

# NEOLIBERAL MOBILITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS.

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# Mobility and Hypermobility

- ▣ People need to move around the city as part of everyday life - for work, for social purposes, and to engage in acts of social reproduction. So a degree of mobility is essential for human survival, and can be liberating.
- ▣ But in the neoliberal age a modern variation of Baudelaire's flâneur has appeared, one who engages in excessive movement. For some residents of the modern city, mobility has become an end in itself, and even a fetish.

# Hypermobility

- ▣ John Adams (1999) uses the metaphor of *hypermobility* to describe extreme travel: rapid growth in the numbers of people exercising that freedom is damaging the planet and exacerbating the *risks* of contemporary global capitalism.
- ▣ To identify themselves as global citizens and players in the modern world, they engage in excessive movement.
- ▣ Sivaramakrishnan & Vaccaro (2006) extend the metaphor to propose that “*the scale and frequency of this interconnectivity*” (p.314) – and the resulting hypermobility – has become the distinguishing feature of post-industrial nature.

# Why Hypermobility?

- ▣ Technology evidently helps mobility – but it is not a sufficient explanation since it often leads to congestion – indeed hypermobility puts into question the sustainability of the city in its present form.
- ▣ Hypermobility is a manifestation of modern culture – people travel to trade shows, conferences, business meetings, as tourists, and to attend spectacles to demonstrate their positionality in the *modern* elite.
- ▣ Much has been written on the role of railways, autos and aeroplanes – but here I will focus on an eccentric machine which has played varying roles over the last 100 years – namely the carrier tricycle.

# The Significance of Cycles

- ▣ Cycles have played a complex role both in the advance of modernity, and in various counter-modern environmental resistance movements: their impact on urban mobility cannot be read off a list of technological improvements.
- ▣ Cycling's impact on urban mobility began with the Paris velocipede of 1865, and took off in the late Victorian age as one of the most visible manifestations of modern life - performed in public spaces – esp. city streets and parks.
- ▣ Today cycles are simultaneously a strand of modernity for those with the latest hi-tech bike, and an anti-modern practical commercial possibility for those discontented with fuel-powered alternatives.

# Argument

- ▣ Sigmund Freud (1929) *Civilisation and its Discontents* argues: humans have instinctive traits towards individual freedom, possessiveness, aggression towards competitors, and self gratification. These individuals are discontented with civilisation's demand for individuals to conform.
- ▣ Joseph Stiglitz (2002) *Globalization and its Discontents*: turns round Freud's argument: in the neoliberal age, it is civilisation that has reason to be discontented – the globalization policies of the IMF, WTO, the World Bank, & many governments favour possessiveness, aggression towards competitors, and self-reward (the bonus culture): all are manifestations of the instinctive traits that, in Freud's view, clash with civilisation.

# Individual traits, community social values... and cycles.

- ▣ Cycles are discursively constructed in different ways in different settings – broadly as either a marker of modern individualism, or as a functional, community vehicle.
- ▣ Some cycles in some settings are an instrument of modernity contributing to hypermobility:
  - As a racing machine
  - A class marker
  - A superior system of delivery
  - An efficient conveyance for shoppers & commuters
  - And for the flâneur on wheels.

# while ....

- For other people, in other settings the cycle is:
  - An environmentally-friendly, if slow, conveyance for commuting and shopping
  - A means of escape to the wilderness & quiet spaces
  - A tool for conviviality
  - Even an aid to romance
  - A low-cost way of delivering goods

## In the Victorian Age of ....

... high Imperialism and Liberal free-trade, bicycle manufacture was concentrated in Western countries under the factory system. Both for producers and consumers it served briefly as a touchstone of modernity (1865-1895). In 1885 the tricycle also served as the platform for Karl Benz's *Motorwagen*, harbinger of an even bigger wave of technological modernity.

