

Architects in Enjoyment: Fun and Politics in the Swedish Cycling Experience, 1918–39

Patrick Hegarty Morrish

Department of History, Central European University, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

Interwar Swedish cycling offers an opportunity to consider the relationship between fun and politics in sport. A collection of sources which reveals that light-hearted fun was central to the experience of cycling, whether through enjoying the landscape, adventuring abroad, or cycling with friends and family, also shows that cycling was connected intricately to the policies of the Swedish Social Democratic Worker's Party (SAP). The SAP programme unlocked cycling for swathes of Swedes, but, more profoundly, enjoying riding a bike also helped to foster new attitudes and behaviours which converged with SAP policies. Simply having fun when cycling encouraged new approaches to nature and travel abroad, and new patterns of sociability, which made cyclists architects, together with the SAP and other leisure time and outdoor organisations, in constructing the new type of society that emerged in interwar Sweden.

KEYWORDS

Sweden; environment; cycling; inter-war Europe; Swedish Social Democratic Party

Reflecting on her youth cycling around Södertälje, the small city southeast of Stockholm where she was born in 1929, Ann-Britt Balaguer conjured an image of leisurely sport and recreation, where connection with nature, authentic experiences, and enjoying sociability were valued. Her favourite part of a bike ride was making bread in a forest: 'when we were out in the woods, we thought that there was no better bread'. Singing about 'how beautiful nature is' while cycling with schoolfriends was likewise enjoyable because it gave 'a feeling of seeing [nature] together'. Ann-Britt Balaguer turned also to politics, discussing the connection between the relaxed sociability of cycling and the ideology of the Swedish Social Democratic Worker's Party (SAP), a strong electoral force from the First World War and in government from 1932-76. She commented that the SAP had similar attitudes to her cycling colleagues, but the SAP 'did not so much encourage' this, 'as they picked up on it – if the SAP did it consciously or not, I don't know'.¹

Within Ann-Britt Balaguer's reminiscences are contained both the idea that cycling in interwar Sweden was primarily considered in terms of enjoyment and light-hearted pleasure, and that practicing sport in a leisurely fashion was connected to political

CONTACT Patrick Hegarty Morrish  patrick.hegarty.morrish@gmail.com  Department of History, Central European University, Vienna, Austria.

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ideology. This indicates how, in the everyday world of interwar Swedish leisure cycling, politics and fun were related complexly and interactively. On the one hand, Swedish cyclists prioritised enjoyment, whether when cycling through nature, exploring abroad, or cycling with friends and family. Yet, on the other hand, this ability simply to have fun while cycling was unlocked for broad swathes of the population by the infrastructure, leisure time and industrial policies of the SAP. More profoundly, Swedish cycling can be seen to have generated new attitudes and modes of sociability which mirrored the SAP programme. Viewed in this way, cycling was an incubator for a new culture of sociability, a desire to enjoy nature in a spirit of togetherness, and an attitude of cosmopolitan exploration abroad, which converged with the socialist ethos. The SAP and the Swedish cyclists studied here were therefore constituents of a broad ideological current which valued egalitarianism, cosmopolitanism, and informal socialization. Cyclists were joined in this social movement by other groups, such as the Swedish Tourist Association, an organization which turned from, at its foundation in 1885, an exclusive mountaineering club for male Uppsala academics into an accessible holiday provider for ordinary Swedes by the end of the 1930s.² When seen as part of this current of change, cycling and social democratic ideology can be regarded as common manifestations of, and cyclists and the SAP as common architects in creating, the new type of society which emerged in Sweden in the interwar years. Thus, as Ann-Britt Balaguer's interview reveals, the pure enjoyment of a bike ride and its related activities were prioritised; yet the fabric of these various modes of fun, in bottom-up fashion, generated attitudes and behaviours which converged with politics.

Theorizing Politics and Fun in the History of Sport

While the relationship between politics and sport has been well-documented and theorized in the history of sport, as a concept 'fun' has been given fairly short shrift. A grasp of the various conceptualizations of the relationship between sport, politics and fun will therefore demonstrate the means by which fun and enjoyment can be added to the analysis of sport and politics. In the main, sport is considered a means to act out political ideology; politics is presented as an enabler of sport; or the process of enjoying sport is shown to inculcate a particular culture that elides with a certain political ideology.

Political ideology appears most pervasive in the sphere of professional sport. Regarding nationalism, for example, Anthony Cardoza argues that 1930s professional cycling in Italy constituted a 'natural fit for Mussolini's ambitious plans to remold the Italian people.'³ In the professional sport of social democratic Sweden, Emma Pihl Skoog has shown that working class sports heroes were celebrated, like European boxing champion and former paviour Harry Persson.⁴ If the connection between politics and professional sport is well attested, the links between politics and leisure sport are also the subject of various theorizations. A first approach is to foreground ideology, in a top-down mode, and to argue that amateur sportspeople conceived of their activities as acting out a political stance. According to Robert Wheeler and James Riordan, the amateurism and non-competitiveness of British socialist sports was an expression of political commitment. Wheeler claims of the 1930s Workers' Wimbledon championships that 'workers' sports

were to be consciously different from “bourgeois” sports in that they were open to all, while James Riordan cites a 1925 Mancunian workers’ newspaper which claimed that sport should reflect ‘fellowship,’ not rivalry.⁵

A second approach can also be categorized as top-down but sees an individual’s activities as less consciously shaped by politics, instead focusing on the way various interwar governments, motivated by their ideology, facilitated leisure sport. As Daphné Bolz has argued, fascist Germany created infrastructure for amateur sport, as Albert Speer planned three sports venues across Berlin; in more liberal Britain also, according to the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act, ‘playing-fields should be a component part of any good residential development.’⁶ That the enablement of sport, through infrastructure and other means, was a way of organizing society to accord to a particular ideology has been well documented.⁷ Yet this does not mean practitioners’ behaviour or attitudes were dictated by a certain ideology, who likely were just enjoying the resources at their disposal.

