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## **Cycloactivism in Mexico City** **Breaking the rules between bodily experiences** **and technocratic politics**

### **Abstract**

Cycling in Mexico City is dangerous. But over the last two decades it has become less so. New cycleways, a large public bicycle-sharing scheme, various government cycling promotion projects and an abundance of official signalling demanding respect for cyclists have made bicycles visible as worthy vehicles on city streets. For cycloactivists, however, such improvements are not enough. Cyclists are frequently harassed, attacked or run over by motorists. Cycloactivists thus demand more and better cycleways as well as increased measures to address injustices in mobility issues across the city. They do so through protests, information campaigns, public performances and academic debates, and crucially, by cycling through city streets. This means that they use their bodies as symbols, to highlight their vulnerability. Along the way, they often break existing traffic rules to highlight how unfair they are and to draw attention to other demands. I refer to their efforts as experiential cycloactivism, which highlights cyclists making themselves vulnerable as a means of denouncing illegitimate rules and policies that need to be changed. I conclude the analysis by suggesting that their style of rule-breaking is a type of ritual with which they seek to improve the city, not burn it down.

Keywords: cycloactivising, cycling, mobility, ethnography, city, body

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Cycling in Mexico City is dangerous. But over the last two decades it has become less so. New cycleways, a large public bicycle-sharing scheme, various government cycling promotion projects and an abundance of official signalling demanding respect for cyclists have made bicycles visible as lawful vehicles on city streets. For cycloactivists, however, this is not enough. Despite improvements in infrastructure and advances in legislature, cyclists are frequently harassed, attacked or run over by motorists. Cycloactivists demand more and better cycleways as well as increased measures to address injustices in mobility issues across the city. Dozens of activist groups state their demands via protests, information campaigns, public performances and academic debates, and crucially, with collective rides through city streets. In a few years, numerous activists have learned to use technocratic knowledge and language to make their points. In collaboration with non-governmental organisations, they cite quantitative studies regarding energy, pollution, congestion, health and the environment to support their claims and demands. Crucially, however, cycloactivists use a qualitative tactic to induce a sense of urgency in public debates: to performatively stress the vulnerability of their own bodies on city streets. They do so by strategically breaking a few traffic rules and rules regarding the use of public spaces to highlight how unfair some of them are and to draw attention to other demands. Cycloactivists thus use their own bodies to denounce illegitimate rules in order to call for an overhaul of mobility legislation, policymaking and practices.

One case in point was a protest that I witnessed outside the police headquarters of the Mexico City government. On a weekday afternoon, in November 2019, a few cycloactivists and cyclo-deliverers started gathering outside the police department, in a busy elevated roundabout known as *Glorieta Insurgentes*. They sought to speak to the head of law enforcement to discuss the death of a delivery cyclist earlier in the week in a traffic accident. It was a demonstration organised between individual cycloactivists and a then recently formed collective of delivery cyclists. ‘We are here to make ourselves heard because things have not changed, we are still victims of reckless drivers’, Adrián<sup>1</sup> told me when I arrived. Adrián is a multitasking cycloactivist: he is a journalist working for an independent cycling online news outlet; a consultant working with friends to design better infrastructures and policies for local governments around the country; and an outright activist who seeks to be present at protests and when stating demands. His social media posts are quite popular, and he plays a central role in public debates about cycling in Mexico City. After more cyclists arrived, they started discussing the problem

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1 I have pseudonymised all research participants in order to reduce any potential risk to their persons or reputations.

amongst themselves and decided to first close one of the three lanes of the roundabout. They did so by turning their bicycles upside down and staying close to them while holding up signs.

A few reporters arrived to take photos and videos and to interview some of the organisers. Many of the participating cyclists worked for delivery services, which have grown considerably over the last few years. ‘The rich pay to avoid risks on the street, and the pressure is on us to be quick, otherwise you don’t get any tip to top up your measly rate per delivery’, Santiago told me on another occasion, referring to the trade he represents. He is the leader of a group of delivery cyclists who have demanded better conditions from the companies who hire them, as well as from the government, which oversees such businesses. After a couple of hours, the cycloactivists decided to block yet another lane, leaving only one lane open for cars and another for the Metrobus, Mexico City’s bus rapid transit (BRT) system. As it got dark, the protesters kept on shouting their slogans and motivating each other, deciding at that point to block the whole avenue. Shortly before they did so, the transit police officers who had been mediating the tensions between motorists and protesters diverted the incoming transit bus towards a sideroad. In the end, the police chief did not show up, but he sent a representative. The cycloactivists were told that efforts were in place to improve the situation, and after a couple of hours they stopped their protest and disbanded.

It is illegal in Mexico City to block city streets (Meneses-Reyes 2015). The primacy of the automobile in the megalopolis is embedded in the inequality-laden shape of the city (Bayón and Saraví 2013), where gated communities (Sheinbaum 2010; Giglia 2008), private shopping malls (Müller 2010) and other securitised areas continuously seek to determine who can use what space. Nevertheless, these issues have not stopped previous waves of protests (Inclán 2019), many of which included avenue blockades and even illegal camping sites across vast stretches of roads (Crane 2017). Public space has thus served as a site of political negotiation for decades now (Parkinson 2012). The difference with cycloactivists is that their protests do not use the blocking of streets as the ultimate tactic. The case that I have described above is neither a common nor the main form of protest by cycloactivists. They usually state their disagreements with government officials during their everyday cycle rides as well as through purposeful interventions and creative performances on streets and in public spaces. For cycloactivists, breaking rules is not merely about blocking streets but rather about highlighting injustices in the governance of mobility in the city. Other rules that cycloactivists break include the following: cycling in tunnels, on bridges and on high-speed avenues where bicycles are not allowed; cycling in a group through heavy traffic, crisscrossing between

lanes to disrupt motorists; hanging banners and signs on bridges, which is forbidden; painting signs on pavement and tarmac; and laying on the ground on avenues or streets, simulating having been run over (usually known as a 'die in'). Rule breaking among cycloactivists, therefore, is performed in such a way as to stress the vulnerability of cyclists' bodies in city streets and avenues.

