decades) and the crossovers between envi-
ronmentalism and ‘militant cycling’, it is hoped that some impression has
been given of how cycling nowadays can still be as ‘revolutionary’ a
pastime as it was often considered to be in the late nineteenth century.

Complexity and identity: speed over time and nostalgia

As Horton, Rosen and Cox (2007: 5) have emphasized, ‘cycling is many
things, varying according to both time and place’, and this volume natu-
rally concurs with this judgement. In the same section of the Introduction
to their edited collection of studies entitled simply Cycling and Society,
they go on to underline their belief in the inescapable ‘complexity’ of
cycling: ‘Historically, geographically, sociologically and culturally,
cycling is a complex and diverse practice’ (2007: 7). Geographically, our
study has been restricted to metropolitan France, and although there is
obviously a rationale for extending the analysis to the whole Franco-
phone world, the diversity and complexity of issues has been sufficiently
challenging merely within l’Hexagone.

Looking at the complexity and diversity of cycling in France within
the chronological span and framework that we have used in previous
chapters allows us to make some tentative suggestions about just how
French cycling has been ‘many things, varying according to time’. And
to provide a peg upon which to hang this brief concluding overview, Henri Desgrange’s famous dictum of ‘head and legs’ seems potentially useful. In his volume *La Tête et les jambes*, Desgrange set out the idea that cycle racing was a sport that required a peculiar mix of qualities: ‘le sport cycliste exige de la part de celui qui veut s’y adonner deux genres de qualité, d’ordre bien différent, qui se complètent l’un et l’autre: la tête et les jambes (Desgrange, 1894). If we adapt this notion slightly to express the idea that cycling is often about identities (*la tête*) and communities as well as about physicalities (*les jambes*) and practicalities, then Desgrange, even now, as the Tour struggles to maintain itself, can seem of some relevance.

In terms of identities and communities, cycling over time in France has seemed to be durably attached to notions of national identity and prestige, defined by the Tour itself (Robic, Bobet, Anquetil), but also by institutions such as the UCI (with France as founder-member) and competition in world championships and the Olympics (Longo, Morelon and so on), with the precise content of imagined community and identity varying as France has negotiated a changing place within the international system since the Franco-Prussian war. Also in terms of identity, cycling as an activity both sporting and utilitarian has enduringly reflected issues of class and sociocultural and socioeconomic status within France, linked, arguably to its iterations as work and pleasure for differing groups of French citizens. Here the insight of Philippe Gaboriau about cycling oscillating between ‘la lenteur des riches and la vitesse des pauvres’ seems to take on a significance wider than that to which he originally referred in his seminal studies (1981; 1991) of cycling’s early history.

Over the time span that this book has considered, cycling as technology of movement has varied, precisely, in its varying forms between speed or conspicuously consumed slowness (reflecting the complex interactions between work and pleasure for different groups), between modernity and archaism, between progress and nostalgia. Thus, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, cycling was symbolic of modernity, either as the leisured speed of the upper classes or as the laboured speed (for utility purposes or for professional racing) of the working classes. However, by the post-war period, as scrutiny of Tati’s *Jour de Fête* revealed, the partial ‘obsolescence’ of the bicycle as a technology of movement/transport was increasingly identifying it with archaism and the past, rather than modernity and progress. And as the world has progressively speeded up since – arguably – the 1960s, using cycling as a metaphor for slowness and indeed nostalgia has been increas-
ingly prevalent: the enthusiasm for rural holiday cycling on véloroutes since the 1990s reflects a ‘return to nature’ and simple pleasures; the principal concern in professional cycling is no longer ‘how fast?’ but rather ‘how slow?’, as doping has invalidated belief in speed as a marker of progress. And as the speed and pressures of urban life have increased, French urban planners have increasingly listened to the critical masses of citizens who prefer the bicycle as an option for utility commuting, very recently allowing cyclists to ride up one-way streets in the ‘wrong’ direction, for example. And overall, the enthusiastic adoption by a range of French cities of cycle-loan schemes seems to demonstrate a developing new strand of ecological progressiveness in French urban planning.