A third approach instead posits a bottom-up relationship between sport and politics: that separately from ideology, engaging in leisure sports encouraged the development of certain attitudes or codes of conduct which came to connect with more avowedly political discourses.⁸ For example, Robert Lake has shown how, until the late interwar years, the etiquette of lawn tennis stressed ‘an upper-class ideal of chivalry’, and bourgeois belief ‘in the moral value of strenuous effort’, which helped to maintain the same class system that the sporting socialists discussed by Wheeler and Riordan hoped to dismantle.⁹ Codes of sporting behaviour could thus develop into a form relevant to a political discourse independent of overt political engagement. As Vernon Lidtke comments in his study of the socialist labour movement in pre-World War I Germany, associational culture constituted ‘an environment [...] permeated with socialist political assumptions’, even if these associations ‘denied all political purpose.’¹⁰ In the context of interwar Swedish cycling, the first approach to sports and politics is of limited value: Swedes hardly thought of cycling as acting out the social democratic ideology. The second two modes of connection are more useful. SAP policies were key enabling conditions without which enjoyment of cycling would not have been possible, and the attitudes and manners of social life encouraged by cycling came to converge with the SAP ethos.

In contrast to politics, fun and enjoyment have not been theorized extensively in the history of sport nor deployed often as analytic concepts, despite that, as Ørnulf Seippel states, it is ‘reasonable to assume [that] fun and joy are weighty reasons for being active in sport.’¹¹ While the eighteenth-century sage Samuel Johnson disdainfully condemned fun as ‘a low cant word’ used to describe a commoner’s ‘frolicsome delight’, Johan Huizinga’s influential cultural history, *Homo Ludens*, rightly makes clear the centrality of these sensations: ‘this fun-element [constitutes] an absolutely primary category of life.’¹² Yet conceptually fun and enjoyment cannot be taken as read. They do not simply denote Bryonic hedonism and refer neither to the professionalized and goal-orientated sport mentioned above. Enjoyment is at the expense of efficiency, productivity, and a focus on mastery; instead immediate and direct pleasant experiences, pursued for their own sake, are stressed. A fun-seeker scorns tedious solemnity and earnestness for amusement, like Jonathan Swift’s cheerfully atheistic church-going woman who ‘Tho’he talk’d much of virtue, her head

always run/Upon something or other she found better fun'.¹³ Such enjoyment could be both individualistic, focused on one's response to a particular stimulus, or relational, deriving from the hum of joviality emergent in a particular situation.

Reflecting this complexity, where fun and enjoyment have been deployed in sport and leisure history the associated meanings have been diverse. Ewelina Szpak has written of fun in the post-war Polish countryside in terms of an intermediary between laborious farm work and supine relaxation, where plucking feathers and shelling beans were opportunities for 'meeting, spontaneous fun, and creativity'.¹⁴ While in Szpak's study, fun seems a daily phase intrinsic to the pattern of agricultural life, for Colleen English, the Depression-era amateur sport of roller derby was instead fun because, as an 'entertaining spectacle' enjoyed by men and women, it allowed escape from the 'horrors' of everyday life in 1930s America.¹⁵ As a reminder of the ambiguity and wide range of meanings referred to by the term, Dimitris Liokaftos also drew on the terminology of 'fun' when discussing Mr Olympia after-parties.¹⁶ Szpak's conception of fun, however, is most instructive, understanding the phenomenon as a sensation deriving from the spontaneous and diverse pleasant and enjoyable activities which emerge in leisure time, that unbuttoned and comfortable mode of being, equidistant between work and sleep.

A previously unstudied collection of two hundred survey responses about cycling held in the Nordiska Museet archive also reflects this multifarious approach to fun. Drawing on these reminiscences, gathered by the ethnologist Annika Österman in 1967-68, carries two risks. First, describing events at least thirty years old, the responses to Österman's survey might carry a certain nostalgia. Yet as with oral history, that these are reminiscences is telling: many 'layers of individual memory' and 'plural[ities] of versions of the past' describing enjoyment, reveal that fun was experienced in a plethora of forms.¹⁷ A second concern is that participants' answers were restricted by the survey questions to reveal only Österman's interests, namely how cycling changed Swedish rural life. Yet, while the questions focused on bicycle brands, components and repair shops, what stands out instead is the detailed and varied manner in which the respondents evoked their memories of enjoying cycling with friends and family, and not just in remote rural villages, but in large towns and cities like Växjö or Trelleborg. The survey responses can be complemented with similar sources to capture the full range of light-hearted fun and enjoyment: these include *Cyklisten*, the journal published by Cykelfrämjandet, the Swedish Cycling Association; songs and postcards in the basement of Cykelfrämjandet's office; and tattered cycling ephemera and long-forgotten travel narratives found in charity shops. Altogether, this constitutes a *smörgåsbord* of sources in which the light-hearted side of Swedish cycling is revealed, experiences of which can be categorized in three ways: to enjoy nature and the outdoors; to explore abroad in an authentic manner; and to have fun on bikes with friends and partners in an atmosphere of relaxed sociability.

Understanding the connection between politics and sport, first of sport as the acting out of a certain political ideology and second of politics as an enabler of sport, reveals important facets of the relationship between Swedish cycling and the SAP. A third connection, and the strongest of the three theorizations, emerges when exploring the diverse fun and enjoyable experiences encompassed by interwar Swedish

cycling, and by foregrounding the voices contained in the sources and delving into the nature of Swedes' enjoyment of bike riding. Viewing the enjoyment of cycling with this wide lens shows that sport can be an incubator for a particular political ethos, thereby demonstrating cyclists' place within the social and ideological movement which profoundly altered Sweden during the interwar years.

