

CHAPTER 13

CRITICAL MASS RIDES AGAINST
CAR CULTURE

We're Not Blocking Traffic...

In 1992, bike riders in San Francisco began to converge at rush hour on the last Friday of every month to celebrate bicycling, express their collective solidarity, and send a public message through a group ride: “We are not blocking traffic, we *are* traffic!” Conceived as a mobile party and a leaderless demonstration, the event known as Critical Mass has since energized legions of cyclists, caused incredible controversy, and helped to transform people’s imaginations about bicycle transportation in hundreds of cities throughout the world.¹

Uniquely, this monthly event turned global phenomenon draws much needed attention to urban bicycle transportation while it gives cyclists the rare treat of doing something they are (technically) not supposed to do: take over the street and bike in the middle of the road with friends and strangers alike. By allowing bicyclists to experiment with spontaneity, playfulness, and dominant uses of public spaces, Critical Mass is a critical practice that, for better or worse, sparks a necessary dialogue about the role of the bicycle in a world increasingly dominated by cars.

Background and (Dis)organization

Critical Mass emerged from the collaborative efforts of cyclists in the San Francisco Bay area who were involved with the San Francisco Bike Coalition, social movement activism, and the largely underground bike messenger culture that flourished throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.² The Commute Clot, as it was initially called, was first proposed as an event meant to join bike commuters with other cyclists who sought visibility on city streets.³ These monthly gatherings quickly began to draw more participants despite a lack of formal organization or an overarching dogma. Initial rides drew around 50 or 60 people but within several years the numbers often swelled into the hundreds and thousands.

Since early rides were designed to celebrate biking, it was and still is common for people to ride with costumes, decorated bicycles, signs, noise-makers, and, in some cases, with sound systems and live bands. Halloween rides, for example, consistently feature some of the most elaborate festivities and parade themes. Critical Mass has also been used to pay tribute to cyclists killed by automobiles, and occasionally integrated into political protests and Reclaim the Streets events. The latter are guerrilla street parties thrown to celebrate both car-free space and the act of celebration itself.⁴ “Warfare” was never so much fun. Without a charter, a centralized network, or formal affiliation with any organization, the event spread to hundreds of cities by the end of the 1990s and has seen up to tens of thousands of “Massers” out on a single ride.⁵ To wit, consider the case of Budapest, where an estimated 80,000 bicyclists rode through the city in April 2008.

Critical Mass is essentially a direct action, anarchic event in that rides are unsanctioned by city officials and riders are motivated by self-determination, self-rule, and a non-hierarchical structure. Bicyclist Michael Klett explains: “within Critical Mass itself there are no leaders; organizers, yes, we are all organizers – but we’re not in charge ... that has been the key to its success.”⁶ His distinction between leader and organizer is a useful one because it points to the active role that participants are supposed to play in the event. Bike riders meet at designated spots on the last Friday of every month (in their respective cities and towns) to collectively decide on the route that will be taken; proposals are verbally solicited and sometimes circulated in the form of maps, before being put to a vote. Routes are occasionally decided in



advance, but this practice is often discouraged in lieu of face-to-face, spontaneous decision-making.

Many of the techniques employed by Massers were developed in the early San Francisco rides, including the practice of “corking,” which is when bikers position themselves at busy intersections to block, or “cork,” traffic while the pack rides by. This tactic is intended to keep the Mass together while riding through stoplights, and though technically illegal, it is designed to maximize safety for cyclists (safety in numbers!) and minimize hassle for drivers (by keeping the Mass moving at a reasonable speed). Rather than causing vehicular bottlenecks, this “cork” actually opens spaces up. Still, this strategy – as well as the event as a whole – garners mixed responses, ranging from enthusiastic support, to indifference, to outright hostility. For example, police have physically assaulted riders and initiated mass arrests in a number of cities, whereas drivers have used everything from foul language to their own fists as a way to squelch rides. On several occasions, motorists aggravated at the temporary seizure of “their” roads have even run over participants with their cars (July 2007 in Chicago; July 2008 in Seattle). At the same time, rides have also been known to draw a variety of antagonistic cyclists, namely young white men eager to harass drivers, start fights, or take revenge on people’s cars. Massers in San Francisco rightly dubbed this amorphous breed of participants the “testosterone brigade” in the 1990s.⁷ Over a decade later, these and other bitter cyclists still pop up from time to time, but the vast majority of riders are there to enjoy themselves and to make a statement while doing so.