The project that informs this article is part of a research group on urban ethics, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).<sup>2</sup> The group included projects in twelve different cities around the world, each studied from the perspective of a different scholarly discipline. Between 2018 and 2020, I conducted eight months of immersive ethnographic participation in what I call the urban mobility milieu, which is comprised of activist groups, non-governmental organisations, private consultancies, academics, international organisations and various government agencies. During my visits, I attended academic events, public discussions and presentations by government officials, as well as activist-organised protests, dialogues, interventions and campaigns. I was also present at cultural events and public occasions. I held informal conversations, conducted semi-structured interviews recorded in digital format, compiled a photographic registry of events and of local infrastructure and urban scenes, and took notes on various events both as they happened and in the form of a fieldwork diary. I have also analysed press coverage, social media and the various publications of activists, NGOs, local academics and governments. Key to my research was my involvement in everyday cycling and cycling events through participant observation. I rode my bicycle alongside activists and others in order to better understand what they faced and how the city is experienced on two wheels.

This article is guided by the following research question: In what manner do cycloactivists use rule-breaking in their efforts to exert influence on mobility in Mexico City? I develop my argument in three phases: first, I describe why activists view the rules and regulations that they break as illegitimate; then I refer to the urban technocratic rituals that cycloactivists take part in; and third, I explore the role of experiential activism that advocates of cycling rely on. I wrap up my analysis with a suggestion that such rule-breaking is a type of urban ritual that seeks to improve the city, not burn it down. It is important to state here that the broader project that the text is a part of involves a study of urban ethics, which in our research group we analyse as quotidian performative or discursive negotiations about what is better for collective life in the city. Although I will not delve here into the ethical aspect of it, mentioning it helps explain the frame used and the attention given to what activists do in relation to the community of urban dwellers and traversers as a whole. In our view, ur-

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2 Project number 240207984

ban ethics exist on multiple scales, ranging from micro-situations between two people, to meso-scenes, for example where activists address more people, to macro-circumstances, like urban planning or policymaking. For these reasons, the political implications of urban activism extend farther than the relatively small circle of onlookers or the audience reached by mainstream or social media. In part, my interest in cycloactivism and its struggles for improved mobility and the environment are due to its practical shaping of aspirations for democratic governance outside of established channels in Mexico City. This, I believe, is related to the bodily experience of cycling in the city and the rational and emotional reflexivity it produces among people (Acosta García 2018; Månistö-Funk 2020). By blatantly breaking a few rules, cycloactivists shed light on the need for rules to better reflect what the collective needs.

### **Illegitimate traffic rules worth breaking**

I arrived early at the Parque de la Bombilla on Friday, 22 March 2019, in the southern part of Mexico City. It was around six p.m. when cycloactivists started coming together. Some turned up alone, others in pairs or in larger groups. Organisers had convened all activist groups in the city for a special intervention, without explaining in advance what it would consist of. The purpose was to protest against government plans to change the denomination of some streets and avenues. This would make it illegal for cyclists to use certain routes because of their re-classification as urban freeways with a maximum speed limit of 80 kilometres per hour. 'Some of us need to use those avenues, otherwise we cannot come all the way into the city from our living areas ... it is simply not possible', Fabián told me. I noticed that many of those arriving were leaders of their own groups from different corners of the city: Iztapalapa, Tlalpan, Coyacacán, Azcapotzalco, Xochimilco. After asking around, I finally found out what they intended to do: the plan was to walk slowly along the Avenida Insurgentes southwards for two kilometres, using all lanes dedicated to automobiles (leaving the lane for the BRT free). In the park, they started coordinating so as to walk in the shape of a bicycle (for a bird's eye photo or video opportunity from a drone). At 8 p.m., they set off. Friday is a heavy traffic day, especially in the evening. As expected, drivers quickly became exasperated. On two occasions, motorists sought to run over some protesters, accelerating and pushing their way into the march. The police did not arrive, despite the havoc that activists were creating via an action that was clearly illegal. A few officers were visible on side roads trying to divert drivers from the area. The mainstream media ignored the protest, but activists shared it on social media as well as through the alternative media that usually cover cycling news (Hidalgo Vivas 2019).

This was another occasion in which Mexico City cycloactivists broke rules, disrupting traffic as a way to demonstrate their disagreement with government

policies. The fact that the Mexico City government did not send police officers to stop them or to negotiate with them meant a sort of tacit agreement about their main critiques. Negotiations would follow through back channels and consultations. On the occasions when I visited the Ministry of Mobility, I noticed how several groups – of neighbours, business leaders or other stakeholders – were there to complain or express their disagreement with certain policies, projects or plans. Several government officials told me about the ongoing negotiations that need to take place before any change can occur in infrastructure or planning. Historically, such demands from the government can be seen in the light of corporatist and clientelist networks, which were of crucial importance during the single-party regime that prevailed for most of the twentieth century. As Laura Nader has put it, ‘the law cannot usefully be isolated from other social and cultural systems of control that serve many purposes’ (2002: 27).

