"The Constant is that Governments Regard Motorcyclists as a Problem": Riders' Rights Activists in the United Kingdom on Threats, Political Mobilization, and Freedom

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Abstract

This article examines the views of UK riders' rights activists about perceived threats to the freedom to enjoy motorcycling, and how to mobilize the motorcycling community against these threats. Through semi-structured interviews with activists, we analyze their beliefs in relation to three areas of concern:

1. The greatest threats to the future of motorcycling.
2. The mobilization of the wider motorcycle community.
3. The nature of the freedoms and rights that activists are trying to protect.

In relation to (1), "motorcycling" is tightly linked, conceptually, to riding internal-combustion powered machines, and this has a significant impact on how riders' rights activists engage with perceived threats to it, particularly in the environmental domain. Threats to the future of motorcycling are taken to come from environmental activism, the rise of autonomous vehicles, and overly aggressive road safety campaigns. Perceived threats also, however, have a potential "upside" in terms of the mobilization of the wider motorcycling community. Finally, rider's rights activists are "classically liberal" in their understanding of the fundamental basis of riders' rights – people have a right to freely engage in activities that are self-regarding, and which have no or minimal impact on the interests of others.

Introduction

In terms of transport choice, it is quite exceptional to be a motorcyclist. Around 0.8% of United Kingdom (UK) road journeys in 2019 were by powered-two-wheeler (PTW) (UK Department of Transport, n.d.). The 3.0 billion vehicle miles (bvm) covered by motorcycles in that year in the UK is less than the total mileage of pedal cycles at 3.5bvm. Like pedal cyclists, motorcyclists are classed as "vulnerable" road users, lacking any kind of protective cage in the event of an accident. Unlike pedal cyclists, motorcyclists do not generally find themselves included in the "holy trinity" of cycling, walking, and public transport that inform the contemporary transport policy planning documents produced by local and national governments the world over.[1] Motorcycles are frequently ignored in local transport plans, and where they are included, motorcyclists are sometimes seen as either a positive nuisance and/or a danger to themselves.[2] Motorcyclists, then, often feel not only vulnerable but also marginalized and misunderstood, in terms of both (a) their identity as motorcyclists and (b) what motorcycles have to offer in the way of transport policy solutions.[3]

In response to this perceived image problems and policy marginalization, motorcyclists have come together in the form of social movements around their shared sense of identity and common interests. Definitions of social movements vary, but have at their core the idea of "networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or

[1] "When announcing the 2018 Transport Strategy, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan notoriously announced: 'If it isn't bicycles, pedestrians, or public transport, we're not interested.' As a statement of intent from a politician, that's about as clear as it gets." (Freeman, 2018). This idea of there being a 'holy trinity' of transport solutions that mistakenly exclude motorcycles is commonplace in the RRO activist literature. See for example Brown, 2019, p.57. The idea of 'The Trinity' is also used by campaigners for cycling, walking, and public transport, see for example *The Trinity.org.uk*.

[2] See for example the reaction to Oxfordshire County Council's Briefing Document for its new "Local Transport and Connectivity Plan", in which the council had claimed that "statistical evidence suggests motorcyclists are a danger to themselves". This has been reported by the BBC (BBC 2020). The BMF responded critically to the Briefing Document (BMF 2020a; also Pick 2020), as did MAG (2020). As a result the language was changed to show less explicit bias against motorcycling.

[3] Freeman (2020) "Motorcyclists: a suspect Community?" https://www.bmf.co.uk/news/features/show/motorcyclists-a-suspect-community

organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities" (Diani, 1992, p.1). Motorcyclists' social movements in the UK have become known as "Riders' Rights Organizations" (RROs) and the two main bodies are the British Motorcyclists' Federation (BMF) and the Motorcycle Action Group (MAG). In an age when "identity" politics is very much to the fore, largely based around elements such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, this "shared collective identity" of motorcyclists is unusual in being both self-chosen and rooted in a form of consumer activity.[4] Intuitively, a self-chosen identity may not seem deeply rooted, yet this sense of what it means to *be* a motorcyclist can be sufficiently powerful that people will give up, time, money, effort, and even their personal liberty in order to promote the cause of motorcycling and defend it against external threats. It is commonplace to say that RROs are committed to the continuing freedom of motorcyclists to ride PTWs, and that they seek to defend that freedom against threats to its continued enjoyment. This article asks how activists *themselves* understand what they are trying to achieve. What do they see as the greatest threats to the future of motorcycling, and how do they seek to respond to these perceived threats?

We seek here to add to our understanding of the politics of motorcycling through consideration of the voices of UK riders' rights activists. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with activists in the BMF and MAG, we look to address the following questions:

i) What do RRO activists see as the greatest threats to the future of motorcycling, and how do they respond to these?

[4] This is also noted by McDonald-Walker (2000a, p.44). See Schouten and McAlexander (1995) on how self-chosen identities can become the most central characteristics of our sense of who we are.

ii) How might these threats impact on the possibility of mobilizing the wider motorcycling community and growing the riders' rights social movement?

iii) How do RRO activists conceptualize the freedoms and rights that they are trying to protect?

We argue that the nature of riders' rights activism in the UK is deeply shaped by a particular view of what it means to be a motorcyclist. For our set of activists, 'motorcycling' is understood in a quite specific way, embodied in the freedom to ride internal combustion engine (ICE) powered two-wheel personal transport. This frame has important consequences, because the agenda of environmental politics is seen, as a result, as a fundamental threat to the future of motorcycling, and ICE PTWs are framed by riders' rights activists as an environmentally sustainable form of transport. While threats to the future of motorcycling from the environmental lobby, or the development of autonomous vehicles, say, are seen as existential, they are also seen as potential recruitment tools for the riders' rights movement. That said, we will see that the 'customer service model' of offering selective benefits to members is seen as the most effective mode of recruitment for RROs.

We find that the "freedom to ride" is interpreted in a classically liberal mode with an implicit or explicit invocation of John Stuart Mill's 'harm principle' as a key element of the justification for the political enactment of riders' rights. While both MAG (explicitly) and BMF (more implicitly) invoke 'libertarianism' as the ideological position of their respective RROs, they tend not to mean by this a view that there should be no restrictions on motorcyclists' choices. They accept that significant environmental harms could constitute a legitimate reason to restrict motorcycling, for example, what they deny is that motorcycles cause such harms. The Millian theme, furthermore, militates against paternalism in matters of road safety – on this view motorcyclists are adult rational agents, morally capable of

authoring their own lives, and so, even if, in some sense, motorcyclists are a "danger to themselves" (e.g., more likely to be killed or injured in a collision than non-vulnerable road users), this fact would not justify state interference in the free choices of motorcyclists. The problem is that state actors do seek to interfere in the free choices of motorcyclists on exactly these grounds, and this is the fundamental reason why riders' rights activists see motorcyclists as suffering from discrimination in transport policy-making. For these reasons – the acceptance of the importance of social harms, and the Millian defense of riders' rights, we suggest that "classically liberal" would be a better description of UK riders' rights ideology than "libertarian".

In the next section we will provide a brief overview of the history of, and the existing literature on, UK RROs. Section three will discuss our theory and methods, the fourth section will present our data and the analysis of same along the dimensions of threats, mobilization, and freedom. Section five will conclude.