Interpretations

Part of Critical Mass’s notoriety arguably stems from the difficulty faced by those who attempt to label and define it; scholars Susan Blickstein and Susan Hanson note that it has been called “a protest, a form of street theater, a method of commuting, a party, and a social space.”⁸ This slippery definition is both embraced and compounded by participants who also describe it as a “pro-bike, anti-car monthly action,” a rebellion, a movement, a revolutionary act, and conversely, “just a bike ride.”⁹ The inability for people to accurately pinpoint what Critical Mass *is* does not necessarily reflect confusion (although it does do that) as much as disagreement over the ride’s meaning and purpose. Oddly enough, this is



not coincidental; Critical Mass was specifically designed to be interpreted, shaped, and actively defined by its participants, regardless of whether they agree. Veteran Masser and bike advocate Jym Dyer writes:

Participants are encouraged to implement their own ideas, and non-participants (including those who for various reasons are averse to the ride) are encouraged to join in with their ideas as well ... be prepared to discuss your missives and defend your arguments!¹⁰

Xerocracy, or “rule through photocopying,” is the dominant paradigm of Critical Mass and it rests on the premise that anyone can (and should) print, photocopy, and solicit media that advocate and/or explain the ride. This approach to grassroots communication creates an interesting space in which riders voice their opinions, debate their ideas, and collectively give meaning to the event through face-to-face communication and the active production and dissemination of writing, art, maps, and other self-produced media – some of which are passed out on rides and some that circulate online through a sprawling web of Mass pages. Artwork celebrating Critical Mass and bicycle transportation is also common, particularly images connecting bicycle transportation to environmentalism, autonomy, and critiques of the oil and auto industries. Xerocracy is thus not only a means to shape participant and public perceptions about bicycle transportation (through facts, statistics, images, and personal narratives), it is also a way for cyclists to actively “channel the energy and focus of the mass” as they see fit.¹¹

While participants clearly articulate ideas about what Mass is and is not – what it does and does not do – the very nature of the event invites a level of interpretation that is completely unpredictable. The ride is contentious for precisely this reason: to its supporters, it symbolizes everything from pedal power to people power to the reclamation of public space, whereas its critics often see it as a symbol of disorganization and lawlessness ... even a hatred of drivers. In particular, there is an ongoing feud between cyclists as to whether the event is helpful or harmful to bike advocacy and the image of cycling, a debate exemplified in an archived 1999 email “flame war” between Critical Mass supporters, participants, and critics (mainly “vehicular cycling” advocates) on the West coast.¹² The debate – which has made as many rounds as a Japanese Keirin racer – tends to revolve around heated disputes over the questionable legality of Critical Mass, and from the ways in which the ride, its participants, and by extension all bicyclists are presented and represented to the public.



Mass media – and the corporate press in particular – have thus significantly altered the stakes of Mass since its inception, namely by stoking the fire of a “Bike vs. Car” drama that journalists themselves have played a central role in cultivating since the 1980s, when urban bicyclists and especially bike messengers were routinely depicted as nuisances or safety hazards. This, despite tens of thousands of annual automobile fatalities and hundreds of thousands of auto-related accidents and injuries in the US alone. News audiences are now treated to a similar set of stories in which Critical Mass riders have taken the place of bike messengers as the two-wheeled clan most likely to be depicted as everything from casual troublemakers, to elitists, to zealots, chaos-loving anarchists, criminals, and even potential terrorists worthy of undercover police surveillance.¹³ There is, of course, a small minority of belligerent (and, on rare occasions, violent) cyclists who are responsible for generating some of the bad press accrued over the years, but journalists have also churned out enough inflammatory news stories on the event to fill an Olympic velodrome. And this makes it all too easy to forget that the issue at hand is, after all, a short bike ride that only takes place once a month.