Cycling and Social Democracy

Ernst Wigforss, the SAP's principal economic theoretician, declared in 1941: 'the equality that I seek lives in every circle of comrades'.¹⁸ The SAP had long renounced communism and Marxism, instead rooting social democracy in the liberal tradition and theorizing that the establishment of socialism was possible through gradual reforms and the creation of a welfare state in a democratic system. In turn, mirroring Wigforss's phrase, this political programme would create an egalitarian, inclusive society marked by the removal of conventional barriers between classes. The SAP forcefully adopted the concept of *folkhemmet*, which, as formulated by Per Albin Hansson, the SAP Chairman from 1925 to 1946, described the 'people's home', based on 'community and togetherness' which Sweden would become under an SAP government.¹⁹ The SAP's focus on community extended to including non-proletarian groups, such as white-collar workers and small farmers: in 1928, for example, Gustav Möller, the long-time Minister of Health and Social Affairs, urged the party to consider 'the mentality of the farmers', in order for the SAP to become 'a real people's party'.²⁰ The theory of social democracy thus constituted an attractive language of egalitarianism and inclusion, promising to temper the tyranny of unbridled economic power that had hitherto divided the Swedish community and which had limited the freedom of ordinary people.²¹

Reflecting the first approach to the connection between sport and politics, cycling's popularity grew because magazines like *Cyklisten* could draw on this inclusive language to present bike rides as activities which acted out SAP tenets. As Walter Holmstedt proclaimed in an article advertising Cykelfrämjandet's hostels, 'a cycle tour is the most democratic type of holiday [because] people of all ages, professions and positions meet'.²² While Cykelfrämjandet's membership was primarily bourgeois and only represented 23,000 of Sweden's three million cyclists in 1945, which had grown from an estimated 1.3 million in 1937, the organization nevertheless attempted to ensure its rhetorical commitment to egalitarian access was reflected in practice.²³ Cykelfrämjandet promoted affordable tours within Sweden, such as a trip around Öland in August 1938 for SEK 45 (\$6.03).²⁴ *Cyklisten* claimed that even Cykelfrämjandet's international tours were inexpensive: they were economical enough for Ingrid Rohloff, a district nurse, to be a 'tour leader who [...] led a troop of cyclists through foreign lands'.²⁵ Thus it could be said that Cykelfrämjandet appealed to the inclusive social democracy promulgated by the SAP and attempted to mould the cycling community into a reflection of SAP beliefs. Like the British socialists discussed by Wheeler and Riordan for whom amateur and non-competitive sport expressed political commitment, perhaps some Swedish cyclists, like Walter Holmstedt, considered their activities as a deliberate act of commitment to SAP ideology.

This view, however, is speculative in that it relies on rhetorical parallels found in a small number of *Cyklisten* articles. A stronger connection between cycling and social democracy emerges when using the second approach to sport and politics, that of politics as an enabler of sporting activity: without the SAP's leisure time and infrastructure reforms, undoubtedly, fun and enjoyable sporting experiences would have been impossible for the vast majority of the population. Regarding leisure time, the Liberal leader Nils Edén, under pressure from the SAP, introduced a 48-hour working week in 1919, allowing for a weekend. By 1936, the largest labour union, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, which had ties to the SAP, supported a 40-hour week.²⁶ In 1920 a government report predicted the 'beneficial effects' of statutory holiday entitlement, and in 1938 two weeks paid holiday for permanent employees was introduced.²⁷ Such reforms also aimed to liberate women from the tyranny of housework, and in 1938 the SAP piloted a programme of state subsidized holidays for housewives and subsequently introduced the policy in full in 1942.²⁸ Certainly this democratization of leisure time was a prerequisite for the greater social inclusivity of cycling in Sweden.

Indeed, in virtue of these reforms, in interwar Sweden cycling became a realistic pastime for a range of individuals from diverse backgrounds. A new generation of cyclists emerged from the working class communities targeted by the leisure time legislation. Nils Månsson remembered that bicycle owners in the Skåne village of Sösdala included 'Johan Sandin, an ironmonger', 'Lindskog, a watchmaker and mechanic', and Johannes Nilsson, who 'drilled stone and dug wells'.²⁹ The cyclists who emerge in the source record embody this diversity: in her diary Britta Karlstrom indicates she was a nurse, Maja Ryberg's father, who bought her a bicycle, was a railway worker, and Holger Schönning, from Kisselby in Medelpad, stated that he 'grew up [among] workers at an industrial site'.³⁰ Cheaper Swedish-made bikes also facilitated the popularization of cycling. The SAP enthusiastically supported industrialization, and Sweden specialized particularly in steel, the principal material required for bicycle construction. Swedish brands like Crescent and Hermes, manufactured in Varberg and Uppsala respectively, built affordable bikes, making inexpensive machines available in Sweden only two decades after their appearance in the United States.³¹ Karl Eriksson remembered that around 1900 'the general perception of this invention was that it was associated with financially more well-off individuals', but from the end of the First World War, 'bikes became so common that all young people used them on trips to school'.³²