# Today, in the neoliberal age ...

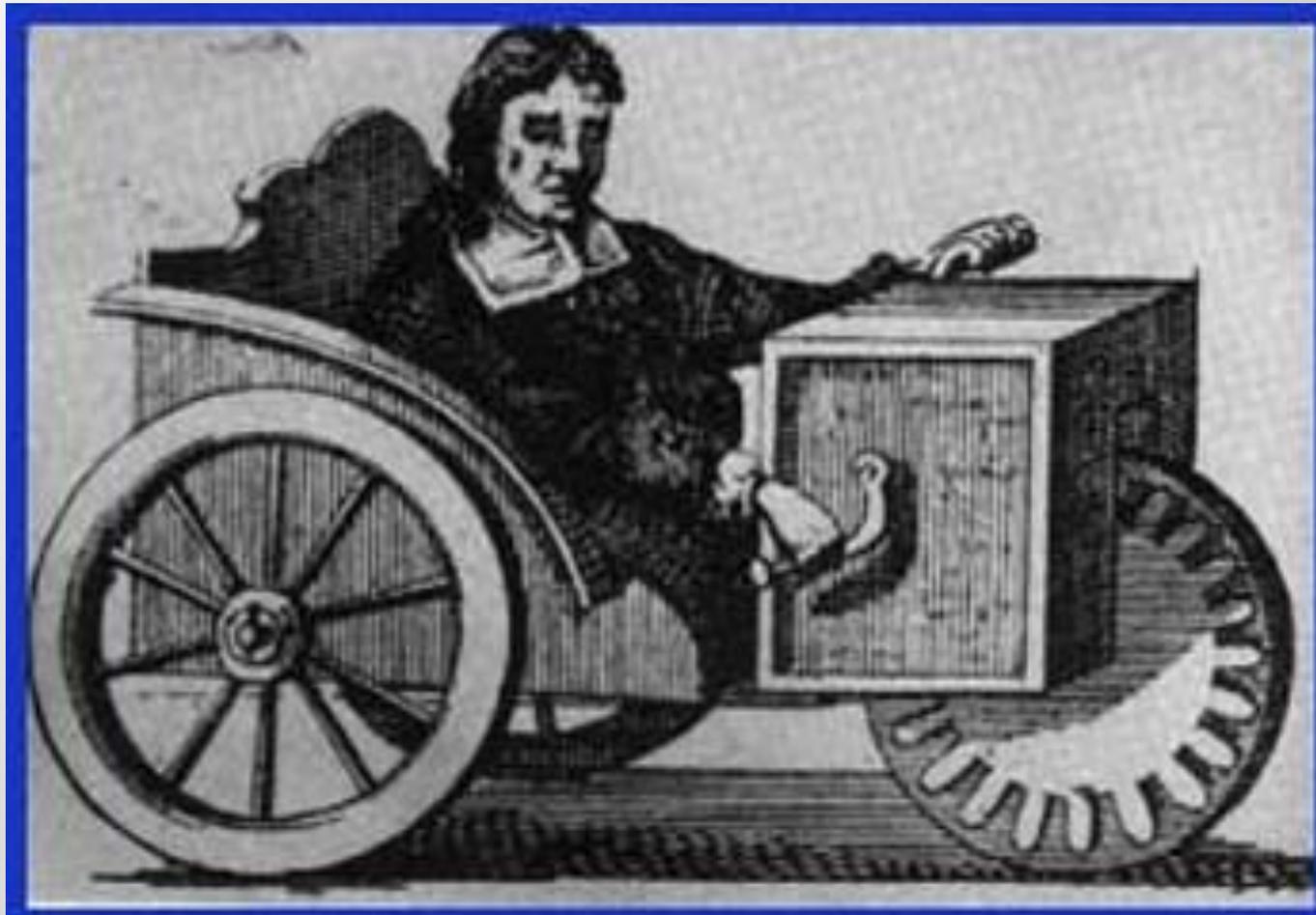
- ... of economic globalization, trans-national corporations, free-trade and massive international flows of capital, we encounter quite different cycling practices in different settings i.e. post-structural contingency, including ...
- a low-cost energy-efficient vehicle
  - the fastest way for couriers to deliver packages in cities
  - a racing machine for big media events (eg Tour de France)
  - a healthy way for daily travel eg Holland & Belgium
  - (with folding bicycles) in Tokyo and Seoul part of a multi-mode commute;
  - in the Global South, an efficient way of moving people & goods.

