



TA Board of Directors

Meeting of November 6, 2025

Correspondence as of October 17, 2025

Subject

1. The Economist - Bicycles are taking over many Western cities

From: Mike Swire <mswire91@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, October 13, 2025 8:02 PM
To: Board (@smcta.com); cacsecretary [@smcta.com]
Subject: The Economist - Bicycles are taking over many Western cities
Attachments: The Economist - Forget EVs. Cycling is revolutionising transport.pdf

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Forget EVs. Cycling is revolutionising transport

Pedal power is booming, spinning up a new culture war

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Oct 9th 2025|Montreal|9 min read

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TO UNDERSTAND WHY urban planners like bicycles, stand on a section of Saint Denis Street in Montreal and count the vehicles going by.

On a sunny Thursday over a ten-minute period at rush hour, your correspondent counted 132 bicycles (at least a half dozen of which had children on the back) flowing one way. In the adjacent—and much wider—automobile lane 82 cars (almost all carrying just their driver) and one city bus moved by in a bumper-to-bumper crawl.

Any more cars would jam it. Yet there is still plenty of space in the bike lane, which on a single day in June was used by more than 14,000 cyclists. Over the past decade or so, and particularly under Valérie Plante, the mayor since 2017, Montreal has become North America's leading cycling city.

In the Plateau neighbourhood, bicycles account for a fifth of all journeys, only slightly less than cars. Across the city more than a third of the population cycles at least once a week. Use of the city's bike-share scheme, Bixi, has doubled since 2019, to 13m trips last year.

Montreal's bike boom is just one example of how a new disruptive transport technology is rapidly changing cities across the rich world. It is highly energy-efficient, costs almost nothing, reduces congestion and pollution, and obviates the need for huge car parks. Yet it is not the self-driving electric car, as tech moguls and car industry executives imagined. Rather, it is the humble bicycle. And as with any disruptive technology, as the use of bicycles rises, and cities do more to make riding them pleasant, bikes are polarising people and setting off culture wars.

Though robotaxis have notched up impressive growth, they look ploddingly pedestrian compared with far zippier pedal-powered rivals. Waymo, Alphabet's self-driving taxi firm, proudly proclaims that its cars do around 250,000 trips a week. Yet in New York alone that number of trips is made every three days using the city's bike-share scheme.

In London cyclists now outnumber cars in the City, the financial district, by two to one. Paris, where they now outnumber motorists across the whole city, is catching up with Europe's traditional bike capitals, Amsterdam and Copenhagen, though cycling is still growing in those cities, too. In Copenhagen, the Danish capital, bikes account for almost half of commuter journeys to work and school.



Photograph: Pavel Prokopchik/New York Times/Redux/Eyevine

Even in Beijing, just 30 years after most cyclists were pushed off the city's roads to make way for cars, the number of cyclists is rising again. Only these days they are more likely to be riding a fancy Brompton bike than a black Flying Pigeon, the ubiquitous pedal-powered ride in the years after the communist revolution.

E-bikes (of a sort) are booming in the developing world, too. In Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, electric rickshaws are rapidly replacing petrol-powered ones. Electric-motorbike taxis are also growing rapidly in many east African cities.

The first reason for this two-wheeled renaissance was covid-19. After the pandemic struck, sales of bikes soared as commuters tried to avoid public transport and governments introduced pop-up bike lanes to encourage social distancing. In one American survey 18% of respondents said they had bought a bike, many of them for the first time ever, contributing to a 16% increase in the average weekly number of bike trips between the summers of 2019 and 2020. In Tokyo 23% of businessmen switched to cycling to work to avoid crowds on the train.

The second reason was the advance in battery and e-bike technologies, which made them cheaper and more fun to ride. By giving cyclists a pedal assist, these open up riding to people who cannot comfortably squeeze themselves into slim-fit Lycra. Workers can turn up at a meeting without breaking a sweat or needing to change. They are especially useful for transporting children and groceries, which is hard going if done by pedal power alone. E-bikes have also massively accelerated the use of local bike-share schemes, and made them profitable. With Chicago's "Divvy" bike scheme for example, e-bikes are now ridden 70% more than "classic" bikes, despite being a lot pricier.

I want to ride my bicycle

The third reason is a spread of bike-friendly infrastructure. Bicycles mostly died out as a form of transport in the mid-20th century not only because cars were faster and cushier, but also because cars made cycling catastrophically dangerous. In 1950 no fewer than 805 cyclists were killed on the roads in Britain—ten times the number killed last year. In 1987 P.J. O'Rourke, an American satirist, gleefully predicted that cyclists would “go extinct” as they were run over by lorries. Alas for bike-hating motorists (though happily for everyone else), he had not anticipated the invention of the separated bike lane.