The longevity of cycling as a mass popular activity has thus enabled a reversal of one of the initial drivers of its appeal: the speed = progress equation has been replaced by slow = clean. But longevity is also a key factor in creating a popular-historical memory of cycling that arguably should be seen as a major factor in the permanence of cycling in people’s affections. As we have seen in looking at Jour de Fête, nostalgia and the narrative of past iterations of cycling are a key element of its enduring centrality.

The Tour de France as modesty rather than grandeur

For many people in France whose perhaps begrudging admiration of Lance Armstrong’s domination of the Tour de France was tempered by just too much suspicion and resentment, the lengthy investigation into recurring allegations of doping by the US champion undertaken by US federal investigators from July 2010 until early 2012 represented a hope that light could finally be shed on the true status of his stardom and on the real state of professional cycling. For such sceptical and reluctant fans, and for others keen more simply to see a foreign, tainted and unloved champion laid low, the decision of the US federal investigators on 3 February 2012 to drop their inquiry was a further blow to any belief in a ‘clean’ Tour, despite the progress made since the 1998 ‘Tour of Shame’.¹ As has been suggested in the previous chapter’s analysis of the complex relationship obtaining between France and Armstrong, the failure of the Grand Jury in California meant that no ‘closure’ on the ‘Armstrong Affair’ would ever probably be achieved, in France particularly.

The lack of closure on Armstrong came only months after the first Tour of the definitively post-Armstrong era, which had witnessed an even more than usually emotional attachment of the viewing public to the
fortunes of French riders in general, and the plucky Thomas Voeckler in particular. France’s enthusiasm for the latest iteration of the ‘Astérix complex’ in sport has notably been chronicled in _Le Monde_ (Dupré, 2011) and _Libération_ (Auffray, 2011; Le Touzet, 2011a; 2011b). Voeckler’s new status as the modest French hero of the Tour is an intriguing reversal of past expectations of iconic riders such as those we have considered in previous chapters. Whereas Robic, Bobet, Anquetil and even Poulidor were expected to win for the greater glory of France and for the strengthening of French identity as defined by sporting success in the Tour, Voeckler’s persona centres on the hope and hopelessness of his ever winning. Although Voeckler managed to wear the yellow jersey for ten days, he always maintained to the media commentators who followed his every move that, given his obvious weaknesses compared with the riders favoured to win outright, he was not ‘là pour gagner’, predicting on a daily basis – ‘C’est promis, aujourd’hui je perds mon Maillot jaune’ – that he would lose the lead during the course of the stage. As well as accepting that he was not ‘de la caste des meilleurs’, he also more positively asserted that the fact that he – as a clean rider – was able to have some success was a positive sign for cycling in general. In terms of his approach to the sport, he stated that he was guided by ‘une obligation morale pour aller au bout de la souffrance’ (Le Touzet, 2011b). As well as honesty and lucidity about the strength of French cycling, two key terms of Voeckler’s time in yellow in 2011 were ‘rêve’ and ‘plaisir’, reflecting as ever, the identification between the _course nationale_ and the French public. Towards the end of his tenure of the lead, Voeckler opined that it was good to ‘donner du plaisir aux Français par les temps qui courent’, and commentators such as Gérard Holtz thanked him and the Tour for having ‘fait du bien à la France’ and for the ‘rêve offert aux Français’.