With respect to infrastructure, the SAP also financed cycling-friendly construction projects, chiefly bike lanes. In 1937, for example, SAP MPs tabled three motions for bike lanes, hoping to create 'more connections between homes in rural areas, and improved living conditions' for workers.³³ Cykelfrämjandet also lobbied the government for better facilities. While 'a bike ride in Norrland', the sylvan mountainous northern region of Sweden, 'can be a memory of a lifetime', all the roads ran through the valleys, and therefore Cykelfrämjandet lobbied government to 'construct bicycle paths through the forests in Norrland'.³⁴ SAP politics therefore connected with cycling in several ways. SAP theory provided an ideal of egalitarianism to which Cykelfrämjandet could appeal, and, more strongly, leisure time and infrastructure reforms meant that swathes of lower middle or working class Swedes were

freed from economic pressure and able to enjoy sport. As Sven Haglund declared: 'never before has the world been as open to us as it is now'.³⁵

Friluftsliv and the Sensory Experience of a Bike Ride

SAP theory and policies may have functioned as key enabling conditions for interwar Swedish cycling, but in the available source base politics is strikingly absent. Instead, Swedish cyclists thought of their activities in terms of enjoyment, in particular, of connecting to the landscape, international adventure, and friendship and family. Exploring and foregrounding these vibrant and diverse experiences demonstrates the prioritization of enjoyment and fun for Swedish cyclists. By revealing cycling and cycling-related activities in their richness, variety, and depth of meaning, this also allows discussion of the third mode of connection between politics and sport. Enjoyed in a fun and light-hearted manner by a broad cross-section of Swedish society, such activities helped to create the new attitudes and behaviours that in turn lent support to the SAP programme.

Identification with the natural world while cycling is particularly prevalent in the sources, which reveal that Swedish cyclists often held an attitude of near-spiritual connection to the Swedish landscape. Gunhild Andersson of Trelleborg, for example, evoked the beauty of the Swedish landscape rolling before her eyes, as she cycled through a changing succession of scenes: 'from the light nights of June to the late August evenings, when the moon shone over the landscape, we went on our outings'.³⁶ In Gunhild Andersson's conception, cycling was enjoyable because it facilitated a desire to observe the landscape and encouraged emotive sensory experiences of all nature's aspects. To adopt a Swedish expression, to cycle was to enjoy *friluftsliv*, the 'outdoor life', a term which has over the subsequent decades come to denote a vision of a more than human world, a 'philosophical lifestyle' based on experiences of freedom in nature, and a 'spiritual' connection with the landscape.³⁷

Cycling was thus enjoyable because it unlocked sensory experiences, of which perhaps the most direct was the visual. Bike riders sought out the best vistas, particularly in sparsely populated areas full of interesting flora and fauna. For example, the peculiar ecology of Öland, the dagger-like island off Sweden's south-east coast, attracted particular attention. The thin soil mantle and limestone bedrock of the alvar dominating the island's southern half supports unusual vegetation including pygmy forests of stunted trees and tussocky plants like *Filipendula vulgaris*.³⁸ 'Nature showed us its best', claimed 13-year-old Tage Erlandsson in 1939 of his ride across Öland, as 'flowers appear in the bushes in full bloom [...] everything is full of life and joy'.³⁹ The series of photographs taken on one of Cykelfrämjandet's tours by Georg Kjellman and sent as 'a little greeting' to the head office in Stockholm, encapsulates how cyclists attempted to capture a panoramic view of Öland's wild landscape. Kjellman photographed a 'typical beach at Öland's southern cape', complete with tuffets of shrub clinging to the rocks, and the 'alvar of the island', showing a handful of thin cows in the foreground, with the flat alvar extending into the background (Figures 1 and 2).

As well as the visual aspects of a bike ride, Swedish cyclists conjured smells, sounds and tastes to evoke the full sensory experience of cycling. Tage Erlandsson described the birdsong on his trip to Öland, writing of how 'the nightingale sings



Figure 1. 'Typical beach on Öland's southern cape'. Reproduced from original, *Cykelfrämjandet*, Celsiusgatan 8, 112 30 Stockholm. Courtesy of *Cykelfrämjandet*.



Figure 2. 'The alvar of Öland'. Reproduced from original, *Cykelfrämjandet*, Celsiusgatan 8, 112 30 Stockholm. Courtesy of *Cykelfrämjandet*.

its atmospheric chords. It is as if nature is singing.⁴⁰ Remembering their bike rides, authors of the survey responses evoked olfactory just as much as auditory experience. Trelleborg, where Gunhild Andersson lived, is at the southernmost point of Sweden, and the smell of the temperate and fertile Skåne county in high summer before the cereal harvest proved an enduring memory: 'I can still smell the fragrance of the fields [of the] summer evenings [when] we loved to go for a ride through the plains and the moor.'⁴¹ This lyrical evocation of aroma, like the birdsong described by Tage Erlandsson, indicates that the enjoyment of a bike ride was contained in the feeling of keen attentiveness to the natural world encouraged by cycling, where, exposed to the elements, sounds and smells were felt in a visceral fashion.

Stopping to eat was a particular pleasure. Looking back on his cycling trips with his wife in the 1920s, K.R. Johansson remembered how on 'one hot summer's day, during a long trip out in the countryside, hunger and thirst settled in: we sat in a ditch with a huge piece of sausage in one fist and a cold sugary drink in the other – that is one of the highlights of my life.'⁴² Cyclists riding in the summer frequently paused to forage for berries and mushrooms. As well as detailing stopping for coffee seventeen times during her fourteen-day journey from Hålla to Kongsvinger, Britta Karlstrom recorded that she and Gunnell Andersson stopped to 'rest in a forest and eat blueberries' and enjoyed 'everything beautiful around us.'⁴³ As a 1929 camping cookbook tells its readers, it was the freedom to search for food and the chance to eat it outside that made these experiences so enjoyable: eating 'in God's free nature is something special in itself.'⁴⁴ This mixture of contemporary accounts and reminiscences thus conjures the full sensory experience of cycling, from visions of Öland to tastes of fresh berries, suggesting that central to the enjoyment of cycling was the instinctive feeling of communion with nature evoked by pedalling through Sweden.