UK RROs

Of the two major riders' rights organizations in the UK, the longest-standing is the British Motorcyclists Federation (BMF). Founded as the 'Federation of National and One Make Motorcycle Clubs' in 1960, the Federation became the BMF in August 1965. The BMF aims at "preserving, protecting and promoting motorcycling and the interests of all riders of powered two-wheelers. Protecting the right to ride and ensuring that the powered two-wheeler is at the heart of transport planning are central to our role" (BMF, n.d.). Often seen as being at the "respectable" end of UK motorcycling ("the political wing of the BMW Owners' Club" as some wags have it) the BMF was set up, in part, to counter the image of bikers associated with the 'rockers' side of the mods v. rockers clashes in English seaside towns in the early 1960s (McDonald-Walker, 2000a, pp.74-5). The Motorcycle Action Group

(MAG) was formed in 1973 with the explicit intention of challenging, and ultimately repealing, the *Motor Cycles (Wearing of Helmets) Regulations 1973 (S.I., 1973, No. 180)* Statutory Instrument that came into effect across the UK on 1st June of that year. For those who founded MAG, the BMF was, in 1973, insufficiently opposed to the new helmet law. From a single-issue campaign group, MAG has developed into an organization with a remit that runs across all the interests of PTW riders. As their current constitution has it "MAG is a civil rights organization working to influence political decision-making and social attitudes for the benefits of motorcyclists and motorcycling" (MAG, 2018a). MAG's current President, Ian Mutch, a prolific author of motorcycle-related books, tells the history of the organization (of which he was a founder member) in his *Motorcycles Forever: a Pictorial History of Biker Subculture in Great Britain*. He notes there the circumstances of MAG's coming into being:

> Before helmet wearing was enforced, the British Motorcyclists Federation (BMF) campaigned against it, though without success. The reluctance of the BMF to pursue an active campaign for reform once the law was passed prompted the formation of MAG which was pretty much a one issue organization in those days, an identity which it has never totally shaken off (Mutch, n.d., p.7).

MAG's vociferous opposition to the helmet law and use of street protests to make its case in the 1970s and early 1980s made it quite distinct from the BMF. As time has gone by MAG has professionalized, and now, for example, has a former Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament as one of its key lobbyists. MAG and the BMF appear more like each other in terms of strategies and tactics than they were, but arguably MAG's continuing explicit commitment to political libertarianism (Lavender, 2019) still serves to give it a distinctive political profile.

Serious analyses of UK riders' rights organizations are relatively rare. The key works in the sub-field are those produced by Suzanne McDonald-Walker (1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2007) in her pioneering sociological and political studies of the biking community in the UK. Her work looks at the interweaving of culture and politics in the UK biking scene, focusing on the history of the BMF and MAG, and on the cultural evolution of biking in the UK. She has also undertaken extensive ethnographic field work with riders' rights activists to understand their motivations and goals, analyzing her data through the lens of social movement theory. To our knowledge there has not been any extensive new study of UK riders' rights groups since McDonald-Walker's *Bikers* was published in 2000. Here we do not seek only to update her work (although after twenty years there is scope enough for that), but also take the analysis of riders' rights activism in new directions, in particular focusing on the political ideologies of riders' rights activism, as expressed by the activists themselves, and through RRO publications.

Theory and Methods

The lead author interviewed seventeen riders' rights activists in the UK from September 2019 until September 2020. The interviews were carried out using a semi-structured interview format where all interviews[5] were recorded and transcribed. The interview questions are included in Appendix A.

Interviewees were selected on the basis of their existing positions within UK RROs. The majority are national officers within their organizations, with some regional officers interviewed as well. Four of the interviewed riders' right activists were women and the other

[5] Apart from one where contemporaneous notes were taken and subsequently approved by the interviewee.

thirteen were men. All were Caucasian. Every respondent provided additional demographic data: all were aged of 50 or above (with three in the '70+' age category), and 47% were in the 50-59 age category. The average number of years these respondents had been riding motorcycles was 45, and the average number of years they had been actively involved in the UK riders' rights movement was 25. These interview subjects are, therefore, all very experienced motorcyclists with many years of service in the rider's rights movement, something that may well shape their views of what it means to be a motorcyclist.[6]

Earlier research in the field has used a "tripartite phenomenological approach of description, reduction and interpretation" (LeBlanc III: 2019) to guide the content analysis of semi-structured interviews with motorcyclists. The initial part of our own research process followed the first step in Neuendorf's guide to the process of thematic analysis. We closely familiarized ourselves with the complete transcripts before proceeding to computer-aided text analysis (CATA) as the second step in the research process (Neuendorf, 2019).

The interview transcripts were prepared for the CATA by removing all questions and comments from the interviewer to ensure that we captured the content from the respondents

[6] One question that arises here is whether this demographic profile mirrors that of UK motorcyclists more generally. Good demographic data on UK motorcyclists is hard to come by, but what there is suggests that the age profile of these senior activists is somewhat older than for motorcyclists in general, as one might expect, but not hugely so. A survey of UK motorcyclists conducted by Bridgestone Tyres found that more than 50% of respondents were over the age of 40 (Bridgestone, 2014). The editor of *Motorcycle News* asked in a 2020 editorial "Why is biking so seemingly low-diversity?", noting that "the vast majority of riders turn out to be white, middle-aged men when they remove their helmet" (Newland, 2020). On this anecdotal evidence, riders' rights activists are fairly representative of UK bikers more generally. One UK insurance company recently noted that 8% of its motorcycle insurance quotes now go to women riders (The Bike Insurer, n.d.). By contrast, 24% of our activist interviewees were women. This also reflects a finding of McDonald-Walker that "the type of woman who is drawn into riding is not 'typical' of the wider society…in that their skills and attitudes make them good candidates for office-holding" (2000, 69).

not the interviewer. The Yoshikoder (Lowe, 2015) software is unable to distinguish between respondents and interviewers when analyzing the transcripts. All cleaned interviews were added to one master file to allow for a streamlined CATA. The second step of the analysis was running basic word counts for the interview transcripts to identify relevant key words mentioned by the RRO activists. The key words were used to construct a dictionary in Yoshikoder to allow for closer inspection of the transcripts running concordance and keyword-in-context analyses. This allowed us to examine the context within which our respondents used the key words – so for example whether a negative or positive value connotation was attached to a particular concept. While it is of course the case that interview responses are framed by the questions being asked, this two pronged approached allowed us to minimize the risk of selection bias in our review of responses, by using CATA to ensure that our initial close reading of the manuscripts was not influenced by our own perceptions of what RRO activists *ought* to think about threats to the future of motorcycling and the freedom to ride.