In one way, therefore, cycloactivists have continued with a tradition of defying legal orders in Mexico in order to gain political influence. Legal institutions may follow examples from Europe and the US, but the way in which they function is in response more to local networks of power and influence (Ferry 2003). Power asymmetries have characterised institutional architectures where successive governments have reproduced inequalities based on ideas of race, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Gledhill 1994). But whereas previously activists had also broken laws and regulations to make their demands, the framework of the cycloactivists’ actions was markedly different. The attempts in previous protest movements to challenge the status quo were often met with state violence or reprisals (Pansters 2012). Those who would take up issues important to the public sphere thus needed to seek allies among powerful figures, be they individuals or established groups (like unions or associations). A case in point are the numerous protests that have taken place on Mexican city streets between street vendors and authorities (Mendiola García 2017). Unionised vendors sought to fight ongoing harassment from police forces and continue their trade. In doing so, however, they entered a complex network of corporatism and clientelism, where demands were negotiated in exchange for political favours or support. For those who refused to enter such arrangements, violence was used to take them out of the political arena, often with deadly consequences for leaders or visible speakers. This *modus operandi* was especially prevalent during most of the twentieth century, as the country experienced a so-called ‘soft dictatorship’ (*dictablanda*) (Gillingham and Smith 2014; Vaughan 2018). The alleged transition to democracy that started in the 1990s came with multiple protest movements demanding major changes in human rights legislation and policies, as well as in numerous other areas. Despite the

perceived urgency of reforms, the emergent constellation of political parties at various levels of government tended to reproduce many of the practices of the single-party regime. Protests were effectively criminalised; that is, those who demanded changes were often accused of breaking laws (Doran 2017). Activists working on human rights or environmental issues, for example, continue to be assassinated on a regular basis. For these and other reasons, several analysts and scholars have argued that democracy as a form of government has remained elusive in the country (Olvera 2010).

In this context, promoters of the bicycle entering the public sphere constituted a conundrum, a puzzle or quandary, for political analysts and government officials. They were difficult to place. If anything, they were considered a leisure club. The first wave of activists who later became influential started out by complaining that they could not use their high-end bicycles on city roads, as they wanted to exercise and have a pleasant day out. They benefitted from their privileged backgrounds. Many were middle class, eloquent, white and studying for university degrees. They were thus not seen as a threat to the status quo. But as they became immersed in discussions about the bicycle, they gradually incorporated less privileged individuals and issues on their agendas. In a markedly unequal context, which has shaped the physical shape of the city, with its gated communities and privatized spaces (Giglia 2008; Sheinbaum 2010), the bicycle has served as a mediator between individual longings and the public good (Meneses-Reyes 2015). In 1998, a group of activists decided to adopt the name *Bicitekas*, combining the short form for bicycle (*bici*) with a stylised ending similar to that of 'aztecas' (Aztecs). This group has led the way for hundreds more by inviting anyone interested to attend their activities and events. Something that caught my attention from early on was that the night rides that *Bicitekas* organised served as a meeting space between social classes. In few other situations had I noticed people from very different socioeconomic backgrounds sharing an experience like that. In doing so, I saw how some people learned to talk to each other across divides that are often stressed by derogatory epithets. Nevertheless, differences remained, especially between those who chose to show-off expensive bicycles and accessories and those with simple bicycles. The scenes of friendly exchanges that I witnessed had their roots in the mobilisations of the 2000s, when cycloactivists started becoming more visible through their public performances and ludic interventions. More recently, social media has helped multiply their messages and announcements. The cycling milieu, therefore, has developed an agenda that crosses socioeconomic divides, denouncing inequalities and injustice. Its aspirations thus combine a broad range of issues, among which the environment and mobility justice stand out (Furness 2010).

The legislation and norms regarding mobility in Mexico are good examples of biased legal frameworks that perpetuate inequalities. Motorised urban dwellers are prioritised over pedestrians and cyclists in various forms: through the distribution of public investment in road and public space infrastructures; through the lack of a need to take a driving test to obtain an official license to drive; and through the incentives that exist for motorised vehicles. For instance, a failure to pay the annual tax for motorised vehicles is often ‘condoned’ or else the tax heavily reduced to entice urban dwellers to pay other taxes instead. In early 2019, as I saw an ad announcing such a reprieve while walking together with Sara, she told me it was particularly painful because taxing motorised vehicles could help pay for a more sustainable infrastructure (for cyclists and pedestrians). ‘As it is, we keep subsidising car drivers’, she told me. In most cities, the majority of public space is dedicated to streets and avenues. For this reason, Jane Jacobs has referred to them, together with sidewalks, as a city’s ‘vital organs’ (2011[1961]: 37). The legislation and norms overseeing the social interactions that occur in such spaces thus reflect the priorities of the society in question. The fact that anyone can drive without needing to prove that they have the knowledge or experience to do so undermines any other provision in the norms or bylaws. For these reasons, in the eyes of cycloactivists much of the legislation and numerous government projects and policies lack legitimacy. Without an acknowledgment of their relevance for citizens, or in this case urban dwellers, existing legislation does not necessarily represent the best interests of the collective (Pardo and Prato 2019). This is at heart a discussion about the social contract, known as the exchange through which people give up some rights in exchange for being looked after by rulers (Supiot 2017).