Whether recording in their diaries or publishing in *Cyklisten*, Swedish cyclists conceived of moments of arduous activity or misfortune as part of the fun of the sport. For example, a steep gradient was not always preferable. In her entry for 29 July 1938, Britta Karlstrom complained that the hills on the road snaking around the Mellan Fryken, the middle of a chain of three lakes in Värmland, were 'the worst inclines we had.'⁴⁵ Yet the difficulty of the climbs made the relaxation afterwards more acute. As Åke Engström wrote in a 1937 issue of *Cyklisten*, after a series of ascents, he finally allowed himself a soft drink at lunchtime: 'on the label I read 'keep in a cold place' [...] I found some shade, where I collapsed in the grass.'⁴⁶ With similar reasoning, the dangers of the terrain were taken as part of the thrill of a bike ride. Gunhild Andersson was cycling with a relative when her 'bike jammed while going downhill'. They did not let the accident dampen their spirits, since 'the weather was wonderful', and 'after a little rest, we continued on our way.'⁴⁷ Difficult climbs and treacherous roads, just as much as the positive experiences of looking over a beautiful rural panorama described above, were subsumed within the full sensory experience of cycling through the landscape.

A central facet of enjoying cycling in interwar Sweden was thus connecting with nature whether through sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or even difficult climbs and perilous accidents. The third mode of connection between sport and politics posited that sport can inculcate behaviours which elide with particular political ideologies. Showing how cycling created an attitude of *friluftsliv* reveals that the spread of a feeling of communion with nature converged with the SAP programme, in particular the SAP's aim to make Sweden's natural beauty available for the entire populace. As Allan Petre explained in his 1932 guide to life outdoors, *friluftsliv* became politically important because of the social change constituted by the rapidity of twentieth-century living, which disconnected the population from their surroundings: 'the hotly driven pace of the time [...] makes us yearn for the peace and quiet that nature offers.'⁴⁸ Indeed, it was a priority of the SAP to protect as a customary law the tradition of *allmansrätten* (everyman's right), which allowed free movement through uncultivated land and forests. Against conservative landlords complaining about damage to private land, a government report in the late 1930s clarified

allmansrätten as the right for travellers to move through, temporarily reside in, and build a fire on private land, all without the owner's consent.⁴⁹ Thus, it might be said that the experience of cycling through the Swedish landscape was one key driver for the new ways of thinking that caused Swedes to identify with the SAP's aim to protect *allmansrätten*. Swedish cyclists thought in terms of fun, but that enjoyment cultivated new attitudes which connected with the political sphere.

Cosmopolitan Cyclists Exploring Abroad

Until entering defence treaties in 2009, Sweden was stringently neutral and had not participated in a war since 1814. Despite lobbies for military action to prevent the loss of the union with Norway in 1905, and to join Germany to liberate Finland in the First World War, public opinion was solidly in favour of neutrality. The Social Democratic government even permitted the Wehrmacht to use Swedish railways in 1941 to avoid hostility towards Germany. The influential Swedish political scientist Herbert Tingsten, a member of the SAP left-wing until 1945, wrote in 1959: 'Swedish opinion has developed a kind of smugness' because of its neutrality, 'the idea that one's own nation is peaceful, well-disposed and basically cosmopolitan.'⁵⁰ Just as exploring the beauty of the Swedish landscape in the spirit of *friluftsliv* converged with the SAP's protection of every Swede's right to enjoy the landscape, so the enthusiasm for adventure abroad also converged with the cosmopolitan and internationalist ethic Tingsten described. In their travel narratives, Swedish cyclists emphasized the desire to enjoy authentic adventure overseas in an attitude of open cosmopolitanism. This was less an active response to the SAP programme than it was facilitated by the nature of exploring abroad by bike.

Self-referentially, Swedish cyclists stressed their internationalism. Writing of his mammoth cycle tour in *Cyklisten*, Sven Stahre evoked the physicality of movement across borders by bike by stressing the number of locations called upon: 'we made visits by bike in England, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. We passed seven border stations, we cycled in London, Brussels and Bremen.'⁵¹ Two striking statements of cosmopolitanism describe how a bike trip allowed participants to escape the strictures of western civilization, losing previous allegiances to community, home and ethnic group. Cycling through the Norwegian 'wilderness' made Erik Hilbert think of 'how nice it is to be homeless, rootless and propertyless'; and William Grebst denounced all Western civilization when he hoped that a bike ride through the Japanese interior would enable him to 'lose my old ways and gain new ones [...] without white man's attitudes.'⁵²

Compared to other modes of travel, Swedes cycling abroad understood their bike rides as activities which not only facilitated but also cultivated this cosmopolitan attitude. In comparison to mainstream tourism, cycling engendered cosmopolitanism because, as Martin Emanuel has described, it unlocked authentic experiences.⁵³ Yet while Emanuel argues that the interwar travel narratives present cycling abroad as a 'quest for finding an authentic self', the authors also suggest that the experiences of different countries themselves were more candid when journeying by bike compared to other modes of travel.⁵⁴ Lars Hermodsson, a student at Uppsala University, complained of how tourists stay in 'giant dull hotels', but by travelling by bike, he

could venture off the beaten track. Therefore, writers like Hermodsson perceived cycling as a means to glimpse a more direct view of the people, the culture, the landscape, and even the politics of foreign countries.