As a result of these and other factors, discussions about Critical Mass tend to slide into an overly simplistic set of pros and cons, love against hate arguments over whether it is “good” or “bad” for bicycling, despite the fact that Mass can exert a positive influence on bike advocacy even when it draws negative attention. For example, the perceived “radicalism” of Critical Mass can provide an incentive for transportation agencies and city officials to increase their dialogue with activists who they see as more “moderate.” A sort of informal “good cop”/“bad cop” routine on wheels. Indeed, many bike advocacy groups have used the notoriety and contentiousness of Critical Mass to secure more influence and a louder public platform from which to express their views and policy recommendations.¹⁴ Amy Stork, co-founder of Portland, Oregon’s bike advocacy network Shift, speaks to this issue as both a cycling enthusiast and a specialist in strategic communication:

I really appreciate Critical Mass because when you are going to change culture, it’s good to have a radical wing, because that pushes folks towards the center. If people see Critical Mass and that appears radical to them, then putting a bike lane in seems reasonable. In places where they don’t have Critical Mass, they think bike lanes are radical.¹⁵



Martin Wachs, a professor of engineering and planning at the University of California Berkeley, reiterates this point in his assessment of cycling infrastructure in San Francisco, noting that pressure applied by Critical Mass and other bike advocates in the late 1990s played a key role in the construction of a \$147 million bike lane on the Oakland–San Francisco Bay Bridge: “it was included because a persistent, organized, and down-right obnoxious group of advocates would not let go of the issue.”¹⁶ In short, while debating whether Critical Mass helps or hinders bike advocacy by sending the “wrong message” is not unreasonable or irrelevant, it is still only one way – not necessarily *the* way – to understand how and why this (or any other) collective action becomes meaningful.

Influences and Impacts

One of the reasons Critical Mass seems to irritate Americans like a fresh saddle sore is because the ride tends to raise critical questions about some of the dominant cultural norms and taken-for-granted privileges associated with mobility, the use of public space(s), and the sacred cow of Western society: the automobile. In this sense, Critical Mass is part of a lineage of bike activism that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s when groups like the Dutch Provo (Amsterdam), Alternative Stad (Stockholm), and New York City’s Transportation Alternatives (among other US groups) began to actively imagine cities in which urban mobility would not have to be organized around the spaces, speeds, and trajectories of motorized traffic.

Then, as now, bicycling was not seen as a “cure all” as much as a utilitarian goal: a goal that speaks to the larger, interrelated problems brought on by air pollution, oil reliance, dwindling public spaces, and decades of unfettered political support for the auto industry and waves of urban development centered around the car. Building off the renewed popularity of leisure cycling and the urgency of both the environmental movement and the oil crisis in the early 1970s, this model of bike advocacy called for people to pragmatically intervene in the composition of the urban environment – through cycling, political organizing, and healthy doses of theatrical protest – to promote a more sustainable vision of city life. It was a basic expression of what Henri Lefebvre famously called the *right to the city*, which could best be described as the collective right for people to have a say in the ways that their cities (their homes)



are organized, and in the way they function. Importantly, having money or owning property is not a prerequisite for one's participation. It is a way of saying that citizens and urban dwellers have the intrinsic right to share in the exciting, challenging, and fundamentally political processes that make a city a city.

By the 1980s, the growing popularity of John Forester's philosophy of *vehicular cycling* – the notion that “bicyclists fare best when they act, and are treated in return, as drivers of vehicles” – marked a clear shift away from conceptualizing bicycle transportation as part of an environmental and political “right to the city,” toward a paradigm that simply emphasized the right to bike.¹⁷ Because while vehicular cycling is unquestionably a worthwhile skill for urban bikers, it is also a rather conservative ideology that draws passionate support from people who take pains to distinguish themselves from anything they perceive to be “anti-car.” Progressive urban planners, environmentalists, so-called “political” bike activists, and even people who simply want off-road bike paths are often lumped together under the broad “anti-car” banner.

