Mission Statement

World Transport Policy & Practice is a quarterly journal which provides a high quality medium for original and creative work in world transport.

WTPP has a philosophy based on the equal importance of academic rigour and a strong commitment to ideas, policies and practical initiatives that will bring about a reduction in global dependency on cars, lorries and aircraft.

WTPP has a commitment to sustainable transport which embraces the urgent need to cut global emissions of carbon dioxide, to reduce the amount of new infrastructure of all kinds and to highlight the importance of future generations, the poor, those who live in degraded environments and those deprived of human rights by planning systems that put a higher importance on economic objectives than on the environment and social justice.

WTPP embraces a different approach to science and through science to publishing. This view is based on an honest evaluation of the track record of transport planning, engineering and economics. All too often, these interrelated disciplines have embraced quantitative, elitist or mechanistic views of society, space and infrastructure and have eliminated people from the analysis.

To help it to reach a wide readership, encompassing advocates and activists as well as academics and advisers, WTPP is available free of charge as PDF files on the internet at http://www.ecoplan.org/wtpp/
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A Nicaraguan Street Clash

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Abstract
The provision of transport services in León, Nicaragua is becoming increasingly difficult for the city government in the face of rapid urbanisation and a shrinking public budget. Some citizens have responded by turning to the bicycle to meet their transportation needs. But the city government promotes automobile-dependent urban development whilst penalising bicyclists with a tax and license requirement. City officials have failed to meet their purpose of eliminating dangerous traffic congestion, in part because of misguided policies and plans, and in part because bicyclists have resisted government authority.

Keywords
Bicycles, informal sector, Nicaragua, planning, politics, transport

Introduction
Most of my North American friends know Nicaragua only through past news reports about the ‘Contra War’. They think of intense conflict at the mere mention of the place. I tell them about a much-less-newsworthy conflict that is intensifying today, a clash that once again pits poor against elite: bicyclists against car drivers. At the same time that a sudden change in the economy brought about an abrupt influx of wealthy people with cars in the early 1990s, thousands of less-fortunate citizens turned to imported bicycles in a manner of self-help. But misguided planning is destroying the hope of affordable mobility for the masses.

León is Nicaragua’s second city with a regional population of 200,000. A beautiful colonial outpost founded in 1524, it enjoys a distinctive historical centre where narrow, stone streets are lined with pastel adobe homes capped with red-tile roofs. But like most Latin American cities, it suffers from an explosive population growth that threatens everyone’s quality of life. Demands for publicly provided services escalate at impossible rates. One example is street space. Traffic congestion is reaching intolerable levels, in some cases exceeding 1,500 vehicles per hour at unregulated intersections.

Even while struggling to meet expanding needs, León faces economic distress of catastrophic proportions. Before conditions improve Nicaraguans must first recover from the severe regional recession of the 1980s, a decade of civil war, and a U.S.-imposed trade embargo that left the highest per capita external debt in the world. To make matters worse, the León region suffered three major natural disasters in a 17-month period during 1992 and 1993. Clearly, financing the rapidly growing demand for urban services in León has become an alarmingly difficult task. The government must find alternative ways of satisfying the city’s needs for urban services, including transport.

The cycling advantage
Bicycles are an excellent alternative mode of transport in a developing country like Nicaragua because they conserve energy and capital, they’re clean, healthy, noise-free, and most importantly they provide cheap mobility for those of limited means. The citizens of León seem to be well aware of these advantages because they’re spontaneously and creatively turning to the bicycle to solve their transportation needs in response to their rapidly spreading city. Even though official records are not

Figure 1. Street Corner in León
kept, the number of bikes on the streets of León has grown at an astonishing pace, as observed by the author between 1989 and 1996. That bikes would be popular is not surprising because León is an ideal city for cycling:

- the majority of residents cannot afford an automobile;
- the city is too large for walking and yet compact enough to bike from end to end;
- the terrain is flat;
- the climate allows for year-round use despite a pesky rainy season; and
- as a university town brimming with youth, the bicycle is quickly becoming culturally accepted as a legitimate means of travel.

Furthermore, bikes are such valuable assets that it’s common to see two and even three people riding a single bicycle.

Conflict

Unfortunately, planners have failed to embrace the bike, even though it represents a cost-effective way of satisfying the basic needs of poor travellers. While the citizens of León foster sustainable development on their own initiative, city officials intensify the struggles over street space – by encouraging people to drive cars and penalising those who ride bicycles.

City planners actively promote automobile travel and the principal aim of city plans is to relieve traffic congestion and build more parking spaces. Several examples illustrate how government measures promote automobile driving and clearly favour those who are wealthy enough to own cars. The first example is an elaborate and expensive proposal that called for converting a vast network of streets to one-way traffic to make room for curbside parking. Despite the dramatic growth in bicycle traffic, the proposal...
ignored the obvious need for bike lanes. The 50-page proposal devoted less than a half page to public transit and mention of bicycles was nearly nonexistent. The central theme was instead a physical design to indulge more automobile throughput and free parking.

