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Review of:
Bike Battles: The History of Sharing the American Road
by James Longhurst
University of Washington Press

James Longhurst is a professor of history at U. of Wisconsin, and a recent adopter of bicycle commuting (2008). His book shows the virtues of historical research as limited by the inability to understand more than the popular superstition. His theme is the continuing conflict between minor road users, cyclists, and the prevailing majority users, first wagon drivers and later motorists. (Though, unfortunately, he phrases these parties as bicycles, wagons, and motor vehicles rather than as their human users.)

Longhurst notes that formal historical evidence is weak for most of "the largely neglected history of bicycle policy". Some sources he has used are: "cranky letters to the editor in small-town newspapers, Boy Scout merit-badge pamphlets, ... government-printed comic books." Longhurst's work may present a reasonably accurate picture of that phase of history, but he has ignored the two aspects of transportation technology that have had the greatest importance for bicyclists.

The first ignored aspect is the development, starting about 1925, of the discipline of traffic engineering, which combines the design of roadways with the rules for the traffic using them, to produce a reasonably safe and reasonably efficient system of road transportation for all users. At no place does Longhurst show that he understands this.

The second is that Longhurst shows no understanding of the developments, starting in 1971, in the scientific and formal knowledge about bicycle transportation, and the application of this knowledge. It is reasonable to claim that I was the leader in this activity. Indeed, the last six pages of the historical section of this 241-page book are devoted specifically to one part of my activities, but Longhurst shows no understanding of the other parts and no understanding of my two major

books on the subject, both published by The MIT Press. (Longhurst refers to my *Effective Cycling* as a "self-published guidebook", although it has been through six later editions published by The MIT Press. The initial edition was self-published because no publisher thought that there was a market for such books, because there weren't any. Much the same for *Bicycle Transportation*.)

Part of Longhurst's deficiencies stem from his excessive concentration on the issue of whether or not a bicycle is a vehicle and the rights that thus ensue. Longhurst's writing seems to show that he suffers from applying the maritime law that ships have rights and duties, whereas in traffic law only people, being drivers or pedestrians, have rights and duties.

The bicycle as vehicle issue was important in the early days when the issue was whether cyclists had the same right to use the roads as did drivers of wagons and carriages. This legal issue was solved early. But by 1926, when cyclists were legally assigned the rights and duties of drivers of vehicles, whether the bicycle was called a vehicle or a device was immaterial to what the cyclist was required to do. Longhurst's attitude is typical; right up to today, many argue that defining a bicycle as a vehicle would wipe out the legal discrimination against cyclists. The UVC rule, 1944, requiring that "persons riding bicycles" ride as far right as practicable (FTR law), applies whatever class of being is assigned to bicycles. This ought to have disabused such believers of this superstition, but it hasn't. Longhurst doesn't seem to understand this.

Furthermore, Longhurst makes erroneous statements. He traces the designs of bikeways as starting with the California contract with UCLA and UC Davis that produced bikeway designs (of a European type), but which did not become the

foundation of the later type. "Standards for bike infrastructure design came from the Federal Highway Administration in 1976." Longhurst ignores the history. California rejected the UCLA designs because of my criticism of them as unduly endangering cyclists, and established a new committee (California Bicycle Facilities Committee) to work out designs that did not so endanger cyclists. The controversy in that committee, in which I was prominent, caused it to work out safer designs. Once these were adopted by California they were then adopted by both the Association of American State Highway and Traffic Officials and the Federal Highway Administration, on the grounds that these designs had been through the most exacting scrutiny available.

Longhurst makes a similar error about modern bicycle traffic laws, first about sidewalk cycling. He quotes the NHTSA as saying that "the bicyclist on the sidewalk is virtually in a legal vacuum". He then notes that the UVC in 1975 adopted the rule that "bicycles" "shall have all the rights and duties applicable to a pedestrian under the same circumstances". This statement contains two errors. The first is that Longhurst attributes the rights and duties to bicycles instead of cyclists, and omits saying that I had produced this rule. I did so to indicate that cyclists, riding along sidewalks and crossing the intersecting street from one sidewalk to that opposite, needed to stop and yield to roadway traffic, just as pedestrians have to.

Longhurst's second error concerns the law that restricts cyclists to as "close as practicable to the right-hand edge of the roadway". Longhurst notes that this entered the Uniform Vehicle Code in 1944, but he utterly fails to understand that this destroys cyclists' normal rights to operate as drivers of vehicles and makes them second-class road users subservient to motorists. Instead of concentrating on this salient point, Longhurst spends three pages discussing the ambiguity of the word practicable. He does state that in California "a statewide Bicycle Committee" found that this section of code "has caused more confusion and frustration among motorists, bicyclists and law enforcement agencies than any other bicycle section", without Longhurst recognizing that there were far more problems with this law than the ambiguities in the word practicable.