The theoretical framework for the analysis of the interview material is adapted from the work of Michael Freeden on political ideologies (1996, 2000, 2003, 2013), and in particular the notions of "decontestation" and "conceptual morphology". On this view, all political concepts are subject to contestation of their meaning, scope, and application, but one role of the political entrepreneur or movement activist is to "decontest" or "fix" a meaning to key concepts in order to foster political mobilization within a target group. Such fixing of meaning may be unstable and temporary, and still be contested from outside (or inside) the target population, but it can provide sufficient stability of meaning to facilitate mobilization in a target group at a particular time and place. A necessary element of a campaign for

justice, for example, would be a sufficiently shared conception of what it would mean for something to be just or unjust. For our group of interviewees, 'freedom', to take one key concept, was normally decontested as the freedom of the individual to pursue their own ends under the constraint of non-harm to third parties within existing socio-economic structures (rather than, say, being premised on a requirement to overthrow those structures). In addition to seeking to understand decontested conceptual meaning, this approach also looks to identify "conceptual clusters", sets of concepts that stand in mutual relations to one another, to flesh out the ideological content of a set of beliefs, thus 'conceptual morphology' — understanding the structure of belief in conceptual terms. For example, how does that Millian understanding of the nature of freedom impact upon what may, or may not, be seen as a 'threat' to the future of motorcycling?

'Threats' to the future of motorcycling

When asked what the main threats are to the future of motorcycling, the most frequent response, both in terms of the number of times it was mentioned in total, and the number of respondents who referred to it, was environmentalism – the "environmental lobby", the "environmental agenda", or "authoritarian environmental policies". There are two dimensions of environmentalism that are taken to constitute a serious threat to continued use of motorcycles: the first is concerns about emissions (both campaigns for clean air and against climate change), and the second complaints about noise pollution. These are taken to be particularly serious threats in relation to the future of motorcycles powered by the ICE. RRO activists are, of course, aware that there are alternatives to ICE-powered bikes, which could allow for the continuation of "environmentally friendly" powered two-wheeler transport, and so a prior condition to understanding why and how the 'environmental agenda' is seen as a

threat requires understanding just how riders' rights activists relate to ICE-powered motorcycles. As noted, these activists are experienced riders and they have spent their riding lives on motorcycles powered by internal combustion. Most interviewees (although as we will see not all) decontest "motorcycling", conceptually, as the riding of an ICE-powered two-wheeler, therefore threats to the future of the ICE are in themselves threats to the future of motorcycling. Such threats were also seen as counterproductive, for example:

> The second big threat is the environmental agenda which really threatens the internal combustion engine. The Conservative government under Teresa May's tenure stated their intention to abolish all internal combustion engines in the United Kingdom. That ignores the vase swathe of data which suggests that could be counterproductive to the environment itself. (2)[7]

To take emissions first, activists see a very significant difference between ICE-powered two wheelers and ICE-powered four- (or more) wheelers. PTWs have, comparatively, lower CO_2 emissions per mile,[8] better power-to-weight ratios, and are less frequently held up in traffic (particularly where, as in the UK, they can filter between lanes of traffic). So, a point often made is that a 'modal switch' from four-wheelers to two-wheelers could result in a significant drop in both congestion and emissions, even if ICE-powered PTWs stay on the roads. One

[7] The number in parentheses refers to the respondent, so that the reader can determine where responses come from the same interviewee.

[8] It is important to note that the same does not apply to other, so-called 'ground level', emissions. Comparative tests of car and motorcycle emissions have consistently found that motorcycles produce higher levels of carbon monoxide (CO), hydrocarbons (HC), and nitrogen oxide (NO_x). This is important in the debate about urban air quality. Two-wheelers 'produced significantly higher emissions of all pollutants except CO_2 than gasoline-powered cars from the same sales period.' (Vasic & Weilenmann, 2006, p.154). This is partly because for some time motorcycle engines were not required to meet the stringent emissions controls applied to car engines, as PTWs were such a minor part of the overall traffic fleet. This is now changing, and as motorcycle engines must meet ever stricter emissions requirements, we require continuing research into comparative emissions. See also Soylu, 2007; Kontses et al, 2020; Momenimovahed et al., 2014; Chan et al., 1995.

BMF respondent makes the point that more motorcycles on the road would be better for all road users: “If more people rode bikes there’d be less congestion so those people that are having to drive on four, six or more wheels for a living will have an easy journey” (11).

Another respondent made clear the connection many activists feel between the whole idea of motorcycling and ICE machines:

> I did ask some of the regional reps so obviously the green fanatical movement, the dogmatic opposition to ICE machines so the combustion engine. Internal combustion engine, we are not against electric bikes or technology but part of the enjoyment of biking is being up to our armpits in oil and grease and maintaining and fixing and building them and talking about them over a beer. (1)

The above quote marks an important belief for many respondents, that ‘biking’ involves much more than just riding a PTW. There is an entire culture around motorcycles that is taken to be under threat here, and that includes the care for mechanical machinery that many bikers devote to their motorcycles. One respondent (among others) was explicit on this: “we have a culture. And that revolves around motorcycling. And we want people to respect that.” (15)

Some respondents expressed skepticism of the viability of electric alternatives to the ICE:

> The electric bike hasn’t come along yet, that will do all the things. I can’t ride an electric bike 220 miles to a bike rally, park in a field over the weekend and make a 220-mile trip back. If you want to take the wiggly route you might not be able to, you might have to take the straight route. Charging points, infrastructure, the whole thing isn’t there. (1)

The same activist sets out the almost emotional attachment between rider and machine:

> Let's face it, there's so much history in British bike manufacture and if people aren't able to fettle with their BSA and go and set their points...there's an enjoyment, there's a satisfaction in much the same way as someone might bake the perfect soufflé, you know getting your bike to run absolutely tip top, the smell of your Castrol, if you're into your two-strokes, there is a whole emotional attachment with a motorbike that doesn't necessarily happen with a car. (1)

In similar vein:

> I've only ridden an electric bike once and that was an off-road Zero, in a field. And that was about 10 years ago. And it was an extraordinary experience. They have got a lot of torque... But without that feel of the reciprocating pistons, I don't think I'd get the same satisfaction out of it. You know, when you hit the starter button, and then you sit on it, and it feels as if it's about to dig up the ground. (5)

Also:

> Well, you know, this idea that we've all got to be using electric transport by 2040. Or there can't be anymore internal combustion engine vehicles registered after 2040. Number one I'm against it. Pure and simple. Because I just don't want to ride an electric bike. I want to ride a bike with an internal combustion engine. And I'm not going to make any pretense about that. (8)

These quotes illustrate quite nicely that, conceptually, many activists equate the freedom to ride with the freedom to ride ICE-powered machines, specifically. Not that these are the only PTWs that can be ridden, but they are what gives riding its unique value. In terms of conceptual morphology, if 'motorcycling' is at the core of RRO ideology, and 'freedom' is an adjacent concept (something that we all require to enable the enjoyment of riding motorcycles), then the internal combustion engine is a 'peripheral' concept, in other words the pleasure of riding, and perhaps also working on the mechanics of, an ICE-powered machine is how the freedom to ride a motorcycle is, for these activists, "cashed out". Note that 'peripheral' does not imply 'unimportant' – while an electric motorcycle is still

recognized as a 'bike', the motorcycling these activists want to defend contains a deep attachment to internal combustion. This view is reflected in the activist literature as well: "A happy engine is a thing of great joy and the amalgam of rider and machine when all elements are moving in emotional and mechanical harmony is an experience of spiritual joy" (Mutch, 2019, p.5).