Nevertheless, cycloactivists strive to bring about a better legislative system and a more effective governance architecture that ensures their right to ride on the city streets and avenues. On one occasion, as I saw a car honking at a cyclist and shouting that he should get out of the way (in somewhat rude terms), I noticed how the cyclist responded by arguing that it was his right to cycle on the street, even pointing out the article number of the local constitution to the aggressive driver. ‘Look it up!’, he demanded as he refused to move from the centre of the lane. Such a sense of having the same right to the space as cars challenges the perspective of motorised urban dwellers, who have been used to having little or no supervision for decades in the city. To better defy the sense of impunity informing the way in which many motorists aggressively target cyclists, activists have teamed up with NGOs and international institutions to help modify the status quo. One example was the ‘Programa Integral de Seguridad Vial’ (Integral Programme of Road Security), which the Mexico City government implemented with the help of the



Interamerican Development Bank (Rodríguez Martínez 2017). It consisted of a roadmap to reduce insecurity in the city's roads and avenues. At its heart was a complex process of consultation, during which time organisers identified the key issues and concerns of urban dwellers, activists and institutional actors. 'It was the best participatory process I have been part of', Alicia told me. One of the organisers was the 'Laboratorio para la ciudad' (City Lab), an office within the Mexico City government that sought to work across different ministries to address pressing problems.

Participation in the process of designing new legislation and its normative bylaws thus provided activists with a feeling of ownership over the result. In his recent work *The Participant*, Christopher Kelty offers an anthropological conceptualisation of participation as an enacting of the sense of community, or 'the experience of becoming a collective' (2019: 3). Kelty argues that the emotional and affective experience of participation, which is an intense and meaningful aspect of people's involvement, is not usually part of scholarly or policy-related analyses of participatory processes. For policymaking, this means that the ultimate decisions about what is incorporated into legislation and by-laws based on the participatory processes are guided more by official agendas than by participants' emotional and affective priorities. Regarding mobility in Mexico City, this has meant that successive changes in legislation and practices have not only fallen short of expectations but are perceived as only cosmetic changes made to appease protesters. Thus, while some policies have improved road safety – like the reduction of drunk driving (Colchero et al. 2020) – many cyclists often feel at the mercy of aggressive motorists. For these reasons, activists break rules on a regular basis not only to get the attention of authorities, but to alert all urban dwellers about the illegitimacy of some rules. To ensure that the new rules are legitimate, cycloactivists have engaged with technocratic knowledge systems and language that seeks inclusive processes and results.

### **Urban rituals of a technocratic sort**

Wendy James has argued that people are 'ceremonial animals' (James 2003), as our existence is laden with symbolism and meaningful practices. I believe that Mexico City cycloactivists enact protests by breaking rules not to dismiss the rules or the government that supports them, but to argue for better rules. It is a process akin to what Max Gluckman has described as rituals of rebellion, in which 'there is dispute about particular distributions of power, and not about the structure of the system itself' (1954: 3). This means that cycloactivists demand that the rules include the bicycle as a worthy vehicle in city streets, in order for there to be legal protection for those using it.

Mexican cycloactivists have benefited from a global surge in interest and appreciation of the bicycle. For Marc Augé, the current fascination with bicycles

is due to the increasing urbanisation of our planet, where cycling ‘gives the city again its character of a land of adventure’ (2009[2008]: 18). Some argue that it is a technified form of *flânerie* (Oddy 2007). The promotion of cycling, however, goes beyond a mere desire to enjoy the city anew. It has become a global political project (Bonham 2011), characterised by a diversity of approaches in each local context (Cooper and Leahy 2017). Mexico City activists have fully engaged in multi-scalar exercises of networking, consistently expanding their collaborative relations with similar groups around the world. At a national level, they started the Bicired, a network of like-minded activist groups promoting the bicycle in various cities (León 2016). In Latin America, they actively participate in the World Bicycle Forum, which was launched in 2012 in Porto Alegre and modelled on the World Social Forum (which, despite its name, has remained largely constrained to Latin America). In 2017, Mexico City hosted the World Bicycle Forum, through which local activists gained support and funding from the city government. Worldwide, local activists have engaged in collaborations with, for example, the BYCS network of ‘bicycle mayors’ (BYCS 2020). This programme consists of a leading activist being named ‘mayor’ either by direct election of local cycloactivists or by the support of existing groups.

One of the main reasons behind the apparent success of cycloactivists and the milieu they participate in can be qualified as neoliberal technocratic rituals. Some activists and promoters of the bicycle have incorporated into their modus operandi a strong sense of measurement and standardisation. This has taken place alongside a cycle of professionalisation through which some activists have trained in national and foreign universities and worked in non-governmental organisations in order to improve their technical knowledge of mobility design and planning. One example is that of Francisca, who started working in 2011 as a cycloactivist but who in 2014 switched to working in the city government to help promote cycling. When she became involved in activism, she was studying public administration in a renowned local university. Once she finished her studies, she was invited to work in the office to promote bicycling. From her position in the government, she has maintained a constant dialogue with activist groups, trying to bridge the gap between their expectations and her projects and constraints. ‘We are a minority in government, so that is why we need you to raise your voice’, she told a group of bicycle promoters at an event in the city centre during an informal meeting, called ‘Café Bicicletero’ (Bicyclist café). This event, held on 21 February 2019, invited the bicycle-promoting community to come together to hear about new government projects and plan joint activities. On that occasion, as during the many other times I heard her speak at events or in interviews with the media – or also in our conversations – she repeated her mantra: ‘what is not counted does not count.’ She thus invited activists to use quantitative studies to substantiate their claims.