Fortunately, the resurgence of urban reform-minded bike activism in the 1990s began to gradually turn the tide away from advocacy bent on preserving the status quo of car culture. Critical Mass was and is instrumental in pointing many people in this direction, which is to say, toward a worldview that sees the bicycle as a tool for rethinking the logic of automobiles, as opposed to a tool one uses to simply imitate them. At the most basic level, Mass tends to spark people's interest in bicycling and it continues to nudge cyclists toward a more politicized engagement with transportation issues writ large.¹⁸ That is to say, monthly rides bring bicycling advocates together, inspire other cyclists to get involved with local advocacy groups, and also provide an important network for activism that is as much tactical as it is social.¹⁹ Cyclist and scholar Dave Horton sees the event as an important tool for enhancing the “activist identities of individuals” and building a wider political community:

Individuals share an alternative culture, but – for as long as they remain anonymous to each other – are unable to develop joint projects from their shared ways of life, values, and goals. Critical Mass made – and continues from time to time to make – visible and tangible the connections between them, transforming anonymous inhabitation of an imagined community into meaningful and possibility-laden participation in a realtime face-to-face community.²⁰



The advocates and activists who emerge from these networks have indeed played crucial roles in putting cycling on the public agenda and pushing bike advocacy in new directions. For example, Critical Mass has almost single-handedly created or rejuvenated widespread interest in using bicycles as vehicles for public expression. This is evident in the variety of creative bike demonstrations and protest rides that ensued since Critical Mass first gained popularity in the 1990s, from the somber memorial rides and “Ghost Bike” installations used to commemorate cyclists killed by automobiles, to the playful World Naked Bike Ride that activist and artist Conrad Schmidt founded as a protest against the *indecent* of oil. In particular, the often-playful nature of Critical Mass has shown bicyclists how they can use satire and humor to highlight the injustices, ironies, and bizarre “common sense” of car culture. Some prominent examples include the construction and public use of the Green Hummer – a pedal-powered vehicle that friends in Savannah, Georgia, built to the same ludicrous proportions of the Hummer SUV – as well as the creation of PARK(ing) Day: a now-annual event started by San Francisco’s Rebar collective, in which activists roll out sod, benches, and potted trees to construct miniature public parks in metered, urban parking spaces.

By presenting bicycling as something different from a sport, a children’s activity, or a means for simply getting one’s butt into shape, Critical Mass has also helped to transform the image of bicycling and the common associations and stereotypes that resonate with the public. Charles Komanoff and other longtime bike advocates have taken note of this in recent years, arguing that Mass not only sparked new interest in urban cycling, it also helped to get cycling “out of its geek ghetto into someplace more appealing to the 99% of people who don’t consider themselves ‘cyclists.’”²¹

The fun, excitement, and even the rebelliousness of Critical Mass have contributed to a growing sentiment that biking can actually be cool (believe it or not). This is hardly an insignificant point when one considers that the most famous cyclist in the United States, aside from Lance Armstrong, is probably Pee-wee Herman or the 40-Year-Old Virgin. Because while environmentalism, physical fitness, thriftiness, and pleasure are all factors that influence people’s bike-riding habits, it is safe to say that most people are not going to start bicycling simply because it sounds good on paper or is better for the environment (as unfortunate as this might be). Indeed, cultural norms play a profound role in our transportation habits and Critical Mass is one of the things that gives people a chance to potentially reassess what it actually means to be a “cyclist.”



Such inroads may not change the negative social stigmas widely associated with adult bicycling (i.e., poverty, eccentricity), but they are especially vital in places where the moniker “cyclist” is exclusively used with reference to lycra hot pants, wacky old professors, or aging virgins.