Another point that activists have been keen to get across is that they want the discourse around motorcycling, and in particular the future of ICE-powered bikes, to be governed by data and rational argument, whereas currently, for them, environmental criticism is often more emotional than rational. We see this, it is claimed, in discussions about emissions, clean air, and public health:

> In order to protect motorcycling we have to analyze and evaluate the claims made about the environment to see if there is any validity in restricting or banning, for example, the internal combustion engine. So, starting at the point of protecting motorcyclists' rights to ride petrol powered bikes, we ended up drilling right down into the IPCC reports into causes of death in the UK and into claims about bad air and mortality, and I would say we have done probably the most comprehensive analysis of a lot of that data ever conducted in the UK. And we found some surprising things which are directly relevant to the threats facing biking and riders' rights for example. There hasn't be a single recorded death related to bad air in the United Kingdom as far as transport emissions are concerned for example.[9] And yet that's been used as a reason to charge and essentially financially ban bikes in London. The difficulty for us with that is policy has been made on the basis of unfounded claims rather than on solid science and I've learned that for MAG to do its job properly it has to become a master of subjects far beyond simple motorcycle technology. (2)

[9] This was true at the time of interview, but it is no longer true at the time of writing. See https://www.newscientist.com/article/2263165-landmark-ruling-says-air-pollution-contributed-to-death-of-9-year-old/ (accessed 8th January 2021).

So, to the extent that there is a collective view on this issue amongst UK RRO activists, it runs something like this, riders are deeply attached to their ICE-powered vehicles, but they know that this attachment, in itself, would not be enough to win an argument over their future. People outside of the movement are unlikely to give this claim a great deal of weight. However, they also believe that the science and data are on their side, that there is a great deal of difference between an ICE-powered two-wheeler versus an ICE-powered four-wheeler in terms of impact on the environment. ICE-powered two wheelers can, on this view, be part of the solution to climate change and air pollution problems. Furthermore, electric solutions are seen as a false solution – limited range, charging time, the need for a massively extended charging infrastructure, and the whole life-cycle environmental costs of electric vehicles all render electric motorcycles as a non-viable alternative in anything more than a niche way (Öpik, 2020). Electric motorcycles might be suitable for short-to-medium range commuting (if charging points are available at each end of the journey), but not for long-range adventure or even typical leisure riding.

It should, however, be noted that this view is not universal among UK activists. One respondent felt that: “The environmental thing isn’t a huge threat because there are alternative technologies coming along, alternative power sources, it would be great if we had got synthetic fuel being produced...We’ll still be on two wheels. Probably look different to what they are now. And perform different to what they are now. So, I don’t see that losing petrol and environmental issues as a huge threat to motorcycling” (14). However, this view that the environmental agenda is *not* an existential threat to the future of motorcycling, is, based on our evidence, very much a minority view.

RRO activists are generally very attached to ICE-powered two-wheelers, and for the most part they do not see a viable future for motorcycling in the absence of ICEs. Their objections to the idea that we could just swap out ICE motorcycles for electric bikes have some empirical grounds – electric vehicles have, currently, limited (although improving) range, relatively long charge times, and there are concerns about the potential environmental impacts of mass-scale lithium-ion battery production and disposal. The environmental impact of the battery production chain is difficult to assess, and therefore comparison with the environmental impact of ICE vehicles is also complex. (see, for example, Melin, 2019; Hawkins *et al.* 2012; Ma et al, 2012). Environmentalism is also, however, held by some activists to be a more general authoritarian threat to personal liberty, which could endanger many more established personal freedoms than 'just' riding ICE machines. We discuss this further below. We should also note that Ultra-Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ) policies are also seen, under some modes of implementation, to create a significant social injustice for poorer road users by both MAG and the BMF (Öpik, 2018; Waters 2020), as the less affluent will tend to use older, higher-emission machinery.

The second environmental element is noise, which is sometimes linked to a more general concern about anti-social riding. This is something that is picked up in the activist publications – in a 'Soapbox' (personal view) piece in *The Road,* Ian Churchlow laments a "small but excessively loud minority." "Fitting excessively loud exhausts is both specious and short sighted and will force the authorities to crack down" (Churchlow, 2018, p.82). Both the BMF and MAG have commented on the proposed introduction of 'acoustic cameras' to crack down on noisy biking, with the BMF noting that "excessive traffic noise is undoubtedly a problem", while skeptical that acoustic cameras will be able to offer "accurate decibel

readings that are good enough for a prosecution" (Bliss, 2020, p.36). Noise and anti-social riding were also raised in the interviews, with activists worried that the actions of a small minority of bikers will affect the whole community. One member of the BMF Management Team said that 'noise' was the key threat to the future of biking:

> I'm not sure if that's surprising for you, but yes it is, because the perception of other people to the biking world…definitely is that a few people, who go about with these after-market exhausts and, you know, a load of revs and unnecessary noise. That comes out very clear in complaints, for one, which we received…If people see us as antisocial, then biking will go. People will find their way to rid themselves from what they perceive as anti-social biking. Simple as that. So we have to really work towards getting or own house in order – probably more than combatting threats from others. (17)

Another senior BMF official takes the same view:

> So noise, another aspect, that we could end up being over-regulated, and I think there's already adequate noise legislation in place, it's under nuisance laws in England, same in Scotland. There's enough enforcement abilities there without needing any more rules. But the government frequently get this wrong, where they'll think "hmmm, we perceive a problem", and they'll want to promulgate a new rule to try and attack that problem, when in fact they've already got perfectly adequate powers that they're not using. But if you look at the detail of the new rule, it's got more ramifications, it's a harsher rule…and so the consequences for the end user of the noisy machine might be out of proportion to what he's actually doing, so for me the way round that is education, and getting people to recognize that. You know, you used to hear the slogan 'loud pipes save lives', no they don't, loud pipes just cause a bloody nuisance, and that's all they do. (16)

It is worth noting that with regard to noise pollution the environmental issue is framed as one of rider responsibility, rather than being seen as a misplaced or poorly understood environmental concern. This links to the Millian emphasis on personal responsibility for harms that we discuss below. It is not the case that, in general, riders' rights activists are arguing that environmental concerns are either irrelevant or unimportant. It is rather that

motorcycling itself is seen as misunderstood when it is taken to be a significant contributor to pollution in general and poor air quality in particular.

After environmental pressure, the second-most cited threat to the future of motorcycling is the rise of autonomous vehicles. Well-established problems that developers of autonomous vehicles have had in getting their systems to recognize and respond to motorcycles lead to the view that the simplest way to get autonomous vehicles onto public roads would be to get motorcycles off them (on motorcycle detection and autonomous vehicles, see ACEM, n.d.; Mukhtar et al., 2013; Mukhtar & Tang 2015). This issue has been highlighted frequently in the BMF's publication for members, *Motorcycle Rider*, which has suggested that it constitutes "The Real Threat to Motorcycling" (Zee, 2018a. See also Duffy, 2018, Zee 2018b. From MAG's perspective, Öpik 2018c). One respondent sees autonomous vehicles as the greatest threat: "what I'm thinking about is, the biggest threat to motorcycling is this drive towards driverless cars, or autonomous vehicles, and things like that" (14). This interviewee reinforced this point later: "I do see this gulf in the technology between driverless cars and powered two wheelers, that could ultimately see two wheelers taken off the road. Because they can't make the autonomous vehicles work with them" (14). In other words, if it proves to be technically difficult and expensive to equip autonomous vehicles in such a way that they can reliably detect lane-splitting motorcycles, or a motorcycle stopped behind a large vehicle, then a cheaper solution might be to push this minority road-user group off the highways completely. Jim Freeman of the BMF supports this view:

> obviously if you are going down the route of level five autonomy in a mixed user environment that could be highly dangerous for bikes, and we felt that the risk would be there that the simplest answer yet again would be saying 'routes which only autonomous vehicles can use' which means that vulnerable users like bikes would only be allowed access to parts of the road network.