'If we can prove that more people are using the bicycle, then our arguments for demanding more infrastructure gain legitimacy', she explained. Her office followed up on this logic by installing three cyclist counters along important avenues with cycleways. Each counter shows the number of bicycles that have passed by on a certain day or in a certain month or year. 'With cycleways, people are a bit shy, you know? You build them and they slowly come. It's not that suddenly they are full ... but that they are used a little at first and more later on', Francisca explained to me at a dinner after an event of the Bicycle Mayors.

A peculiar challenge in Mexico City is to administer this push towards technocratisation. In particular, the reliance on trustworthy data is crucial. One of the first institutions that I visited during my fieldwork was the 'Laboratorio para la ciudad' (Laboratory for the City) (LabCDMX 2018). Launched in 2013 and closed in 2018, it was an experiment that combined efforts by government, civil society, the private sector and academia to enact specific projects. One of them was mobility. I went there to interview Javier, who was a renowned activist for pedestrian rights. He explained to me what the Lab did and showed me around the offices. The lab was modelled on an international trend to bring innovation to the management of urban affairs (Karvonen and van Heur 2014). Javier confided in me that part of the challenge was to make sense of the contrasting types of information handled by different ministries. Another one of the Lab's projects was to help ensure the commitment to an 'open city', that is, to the availability and accessibility of public information for its citizens. To achieve this aim, however, they first needed to promote 'data science' in government, or a standardised approach to handling information and its analyses. Major NGOs and international foundations sought to help the Mexico City government enter what was quickly becoming a dynamic field, where delivery and taxi transport companies were handling vast amounts of data on urban dwellers' habits and practices (Goletz and Bahamonde-Birke 2021). But the mass of new data produced by technology companies was at odds with a thorny culture of information handling by government authorities. In a telling study, Sara Sefchovich analysed public discourses by Mexican authorities and prominent figures, showing not only minor discrepancies between ministries, but systematic processes of hiding and obfuscating the truth, proving that governmental practice was not simply careless, but rather openly untruthful. The title of her book summarizes her findings, *Country of lies (País de mentiras)*, in which she provides evidence to argue that 'as the years go by and ideological fashions change, and despite the changes of political parties in power and officials in government, we Mexican citizens are lied to over and over again' (Sefchovich 2013: 16).

In their efforts to achieve meaningful changes, cycloactivists sought to align their efforts with non-governmental organisations that work closely

with international financial institutions and development agencies. The two key players in mobility policymaking are the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) and the World Resources Institute (WRI). Both are international NGOs based in the United States. ITDP has historically been more involved with cycling infrastructure, while WRI has prioritised public transport. Numerous activists have at some point either worked in one of these two organisations or else maintain close relations with some of its members. Several of their workers are also activists in their free time. ITDP developed out of a 1980s initiative to deliver bicycles to Nicaragua instead of the military aid that the American government had been using against the left-wing regime (ITDP 2020). The Mexican chapter of WRI grew out of a project to help the Mexico City government launch its Rapid Bus Transit system, called *Metrobús* (WRI 2022). Both ITDP and WRI produce a series of reports and studies to help governments improve their projects and policymaking. They do so with a clear technocratic approach, prioritising charts and diagrams that show the benefits of sustainable transportation.

To motivate local governments to improve their policies for bicycles throughout Mexico, ITDP awards an annual *Cyclocities Ranking* (Medina 2021). It is an exercise of quantifying the quality of policies and projects to promote the use of bicycles. Sara, who works at ITDP and is an active member of a collective of ‘cycle-travellers’, or bikepackers (Reiss 2021), explained to me ITDP’s approach. ‘We do not want to simply count the kilometres of cycleways to evaluate what cities are doing ... what we try is to combine a bunch of issues, with clear indicators that can be measured, to explain our results’, she told me one day over lunch close to her office. The Mexican office of ITDP has been doing these rankings since 2013, although they were interrupted for a couple of years (2016 and 2017).

I argue that by engaging with technocratic methods to measure, analyse and make suggestions to governments, activists participate in peculiar urban rituals of a neoliberal age. These rituals are urban not simply because of where they take place, but because they are shaped by thinking and living the city. They are neoliberal since they focus on a heightened responsibility of private actors (individuals, NGOs and organisations), while also pushing for an entrepreneurial approach to creative thinking. Ironically, therefore, activists have tended to demand that the government be more technocratic. This approach has helped activists navigate changing political parties at different government levels, by maintaining a discourse of evidence-based improvement in infrastructures and policies, while remaining free from contractual obligations (which NGOs often had in their dealings with governments) and thus being able to break some rules. This playing on different fields to differ-

ent tunes is not too far from JoAnn Martin's (2005) analysis of the role of 'loose connections' in the transformation of the Mexican state. In a detailed study of Tepoztlán, Martin (2005: 95) identified that loose connections with people they trusted and distrusted helped locals deal with bureaucrats without allowing the state to take over their dealings. In this sense, cycloactivists played the tune of technocratic data management, but in their hearts they still held true to the sensory experience of cycling the city.

