Session proposal “Tipping Points in Urban Mobility: Cycling’s Role in Shifting Gear”
Organizer: Frank Schipper, independent scholar, The Netherlands

In car-centred cities, cycling could play an important role in making urban mobility more sustainable. Indeed, it has fulfilled this function in several cities in the mass-motorized world over the past decades. Recent comparative history-writing provides a lot of insight into what factors help explain the ups and downs of cycling over time.

In this session we wish to use these insights to theorize ‘tipping points’: when do circumstances give cycling (or urban mobility systems in general for that matter) a push or grind them to a halt? Which actors, events and other elements are key ingredients of such tipping points? Such questions squarely fit a historiographical tradition that values periodisation as a key contribution that historians can make.

The session aims to do three things:
1) Definition: What constitutes a ‘tipping point’? And are we better off thinking of them as ‘periods’ rather than ‘points’?
2) Topicality: Are we living through a ‘tipping point’ for urban mobility in the COVID-19 crisis, as many hoped or have called for? Cycling and walking get more attention, space and financial resources in some cities to ensure people will be able to comfortably keep distance from each other in dense urban areas.
3) Empirical evidence: The contributions to the session will present empirical evidence from different locations at different points in time, connecting our theorisation effort to historical narratives.

PAPER 1
Transformative change in urban mobility: Reflections on thresholds, turning points, and transitions

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How do substantial change in urban mobility patterns come about? What would be the relevant factors, indications, measures of (quantitative, qualitative) change—that is, what should count as being transformative enough to justify talk of, for example, a tipping point or a transition in urban mobility? This intervention will, firstly, revisit selected writings on thresholds (e.g. Granovetter), turning points (e.g. Uekötter) and transitions (e.g. Geels) to conceptualize transformative change. Secondly, it will seek to evaluate their applicability to past and possibly ongoing transformative change processes in European settings: the rise of urban automobility and, more recently, the challenge and perhaps even decline of the same phenomenon in combination with a continuous rise in urban cycling.

PAPER 2
Exploring the tipping points for a history of Lisbon’s cycling mobility

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**Abstract**

This paper offers a preliminary periodization for an on-going project on the history of Lisbon’s cycling mobility, to be published in the Cycling Cities (CC) book series. It is exploratory: little has been published on (utilitarian) cycling history in Portugal and the research for this book project is in its early stages. We trace the bicycle’s uses through an array of textual and visual sources to understand its role in Lisbon’s urban (and suburban) mobilities between the early “bicycle craze” (1880s-1910s) and the “revival” of the late 2000s. The periods of the preliminary periodization we offer end and start at tipping points depending on the five overall factors that help explain changes in bicycle use: urban development, alternative mobility options, traffic policy concepts, social movements, and cycling’s cultural status, to which we will add the existence of a cycling industry and businesses (sales and accessories, rental, repairs), and the strength of the motoring lobby. In particular, for the tipping points in Lisbon we will investigate the impact of: 1) changes in the (sub-)urban socio-technical mobility system (vehicles in use, infrastructures, regulations, expertise at play); 2) changes in the national political system (dictatorship, public spheres, social movements); 3) important structural changes with an impact in people’s mobilities (such as the world wars, the 1970s’ oil “crises”, or pandemics, such as the current covid-19 crisis).

**PAPER 3**

**From fighting traffic to traffic calming: Tipping points for cycling in postwar Dutch cities**

**Frank Schipper**, independent scholar, The Netherlands

There is a rich recent historiography on the history of urban cycling in The Netherlands. With regard to previous historiography, these studies have spotlighted the important role of the social movement in halting car-centred planning in Dutch cities and improving the prospects for urban cycling. The car takeover of urban settings and its nascent turnaround of about fifty years ago can both be considered tipping points towards different urban mobility systems.

This paper investigates such tipping points based on empirical evidence (archive holdings, oral interviews) collected as part of recently finished and ongoing Cycling Cities projects for the Dutch cities of Delft and Rotterdam. It investigates the dynamics of the social movement and the role of expertise in particular. To what extent did it matter that protesters on the one hand, and traffic engineers and urban planners on the other were trained in the same institutions and thus shared a common background?