Another threat to the future of motorcycling is perceived to come from over-zealous public health and road safety campaigners, with particular ire reserved for the 'Vision Zero' project (Vision Zero Project, n.d.). This brings us to the question of the relationship between the individual and the state, and the degree to which the state can and should exercise power over the individual to deter them from risky behavior that might constitute a danger to their own health. One respondent brings this together succinctly:

> The biggest threats to motorcycling at the moment are the misplaced belief that the state has the right to protect us from ourselves. There's a horrendous fashion-focused campaign called Vision Zero which claims to, well it has the claimed intent of eliminating all deaths and serious injuries on Britain's roads by a certain date. It is preposterous, but it can be used to justify any restriction on personal liberty. (2)

Another puts it this way "I suppose what we see now, traditionally, historically, the great threat has been road safety, is that the people can't bear the idea that others will take chances that they consider to be irresponsible" (5). A senior BMF official puts the point about the road safety campaigners' view of motorcycling pithily "It's basically ride a motorcycle and die" and what gets forgotten is "just the feeling of freedom and speed and just the whole joy of the situation" (10). These responses both stress that road safety campaigns have long constituted a threat to motorcycling's survival, and also invoke, if somewhat obliquely, the idea that this interference in motorcycling on grounds of public health is based upon what the political philosopher Ronald Dworkin referred to as an 'external' preference (Dworkin, 1977). In other words, it rests on a preference, on the part of non-motorcyclists, about how *other people* live their lives, even if that lifestyle constitutes no particular threat to the

individual with that preference. All that said, this does not imply that RROs believe road safety to be unimportant, this is a more nuanced objection to the idea that riders are a 'danger to themselves', rather than focusing on what activists would see as the real problems with road safety, such as that "with reduced expenditure on roads, the conditions, the restrictions on highways maintenance, carriageway condition is deteriorating along with how road repairs are done, carriageway markings. These type of concerns makes the BMF's inclusion in the consultation process critical." (11). Other threats noted in the interviews include motorcycle theft ("when 10% of motorcycles have been stolen in London and other places, there's a great disincentive to replace your bike once it's been taken/stolen" (2)), complacency amongst the motorcycle riding community ("riders in general are not aware and I think politics is a turn off"(7)) and unaccountable political power ("the biggest threat to motorcyclists' freedom is exactly the same that threatens everybody's freedom, and this is the growth in the unaccountable power of people who are in a position to control the way that you live your life" (8)). Another interviewee also notes the power of "well intended, ill-informed decision makers", going on to say that "Because bikes divide people, I think there are very few ambivalent people, you either like bikes or they should be banned off the road forever. Unfortunately, a lot of the latter are in the decision making or influential positions" (11).

We should note that these perceived threats to the future of motorcycling as we know it are not necessarily seen as an entirely bad thing. This brings us back to the point about complacency – if threats are highly visible and immediate, they can mobilize riders to join RROs and become active, which can in turn have a legacy on rider mobilization. As one

MAG official put it, “MAG’s membership can go up by 30% when we get a perceived threat” (14).[10]

Collective Action for Individualists

This perceived link between threat levels and recruitment to RROs raises another question. Any social movement depends for its political strength upon what is sometimes called ‘turnout’. Social movements are collective organizations pursuing political ends, and the rely on the successful mobilization of significant numbers of their target groups for their success. Money, turnout, and access to policy-makers all play their part in political success; social movements work on all these dimensions, but turning out significant numbers of supporters is often critical for political influence. In this scenario low membership translates into a lack of political heft. This, ostensibly, creates a problem for motorcycle riders’ rights organizations akin to the ancient saw about obtaining coordinated activity out of felines. Part of what we might call the ideology of motorcycling stresses its individual and individualistic nature, riding out alone on the open road, in control of one’s own destiny. Even when we ride in groups we ride in a kind of social isolation, *en vogue* for our times. Accounts of ‘why we ride’[11] often stress the pleasures of a solitary existence on the road, riding where one wants to, when one wants to, by any chosen route. How do you foster the kind of collective action that effective social movements rely upon, amongst a population of committed individualists?

[10] This phenomenon of a threat-mobilization link was also noted by McDonald-Walker's interviewees (2000a, p.99)

[11] See for example *Motorcyclist* (2009), also *RideApart* (2019).

As one MAG official of long-standing put it, “it’s clearly something within the mindset of the motorcycling public that prevents them from joining riders’ rights groups” (14).

Things may not be quite so bleak for RROs, however. Bikers also tend to stress the camaraderie of life on two wheels, and often feel the need to come together and share their experiences socially. Motorcycle clubs are of course the most obvious example of this tendency. As one respondent put it, “biking works in the individual and in the collective” (8).[12] That said, social movement organizations such as MAG and the BMF are not just regular bike clubs based on a shared interest, they are political organizations, and if politics really is a ‘turn off’ for most riders, they still, potentially, have a serious problem in mobilizing the wider motorcycle community. So how do they seek to address this challenge?

Mobilizing the wider community of motorcyclists is, says one respondent, “the campaigning Holy Grail”. The ideal would be to:

> unlock the door to mass membership and movement. That’s because number one, it gives us a great deal more income to do work, to do business with, and number two, it gives us a much wider army of voices who to a greater or lesser extent will then be aware of what we are doing. There are, it is estimated, about 1.5 million avid riders in this country but something like 6 million qualified riders of some sort or another. MAG’s membership is, if you include all the affiliated individuals and so forth, around 60,000. (2)

[12] McDonald-Walker also discusses this tension between individualism and collectivism in RROs, and the consequences of that individualism for motorcycle politics (2000a, p.95).