Here's the story that Longhurst doesn't tell. California's Motordom had become fearful that the growing tide of adult cyclists would block up "motorists' roads". (They were wrong, of course,

as consideration of the birthrate records would have shown.) So they decided that in addition to having restricted cyclists by the far-to-the-right law (FTR) since 1963, cyclists must also be restricted to bike lanes and bike sidepaths, wherever these might be constructed. They got the legislature to establish the California Statewide Bicycle Committee with the task, never publicly admitted, of working out the two new appropriately restrictive laws. Motordom's role was replete with lies; it's no wonder that these allowed me to create a bikelash. The committee had eight members from Motordom and one cyclist. I was accepted because I persuaded them that I advocated lawful cycling. Here's the conflict. They believed that I would obey any discriminatory law they enacted for cyclists, while I meant cyclists had to obey the rules of the road for all drivers of vehicles, which meant, of course, repealing the FTR law and having no bike-lane or bike-path laws. (This story has been printed many times; Longhurst should have known of it.)

The committee report contains the statement about the confusion created by the FTR law only because, in a great many eight-to-one arguments, I had forced Motordom to recognize, using their own information, that in many situations obeying the FTR law was more dangerous than obeying the standard rules of the road. The committee report then lists many of these, and, subsequently, the legislature considered them. But, instead of repealing the FTR law because of its dangers to cyclists, the legislature kept the restrictive law by adding exceptions that allowed cyclists to obey the standard rules of the road under a (supposedly nonexclusive) list of conditions. This has become the model rule in the Uniform Vehicle Code and for many states.

Longhurst describes events as "California state law -- the most bicycle-friendly in the nation, and later a model for others -- adopted the general UVC instruction but added a welter of exceptions allowing bicyclists to avoid obstacles and make turns." Longhurst omits the twenty-three year gap between adopting the FTR law and enacting the exceptions, he fails to understand that the exceptions admitted that the FTR law endangered cyclists, he fails to understand that the FTR law should be repealed, and he fails to understand that all of these changes were the result of my work, although not the result that I intended.

Longhurst describes his evaluation of my work using some words of mine. "Forester railed against separated paths as a conspiracy of motor-

ists to erode bicyclists' rights and remove them from the road." Longhurst then claims that I said: "These people wouldn't succeed if they said openly that they wanted cyclists cleared off the roads. They have got as far as they have only because they are able to use arguments that mislead the public into thinking they are pro-cyclist." Of course I have written or said such words. The peculiar point is that Longhurst, writing a book largely about the oppression of cyclists by the majority road users, should have chosen to describe my words as a personal claim rather than as describing the process that is the main subject of his book.

The next part of Longhurst's evaluation of my work is quite similar. "Forester argued that his observations of traffic accidents and intersections had 'completely demolished the logical foundations for the bikeway propaganda.'" There were two "logical" foundations for the bikeway and FTR propaganda. The first was that same-direction motor traffic was the greatest danger to cyclists; the second was that cyclists are incapable of obeying the standard rules of the road. The first argument was demolished by the Cross studies of car-bike collisions, 1974 and 1976, demonstrating that about 5% of them were caused by same-direction motor traffic and 95% by turning or crossing movements by either party. Nobody has tried to demonstrate that cyclists teen-aged and above are not capable of obeying the standard rules of the road. Contrariwise, it has been repeatedly shown that this skill is easy to learn. Thus both of the supports for Motordom's motorist-superiority/cyclist-inferiority policy had been disproved. Furthermore, the evidence has been piling up that bikeways don't make cycling safer and that their supposed advantage is only that they make superstitious people feel safer. These are not my personal observations; they are scientific facts of which Longhurst appears to be ignorant.

All of the above accounts concern my activities to preserve, really to regain and revitalize, cyclists' right to operate with the rights and duties of drivers of vehicles. I do so because that is the best way for cyclists to operate in American society and traffic. I named this activity "vehicular cycling" because it is based on the rules of the road for drivers of vehicles. Longhurst quotes Bruce Epperson, a bike planner, in attempting to pass credit for this onto Hal Munn, a Caltrans engineer, "who argued that the solution to mixing traffic was to encourage more skilled, assertive cyclists to lay claim to their space in the lane."

This is false. All Munn argued in his paper was that since roadway space is so limited cyclists will have to operate in traffic. The rest of Longhurst's statement is just Longhurst's cyclist-inferiority phobia.

Epperson's claim that I "was a devotee of Harold Munn's 'vehicular cycling' theory" is false. Hal Munn and I were cycling buddies in the Los Angeles Wheelmen, most of whose members recognized the desirability of obeying the rules of the road for drivers of vehicles.

Furthermore, my attachment to the vehicular cycling principle goes back to my early training in England in the 1930s and to reading the articles by George Herbert Stancer in the 1940s. Stancer was the leader of the British Cyclists' Touring Club from 1920 to 1962. Furthermore, my first analysis of the superiority of vehicular cycling over bikeway cycling was done for the Palo Alto bikeway case, in 1972, while Munn did not publish his article until 1975.