## So today, paradoxically ...

- ▣ Nearly all the famous Western bicycle brands are made OEM in China (Taiwan owns many of the larger bicycle and parts firms).
- ▣ The bicycle has shifted from being a high cost vehicle (19C) to being both a high and a low-cost vehicle.
- ▣ In the Global North – a growing number recognize the bicycle as an earth-friendly vehicle that reduces some of the dangers of risk capitalism.
- ▣ Yet in the Global South for many it is a stepping stone on the ladder to automobile ownership.
- ▣ The latter embrace the risks of modernity, the former spurn them.
- ▣ TAKE THE EXAMPLE OF THE CARRIER TRICYCLE

## Early carrier tricycles.

The first known carrier tricycle was made in the pre-industrial era – Stephan Farrfler's *dreirad* of c. 1655 – he was a paraplegic clockmaker. This makes 1655 one of the seminal dates in the history of human mobility.



# The Tricycle Boom 1877-1886.

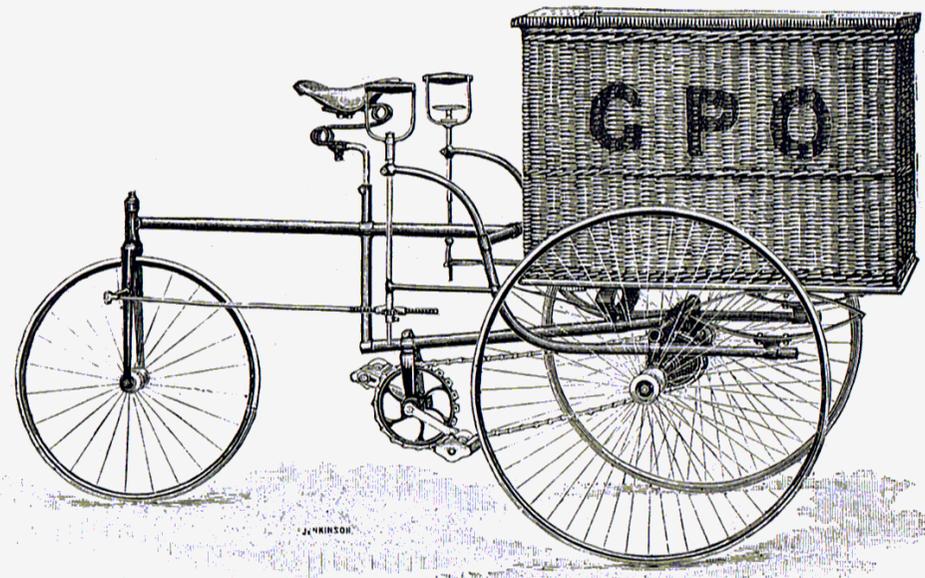
Beginning in 1877, a little recognized tricycle boom took place, with a proliferation of designs. They were soon adapted to carrying passengers and freight.

LONDON : 14, Holborn Viaduct, E.C., and 5, Lisle St., Leicester Sq., W.

