

# CRITICAL MASS

**Bicycling's Defiant Celebration**

**Edited by Chris Carlsson**



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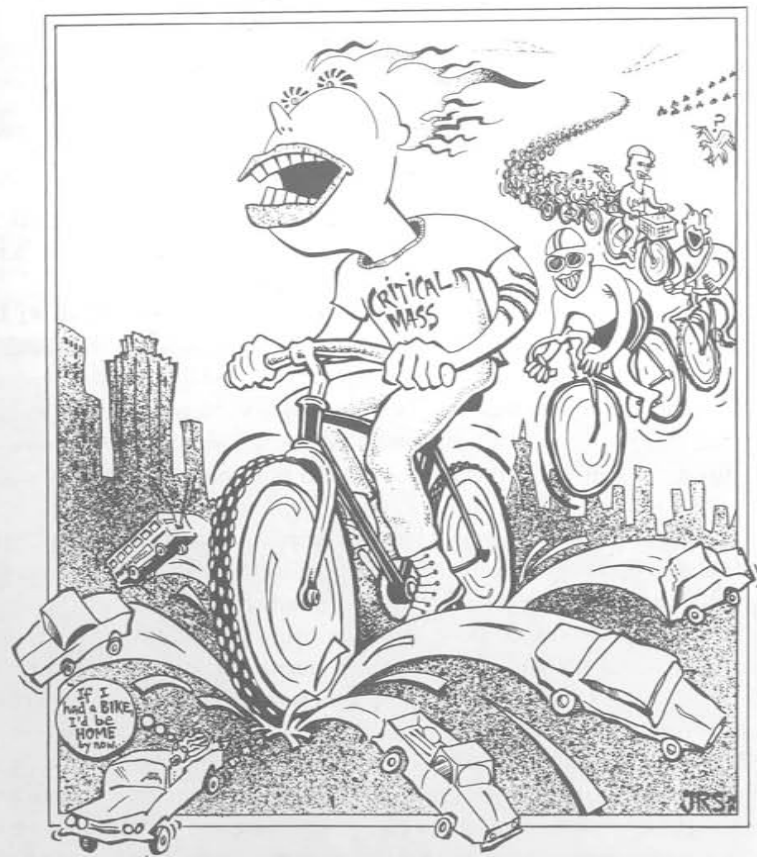


HUGH D'ANDRADE

## INTRODUCTION

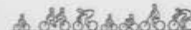
Critical Mass—the name inspires passion and loathing. Originally a term applied to nuclear fission, it has become a rallying cry for bicyclists, rejecting the priorities and values imposed on us by oil barons and their government servants. But Critical Mass bicycle rides are no protest movement as we commonly imagine. Instead, riders have gathered to *celebrate* their choice to bicycle, and in so doing have opened up a new kind of social and political space,

# HEY!



# GET OUT OF OUR WAY!

JAMES R SWANSON





Critical Mass chugs up San Francisco's Potrero Hill, August 1998

unprecedented in this era of atomization and commodification. Bicyclists are reclaiming city life from San Francisco to St. Louis, Melbourne to Milan, Berlin to Bombay, and hundreds more cities across the planet.

Critical Mass started in the dark days of 1992 not long after Bush #1 had manipulated Iraq into becoming the new boogeyman, massacred thousands in the Gulf War and declared a New World Order. Critical Mass had already spread to over a dozen cities by the time the Zapatistas rose on New Year's Day in 1994 (against the "free market" neoliberal deal NAFTA was shoving down Mexico's throat). Since the Zapatista uprising, the myriad movements contesting corporate globalization have grown in the shadow of the famous "irrational exuberance" of the 1990s. Alternative seeds have sprouted into thickening branches of oppositional and visionary movements, from Reclaim the Streets to community gardening to the summit-hopping Turtles and Teamsters.

In the pages that follow, Critical Mass is described and defined by many voices. Critical Mass is far from a homogenous movement, and its participants have a diversity of views and missions. Inevitable conflicts that necessarily arise in public get an airing here too. The beauty of Critical Mass—one of them, anyway—is the chance it provides for people to face each other in the simmering cauldron of real life, in public, without pre-set roles and fixed boundaries. Naturally this leads some people to feel that Critical Mass fails to meet their goals, and such sentiments can be found among the writings that follow. Nevertheless, where else in our society has there been such a remarkable opportunity to test one's own theories and ideas in public, in a chaotic and unpredictable real life context? I will leave it to our many contributors to flesh out the details of the Critical Mass experience, its pros and



cons, its beauty and its occasional ugliness. As several writers take pains to point out, no one can claim to have the "truth" when it comes to Critical Mass. Each person is equally capable of offering a perspective, a definition, a manifesto, a purpose. And it's in that openness that Critical Mass continues to thrive, ten years after its birth in San Francisco on a warm September evening in 1992.