Second, the automobile enjoys a favoured status when government implicitly subsidises parking for car owners. To illustrate, the city government constructed a parking lot in 1995 and charged a paltry 50 centavos (U.S.$ 0.06) to park all day. But the ‘right’ to park for free was so deeply ingrained that drivers soon refused to pay even this token amount. So the city caved in to the demands of the driving elite and opened the lot to free parking.

Finally, the most troubling example of shortsighted measures was a decision to impose a license and tax on bicycles in 1994. Planners regarded bikes as a safety hazard and a menace in worsening traffic congestion. City planners commonly referred to the intensifying competition over street space as the ‘bicycle problem’, suggesting that the bicycle was still regarded as a mere plaything that disrupts a driver’s right to the road.

The result of measures like these is that cars are grabbing ever more precious urban space – sometimes violently – by pushing out other modes of travel that the neediest people increasingly rely upon. These regulatory planning measures were intended to bring order to a situation that was quickly eluding government control. But implicit in the plans were goals to shape the city into a form that accommodates the economies and lifestyles of more developed countries. Imposing regulations that render the majority of cyclists ‘illegal’ is misguided for the following reasons:

• Economic Inefficiency
• Social Inequality
• Failure to Achieve Purpose

Economic Inefficiency

The harmful external costs of motorised transport enormously outstrip the costs imposed by bicycles. Efficiency would call for motorists that clog urban streets to pay directly for the full costs they impose on others. But current plans are back-to-front – motor vehicles are subsidised while the environmentally friendly bicycle is penalised.

Social Inequality

The measures are costly and unfair to low-income citizens. Notwithstanding the bribes and lost labour required to cut through bureaucratic red tape, the monetary cost of the tax and license amounts to 16% of an average Nicaraguan monthly income – far beyond the means of most bicyclists. Even worse, the police confiscate bikes – a valuable economic resource – from riders who ignore the license and tax.

Failure to Achieve Purpose

The fees provide no incentive for a cyclist – such as offering training, safety tips, or maintenance lessons – except to insure against confiscation. But because the police lack the resources to fully enforce the law, few bicyclists comply.

Prospects for change

How might the citizens of León induce change? The political power of the driving elite does not derive from the same pluralistic sources as in North America or Western Europe, such as well-funded lobby groups. Countries like Nicaragua suffer not only from tremendous levels of social inequality, but also from a profound mismatch of institutions. The customs, norms and rituals that once regulated the behaviour of the traditional classes – farmers, peasants, piece-rate workers, etc. – have been dislodged by a legal and bureaucratic order that dominates society at large and bolsters a particular set of social interests. The governing institutions of the developing world today

Figure 4. Passenger, Rider, Cargo

Figure 5. Roadside Repair Shop
did not so much evolve out of but rather were thrust upon traditional ways, imposed by people – like those wealthy enough to own cars – with direct links to more advanced economies at a dramatically different stage of economic and social development.

Given this political context, two steps may offer some hope. Firstly, bicycle activists should study how local political power works. For example, one result of mismatched institutions is an entrenched system of political patronage. Because bicyclists do not enjoy the full privileges of legality, they are more likely to succeed by turning to the tactics used by other informal actors: by resorting to confrontational threats to exert pressure on authorities, or by trading their pledges of support in electoral campaigns in exchange for government recognition. Both require mass mobilisation, which in turn requires building alliances with more powerful groups. León provides a rich source of potential allies, including respected university student unions, an unusually dense network of Non-Governmental Organisations, and funders with local clout such as Japan’s International Co-operation Agency (JICA), an international development agency with an especially prominent presence in the region.

Secondly, the goal of political organising should not be to extract particular favours, such as eliminating the bicycle tax. Instead, the objective should be a long-term, counter-hegemonic change in the way the problem is defined. Innovative institutional changes might bridge the gap between, on one hand, the rigid rules that advance the legitimate interests of government and, on the other, the norms accepted in civil society as survival tactics, like riding an unlicensed bicycle in the streets knowing the act is illegal. Activists might teach government officials about the positive sides of the informal sector, which might help government to promote its own interests in boosting the economy, thus alleviating poverty and improving the environmental quality of a city.

Conclusion

Government seizure of bikes in León has not diminished the hope of people creating their own means of accessing important places in the spreading city. Until steps are taken to meet the needs of the majority, under-privileged citizens will find ways to resist, including riding bikes illegally. Planners can learn from the clash between cars and bicycles. The people of the city clearly need what planners can foster: a more equitable allocation of public street space, where cyclists, pedestrians and vendors are not pushed away by more traffic lanes and parking space. City officials should scrap the license and tax on bicycles, move toward full-cost pricing of car facilities, and promote more cost-effective law enforcement in the streets. Otherwise, the conflict between bikes and cars will continue in spite of authoritarian control measures that achieve no public purpose.

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