In this figure of 60,000, the vast majority of members are so through an affiliation via another motorcycle club, these include one-make clubs such as the Norton Owners' Club or Ducati Owners' Club, and more general clubs such as the Vintage Motor Cycle Club. As another MAG official notes, whilst affiliated members are valuable in terms of increased membership numbers, the financial contribution from affiliated members is fairly minimal – for one of the larger clubs it amounts to "three pence a head, per year" (3). By contrast individual members currently pay £27 each per year. Membership figures for the BMF follow the same pattern,[13] with most members being affiliates. From the informed estimates of our interviewees, there are around 14,000 UK motorcyclists who are fee-paying individual members of UK RROs.[14]

Senior officials in both MAG and the BMF are of course aware that increasing membership would also increase their resource base and allow them to campaign more effectively. One suggests there are two models that could be followed. One would be the "consumer group" route, as practiced by the Royal Automobile Club (RAC) and Automobile Association (AA) in the UK, where customers join, overwhelmingly, for the breakdown and rescue services. Both the RAC and the AA are lobbying groups for UK motorists, but as the respondent jokingly put it "nobody who joins them realizes" (3). This is seen as the route that would maximize membership, while possibly diluting the message of what groups such as MAG and BMF are really about. The second route is to "say well actually we want to keep it pretty pure and represent the views of people who really care. And the only way you're going to do that

[13] The BMF's individual membership fee is £28 per annum at the time of writing.
[14] We can of course expect the actual number of individual members to be lower than this given the unknown, but possibly significant, amount of overlapping membership between MAG and the BMF.

is only having a membership who are there for one reason and one reason only. So it is a tricky one, because that is clearly the route that gets you the least membership." (3)

In our interviews there were five main explanations offered as to why relatively few motorcyclists join UK RROs. One, as noted, is that there is just an individualist streak in motorcycle riders that prevents them from joining collective organizations. However, as the same respondent who made that point noted, penetration into the motorcycling community by RROs is much higher in countries such as France and Sweden than in the UK, which rather tells against the idea that this is a universal trait amongst motorcyclists.[15] This brings us to a second possibility, that there is something in the *UK* rider's psyche, in particular, that deters people from joining. As one respondent puts it, "I think part of it is it's our national psyche. We're not joiners by nature, as a country. So, we just sort of think, 'Oh well somebody's doing something about it, so I'll just let them get on with it'" (7). A third reason offered is that the nature of motorcycling and motorcyclists has changed over the decades since MAG and the BMF were formed. It is no longer so often the case that people really identify with bikes and biking, as part of their very sense of who they are and who their friends are. For many it is, now, an expensive leisure pursuit, on a par with, say, skiing or sailing, and if these leisure-based riders were forced to give up motorcycling, they would simply turn to another form of leisure pursuit. This view is reflected in the following interview responses:

> To encourage somebody who has a motorbike and rides on a Sunday and does the odd charity ride, and to motivate that person into caring enough about

[15] Sweden's Sveriges Motorcyklister has approximately 70,000 members in 2020 and 150,000 members when combined with affiliated members via Svenska Motorcykel och Snöskoter Förbundet (Swedish Motorcycle and Snowmobile Organization, for those who ride motorcycles or snowmobiles as a sport). Sveriges Motorcyklister (n.d.).

> motorcycling in general, is really difficult. And we do get quite a lot that just turn and go, 'Well I'll just stop then.' I think riders have changed. So my answer to that, I haven't got an answer to that because it's just becoming more and more difficult to even find those people to engage with, that you can even start to have a conversation about the politics and how it might affect them. (6)

This same point is sometimes made in the context of generational shifts. One senior BMF figure put it like this:

> I think it will be somewhere down the road as the younger generation, if they don't want to join clubs and affiliate… they're suddenly going to realize there's legislation going to come across. And they're going to say "how can they do this; how did this happen to us?" you know? "I'll go and talk to my MP" what, "ah yes, I remember a lot of years back there was a couple of groups that used to come to us and say you know you can't put this on us. And they shouted a bit and they're like representation. They're all gone now, I'm sorry you know you can like it or lump it, but this is what's happening". And I think we're going to be there in a couple of generations unfortunately you know. (10)

A fourth response to questions about the problems of mobilizing the wider motorcycling constituency focus on free-riding. Groups such as the BMF and MAG effectively provide public goods to the general population of riders. One respondent notes this wryly:

> Like I say, if we could have a campaign for access to bus lanes for our members only, that would be great, but I don't see how we can achieve that. You know, or you know, a 100-brake horse-power limit for everybody who's not a member, that kind of thing, maybe that would work, I don't know, but yes, you're never going to achieve that. Everything that we do benefits all motorcyclists. (3)

Given that, when MAG and BMF embark on membership drives, they are sometimes met with a response along the following lines: "I have had literally some people say, 'well if I

don't join MAG, are you still going to keep campaigning?' 'Well of course we are.' 'Well why would I bother joining then?' Good point!" (3)

The fifth reason offered is that people react negatively to bringing politics into biking. This has two aspects, firstly, in regular motorcycling publications such as *Motorcycle News*, *Ride*, or *Bike* there is very little coverage of the politics of motorcycling, despite the impact that government policies can have on people's ability to ride where and as they want to:

> there's been this problem with the UK press that the politics of motorcycling is a turn off to them. And so there's very little in the wider motorcycling press about the politics of motorcycling. And because of that, there's an ignorance within the wider motorcycling public. They're probably not aware of a fraction of the stuff that MAG gets involved with. (14)

Furthermore, there is a belief that politics, particularly in the wake of political battles in the UK such as over the Brexit referendum, does turn people off, even when they do get information. "When he gets talking to people, the minute you mention politics, they kind of glaze over. And they just don't want to know anything about that, you know" (6). And "I think politics is a turn off. Politics at the moment is a real turn off for everybody isn't it? With the Brexit debate. We're just sick and fed up with it. However you voted people are sick and fed up with it aren't they? So, yeah, it is a big issue." (5)

Given these perceived challenges to wider recruitment, do MAG and BMF officials believe that anything works well in terms of bring new members in? When they come to talk about recruitment success, officials in both organizations bring us back to versions of the customer

service model. Both the BMF and MAG have arrangements with motorcycle insurance providers to offer a discount to members of their organizations, as well as schemes for public liability insurance that facilitate member clubs being able to run events that are open to the public. One respondent sees the personal motorcycle insurance scheme as one of MAG's successes:

> if you ring up for bike insurance they'll ask if you've got any memberships. If you haven't they will offer you MAG membership and then apply the MAG discount. So effectively [the insurance company] then pay us for your first years' MAG membership. That's been very successful. (1)

Another respondent agrees that the insurance scheme has been very successful for MAG in terms of recruitment and retention, although what is less clear is whether riders stay with MAG even if they later go to another insurer:

> it's brought in a lot of members to MAG and the retention with that is really good. So, hopefully there are people out there that are getting the magazine, and they're going, "this is something that's worthwhile." But what we can't tell from the database is, are there any people that are no longer insured with [company name], but have continued their MAG membership? (14)

Anna Zee, Political and Technical Services Director of the BMF highlights the draw to motorcycle clubs through insurance:

> Yeah, well one of the draws of the affiliate clubs is actually the insurance cover they get by joining. So, if they run rallies, shows, events of any sort the deal that we can offer with the insurance is really good. I think we've got a £10 million limit on – for the public liability. (13)

Another successful route for recruitment is the use of personal contact and social events, although of course this is inevitably limited by the time and mobility that existing members have available to them:

> I think one of the things we've found a little bit more successful recently with recruitment, is personal contact. We've got a number of friends in the village who have recently come back to riding bikes having had 20 odd years off with kids and jobs and what have you. And some of them have been MAG members in the past. And they're getting back on the bike. They're loving it. And they join MAG. I think some of that's because we've got the bike nights going. (15)

If it is the case that people find politics in the UK something of a turn-off, on the whole, then stressing that MAG is also a social organization that brings people together for rallies, ride-outs and bike nights can be an alternative route to getting interest:

> So, we're quite conscious that selling MAG is selling the whole picture. Not talking too much about the political side of it. That's something that they can evolve into. But telling them what benefits there are, and how much fun they can have, you know. We can pretty much go somewhere every weekend of the year. There's always a MAG event on or a MAG party. (6)

Similarly, a number of BMF respondents mentioned the 'Peterborough Show', which the BMF used to organize (it was once the largest outdoor motorcycle show in Europe), as

something that gave the BMF very good name recognition in the biking world, without people necessarily understanding that the BMF's primary purpose is political rather than to provide entertainment.