Attaining a genuine connection with the country's inhabitants, and an undiluted experience of how they lived, was often the most immediate object of this cosmopolitan desire for authenticity. Jan-Arwid Böök wrote that cycling through Yugoslavia offered the opportunity to 'study the real life of the people'. One should travel 'into the heart of the country, where there are only narrow paths and semi-nomadic shepherds'.⁵⁵ Cyclists did not necessarily have to ride far from Sweden to meet people whose way of life they saw as sufficiently different to be of interest. In the Norwegian far north, Erik Hilbert spent 'Saturday night dancing [...] in a wooden hut, [where] life roared wonderfully. Two amusing men played accordion and violin'.⁵⁶ Cyclists thus travelled off the beaten track and embraced indigenous custom, forging close contacts with the locals.

Cyclists therefore perceived their mode of travel to encourage greater connection with local people, and as war loomed in the later 1930s, some bike-riding Swedes considered a bike a means to a more genuine understanding of the unstable international situation. On observing the ruins of a synagogue in Germany in 1939, 'a testimony of the danger of animalistic human instincts', Lars Hermodsson felt it 'incomprehensible, when we were in a country full of decent people'. The experience offered by a bike ride countered his fears of imminent war: he was able to meet ordinary, 'decent' Germans, who thought that "'Hitler does not want war"'.⁵⁷ Contact with the German population thereby challenged assumptions about the extent to which war-mongering encompassed the entirety of Germany. Thus Hermodsson celebrated riding bikes through new regions because this practice satisfied a yearning for genuine experiences and unaffected relations with locals. Enjoyment therefore derived from a feeling of authenticity, adding up to a cosmopolitan belief that all cultures ought to be encountered on their own terms, to be valued and connected to in virtue of their inclusion in the same worldwide community as the traveller.

The corollary of this search for authenticity was independence, as Swedes travelling abroad enjoyed journeying by bike because it enabled travellers to seek out atypical objects of interest without the safety net, for example, of a tourist group. Stig Pallin published his trip to Africa in 1926 as part of a 'boy adventure series', and his description of the journey's thrills lent the narrative an adventurous tone: 'there we were, two Stockholm lads, alone on the most remote outpost of Spanish Morocco'.⁵⁸ As a 'Stockholm lad', Stig Pallin attempted to evoke a solely masculine audaciousness. Perhaps responding to this kind of gender exclusivity, during her travels Karin Johnsson intended to learn the extent to which gender shaped bike tours for lone female cyclists, to discover 'how safe a woman can feel on the country roads without any other protection other than that which she can achieve herself'.⁵⁹ Regardless of the expectations of gender, Johnsson evinced an attitude of perseverance, for example continuing through a downpour in Germany by interpreting it as 'the weather Gods inciting [a] go-ahead spirit'.⁶⁰ Part of achieving authenticity was therefore self-reliance. An ethos of independence combined with cosmopolitanism because it resulted in cyclists travelling alone, or in a pair like Stig Pallin, through unknown territory. Lonely cyclists therefore lived alongside locals and relied on

strangers for bed and board, improvising their subsistence far from the comfort of family and friends in Sweden.

The experiences of cycling in foreign countries were as diverse as the evocations of sensory pleasure within nature, as Swedes cycled abroad to satisfy various curiosities about the world. The nature of enjoyment was different, however. Rather than deriving from the sensory immediacy of freedom within nature, enjoyment originated in realizing a self-conscious desire to experience authenticity, which was in turn dependent on self-reliance. To distinguish between attitudes, instead of an idealization of outdoor life indicated by the concept *friluftsliv*, Swedish cyclists abroad prioritized a cosmopolitan outlook, gaining satisfaction from viewing new landscapes and meeting diverse individuals. Just like the convergence between the SAP programme of *allmansrätten* and the attitude of *friluftsliv*, the experience of enjoyable cycling tours abroad, in reflecting the SAP's cosmopolitan neutrality described by Tingsten, was one driver for the development of a new way of viewing the outside world which converged with the SAP ideology.

Cycling and Relaxed Sociability

Perhaps the strongest connection between politics and sport of the third theorization, that of sport as an incubator for an ethos relevant to a certain political ideology, appears in the relaxed and easy sociability encouraged by cycling. It is difficult to overestimate the extent to which an open, inclusive, unpretentious and relaxed ideal of social intercourse shaped SAP theory. In 1962, Wigforss made clear that the formation of a social democratic society did not stop at the creation of a welfare state, leaving the rest of society characterized by 'each individual's [action] in an unlimited competition', but continued in the foundation of a social 'spirit' based on 'equality, cooperation, and solidarity'.⁶¹ Primarily in the survey responses collected by Österman, cycling appears to have encouraged new patterns of sociability which provided a seedbed from which attachment to the SAP social programme, as summarized by Wigforss, could have sprung. Bikes were a facilitator, emblem, and driver of social mixing, whether between couples involved in courtship, honeymoons and marriage; or across friends and family, as buying bikes, learning to ride them, and cycling in groups was a chance to create or reinforce bonds in an attitude of informal, egalitarian, and relaxed sociability. Just having fun together with bikes thus created an ethos of inclusion and solidarity, adding a powerful current to the tide of change among ordinary Swedes which underpinned the popularity of social democratic politics.