It is one of the features of the Tour that it throws up incongruous interactions of people and ideas, either through the sinuous itineraries of its routes through rural and urban France – for example, the visit of the Tour to Colombey-les-deux-Eglises in 1960, when two national myths came together (Dauncey, 2003: 175) – or, more prosaically, events such as President Sarkozy’s presence in the race director’s car in 2010. Two discussions of the Tour in this volume have suggested a strange meeting of minds between Lance Armstrong and Louis Aragon. Considering the ‘meaning’ of the symbolic Tour of 1947, when the first of the post-war Tours was run in a tired and under-nourished country struggling to regain normality and a sense of pride, we touched on Aragon’s view, expressed in the communist newspaper _Ce Soir_, that ‘Le Tour, c’est la
fête d’un été d’hommes, c’est aussi la fête de tout notre pays, d’une passion singulièrement française: tant pis pour ceux qui ne savent pas en partager les émotions, les folies, les espoirs’ (Aragon, 1947). And fast-forwarding to 2005, to the end of the first ‘Armstrong Era’, when the retiring champion said his farewells to France and the Tour on the Champs-Elysées podium, there is an echo of Aragon’s statement of passion for the race, if not for France: ‘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’ (Wyatt, 2005). Although the plucky exploits of clean riders such as Voeckler in 2011 give hope to idealists who wish to see the Tour as a pure test of athletic prowess, the reality remains that the passions it elicits in riders and fans of all degrees are still tainted by the issue of doping, and this intrinsic flaw of the Tour and the sport of cycling in general makes the meaning of France’s course nationale – or in Barthes’ formulation (1957: 119) her ‘fait national fascinant’ – less felicitous than it might be.

Whereas in the 1890s and early 1900s, cycling was a ‘point of entry’ for French sport, politics and society into the modern international community both in terms of international competitions but also through the creation of the Union cycliste internationale, it is poignantly yet significantly interesting to note that, in the late 1990s and 2000s, France has similarly been negotiating with world sporting and anti-doping bodies, principally because of Armstrong and the Tour de France. During the Belle Epoque and France’s development towards modernity, cycling was a facilitator of change and of the introduction of French influence into the international sporting arena, whereas in the 2000s the ‘national cycle race’ of the Tour is no longer a laboratory for the invention of France, but an international testing ground for anti-doping procedures and legislation.

Cycling as a contemporary bienfait social

The final words on cycling in France can perhaps usefully re-engage with one of the earliest French attempts to circumscribe the meaning and significance of cycling. We have already returned to Henri Desgrange, and his notion of the inextricability of the cerebral and physical dimensions of cycling, so it is only fitting to conclude with his rival progenitor of cycle sport in the 1890s, Pierre Giffard. As a popularizer of both prac-
tical cycling and of cycle sport, Giffard was an incomparable figure, remembered for his launching of cycle races such as Paris–Brest–Paris for *Le Petit Journal* in 1891, and numerous other competitions, as well as for stimulating the growth of the sporting press through the iconic *Le Vélo*. Only Vélocio, perhaps, can rival Giffard and Desgrange for the theoretical and practical contributions they made to French cycling. Giffard’s most famous definition of cycling was that ‘la vélocipédie est autre chose qu’un sport; c’est un bienfait social’. To locate this judgement in its principal context of the 1890s requires us to recognize the essentially revolutionary appeal of cycling in the *Belle Époque* in terms of technology, mobility, speed, emancipation and the attendant freedoms that came with these transformations of individual experience. Different elements of the nexus of activities making up cycling as both a sport and a ‘service to society’ developed from the late nineteenth century onwards into the strands of cycling that now constitute its taxonomic complexity: commercialized sport and entertainment; amateur sport and entertainment; amateur leisure and entertainment; everyday transport and utility. It would seem that the strength and permanency of cycling as a varied and complex practice has, in France at least, been dependent in large part upon the association between its various forms and leisure/pleasure. What is perhaps particular to the case of France has been the special strength of the form of cycling defined as competition (primarily professional, but also amateur), highly mediatized and packaged as ‘sports-entertainment’, exemplified for more than a century by the Tour de France, but also by traditions of competition dating back to the great races of Bordeaux–Paris and Paris–Brest–Paris in 1891 and even before.

In the early twenty-first century, as French citizens and public-policy makers become increasingly aware of the limitations and costs of motorized transport and move towards adopting ecologically sustainable forms of tourism and urban transport in which the bicycle is a key element, it may be that cycling is becoming once again primarily to be conceived as a *bienfait social*, whose very pleasurable slowness has become a sign of progress for current times.

**Note**

1 In August 2012, Armstrong surprised supporters and detractors alike, when he apparently capitulated in the face of USADA evidence that he had cheated throughout his career. Although not admitting guilt, Armstrong abandoned his struggle with the US authorities, leaving the UCI and ASO to determine what – if any – sanctions should apply to his record in the Tour de France.