Bike lanes create cyclists because they largely eliminate the risk of being crushed by careless or aggressive SUV drivers. Surveys show that rates of cycling are higher in countries where cyclists feel safest. And there are few things that make riders safer than lanes that separate them from cars. These are a lot cheaper to build than new subways, allowing cities to reduce traffic and save money by encouraging people to switch from four wheels to two. “If you build bike lanes well, and have a bike system that can compete with the car, then bikes can go a long way to mitigate congestion,” says Brent Toderian, a former Vancouver chief planner.

In Montreal, Madeleine Giey, a 37-year-old mother of three, is a good example of how this can actually work. “I never, ever biked as an adult in the city or as a kid,” she says. But since the city started building bike lanes, she and her husband sold their second

car. Now Ms Giey rides her bike each day to drop off her children at school. Then she cycles to work.

Under Ms Plante, Montreal has also started closing whole streets to cars over the summer, narrowed others and removed parking spaces. The idea, says Ms Plante, is not to stop drivers altogether, but to slow them down, making streets safer for all users including pedestrians. This, she insists, is good for businesses (though many businesses still hate bike lanes). Since the bike lane on Saint Denis Street opened, vacant storefronts have fallen by half.

Yet safer bike lanes are often pitted in opposition to cars in a zero-sum fight for road space and parking places, putting cyclists and motorists on opposite sides of an increasingly acrimonious culture war. Though bike lanes take up less than 2% of road space in Montreal (cars get 80% and pedestrians the balance), they are a hot issue in its mayoral election on November 2nd. Soraya Martinez Ferrada, the leading opposition candidate, wants to pause new bike lanes and remove those that make business owners anxious.

Wind in their hair

Selected cities, trips made by bike
2019 or latest available, % of total

■ By women ■ By men



Chart: The

Economist

More than a decade ago Rob Ford, then the crack-cocaine-smoking mayor of Toronto, popularised the phrase “the war on cars”, promising to cut funding for light rail and to remove bike lanes. The battle cry has been keenly taken up by populist and right-leaning politicians elsewhere. Nigel Farage, the leader of Britain’s

hard-right Reform Party, sees low speed limits and bike lanes as evidence of woke “anti-car fanaticism”. Richard Holden, Britain’s shadow transport secretary, accuses the government of waging a “war on motorists”.

Sir Sadiq Khan, the left-wing mayor of London, says one of his trickiest policy choices was to extend the city’s clean-air zone, because he received so many death threats over the plan. In Berlin in 2023, when the conservative Christian Democratic Union came to power, it immediately suspended new bike lanes planned by the party’s more left-wing predecessors.

That the most cycle-friendly areas tend to be home to the sorts of wealthy young things who vote for more left-leaning parties helps to rile up populists. In America, after Donald Trump took office, the Department of Transportation ordered a review of all federal funding for projects like bike lanes intended to reduce fossil-fuel use. Increasingly, car ownership and use is the dividing line in European and American politics. In New York City’s recent Democratic primary, Zohran Mamdani, the winner, a socialist who does not own a car and boasts of a CitiBike record of thousands of rides, performed best by far in precincts where few drive. Motorists voted for Andrew Cuomo.

Races are coming your way

E-bikes do raise some genuine problems. Because they are heavier and go faster (and are often ridden by novices) accidents can be

worse than on traditional bikes. Lime's bikes in London have been blamed by doctors for a surge in broken legs. In the Netherlands deaths of cyclists hit a record high in 2022. E-bike riders face death rates that are sharply higher than for riders of normal bikes. Worries about teenagers getting injured have led dozens of suburbs in America to ban electric bikes.



Photograph: Getty Images



Photograph: Getty Images

Adding to this problem is the rise of illegal, fast e-bikes—the sort that can accelerate via a throttle, not just pedals. In London and New York City these have become favourites of food-delivery riders, who make more money the faster they can go. In most cities in the United States only bikes with pedals and a maximum

speed of 20mph (32kph) are allowed in bike lanes. In Europe the equivalent speed limit is 25kph. But many Chinese manufacturers sell bikes or motors that can be modified to go far faster. These scare pedestrians and risk poisoning the boom.

In New York City the police under its mayor, Eric Adams, who has recently declined to take on Mr Mamdani in November, have responded to the fast e-bike surge with a spree of arrests. Astonishing cycle-safety advocates, cyclists are facing criminal charges, whereas car drivers who break the law usually get tickets.