On sociability between couples, the increased mobility offered by a bike meant men and women could travel further afield in search of romance. Holger Schönning wrote that during his late teens in the 1920s, 'we young people realized that visiting the [...] maids of the farmers in the nearby countryside could be greatly facilitated' by owning a bicycle.⁶² An increase in disposable income encouraged engagement in romantic sociability, as during the 1920s and 1930s the contribution of adolescents to family budgets decreased markedly despite their continued employment.⁶³ By 1942 at age 19, on average boys spent 17 SEK (\$2.17) and girls 7 SEK (\$0.89) a week on entertainment and alcohol.⁶⁴ Dances, in particular, were opportunities for

romantic activity, and male and female cyclists remembered that bikes made attending such events much easier. 'The bike meant a lot for young people to [...] have a social life', remembered Harald Gustavsson, of the remote Dalsland hamlet of Ellenö, as 'they could go to dance halls far away from their home'.⁶⁵ The attraction of such merrymaking meant Helmer Granbom just had to buy a bicycle: 'when Saturday night came and the others took their bikes to some dance', she remembered, 'the one who was without [a bike], had to stay at home'.⁶⁶

As well as enabling the spark of romance, a shared bike ride was a symbol that confirmed a couple's bond. Newlyweds thus often chose a cycle tour as a honeymoon. Gunhild Andersson remembered that in 1919 her aunt's honeymoon was a cycle tour around Dalakarlia from Strängnäs, while in the summer of 1939, Maja Ryberg and her new husband Henning cycled around Lake Vänern, tracing its western edge from Hjo through Olshammar to Askersund, spending the nights in hostels.⁶⁷ The romantic appeal of cycling also extended to the style of bike employed, as tandems embodied a couple's bike ride. Gustaf Bengtson celebrated tandems because couples could travel in close physical proximity and because they allowed the man to show his cycling prowess: 'you often meet boys and girls cycling at a speed that may be strenuous for the lady [...] why not use a tandem and let the stronger party provide 75 percent of the power?'⁶⁸ Whether cycling encouraged romantic sociability by facilitating trips to dances, honeymoons by bike, or a shared tandem holiday, cycling seems to have unlocked new opportunities for the kind of relaxed and informal mixing between individuals that could be a prelude to a relationship.

Moving from romantic relationships to friends and family, cycling affected other social spheres too: even before being able to ride a bicycle, the process of becoming a cyclist represented a series of sociable activities that intertwined neighbours, acquaintances, and relatives. Intrigue about bicycles united the youth of the Skåne village of Sösdala: 'where two or three young people were gathered, there was always talk of bikes'.⁶⁹ Nils Månsson remembered that one Nils Law was the first bicycle owner in Sösdala, and 'the youth of the community looked on with interest' when he rode the bike.⁷⁰ For K.R. Johansson, the appearance of the first bicycle was a similar subject of interest among the local youth in Växsjö. He remembered that 'the first bike I saw was owned by the policeman, Albihn', and 'despite the ban on touching the bike, both me and several other boys learned to ride it'.⁷¹ Uniting friends in a community, Nils Law and Albihn's bikes were shared objects of excitement.

To satisfy this enthusiasm, families often had to pool money to buy bikes, and subsequently family members shared in the difficulty of learning to ride their new machine. When he was 18 in 1937, Sven Kjellin and his father 'had to make a united effort' to buy a bicycle 'because at that time 85kr [\$11.39] wasn't just a little money for a small farmer and a lumberjack'.⁷² Similarly, K.R. Johansson shared a 'woman's bike, that both me and my wife could use' for 'financial reasons'.⁷³ Purchasing a bike thus reinforced familial bonds, and likewise the excitement of the first months of ownership was shared within families. At the end of the First World War, remembered Maja Ryberg, 'Father [...] came home with a really nice bike: the whole family [...] travelled to Gullberg's street, where the lessons in cycling would begin'.⁷⁴ Once able to ride, these cyclists could return with pride to their friends. Hence, Nils

Månsson wrote of how 'after many hard hours of training on the fine forest roads,' he had 'enough skills to show off to a larger audience.'⁷⁵ All aspects of becoming a cyclist, from excitement about bikes shared with friends, to purchasing one and learning to ride it with one's family, thus involved sociability.

Connecting to the other modes of enjoyment such as travelling through the Swedish landscape or exploring abroad, once able to ride a bike, cycling sociably made exploring foreign countries more exciting and enriched the immediate sensory pleasures of journeying through the natural world. Reflecting the desire for authentic experiences with locals, when stopping at Buchen in Germany, Ernst Öhlen and his wife were pleasantly surprised to eat with the town's hotelier, 'and we did not part with him until about twelve o'clock'. The next day, 'it was with sadness that we left this gentleman, my wife's arms full of flowers from his garden.'⁷⁶ As with the experience of travelling to new locations, the sensory experience of the landscape could be more enjoyable when shared with friends and family. Conspicuous in Inga Edlund's account of her trip to Hargshamn are descriptions of enjoying the picturesque vistas accessed by a cycling tour with her friends. They 'agreed to go up a high mountain,' and 'it was very beautiful to sit and look out over the lake together.'⁷⁷ For Inga Edlund, then, it was not just the lake that was striking but a shared focus on the view: that the landscape was appreciated 'together' was a composite part of the beautiful experience.

To link back to romantic sociability, couples perceived a natural setting as the perfect backdrop for a shared bike ride. Britta Karlstrom continued to ride her bike after her trip to Norway in 1937, and in a letter written in the 1990s and attached to her diary, she described how 'my husband and I have ridden a lot [...] on Sunday trips we photographed all the lakes in old Nacka.'⁷⁸ Evoking the sentimental languor of a balmy summer's evening, Holger Schönning wrote of how 'the blessed summer was engagement time, and many young lovers cycled in the bright summer nights for miles along winding roads.'⁷⁹ Photographs of couples sent by members of *Cykelfrämjandet* to illustrate their travels show the feeling of romance when experiencing freedom in nature on a bike tour. In [Figure 3](#), with their bikes parked under a nearby tree, a couple face away from the camera and embrace, below a sign declaring 'no gatherings'. Perhaps their attraction was affirmed by the mutual amusement aroused by sharing this small act of irreverence. The combination of romance and the sensory experience of nature was drawn upon in the advertising campaigns of bicycle manufacturers. For example, advertising their men's and women's bikes, Hermes published a conversation between a couple: 'one feels free as a bird,' 'you can never move as freely in God's free nature as with a bicycle'. As Britta Karlstrom and Holger Schönning's testimonies indicate, Hermes advertisers connected to a common feeling that a bike ride through the Swedish landscape was naturally conducive to romantic feeling.

