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## Object in focus: The Cargo bike

**Outward similarities can hide changing meanings, argues Peter Cox**

Two images of carrier tricycles, built almost a century apart. The first is from a 1912 catalogue in the archives from the Deutsches Museum in Munich. The second is a Christiana Bike from a recent catalogue. At a glance, they appear to show remarkable continuity, even the longevity of a single technological artifact. But their histories tell hidden stories of social change, in shops and shopping, of counter-culture and alternative lifestyle, and of the convergence of environmental sustainability and economic efficiency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



From the very earliest days of the crank-driven bicycle, the possibility of designing machines for commercial goods carriage was apparent. In a satirical set of drawings commenting on the new craze for the velocipedes, the *Leipzig Illustrierte Zeitung* of 3 July 1869, carried a sketch of a wheelbarrow-

velocipede hybrid, complete with cargo of an unfeasibly large sausage. Yet by the mid 1880s, most manufacturers of the increasingly popular tricycle offered commercial carrier models. The standard safety bicycle was still an expensive plaything for the bourgeoisie, but for commercial buyers, carrier cycles offered a modern, novel and cost efficient solution to the everyday delivery of business services.



The late nineteenth century retailer was not just in the business of selling, but was a mediator between the customer and the objects of sale, expected to deliver as well as supply. While a delivery bicycle might not carry as large a volume of goods as carriage by animal traction, it had obvious advantages in that there were no constant running costs and it could be easily be left unattended or unused (and unfed). The iconic roles of butchers', bakers' and grocers' cycle deliveries were forged at an early stage. The delivery bicycle was also a deeply modern vehicle, an efficient device for the reproduction of capital in the growing retail economy.

Where growing rates of private motorized transport changed patterns of individual mobility (especially for male employees) in 1950s and 1960 Europe, the cargo bike suffered a parallel fate. Although it lost none of its economic efficiency relative to other means of delivery, the changing character of retail made it redundant. The advent of self-service shopping stripped out the delivery role of the retailer. Even before the widespread growth of supermarket sales in the 1970s, the changes of shopping patterns and the role of the supplier had dealt a considerable blow to the

traditional carrier bike. Its image had slipped from a symbol of innovation to an old fashioned anachronism, as its potential economic roles declined. Major cycle manufacturers let their cargo bikes quietly disappear from their catalogues, specialist manufacturers went out of business.

Yet just as commercial cargo bike manufacture disappeared, small-scale, independent construction began. A resurgence of popular interest in cycling in the light of the growth of radical environmental activism reimagined the bicycle as a means of sustainable transport. Cycling for everyday transport, which had sunk to low levels across Europe, became a means of expressing an individual critique of car-centric cultures. And old cargo tricycle designs were rediscovered as potential alternatives to the car. Practical carrier cycles and trailers began to be made and distributed through counter-cultural networks and communities, most famously, the Christiana bikes first built in 1976. What had been a means for the efficient reproduction of capital had become a means of its critique.

The cargo bike had a role in the formation of twentieth century consumer capitalism, as a means of distribution of consumer products. Its place disappeared as the retail trade outsourced final distribution to the customer - part of the customer's transition to consumer, enabled by the growth of private motor transport. The cargo bike re-emerged as a counter-cultural alternative to the car, enabling continued participation in societies restructured by automobility. As recognition of the unsustainability, impracticability and undesirability of accommodating universal urban private motoring (and the rebuilding of cities necessary to facilitate this) has spread, so what was once the basis of a marginal critique has been translated into mainstream policy for many European cities. The market for carrier bikes and trikes as car replacements, whether for ideological or for practical reasons, has grown sufficiently to warrant their mass production once again.

As if this twist was not enough, there is now another story emerging as the retail trade continues to restructure today. Many European cities, focusing on the quality of life, seeking to avoid congestion, air and noise pollution and conscious of CO2 emissions in the transport sector increasingly close –off core areas at certain times of day. Coupled with the growing importance of logistics for small volume, just-in time deliveries and maximum flexibility in retail supply chains (rather than holding large amounts of fixed stock) enabled by digital information systems, cargo carrying bikes and trikes are increasingly economically competitive options. Fleet operators such as DHL are today reporting considerable savings after replacing delivery vans with cargo bikes for some operations.

Today's cargo bikes may appear to present an unbroken continuity over a century of travel, but how they got from there to here is far from a simple story.

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