These challenges will slow the readoption of the bicycle. Still, in cities that have made them mainstream, the idea of going back to car-clogged streets is considered ridiculous. In the Netherlands a former prime minister, Mark Rutte, made a point of riding to work. In Denmark last year King Frederik arrived at a charity event with his two sons in the front box of an electric cargo bike. In Paris there is a new complaint: bicycle traffic jams. Montreal is reaching that point now too, at least in summer. On yer bike. ■

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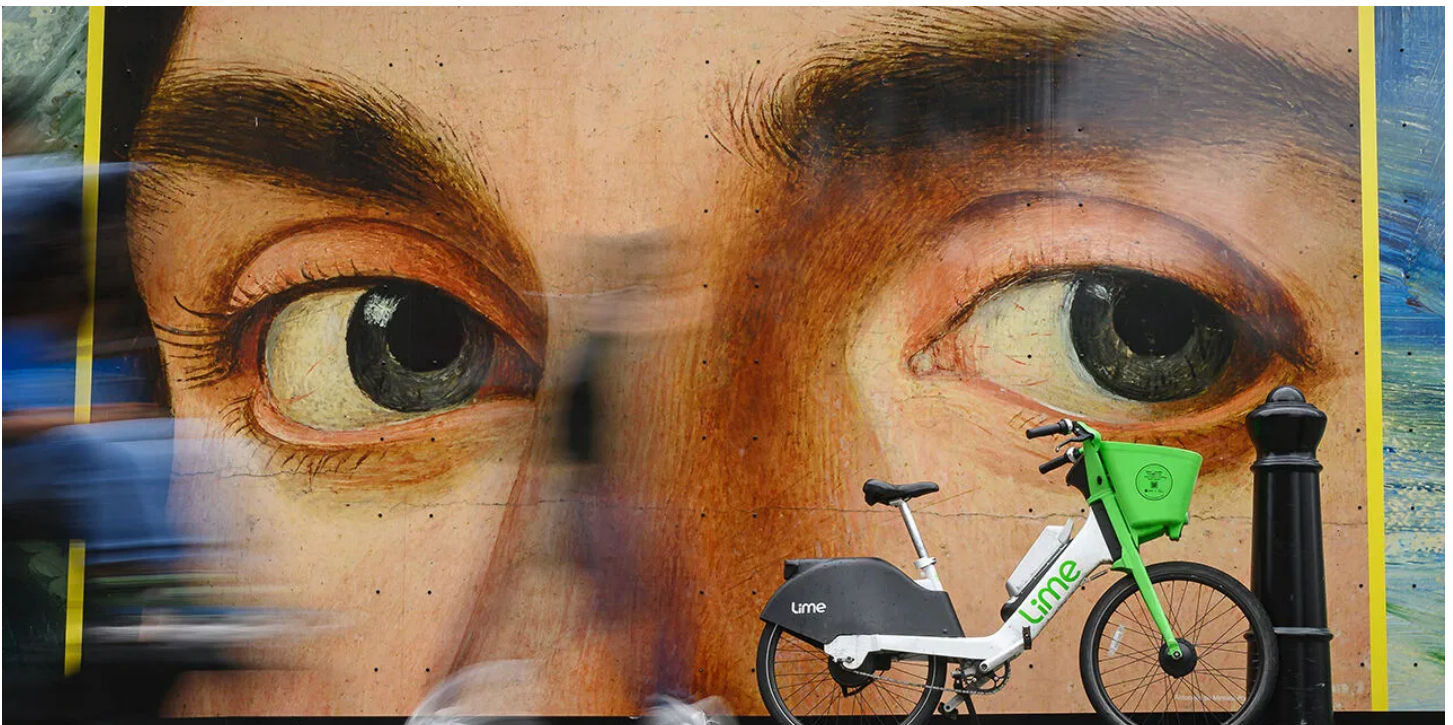
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PHOTOGRAPH: PAVEL PROKOPCHIK/NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX/EYEVINE