1886

## “PREMIER” CARRIER TRICYCLE.

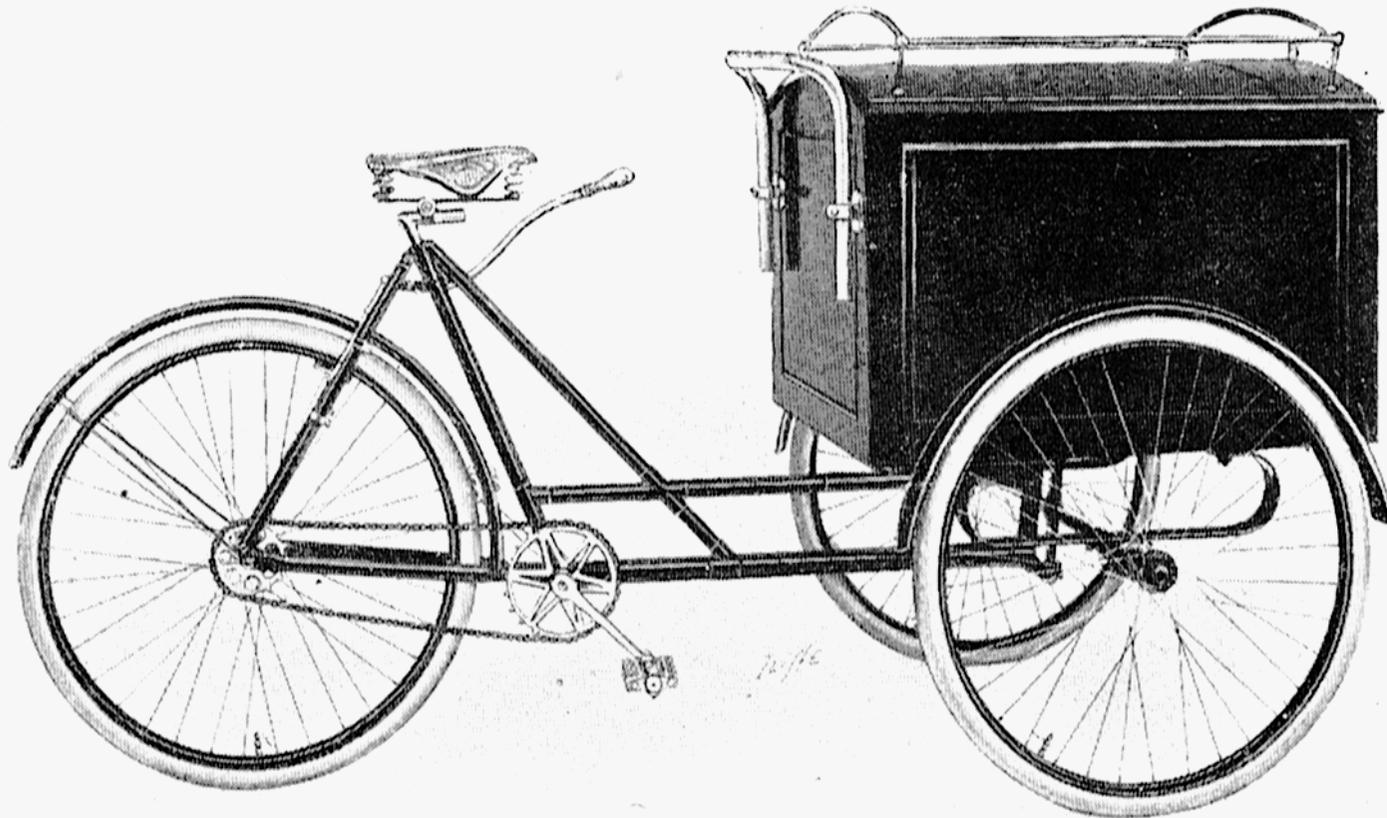
As supplied to H.M. Government for Postal Service.



**Triumph Front Carrier – 1903**  
**configuration of the ice-cream tricycle for the next century**

“TRIUMPH” CARRIER No. 1.

**1903**



# Carrier Tricycles in the Twentieth Century

- ▣ After the 1890s the carrier tricycle lost its novelty, and status as a marker of modernity. But it continued to be widely used in Europe as a functional carrier of freight around cities.
- ▣ It also began to appear in Asia and elsewhere as an alternative to the rickshaw. The pedicab grew in importance as a carrier of passengers for short neighbourhood trips.
- ▣ Carrier tricycles began to disappear in the West after the Second World War – with the ice-cream tricycle the last survivor.

## Tricycles and Mobility in 21C.

- ❑ As tricycles faded from the streetscape in the West, they were entering their prime in the Global South.
- ❑ While conducting research in China in 2007-2009 I began to photograph many examples of working tricycles.
- ❑ The street system in most Chinese towns has a separate roadway for bicycles, tricycles, electric bikes, and scooters. These typically flow at around ~20 kph, and are rarely blocked by jams. Motor traffic in cities sometimes moves faster, but is frequently blocked, especially during the rush hours: average vehicle speeds in the city centres are probably about the same as bicycles.