### **Cycloactivism as a transformative experience**

Over the last few years, the bicycle has gained significant status around the world as an ideal example of sustainable mobility. This is mostly because it is propelled by its rider's muscles, eliminating the need for other sources of energy and the pollution that comes with the use of fossil fuels. Some of a bicycle's characteristics have added to its merits in the eyes of urban planners and dwellers, especially its size, which allows many units to flow on streets, and its social character, as it enables people to see each other and sometimes even cycle together while following conversations (Vivanco 2013). It is also considered conducive for public health, as it provides riders with physical exercise while also serving as a form of transportation. In Mexico City, I spoke to dozens of cyclists, some devoted to activism in promoting the bicycle and others who simply rode for practical purposes or for leisure. While many mentioned environmental concerns, economic savings or convivial benefits as motivators for their own cycling, the single most important reason for the vast majority was the personal transformation that cycling had brought about in them. Some feel the urge to encourage friends and family to share in the experience, which is at the root of their choosing to promote cycling. Cycloactivists often told me that they understand the difficulty for drivers and others to understand the cycling experience if they have not cycled themselves, and that awareness is at the root of performative interventions in the public sphere, i.e. to spur a sense of empathy among urban dwellers (Acosta García 2018). Cycloactivists choose to use their own bodies to highlight their vulnerability in streets and avenues and to make onlookers reflect and act differently.

Most cycloactivists that I met in Mexico City only became avid cyclists in their adult life, after years of not having used the bicycle on a regular basis. Most had learned to cycle as children but had abandoned the practice as they grew older. In different ways, many shared with me the awe they felt when taking up cycling on a regular basis, because they discovered the city and themselves anew. But they also discovered the dangers of a city not used to cyclists, where a lack of effective regulations enables motorists to claim every inch of space in streets and avenues. Cycloactivists therefore demand first of all to

be recognised as legitimate users of public routes as a means of seeking protection from harm from all other actors using such spaces. Their actions are akin to Judith Butler's considerations on precarity as the 'politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence, to street or domestic violence, or other forms not enacted by states but for which the judicial instruments of states fail to provide sufficient protection or redress' (2015: 33–34).

The intervention that launched cycloactivists onto Mexico City's public scene took place in 2004, during the inauguration of an elevated freeway that was meant to reduce the city's greenhouse emissions by resolving some of the gridlock that abounded in the city. The Mexico City government had tapped into international resources focused on addressing global environmental concerns to expand infrastructures for motorised vehicles as well as renew some public transport networks. For the small group of cycloactivists active at the time, the construction of an elevated freeway only exacerbated the problems and did not solve them. When the first overpass was completed, and as the authorities were getting ready to officially inaugurate it, a group of cyclists snuck in and performed a die-in. This is a tactic according to which activists offer a dramatic representation of risks to human life (Hayes 2006). By lying on the floor, acting as if they had died, activists accomplish two things at once: they occupy a space that may be of symbolic significance (in this case, an avenue that could not be opened to traffic), and they provide photo opportunities for the press, which makes it more likely that the issue at hand will appear in mainstream media outlets. Activists' bodies, therefore, provide the legitimacy for their stated objective. In this case, because authorities had determined that the overpasses were good for Mexico City's environment (by reducing congestion), the cycloactivists' arguments were particularly poignant. The government decided to use some of the funds for the overpass to build the city's first cycleways alongside it. While the result is a far from ideal pathway, with steep inclines to avoid streets, at times too narrow and also exposed to all the fumes of the traffic below the underpass, it was a first step. It also provided activists with a sense of success. 'I was crying [for joy]', Alicia told me in her house as we talked about the first strides of Bicitekas, the cycloactivist group that she is part of: 'Together with gaining access to the metro, it was one of our first victories', she said. Alicia, a housewife and mother of two in her early fifties, is a force to be reckoned with. She is one of the most visible cycloactivists in Mexico City and is frequently invited to talk on mainstream media programmes and at other events.

Through their mobilisation efforts, cycloactivists not only seek to persuade government authorities but also all urban dwellers. For each of these target

audiences, the message is somewhat different. For government authorities, the main message is that cyclists have the right to use city streets and avenues. In fact, they argue, all urban dwellers, but especially those who do not own cars and use other means of transportation, pay the taxes that are used to pave streets and build bridges for motorised vehicles. This means that motorists are subsidised by the users of public transport and pedestrians. For other urban dwellers, cycloactivists want to entice them to become cyclists. They do so through a series of activities and programmes to encourage everyone to have the confidence to use a bicycle to commute to work. One such initiative is called 'Yo te cuido' (I take care of you), which, as David explained to me over a cup of coffee, occurred to him as a way to link volunteer cycloactivists with inexperienced cyclists feeling insecure about cycling in the streets. This assistance is threefold: 1) to identify the best possible route to reach the workplace every day ('a common mistake is that people first want to follow the same route they would take by car or by public transport, and it should be different', David told me); 2) to give pointers about how to use the bicycle in normal traffic ('newbies are used to cycling in the park, but not on city streets'); and 3) to cycle together for a week or so, to help the neophyte gain confidence. For all urban dwellers, the message is not limited to cyclists having the right to use city streets and avenues, but crucially of doing so with preferential treatment by motorists because of their vulnerability.

