

Panel report:

## Les mobilités invisibles. Une histoire des cyclistes et des piétons en Suisse et au-delà

Lucerne, July 10, 2025, Seventh Swiss Historical Congress

*Organizers: Tiphaine Robert and Ueli Haefeli*

*Participants: Tiphaine Robert, Tiina Männistö-Funk, Claire Pelgrims, Patrick Rérat*

*Commentary: Ueli Haefeli*

**Report by: Aline Martello, University of Lausanne**

In her introduction, **TIPHAINE ROBERT (Lausanne)** explained how active mobility practiced by pedestrians and cyclists has been rendered invisible over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The panel organizers went on to explore past representations of pedestrian and cyclist mobility in order to understand whether these have influenced urban planning and traffic accident prevention practices. What counter-discourses have emerged, from which stakeholders, and with what motivation? The panel contributions shed light on the diverse views and representations of cyclists and pedestrians in Switzerland and Europe.

The panel started with a presentation by Tiphaine Robert, who analyzed twelve issues of *Der Fussgänger*, a review produced in the interwar period by a pedestrian association founded by Philipp Schmid-Ruedin in response to the 1932 Swiss law on the circulation of cars and cyclists.<sup>1</sup> The association brought together police chiefs, legal experts, engineers, housewives, and pedestrian lobbyists, criticizing the general state of urban infrastructure and pedestrian behavior, while also advocating for the protection of pedestrians. Robert identified the main targets of *Der Fussgänger's* denunciations as the automobile industry, car drivers, and automobile clubs. She explained how the review strictly distinguished pedestrians from car drivers, thus attempting to marginalize motonormativity. Robert rounded her presentation off by relating how *Der Fussgänger* focused on pedestrian behavior by dictating how pedestrians should act in traffic – often promoting highly consensual solutions.

**TIINA MÄNNISTÖ-FUNK (Turku)** continued by exploring how cycling and walking can be studied through various historical perspectives. First, she presented alternative interpretations of statistics, photographs, and maps from the city of Turku, Finland, spanning the 1950s to the 1970s. The photographs were combined with a thematic map on which the researcher traced the movements

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<sup>1</sup> Loi fédérale sur la circulation des véhicules automobiles et des cycles du 15 mars 1932.

of cyclists and pedestrians. She demonstrated how, starting in the 1960s, bicycles began to be marginalized by architects and urban planners to make way for cars. As a second approach, Männistö-Funk proposed to analyze data produced by activists, Finnish urban planners and city administrations. She emphasized the importance of recognizing that what is measured and how it is statistically represented shapes what is considered significant. Further, she criticized researchers' reliance on statistics produced by urban planners in the 1970s, which focused on measuring distance traveled. These statistics inevitably failed to reflect the challenges faced by those on foot, particularly women, who made up the majority of pedestrians. Moreover, she argued that since most drivers were men during the period studied, neglecting to analyze pedestrian mobility also means overlooking how women moved through the city. Männistö-Funk's final suggestion concerned discourses of invisibility, particularly regarding cyclists. She underscored the importance of examining how cyclists have been rendered invisible in historical sources through their systematic exclusion or neglect. She also explained how they were often expected to protect themselves – especially by wearing reflectors. According to the researcher, this discourse reinforces a perception of cyclists as unprotected, reckless, and invisible until today.

**CLAIRE PELGRIMS (Brussels)** presented representations of pedestrian and cyclist mobility in Brussels, Belgium, from the 1950s onward, drawing on her recently published PhD research.<sup>2</sup> Using urban plans and photographs, she analyzed how pedestrians were depicted within a commercial context during the 1960s. She highlighted how the development of shopping arcades went hand-in-hand with creating areas accessible by car or public transport. These spaces, she argued, embodied a "right to efficient walking": they were designed to streamline pedestrian movement while keeping consumers confined within controlled indoor environments. Next, Pelgrims examined the *Carrefour Agora* development project in 1970s Brussels, which sought to extend pedestrian zones across a broader area, albeit with commercial intent. She identified the emergence of a new concept called 'leisure walking', where pedestrians moved from one shopping arcade to another while experiencing an imagined version of the "old city of Brussels". The project revealed the difficulty urban planners faced with planning pedestrian areas on a larger urban scale, as these spaces were only accessible by car or public transport and remained small in relation to the broader city. Analyzing the creation of the Brussels Region in 1989, Pelgrims pointed to a new generation of regional political leaders committed to restoring urban conviviality and improving pedestrian infrastructure. While they focused on spatial and qualitative continuity for pedestrians, cyclists were initially neglected. Limited funding meant improvements were restricted to a few key routes. In the 1990s, fully pedestrianized zones gave way to hybrid spaces such as shared streets and zones pacing cars to a speed of 30 km/h. Meanwhile walking conditions remained poor outside these flagship areas, especially in car-dominated suburbs. Finally, Pilgrims showed how, since the 2000s, walking and

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<sup>2</sup> PELGRIMS Claire, *Entre vitesse et lenteur. Tension entre imaginaires de la mobilité à Bruxelles*, Bruxelles, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2025 (Architecture, urbanisme, paysagisme).

cycling have been promoted by political authorities as sustainable urban transport modes, tied to climate goals, public health, and urban livability, thus moving away from earlier representations of leisurely, *flâneur*-style walking.

The panel concluded with a presentation by **PATRICK RÉRAT (Lausanne)**, who examined how road safety is represented in public campaigns in the Swiss canton of Neuchâtel. He explored not only the visual and textual content of these campaigns, but also their underlying conceptions of safety and risk. For his analysis, Rérat selected posters of Swiss road safety campaigns between 2014 and 2024. He highlighted the involvement of both public and private actors, including the Swiss Council for Accident Prevention (BFU/BPA/UPI), the main national accident insurance company SUVA, the Road Safety Fund (FVS/FSR/FSS), as well as automobile lobbies, private insurance companies, and NGOs promoting sustainable mobility. Rérat demonstrated how the campaigns often present contradictory portrayals of cyclists. On the one hand, cyclists are portrayed as irresponsible, lacking proper safety equipment, or riding too fast, implying that they are often the cause for accidents. On the other hand, they are shown as role models for safe participation in traffic, effectively demonstrating how to avoid crashes. Rérat uncovered another narrative within the campaigns: a subtle expression of affection for cycling itself. Ultimately, Rérat argued that these campaigns disproportionately target cyclists, largely ignore car drivers and their responsibilities, selectively interpret accident data, and reinforce motonormativity.

The panel concluded with **UELI HAEFELI (Bern)**, who shared three general comments on the panelists' presentations. First, Haefeli identified two contrasting discourses surrounding pedestrians and cyclists. One portrays them as victims of mass motorization, emphasizing their status as vulnerable road users; the other highlights them as efficient and sustainable modes of transport, focusing on economic reasoning and practicality. Second, he explored how cyclists are depicted either as integrated within or separated from other modes of transport, questioning the logic behind their place in mobility systems. Finally, Haefeli pointed out the frequent confusion between maximum speed, average travel speed, and average travel time, which can lead to misleading assumptions in traffic planning and discourse.

Aline Martello

### Panel overview:

Tiphaine Robert: “The Pedestrian is also a Human Being”. A Pedestrians’ Association Facing Mass Motorization in the Switzerland of the 1950’s

Tiina Männistö-Funk: How to Study the History of Invisible Modes

Claire Pelgrims: Imaginary of Slowness in Brussels: Between Relegation and Redeployment of Pedestrian and Cycling Infrastructures and Practices

Patrick Rérat: The (In)visibility of Cyclists and Car Drivers in Road Safety Campaigns

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