Critical Mass is by no means a substitution for formal bike advocacy, nor does it offer a solution to transportation problems by any stretch of the imagination. Many participants are admittedly apolitical or gleefully disorganized, and the event does little to transform the social and economic aspects of car culture, or the actual “stuff” of urban planning, such as concrete, roads, and the like. But what it succeeds at doing is creating conditions in which people actively use bicycles to forge new ways of imagining, understanding, and ultimately utilizing both public and social spaces. Perhaps most importantly, it gives people who are marginalized on busy city streets a chance to “live the impossible” and immerse themselves in what cyclist Charles Higgins describes as a *festive rolling adventure*:

Though it raises the blood pressure of some rush-hour commuters, Critical Mass offers a change, if only for a few moments, in the domination of the streets. In place of tons of steel and glass is a rolling community of people who can talk to each other and experience safety in numbers ... Critical Mass provides an opportunity for average people to gather surrounded by other cyclists on the streets that otherwise threaten them.²²

People who ride in Critical Mass frequently testify to the power of this experience because it obviously transcends the mere act of bicycling. Matthew Roth of New York City’s *Time’s Up!* states, “it is one of the few authentic experiences that I’ve had in a group setting,” while Wisconsin cyclist Isral DeBruin reflects on the way it informed his sense of place:

I began to truly appreciate seeing the city of Milwaukee at street level, moving more quickly than walking, but without any glass or the sound of an engine between the buildings and me. I started noticing things I’d never seen before and felt the city in an entirely new way. I could feel the streets. I could feel the pavement.²³

Sharing a collective experience with a group of fellow cyclists and conveying one’s right to the bikeable city can be a profound moment for a person, particularly one who is unaffiliated with, or simply uninterested in, formal cycling organizations, clubs, or traditional cycling events. It can



serve as an introduction to a larger community of bike riders just as it can affirm, renew, or develop one's commitment to bicycling or one's identity as a bicyclist. In short, it can give people a reason to ride and a reason to take pride in doing so. Ayleen Crotty, a veteran bike advocate and co-host of the *Bike Show* on KBOO radio in Portland, Oregon, says that while Critical Mass has its limitations, it is also a "forum for cyclists to meet, feel supported and feel elated ... to know they're not the only ones out there."²⁴

In creating a unique space where communities of cyclists can emerge through a common love of the bicycle, Critical Mass serves an important ritual function that gives a tangible, human expression to the slogan "Ride Daily, Celebrate Monthly." This is arguably the most cherished feature of the event and, incidentally, one of the characteristics its critics frequently overlook when they judge Mass by a set of standards better suited for measuring the worth of an old radio, that is, whether it transmits a clear message to a passive audience. Because ultimately, the value of Critical Mass is less contingent on what it *says* to the public than what it *does* for the people who show up to ride each month.

... We (Still) Are Traffic

If Critical Mass is judged solely by its capacity to live up to the rhetoric of its most adamant supporters, then one can hardly call it a success. But despite the bad press and the temptation to dismiss it as either a disturbance or mere street party, Critical Mass is much more than just a protest or fun ride. For short durations, cyclists disrupt the automobile's domination of the street and try to demonstrate something admittedly utopian: a vision of pedal power and human-scale community in action. Moreover, bike riders have often used this experience to actively question the functions and uses of public spaces, thereby thrusting the politics of car culture into the public spotlight in ways that are typically shielded from public debate or scrutiny. It may not prompt a revolution or usher in the post-automobile era, but at its best, Critical Mass is an expression of solidarity, passion, and critical thinking that is fundamental to the germination of any progressive moment; it pushes others to consider what is possible ... what *could* be.²⁵ At the very least, it is a demonstration of creative dissent and public experimentation with pleasure in an era of widespread apathy and cynicism about real change (not the



kind promoted by politicians or advertisers). Even if these moments of dissent are fleeting, and at times poorly executed or misunderstood, they give people a unique chance to consider how they might use their voices, their bodies, and even their bicycles to exercise their collective “right to the city.”