This message in part informed another protest that I witnessed on a cloudy Saturday morning on the corner of a busy crossing in Mexico City. Part of an intervention that included other activities to highlight the vulnerability of pedestrians, nine cycloactivists wearing bright yellow security vests started riding on the Avenida Revolución. They all had a similar sign hanging from their backs, which had been printed on a grey board: 'I am a \_\_\_\_, one less car.' Each activist filled in the blank space with marker. One read 'mother', another 'engineer', yet another 'architect', and so forth. When they rode onto the avenue, they did not do so on the cycleway that had recently been built on the right side of the route, which is protected from motorised traffic by rectangular cement plant holders. They went straight into the five lanes of traffic. They stuck together as they advanced through the traffic, changing lanes and clearly annoying drivers. Since it was a Saturday, the avenue was not as full nor as hectic as it usually is during weekdays. The purpose of such action, activists told me, was to be seen by motorists and make them pay attention to cyclists as vulnerable human beings, and also to help motorists realise that normal people can ride bicycles and reduce traffic by using fewer cars. This action was part of an activist-led, privately financed campaign called 'Mission: zero' to reduce fatal accidents with pedestrians and cyclists in Mexican city streets.

The activist groups involved are Liga Peatonal (Pedestrian League) and Cultura Vial (Road Culture). The funding company is Cemex, the largest cement factory in the world, which decided to sponsor the national campaign after one of its trucks ran over a cyclist in Mexico City.

The strategies that cycloactivists use to get their messages across vary widely. But in essence, they rely heavily on preaching by example. On cycling city streets, they use their bodies as a show of vulnerability and of deserving rights. They insist on forcing a rethinking of the status quo by highlighting the unfairness and problems perpetuated by current arrangements. One example is that of gender violence (Balkmar 2019). The current levels of insecurity in Mexico City have led several public transport services to segregate areas as being only for women and children. Nevertheless, harassment, violence and even kidnappings of women continue to be reported throughout the city's public transport network. During my fieldwork, a few public campaigns had been launched inviting urban dwellers to identify scenes of abuse and inform authorities. The reason was that passers-by frequently assumed that molesters were annoyed partners. It had become a *modus operandi* for men to talk loudly as if the woman had been acting up and he was 'taking charge' and taking her home, when in reality he was kidnapping her. Many cycloactivist women that I spoke to told me they felt much safer cycling than on public transport. 'Even if men whistle at me while I'm cycling, it is not as bad as men being close to you when you don't have anywhere to go on a crowded metro car; one moment I'm there, the next a hundred meters ahead', Esther told me. An architect studying philosophy in her early thirties, she was particularly attuned to her bodily experience. Esther combined her studies of architecture, urban design and philosophy with activism, but also with art. She taught dance and performance arts, and she regularly held performances to process the difficulties that she experienced in urban life as a woman in Mexico City. She told me that instead of relying on a victimhood discourse, she sought to take control of the situations that she was faced. Her words reminded me of recent feminist reflections on vulnerability and protest, which laud activists' work as offering 'alternative resources for self-empowerment, collective agency, and protection' (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016: 2).

The bodily experiences of cycloactivists, therefore, guide them in navigating the precarity of life in Mexico City (Butler 2012). One of the challenges that cycloactivists face is in confronting long-held views on inequalities and power hierarchies, which shape the city, its regulations and the behaviour of its inhabitants. Since the bicycle is considered much lower in the pecking order than motorised vehicles, the violence that some drivers direct at riders often presumes a need to subjugate the latter, to show them their place. Cycloactivists have used social media to denounce such attitudes and abuses by



demanding their own right to use city streets and avenues. In some cases, they cite established regulations where such a right is already stated. In others, they argue that their rights need to be expanded because of the imbalance that various modes of transportation imply for their users and passers-by.

For my fieldwork in Mexico City between 2018 and 2020, I frequently rode bicycles, sometimes joining activists in public demands, other times becoming involved in collective rides, but also simply as a form of transportation, to know what thousands of urban cyclists face every day. Many people that I know find Mexico City's streets and avenues daunting. Before this project, I had never imagined that I would cycle on its avenues and even through tunnels. But I did, and it was empowering. After some of my initial conversations with cycloactivists, and after hearing some of them in talks and debates, I felt motivated to be more assertive when riding on two wheels. I thus came to realise how one's attitude changes the experience of cycling on dangerous streets. By overtly asserting my right to ride within a lane, to engage in movement that included not just large, heavy and loud machines, it became easier to cycle on a regular basis. This sentiment certainly did not minimise the risks, though, which were always present. But I also noticed that quite a few drivers were actually very considerate; some kept their distance, others waited for me to advance into a crossing before making a turn, while others still made eye contact and smiled. I also came across a few aggressive drivers, but these encounters were not frequent or overly dangerous. After I met some childhood friends for breakfast, it suddenly dawned on me: I had grown up in a suburb of Mexico City, and during each day of my fieldwork I had seen more cyclists moving around the city than I had remembered seeing during my entire childhood and teenage years combined (I moved away when I turned 18). But the streets were also relatively quieter. Busier, certainly, but less noisy. I remember much less restraint in the use of the car horn, often in rapid compositions translating into rude melodies targeting other drivers or pedestrians. I also remember drivers rapidly accelerating their car as a menacing warning, or shouting and swearing. In contrast, during my fieldwork I only sporadically heard car horns, menacing accelerations or shouts. I could not help but wonder what had led to such a change. It may well have been, I thought, that the city itself had changed. There were also now some red lights for pedestrians, which simply did not exist when I was growing up.