So, although both MAG and the BMF are avowedly political organizations, committed to fighting for riders' rights, as far as our interviewees are concerned the only effective recruitment strategy directly connected to their lobbying activity might be to 'talk up' the threats to the future of motorcycling, although not all are convinced that this will get much traction. Otherwise, the emphasis is on insurance discounts and the fun that can be had through the social events that both organizations run. This outcome mirrors quite closely Mancur Olson's analysis in *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965); organizations that provide public goods will have to offer selective incentives to overcome the free-rider problem. Access to bus lanes, or the prevention of horse-power limits being applied to motorcycles are, as our interviewee rightly noted, non-rival and non-excludable, so just as much available to non-members as members. Insurance discounts, however, can and do require membership of the organization, and whilst it is possible to attend a MAG or BMF social event without being a member, these events allow for the kind of face-to-face interactions that can be successful in recruiting and retaining members.

Freedom and Rights

The third element of rider's rights organizations that we want to examine here is exactly what 'rights' are taken to be under threat – what do RROs see themselves as trying to protect, and how they understand these rights in terms of the relationship between the individual and the state in a democratic society? It is here where we perhaps see some ideological differences

between MAG and the BMF, in that MAG is an avowedly libertarian organization in a way that the BMF does not so overtly claim to be to be – although even these differences must be understood as occurring within the common ground of seeking to protect the rights of riders to ride. This common ground is sufficient for MAG and the BMF to co-operate when they choose to, as in the recent 'Coalition of Motorcycling Organizations' guidance to riders in response to the UK government's COVID-19 strategy (BMF 2020b).[16] Still, ideological differences do undoubtedly exist, and MAG's explicit commitment to libertarianism is one that its own members certainly see as a distinctive position.

This political commitment is reflected not only in interview responses, but also in MAG's own publications. For example, in the January/February 2018 edition of MAG's in-house magazine, *The Road*, a piece on the tensions that exist between road safety campaigners and bikers notes that "MAG is one of those organizations that does its best to take a libertarian stand against the march of the state" (Öpik, 2018, p.59). This political stand is also central to MAG's annual celebration of the life and steadfastness of Fred Hill. Hill was a former army motorcycle dispatch rider and retired math teacher, who found the 1973 law mandating helmet use abhorrent to his sense of personal freedom. Instead of a helmet he rode everywhere in an old beret. He would not pay fines levied for helmetless riding, and so was given custodial sentences for contempt of court on thirty-one occasions. During one of these sentences, at Pentonville, he suffered a fatal heart attack at the age of 74. As one interviewee said to me "he died in prison for the cause. He is regarded, pretty much, as a saint." (2) In memory of Hill, every February MAG branches organize "Fred Hill Runs", often to prisons

[16] At the time of writing, the Coalition of Motorcycling Organisations' (COMO) consists of the BMF, MAG, the Trailriders' Fellowship, the Vintage Motorcycle Club, IAM Roadsmart, the Auto Cycle Union, the Triumph Owners' Motorcycle Club, and Biker Down UK.

where he served time. A report on these in the May/June 2018 edition of *The Road* claims that "It is testament to MAG's ideological consistency that over thirty years on Fred's extraordinary campaign is saluted by MAG groups and others around the country." Later in the same piece: "MAG flies a flag for all free-thinking individuals who do not want their lives organized in fine detail by those who 'know best'." (MAG, 2018b). In the Chair's op ed piece in September/October 2019, MAG's position is defined as not 'anti-helmet' but 'pro-choice' – "a simple libertarian viewpoint. Education not legislation; let the rider decide" (Lavender, 2019). Interview responses support this view – "MAG was born in 1973 explicitly on a libertarian agenda…some people just don't like that almost purist libertarian agenda, that maybe makes the BMF uncomfortable." (2) The view from BMF interviewees is that it would be easy to overstate these differences, and to affirm that a concern for individual freedom is also central to the BMF's ideology. Anna Zee says "the principle of the BMF is to look after the interests of motorcyclists. Okay, so what are the interests of motorcyclists? Well, usually just to be left alone to ride their bloody bikes", adding that the BMF is just "quieter" about its libertarian credentials. Jim Freeman states explicitly that "I think the BMF have never, at any time, had a less libertarian outlook than MAG". Both organizations oppose mandated helmet wearing (which, it is always worth repeating, is not the same thing at all as being against helmet wearing *per se*). The BMF decided that "lobbying for repeal was a complete waste of time and effort" (Zee), whereas MAG was born in order to campaign for repeal. This historical divide still marks the fundamental difference between these organizations, although both have changed significantly since 1973.

It is, then, the *public commitment* to libertarian ideology that seems to separate MAG from the BMF here. Beyond that, there is a shared understanding of the normative relationship between the individual and the state, and the responsibilities that might accompany the rights that activists want to see respected. On these matters, respondents from *both* the BMF and

MAG coalesced around an interpretation (explicit or implicit) of J S Mill's harm principle (Mill, 1991). With some minor variations, the view expressed by activists is that the state should only be in the business of constraining the behavior of individuals if the acts involved in that behavior cause identifiable harm to others. This mirrors Mill's view that "the individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself" (1991, 108).

As ever when discussing the harm principle, what constitutes 'harm' to the interests of others is itself open to interpretation. As we will see, activists are aware of this, but we can begin by looking at how they decontest the principle itself. For one respondent:

> in the wider context of you can't realistically expect to carry on doing something, if that's causing harm or annoyance to somebody else, so you've got to look at the impact of your actions, but ultimately, unless there's a very good reason why I shouldn't be riding my motorcycle, I don't expect anybody to restrict my choice to do that and I think that's probably the core of what we fight for. (3)

Jim Freeman, Chair of the BMF, cited Mill explicitly:

> And philosophically, well stopping people doing things which they want to do provided they don't — you know I am a classic JS Mill supporter on that one. If it doesn't damage anybody else don't stop me doing it. Something like that pretty much. (12)

In terms of what might cause the kinds of harms that would violate the harm principle, MAG is clear this rests on the capacity to make a distinction between the private and the public interest, anything involved in riding a motorcycle is unlikely to be a serious candidate for

causing harm to the public (with, as we have seen, the possible exception of noise pollution). This position is spelled out in the January/February 2018 edition of *The Road* – "Authorities are not good at defining the boundary between private and public interest. If I want to ride a motorbike I am essentially making a decision that harms NO-ONE else apart from, potentially, me…As such, what right has the state to prevent me from taking risks knowingly – and accepting the consequences for that?" (Öpik, 2018). In an interview with the author of that piece, he clarified the point further:

> We'll know we've won if people have the right to do stupid things and say stupid things, and harm each other, within a tolerable margin, and ride motorbikes which previously hardly ever harmed any third party at all. And actually does far more good than harm if you look at the overall ecological, financial, and social equation.[17]