The enjoyment of cycling sociably in interwar Sweden, with friends, family, and partners, whether in Sweden's landscape or abroad, was therefore repeated across a variety of media: from advertisements and newspapers to travel narratives and personal testimonies. Cycling was a facilitator of sociability, making it easier, for example, to reach dances or to converse with friends when rolling through the countryside. Bikes were likewise an emblem of connections between partners, as a shared tandem



Figure 3. Åkernäs, 'No Gatherings'. Reproduced from original, Cykelfrämjandet, Celsiusgatan 8, 112 30 Stockholm. Courtesy of Cykelfrämjandet.

ride symbolized a couple's unity. Finally, cycling was also a driver of sociability, as saving jointly to buy a bike, learning to ride it, and riding bikes together crafted and solidified relations between friends and family. In all these aspects, cycling nurtured an ethos of sociability marked by informality, inclusivity, and relaxed gender relations, deriving from the easy companionship of a leisurely bike ride outdoors.

Cycling and Social Democracy: A Convergence

The relationship between politics and sport is thus synergetic. On the one hand, the diaries, leaflets, magazines, travel narratives and personal reminiscences which reveal the world of interwar Swedish cycling do not present cyclists' activities in terms of the social democratic ideology dominant in interwar Sweden. Instead, these sources emphasize experiences of enjoyment and fun, in their nature various, colourful, and multi-layered: from the pleasure of sensory communion with nature to the excitement of apparently authentic connection with locals on a bike tour in northern Norway, and to the comfortable sociability of an evening bike ride with friends and family. As in the interview with Ann-Britt Balaguer, these diverse experiences all

have at their core that ‘primary category of life’, that instinctive feeling of enjoyment and fun.

It is also clear, on the other hand, that politics was not entirely absent. To speak in terms of the three approaches to the connection between politics and sport, understanding sport as the playing out of politics is limited, as only a small number of Swedish cyclists, like Walter Holmstedt, appear to present their activities as a deliberate act of commitment to social democratic ideology. Considering how politics enabled sport is more significant since infrastructure, leisure time reforms, and the provision of affordable bikes was of vital importance to leisure cycling attaining wide social breadth. Sport as an unconscious incubator for certain political cultures is of greatest importance both in order to understand the characteristics of interwar Swedish cycling and the development of Swedish social democracy. Sweden experienced deep social and ideological change during the interwar period. In 1936, Swedes flocked to an exhibition entitled ‘Free-Time’ in Ystad to explore the leisure activities, particularly active and outdoor hobbies, available to ordinary citizens.⁸⁰ Whether by cycling through nature, exploring abroad or cycling in a manner of relaxed sociability, the act of having fun by bike made cyclists part of this movement. Riding bikes together thus encouraged new behaviours and attitudes which connected to the ethos of egalitarianism, cosmopolitanism and informality espoused by the SAP.

The relationship between sport and politics is thus complex and interlinked: Swedish cyclists rode bikes largely in virtue of new cycling infrastructure sponsored by the SAP; while riding bikes, however, they thought of their activities in terms of light-hearted enjoyment and not of political ideology; yet this behaviour in turn engendered a certain ethos germane to the SAP programme. This latter re-politicization of relaxed and simple fun nevertheless recognizes that Swedish cyclists prioritized enjoyment, and the convergence with SAP ideals grew out of the attitudes and modes of sociability encouraged by a bike ride rather than a particular desire to identify with social democracy on the part of the cyclists themselves. Swedish cyclists therefore were, just as much as the SAP, the architects of social democratic society, but their participation in its construction was intrinsic to the character of their activity and did not derive from an enthusiasm to glimpse the completed edifice. The broader lesson is that leisure sport provides one way in which political programmes can gain their power, through a bottom-up model where a certain ideology or policy platform attains relevance in virtue of the quotidian activities of individuals.

Notes

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4. Emma Pihl Skoog, 'The Professional Body in Boxing and Strength Sports: The Connection between Manual Labour and Sports in the Early and Mid Twentieth-Century Sweden', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 38, no. 9 (2021): 962.
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8. Instructive is Fiona McLachlan's use of Joan Scott and Michael Foucault to discover how 'certain exclusions and obligatory social behaviours' within sport relate to broader political discourses about gender. Fiona McLachlan, 'Gender Politics, the Olympic Games, and Road Cycling: A Case for Critical History', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 33, no. 4 (2016): 474.
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23. Cykelfrämjandet, 'Cykelfrämjandet har förtuom föreningsmarket nu även anskaffat en föreningshalsduk [Cykelfrämjandet Has Now Acquired a Cykelfrämjandet Tie for the Association's Shop]', *Cyklisten*, nos. 11–12 (November–December 1937), 32; Martin Emanuel, 'Seeking Adventure and Authenticity: Swedish Bicycle Touring in Europe During the Interwar Period', *Journal of Tourism History* 9, no. 1 (2017): 11.
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57. Lars Hermodsson, *Cykelssommar i Europa* [*Cycling Summer in Europe*] (Uppsala: Weiland, 1940), 9–40.
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Notes on Contributor

Patrick Hegarty Morrish: After a BA in History at Oxford University, Patrick is reading an MA in History at CEU in Vienna. He is the recipient of the Gibbs Prize in History and the Alpine Fellowship Prize.