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Photo: Rental bikes from providers such as O-Bike and Limebike are causing a stir on the streets of Zurich. Photo: Keystone

Cyclists are moving into the fast lane

Do bicycles have a place in the city of the future? Whatever the answer, many Swiss cities are focusing on more bikes and on doubling their share of overall traffic. Muscle-powered travel gives rise to new hopes but also triggers defensive responses.

MARC LETTAU

Two hundred years after the invention of the bicycle by the ingenious Karl Freiherr von Drais, this engineless mode of transport is causing a stir in the cosmopolitan city of Zurich. It is not that Switzerland's largest city has just discovered the bicycle. But one particular trend has become a hot topic of conversation. Rental bikes are appearing all over the place. There are hundreds of them. They are also found in places where they seriously infringe upon the people of Zurich's expectations of orderliness.

The situation in Zurich is indicative of what is currently going on in other Swiss cities, too. Resourceful companies are pursuing the business strategy of flooding urban cen-

tres with their rental bikes without creating parking facilities for them. Instead they provide smartphone apps which enable available bikes to be found and unlocked. Customers who no longer need the bicycle after their journey can park it anywhere. At least six providers are vying for business from cyclists in Zurich: O-Bike, Limebike, Züri rollt, Züri-Velo, Smide with electric bikes and Carvelo2go, which hires bikes to transport goods. The Danish company Donkey Republic is also considering entering the rental bike market in Zurich.

In other cities, Nextbike, Velospot and PubliBike are shaking up the market. They are causing a stir and not just because of the revolution in transport. Great scepticism is

being shown towards the Singapore-based company O-Bike in particular. O-Bike's bikes tend to be of low quality, so the company is coming in for criticism, with people saying that its primary focus is on gathering useable and sellable customer data. More fundamental issues are also inflaming passions. There is major discontent about the commercial appropriation, constriction and "blighting" – a quote from the NZZ – of public space. Others, on the other hand, proclaim that rental bikes simply provide proof that sharing is increasingly becoming more important than personal ownership.

The bicycle in the Federal Constitution?

The current furore over rental bikes obscures the view of the bigger picture. Rental bikes may well become a firm fixture. Some rental providers may well disappear from the scene. But the importance of bicycles will undoubtedly increase in Swiss cities with or without the rental market. Many city authorities have put the promotion of cycling on their political agenda. The cities are going through a process of transformation. The "escape" to the country has long been supplanted by the desire to return to the city. The demographic change this entails is in turn putting pressure on the cities – including in terms of mobility. If they do not wish to suffer the impact of individual motoring to an even greater extent, they also have to promote "non-motorised transport" – walking and especially cycling – in addition to public transport. This has led to an ideologically charged situation. Left-wing and green politicians see the bicycle as a panacea in the fight against urban pollution, noise and confinement. In contrast, motorists feel patronised but understand that no new cycle paths can be created without reducing the road space dedicated to cars.

However, the general course has already been set. Under pressure from the popular initiative calling for the promotion of cycling to be enshrined in the Federal Constitution, the Federal Council has also yielded. Its counter-proposal does not go as far as the bicycle initiative, but it does recognise the importance of cycling and its promotion. Adopting the same position as the Council of States, the National Council also backed the Federal Council's cycling proposal in March. The Swiss people will have the last word.

Ever more car-free households

The politicians may well be lagging behind what is actually going on. Mobility in the cities has long been undergoing a process of transformation. In several of Switzer-

land's larger cities, less than half of all households now still own their own car. The main reason for this restraint is the well-developed public transport infrastructure. However, expanding it is expensive and restricted by urban density. The promotion of cycling in the cities as a transport policy goal not only aims to restrict private motoring but also to take the pressure off the buses and trams which are often full.

Evi Allemann endorses this view. The President of the Swiss Association for Transport and the Environment and SP National Councillor, who has just been elected to the Bernese cantonal government, believes public transport is extremely important in Switzerland. The share that bicy-

Swiss transport behaviour

Of the almost four million commuters in Switzerland who travel to work every day, 54 % drive a car or ride a motorbike, while 31 % use public transport, 9 % go on foot and 7 % cycle to work. Of teenagers and young adults in education 7 % also travel to their place of education by bike. The proportion of carless households is on the rise, particularly in the cities. The leader here is Berne at 56.8 %, followed by Zurich at 52.8 %, Basel at 52.1 % and Lausanne at 46.3 %. Lagging behind amongst the big cities is Geneva at 40.9 %.

cles make up of all modes of transport will probably double to 20 % or more, particularly in urban areas, she says. However, it is unlikely that the figures of outstanding cycling cities, such as Copenhagen, will be reached in Switzerland. Public transport in Switzerland is simply too good for that. The burden on the cities will nevertheless be relieved by promoting cycling.

What steps are needed? The transport politician believes clearly marked and safe cycling lanes and paths are required as well as the improvement of danger spots. A perception of a lack of safety is preventing people from using their bikes in everyday life. Allemann: "Too many people say they are quite simply frightened." A sufficient number of suitable parking places is also required, she says. Is she implying that the flooding of the cities with rental bikes without fixed parking places is a problem? "If anarchy reigns over cycling, this tarnishes its image." "Clear rules" for everyone and binding agreements between providers and city authorities are needed. She also applies clear rules to her own mobility. She never drives a car and does not even hold a driving licence. Though this is actually no longer particularly unusual in Swiss cities, as already mentioned.