This last sentence points to another dimension in activist's thinking about motorcycling and harm, that when to it comes to the contemporary environmental problems — where any mode of powered personal transport might be considered potentially harmful — motorcycles are

[17] The arguments employed about the harm principle by riders' rights activists raise a host of philosophical questions. There is of course a huge literature on the harm principle, which there is no space to explore here. A couple of points seem worth making, however. Firstly, a claim that motorcycle riding risks harm to 'no-one' but the rider (Öpik 2018) seems implausible. Dead and seriously injured riders often have partners, children, and/or living parents whose lives will be diminished by their loss. Also, other road users involved in accidents where motorcycle riders are killed or seriously injured, as well as medics who must attend the scene, can be traumatised by the experience. More convincing is the claim made by Öpik in the interview that harm should remain within a 'tolerable margin'. This caveat is itself, of course, open to different interpretations, but with 87% of those killed in motorcycle accidents being the riders themselves (RoSPA, 2017), there is no doubt that the *preponderance* of harm falls on those who choose to ride bikes. The distinction between self-harm and harm to others is never absolute. As Suber points out, "In a welfare state which shifts costs to those who harm themselves, virtually all self-harm will be other harm too; hence virtually every corner of life could be regulated by law without violating the harm principle, and virtually all paternalism would be justified.' (Suber, 1999). Secondly, as motorcycles have to meet increasingly stringent emissions standards, if we include environmental harms in the equation this can be expected, increasingly, to shift the argument toward motorcycle riding *vis-a-vis* car driving. As motorcycles move toward meeting the same emissions standards as passenger cars (in Europe this is currently Euro 6 for cars and Euro 5 for motorcycles), the apparent advantages of two-wheeled transport in terms of elements such as power-to-weight, manoeuvrability, and lower raw-material consumption in manufacturing come to the fore.

seen as part of the solution rather than part of the problem (Waters, 2020). It has been estimated that a 'modal shift' of 10% of road users from cars to motorcycles would result in an 40% drop in total time losses for all vehicles (Canters, 2014). Obviously, motorcycles could not replace all forms of four-wheel (or more) transport, but activists claim that they could ease commuter transport congestion in traffic-saturated cities. This point is covered extensively in RRO publications, and was made on several occasions by interview respondents from both MAG and the BMF, as the following quotes illustrate:

> We can't just campaign on the basis that we want to keep ICE bikes because they are fun for us. We can promote biking on the grounds that bikes part of the solution to congestion and air pollution rather than part of the problem. (4)

> to try to ban motorcycles which are clearly part of the solution, not the cause, with fuel consumption up to 130 miles per gallon is barmy. (2)

> in fact in a lot of ways we think we are a solution to quite a few transport problems in some senses. I mean if you want urban transport that doesn't take up lots of space and that can actually carry someone a lot further than a sensible cyclist will go. (12)

These final activist observations take us back to where we started, the relationship between the motorcycling movement and the environmental movement. This is no surprise, as the activist arguments and observations that we have been considering are, conceptually, tightly linked. The distinctions drawn here between threats, rider mobilization, and the idea of freedom are analytically useful, but risk obscuring these deep connections. So for example the threats from environmentalism relate closely to the freedom to ride ICE-powered

machines, but properly understood, that freedom to ride ICE-powered machines offers potential solutions for the very problems that environmental campaigners are most concerned about. These potential solutions are, however, seen as ignored by both the green lobby and transport planners, which us brings us right back to the self-image of bikers that they (and their activities) are marginalized and misunderstood. Jim Freeman (BMF) sums up the activist view succinctly: "the constant is that governments regard motorcyclists as a problem." Whether it is air quality, facilitating autonomous vehicles, road safety and accident prevention, noise pollution, or road maintenance, the transport planners' task would be so much *easier*, on this view, if only motorcycles were not part of the transport equation.

Conclusion

What strikes us, some twenty years after McDonald-Walker's interviews, is the combination of continuity and change. At the core, then as now, the ideological motivation for riders' rights activists is motorcycling and its future. However, "motorcycling" in this context is symbolic of a great deal more than just a minority mode of transport. It is a mode of being, a culture, and a lifestyle that is simultaneously individualistic and collective. This is seen as something worth defending, against the multiple threats that are perceived to be accumulating in opposition to motorcycling and motorcyclists. This defense is rooted in an account of a basic human right to freedom to undertake activities that do not harm (or at least carry a very low risk of harming) others, even where they result in elevated risks of harm to the self. This is the key riders' right. The risk of harm to the rider is explicitly traded off against the joys and pleasures of riding, meeting other motorcyclists at ride-outs and rallies, and motorcycle maintenance.

What has changed are the nature and extent of the perceived threats to the values that riders' rights activists cleave to. One example of this is the need to contend with the rise of autonomous vehicles that may not be able to adequately detect motorcycles. Another is that the pressure to ramp up environmental legislation is much stronger now that it was twenty years ago, with a significant focus on transport. Our interviewees are all motorcyclists of long-standing, who were socialized into riding at a time when the internal combustion engine did not face this kind of challenge. Their close association of "motorcycling" with ICE-powered machinery has consequences for how they interact with contemporary debates about transport and the environment. Their reasoning is at least partially motivated by the desire for ICE-powered motorcycles to be seen as environmentally sustainable, but partially motivated reasoning is not necessarily false, one must see how it fits with the data.

The larger, or at least more philosophical, question underpinning these policy positions is an understanding of the relationship between the individual and the state, and how an interpretation of legitimate personal freedom should shape that relationship. MAG and the BMF claim libertarian credentials in their fight for riders' rights. However, given their invocation of a version of the harm principle in defense of these rights, it might be better to consider their position as one of "classical liberalism". RROs do not see rights as absolute, and they accept that social impacts and the possibility of harm to others are significant concerns, as we see with noise pollution. Their argument is that even when these considerations are in play, the activity of motorcycling is overwhelmingly a self-regarding matter, where the substantial risk is borne by the individual engaging in the activity. This argument may be self-serving for motorcycle activists, but it might also be true. A serious transport planning process would at least assess the case on its merits.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

These are ‘semi-structured’ interviews, which to some extent followed and built upon wherever the conversation led. Questions were not necessarily asked in this order or with this exact wording.

Questions (RRO = Riders’ Rights Organization):

1. Can we start with some personal background, what was the journey that led [name] to (a) take up motorcycling, and (b) become [position] within [RRO]?

2. If you met someone who’d never heard of [RRO] but wanted to learn about it, how would you describe it and what is it trying to achieve, politically?

3. What strategies/tactics does [RRO] use to achieve these political aims? How does [RRO] seek to get/keep motorcycling on the political agenda?

5. How does [RRO] seek to mobilise the wider constituency of motorcyclists?

6. Has [RRO] changed in your time as a member, and if so how? How is [RRO] distinct from other RROs?

7. Can we talk a bit about the idea of freedom, which comes up a lot in RRO publications? For you, what does freedom mean in relation to motorcycling, and how important is it? What is the biggest threat to it right now?

8. If motorcycling disappeared tomorrow, would we have lost anything of value? If so what would that be?

9. Thank you for answering my questions. Of course I may not have touched on everything that you think is important about riders' rights. I'd now like to give you the opportunity to add or say anything that you would like me to take into account.