Cycloactivists thus use their experience of cycling in Mexico City's streets as part of their protest repertoire. Their bodies are the message and the medium, used to highlight the poetics and politics of cycling. I could link my own sensory experiences of cycling with anthropological reflections on bodies, where perception and practice are fused as modes of understanding and dealing with

the world (Csordas 1990, 1993). As I cycled on Mexico City's streets, I could also understand some ideas that cycloactivists had shared with me as being crucial to their ongoing activism. The one that I heard quite often, which I had thought was simply a rehearsed statement, was that they had discovered the city anew. Some framed it in terms of distance ('I never imagined places would be so close'), others in terms of navigation ('it is very different than being crammed in a train dozens of meters below ground'), and yet others as a means of discovery ('I have found corners I had no idea existed'). After a few weeks of regular cycling, I also felt like I had experienced the city anew. It was suddenly less scary, less menacing. But, crucially, it also felt more like a process of collaboration instead of consumption. I did not feel like I was using the streets as my road, but that I was negotiating with pedestrians, drivers and others to decide how we would all flow a bit more easily. Sometimes it was not easy, but it worked. It was similar to how cycling allows the rider to perceive many aspects of urban life more immediately. Some of them are uncomfortable, like the stench of sewage, which is at times unbearable. Other times it is quite joyful, like the gentle breeze below a tree beside a park on a warm sunny day. Cycloactivists often insisted to me that they worked to allow more people to discover the city as they do, because the more people who would choose to do so, the nicer the city would become.

### **Concluding remarks**

Cycloactivists break a few rules in order to get their message across, usually seeking to shed light on what they consider illegitimate policies or procedures. Their rule-breaking activities are meant to attract maximum attention from onlookers and media for their interventions or performances in public areas. By breaking minor traffic regulations or public space use guidelines (like those relating to protests), they seek not to undermine the city government's authority, but to highlight the unjust and unequal treatment that cyclists receive every day. They break those rules using their bodies. Cycling. By riding their bikes or placing their bodies in forbidden spaces, they highlight the vulnerability of individual people on city streets and avenues. But they also complement such bodily performances with texts or statements that justify their actions. In collaboration with established NGOs, activists have developed sophisticated discourses to explain each of their actions. They explain the reasons underpinning the unjust treatment they are calling attention to and demand improvements to protect cyclists and pedestrians. This combined strategy of embodied interventions together with technocratic information and language has managed to galvanise some government institutions as well as international agencies in their favour.

The fact that various government offices have chosen not to pursue any punitive action against activists when they break the rules speaks of a tacit agreement regarding their criticisms. Or at least it refers to a willingness to allow certain rule-breaking actions on their part. For activists, this has provided a sense of righteousness that allows them to continue with their campaigns and strategies without feeling threatened. This in turn has helped the cycloactivist milieu to blossom and spread across the city, with numerous groups being formed in numerous neighbourhoods. These nascent collectives serve the double purpose of promoting cycling throughout the megalopolis and extending the collaborative network that underpins city-wide campaigns.

A risk that cycloactivists often seem to gloss over, however, is that relying so heavily on technical expertise, rhetorical abilities and diplomatic practices to liaise with NGOs and international institutions often means letting well-off activists handle the decision-making, leadership roles and important tasks. While new activists who become involved are given advice and pointers, they do not necessarily receive formal or systematic training. This means that individuals who already have oratory skills and social capital tend to remain the most visible and influential activists in the city. With such privileged positions, the egalitarian ethos that the bicycle has come to represent is undermined. Many of the technocratic discourses used by cycloactivists argue against mobility injustice. All cyclists are vulnerable on urban roads and avenues; but if only a few voices end up shaping collective demands, there is bound to be a disjuncture between statements and reality.

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## **SOURCES**

### **Interviews and other fieldwork materials**

All the interviews, fieldwork journals, notes, photos, and videos are in the possession of the author, who conducted interviews himself in Mexico City. The interviewees' names have been pseudonymised. The following list is in the order of appearance:

Adrián, male, late 20s, cycloactivist & journalist, conversation at the Avenida Insurgentes roundabout, 15 November 2019.

Santiago, male, early 30s, cycloactivist & leader of delivery cyclists' union, interview done at the Parque de los Venados, 5 February 2020.

- Karina, female, late 20s, avid cyclist, local government employee and mother of two girls, interview done at a café in the Roma Norte neighbourhood, 3 April 2019.
- Alicia, female, late 40s, cycloactivist leader and stay-at-home mother of two boys, interview done in her house, in the Portales neighbourhood, 16 October 2018.
- David, male, mid-20s, journalist and organiser of 'Yo te cuidó', interview done at restaurant in the Roma Norte neighbourhood, 12 March 2019.
- Esther, late 20s, activist on pedestrian rights, architect completing a doctoral degree in philosophy and a performance artist, interview done in a restaurant, in the Colonia del Valle, 24 March 2019.
- Fabián, early 30s, activist and entrepreneur, interview done in the Parque de la Bombilla in the Iztapalapa neighbourhood, 23 March 2019.
- Sara, late 20s, NGO worker and member of a bikepacker collective, conversation over lunch and on her way back to her office in the Roma Norte neighbourhood, 4 April 2019.
- Francisca, mid-30s, government worker in charge of sustainable transportation at the Ministry of Mobility, conversation in a restaurant in the Roma Norte neighbourhood, 10 October 2018; interview done in her office in Chapultepec park, 17 October 2018; presentation at the Café Biciclero, in a restaurant in the city centre, 21 February 2019.
- Javier, late 20s, activist and urban planning student, interview done at the Laboratorio para la Ciudad, in the city centre, 7 June 2018.

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