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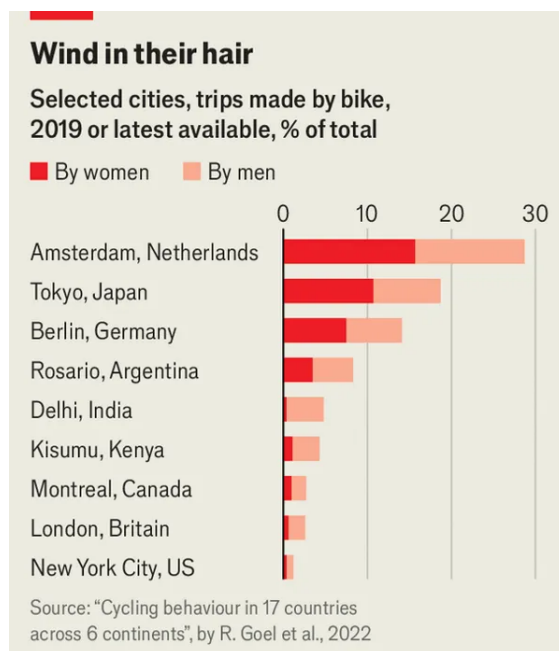


CHART: THE ECONOMIST

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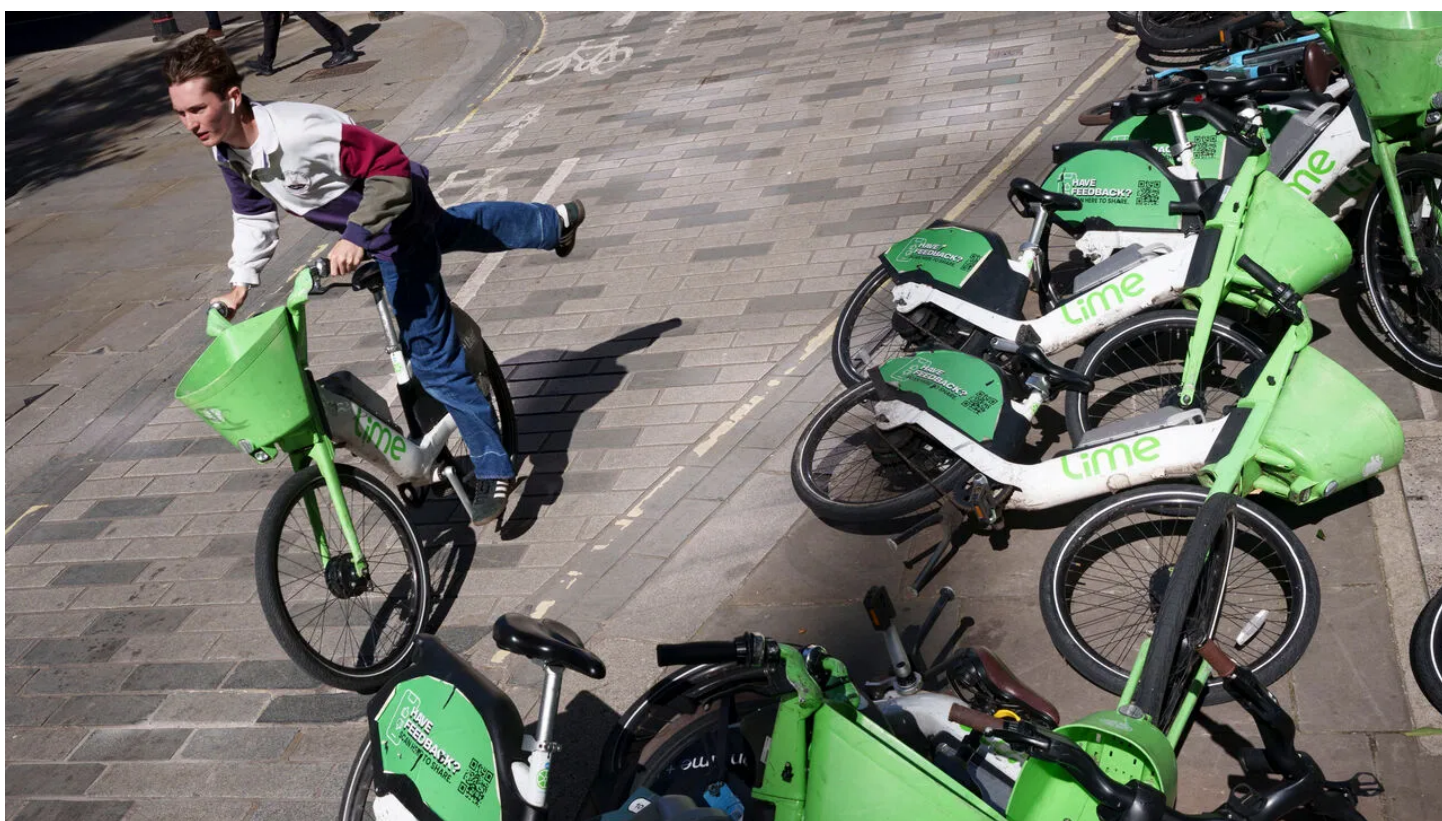
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This article appeared in the international section of the print edition under the headline “Four wheels good, two wheels better”