NOTES

- 1 Chris Carlsson, “Critical Massifesto,” in *Critical Mass Essays, Flyers, Images from San Francisco, 1992–1998*. Available online at www.processedworld.com/tfrs_web/history/Index.html. (Originally published in June 1994.)
- 2 Rebecca Reilly, *Nerves of Steel* (Buffalo: Spoke & Word Press, 2000); Travis Hugh Culley, *The Immortal Class: Bike Messengers and the Cult of Human Power*, 1st ed. (New York: Villard, 2001).
- 3 Jym Dyer, “Flocculating in the Streets of Berkeley,” *Terrain*, August 1993.
- 4 See John Jordan, “The Art of Necessity: The Subversive Imagination of Anti-Road Protest and Reclaim the Streets,” in *DiY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, ed. George McKay (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 129–51.
- 5 The April 2008 ride in Budapest, Hungary, drew an estimated 80,000 bicyclists while rides in 2006 and 2007 both saw over 30,000 participants. See Zsolt Balla, “Critical Mass Wheels Away,” *The Budapest Sun*, April 23, 2008.
- 6 Michael Klett, “A Uniquely Democratic Experiment,” in *Critical Mass, Bicycling’s Defiant Celebration*, ed. Chris Carlsson (Oakland: AK Press, 2002), p. 90.
- 7 See Steven Bodzin, “Politics Can Be Fun,” in *Critical Mass*, ed. Carlsson, p. 103.
- 8 Susan Blickstein and Susan Hanson, “Critical Mass: Forging a Politics of Sustainable Mobility in the Information Age,” *Transportation* 28, 4 (2001): 6.
- 9 Bernie Blaug, “Crit Mass,” in *Critical Mass*, ed. Carlsson; Charles Higgins, “Critical to Recall Real ‘Mass’ Appeal,” *San Francisco Guardian*, June 30, 2000.
- 10 Dyer, “Flocculating in the Streets of Berkeley.”
- 11 Klett, “A Uniquely Democratic Experiment,” 90.
- 12 “Critical Mass Flame War,” in *Monkey Chicken*. Available online at www.monkeychicken.com/fwar.htm.
- 13 For examples, see: Alex Storozyński, “End the Anarchy: Critical Mass Deserves a Police Escort to Keep It Safe,” *a.m. New York*, November 5, 2004; Elizabeth Press, Andrew Lynn, and Chris Ryan, *Still We Ride*, Tandem Production, 2005 (film).



- 14 Blickstein and Hanson, "Critical Mass," 360.
- 15 Amy Stork, interview with the author, August 6, 2004. Also see Dave Snyder, "Good for the Bicycling Cause," in *Critical Mass*, ed. Carlsson, p. 112.
- 16 Martin Wachs, "Creating Political Pressure for Cycling," *Transportation Quarterly* 52, 1 (1998): 6.
- 17 See John Forester, *Effective Cycling* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).
- 18 Adam Kessel, "Response to Boston CM Critics," *Chicago Critical Mass*, April 9, 2000. Available online at chicagocriticalmass.org/about/faq/adamkessel.
- 19 Dyer, "Flocculating in the Streets of Berkeley."
- 20 Dave Horton, "Lancaster Critical Mass: Does It Still Exist?" in *Critical Mass*, ed. Carlsson, pp. 63–4. See Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 25. Originally published in Paris, June 1957.
- 21 Charles Komanoff, "The Need for More Cyclists," *Remarks to the Bicycle Education Leadership Conference/League of American Bicyclists in New York City, May 3rd 2005*. Available online at www.cars-suck.org/littera-scripta/LAB-talk.html.
- 22 Jeff Ferrell, *Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 115; Higgins, "Critical to Recall Real 'Mass' Appeal."
- 23 Mindy Bond, "Matthew Roth, Bicycle Enthusiast, Time's Up," *Gothamist*, April 29, 2005; Isral DeBruin, "Critical Mass: A Personal Perspective," *University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Post*, September 5, 2006.
- 24 Ayleen Crotty, personal correspondence, January 3, 2007.
- 25 David Pinder, "Commentary: Writing Cities against the Grain," *Urban Geography* 25, 8 (2004): 794.