How is it that Longhurst got so much wrong about my activities and the events of the 1970s? Longhurst early on described the odd types of documents he found necessary to consult for his history of cycling. But two books kept continuously in print by The MIT Press, the *Bulletins of the League of American Wheelmen*, the newsletters of the California Association of Bicycling Organizations, my historical article in *Transportation Quarterly*, and the public debates in which I have been involved are hardly difficult to find.

Longhurst's only stated reference to material about me comes from several statements by Bruce Epperson, bicycle planner and attorney. Epperson published a paper arguing that my opposition to the federal regulation for the design of bicycles precipitated the cessation of bikeway planning. This is: *The Great Schism: Federal Bicycle Safety Regulation and the Unraveling of American Bicycle Planning*; *Transportation Law Journal*, 37 Trans L. J. 73, Summer 2010.

The connection between these two subjects seems remote, even when the history is described. The federal Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) decided that its first big project was to "make bicycles safe". The members of the Bicycle Manufacturers Association (BMA) sold bicycles to parents for use by their children. It had produced a design standard (BMA/6) to persuade parents that its products were sturdy, reliable, and safe. The CPSC started by using this standard, saying that this was only for children's bicycles and that it was regulating them under a law allow-

ing regulation of “toys or other articles intended for use by children”. Then the CPSC pulled a nasty trick. Saying that because some fifteen-year-old children were as tall as adults, the regulation actually applied to all bicycles sold. That meant that bicycles intended for adult and transportation use, real bicycles as opposed to toy bicycles, would become prohibited. I published this situation in *Bike World*. That resulted in a flood of protests, some of them quite obscene, to the CPSC. I sued the CPSC over the engineering errors in its standard. However, the CPSC realized that it did not have the political, or legal, power to prohibit real bicycles, so that it modified its standard to allow real bicycles, and the noise died down. The standard did not reduce the cyclist casualty rate, and it retained the very dangerous feature of a front reflector that falsely appeared to supplant the function of a headlamp.

Epperson’s argument appears to be that my actions in this affair destroyed the faith in government’s bicycle policy that was allowing building of bikeways.

That’s rather a stretch, and it ignores the facts. Bikeways have never had scientific support for the claims that they make cycling much safer and reduce the level of skill required for safety. Epperson is upset because I had a very significant part in demonstrating bikeways’ failures to the public and government. But the fact remains that the policy of incompetent cycling on bikeways did not produce new bikeways as rapidly as its proponents thought it should. Hence Epperson’s paper.

It is one thing to publish papers asserting some historical causality, but that’s not what Epperson did. He produced a tangle of guesses and assumptions. One of the silliest is that I was supported financially by an agreement with my ladyfriend. It wasn’t true, but even if it were it had no bearing on the paper’s argument. Epperson’s paper contained so many easily disproved factual errors and so many irrelevant assumptions that the editors of the *Transportation Law Journal* recognized that they had to publish my detailed refutation, almost half as long as the original paper. Epperson is the only person whom Professor Longhurst quotes as a source for information about me.

Both papers appear on my website:

<http://johnforester.com/Articles/Social/Epperson%20Review%20TLJ.htm>

Longhurst spends considerable space on the sidepaths existing before the automotive era,

explaining why cyclists failed to make these financially successful. It is obvious that he wishes for a widespread sidepath system. His final chapter hopes that society will come to some reasonable understanding of the road system as a common good appropriately shared.

That is all very well, but Longhurst provides no clue as to how this could be made to work. Of course he can’t, because he has no understanding of the technology of road transport; nothing in his book considers that technology. Longhurst writes that his theme is cyclists sharing the road with the predominant users of the time. But he has never realized that the system of well-designed roads (which most of ours are) operated in accordance with the rules of the road (which nearly all drivers obey) provides a well-arranged system of road sharing proved, and improved, by a century of use. That he failed to discover this fact, though being a cyclist who was researching into sharing the road, shows the power of the cyclist-inferiority phobia to close the mind.

Longhurst presents more evidence of his motorist-superiority/cyclist-inferiority superstition when discussing the AAA film *Only One Road*, 1975. This film attempts to show cyclists obeying the rules of the road, but it fails. Longhurst shows a still of a cyclist adopting the panic braking posture immediately before a car’s open door. The cyclist should have been riding outside the door zone, not inside it. Likewise, Longhurst quotes my criticism of the film as being defective, without understanding the reason that I gave, in the same sentence, that the film advised cyclists to ride between right-turning traffic and the curb. Riding in the door zone and between right-turning traffic and the curb are both stupidly dangerous movements, but they are part of AAA’s program of limiting cyclists to the edge of the roadway as much as possible. That’s Motordom’s motorist-superiority/cyclist-inferiority program at work, but Longhurst fails to understand it.

Longhurst’s cyclist-inferiority phobia prevents him from understanding the value that cyclists attach to the rules of the road system. He is thereby absolutely prevented from understanding cyclists’ resistance to Motordom’s use of FTR and sidepath laws to kick them out of that system, making them second-class road users subservient to motorists.

In short, his so-called *History of Sharing the American Road* contains no understanding about the important *Bike Battles* occurring from 1970 on that have shaped our bicycle transport system.