# Uses of the Carrier Tricycle

Carrier tricycles in China are put to a very wide range of uses:

- Carrying goods of every variety
- Carrying passengers – as pedicabs
- For handicapped people
- As mobile shops
- To facilitate city markets
- To clean roads and parks
- For re-cycling

# Delivering firewood: Hangzhou



# Bicycle repair shop: Suzhou



# Outside neighbourhood market: Shanghai



# Recycling in Zhou Zhuang, Jiangsu



# The Importance of Carrier Tricycles in China Today

- ▣ How many? I estimate between 20 and 28 million are in use.
- ▣ Where? Most rural households have one. Most small urban businesses have one.
- ▣ Most are HPV, but some have small 2 stroke engines or batteries – they cruise at ~ 20 kpm (12 mph).
- ▣ The largest manufacturer – Ningbo Nanyang Vehicle Company located in Cixi City (near Hangzhou) makes approximately 700,000 tricycles a year.
- ▣ They carry much freight and many people on short haul journeys in the city, with almost zero pollution, they move in narrow and congested streets where motor vehicles cannot move. The built form of the city would have to be torn down if motorized vehicles are access these spaces.

# Are Tricyclists Discontented?

In a word – “no”! Most would like to own a “modern” vehicle if they could afford it – as did westerners in the last century. Under China’s developmental state, neoliberal practices are accepted with enthusiasm, although carefully managed by the People’s Republic. Most were proud that globalization has brought China from the margins to become the world’s second largest economy, and the largest exporter of manufactured goods.

And most were puzzled at my interest in old tricycles – and asked why I was not photographing the new China.

Few were willing to accept that an up-dated version of these simple technologies may have a future.

## Are Tricyclists Discontented?

In 2 words – “yes” & “no”! Many would like to own a “modern” vehicle if they could afford it – as did westerners in the last century. Neoliberal practices are accepted with enthusiasm, although carefully managed by the People’s Republic. China’s evolution from the margins to become the world’s second largest economy, and the largest exporter of manufactured goods was a source of pride. And most were puzzled at my interest in old tricycles: why I was not photographing the new China?

But efforts by the state to squeeze out carrier tricycles have been resisted. A minority in China see an up-dated version of these simple technologies having a future.

# Tricycle drivers in Wuhan protest - but their small motorized (polluting) tricycles were banned

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Saturday, February 21, 1998 Published at 12:00 GMT

## World

### China jails tricycle protest organiser for three years



The protestors were angry at being deprived of their livelihood

1998

A Chinese court is reported to have sentenced a tricycle driver to three years in prison for his role in a demonstration in the central city of Wuhan last year.

Around 1,000 disgruntled drivers blocked roads in Wuhan for several hours with their tricycles as a protest against plans by the city to ban the vehicles to ease traffic congestion last October.

# Conclusion

Freud focussed on the discontent of individuals who resisted the rules of civilization. Stiglitz is concerned that free-market global practices give enormous benefits to a small minority of individuals while weakening civilization itself. His discontent is with globalization – inc. hypermobility.

The risks of hypermobility include:

- more polarization between rich and poor;
- more anonymous, less convivial communities;
- less cultural variation;
- increased risk to pedestrians and cyclists;
- reduced health and fitness;
- travel as a fetish;
- environmental degradation.

The carrier tricycle, which a century ago was in the vanguard of modernity, today is a utility vehicle that complements many economic, social & environmental goals.

It has largely disappeared from western cities, but is still important in cities of the Global South. It is an effective, efficient and flexible means of transport at the neighbourhood scale.

But there is widespread enthusiasm for hypermobility, most probably because it is central to the workings of neoliberalism, and therefore condoned in both the discourse and practice of globalization.

In consequence there is little interest in the potential of utilitarian alternatives such as the carrier tricycle, and few voice discontent with the neoliberal hypermobility.