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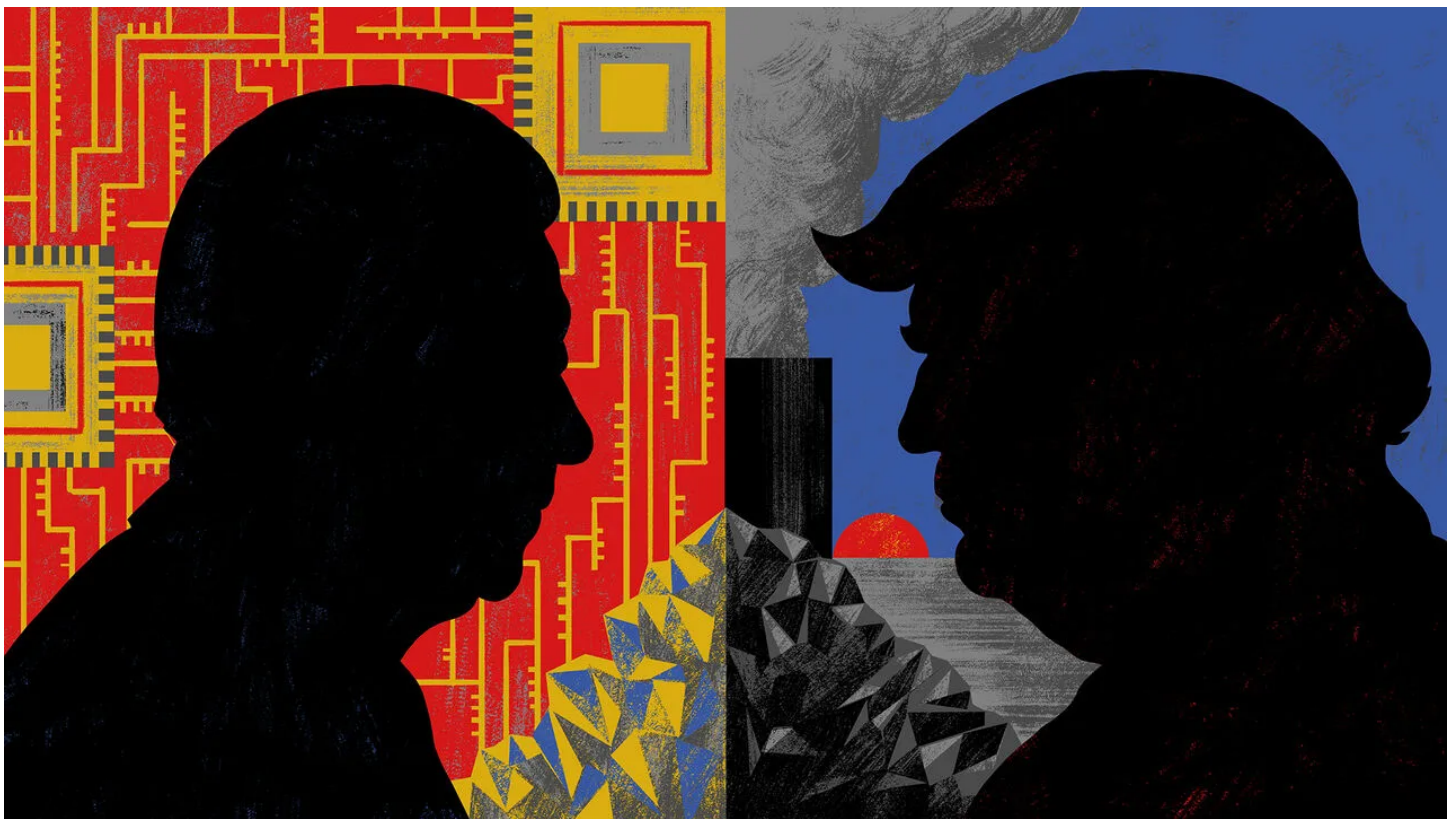
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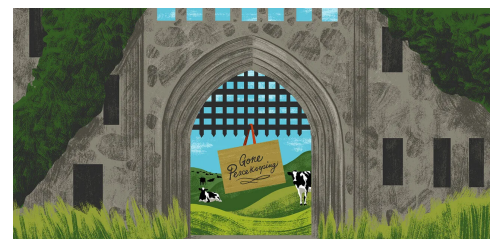


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