This book came together rather abruptly during the early spring of 2002. After sending out a solicitation around the world, I was happily deluged with wonderful material. I spent the bulk of April and half of May intensely editing and working with contributors, then designing and producing the book. Thanks to AK Press for taking on the publisher's role, and promising to get the book out in time for our Tenth Anniversary celebration on September 27, 2002.

At the outset I wanted this book to be a global history of the amorphous phenomenon we call "Critical Mass." Dozens of contributors define this mysterious social movement in a charming cacophony of voices and perspectives. But this is less a history book than a solid resource for future historians. Nearly all the contributors are themselves participants, each writing from his or her own experience within Critical Mass in cities across the planet. In some ways we emulate the old saga of the blind men and the elephant, each of us describing the part of the experience we know best, which is in turn shaped by our preconceptions, hopes and fears.

Iain Boal's "The World of the Bicycle," and Hank Chapot's "Great Bicycle Protest of 1896" show how fuzzy the notion of a beginning is, when it comes to mass bicycle rides with a political-social purpose. Unfortunately, participants and outsiders have often fallen for the myth that Critical Mass was started by one person.



Critical Mass emerging from a sudden rush through the underground Moscone Convention Center, August 2000.



Due to our cultural predisposition to attribute all events to the exemplary efforts of one or more heroic individuals (usually "great men"), the mythical history of Critical Mass has become something like "it all started with Chris Carlsson going to the SF Bike Coalition in August 1992." While I did go to that meeting and make a suggestion for a spontaneous, monthly gathering of bicyclists, this idea was by no means mine alone. It is patently absurd to attribute any social movement to the good idea of a single individual. In fact, many of us had been discussing this idea for the better part of six months prior to its presentation to a (less-than-enthusiastic) SF Bike Coalition meeting. The concept evolved over this time, with multiple input and influence from many people, and plenty of others who never took part directly in the conversations.

Social movements don't erupt from individuals, and individuals don't have ideas that are solely theirs. We are all shaped and influenced by our social conditions; our sense of what's possible and what we do about it is shaped IN ACTION WITH EACH OTHER. No better example exists of this larger dynamic than Critical Mass itself.

—Chris Carlsson



IZ HAFALIA San Francisco Critical Mass August 1996: The *SF Chronicle* used this image to advertise *itself* as authentically San Francisco!



## SWEET SOUNDS, SWEETER SMELLS



**NO LIFE**  
9 A.M. TO 5 P.M.  
**MON. TO FRI.**  
BRAIN CLEANING

## BY BERNIE BLAUG

I love Crit Mass for its anarchic nature. No one leads it, no one controls it, no one plans its routes and no one is its spokesperson. Whenever anyone has attempted to take control of any part of it they've always been unsuccessful—and I, for one, am glad of that.

Depending on who you ask, you'll always get a different description of what Crit Mass actually is. To some, it's a pro-bike, anti-car monthly action. To others it's a friendly, social, casual cruise. And, to yet more it's an opportunity to ride *en masse* through downtown and the neighborhoods—and for a change outnumber the cars. To me, it's all that and more.

Its anarchic nature has also made it difficult for the cops and mainstream media to pin it down. Doubtless the cops would love it if there were "leaders" they could hold accountable, meet with before, during and after the monthly rides—and threaten if they weren't getting things to their liking. Whenever anyone has tried to step forward and speak for all Crit Mass riders, frustration and confusion have nearly always quickly followed. I think its very nature of no leaders, bosses or appointed spokespeople is the main reason the Ride has lasted a full decade.

The media would also like spokespeople, or at least an office, they could go to for quotes and insights, but alas, for them, that's also proved elusive. Instead, if they want to write about it they actually have to go out and engage cyclists on the ride itself and really pursue the story, rather than compiling it all from their offices.

The police, and to a lesser extent, the media seem to have come to their senses in the past year or so and realized that it's easier to let the Ride go ahead, rather than trying to outlaw, restrict or re-route it. After all, it's only a couple of thousand people going on a bike ride. . .

Anarchy: The very word (especially after 9/11) invokes many images for all of us, nearly every one of them now negative. I feel Anarchy is not about chaos, murder, mayhem, etc. (as it's invariably portrayed in the mainstream media). To me, Anarchy is all about self-responsibility, self-empowerment and not needing

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| STATE  | TAB     | MAKE                                  | DATE   |
|  | MO   YR | TIME CHECKED                          | TIME ISSUED  |
| V.I.N.   |         | BODY                                  | LOCATION (APPROX.) OF VIOLATION  |
|  |         | COLOR                                 | NOTE: FAILURE TO OBEY OR TRANSPORTATION HABITS MAY SUBJECT US ALL TO A GRIM FUTURE |
|  |         | U<br>V<br>P                           |  |
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CLASSIFY UNDER PENALTY OF PERJURY THAT YOU NOT BESEEN BY RADAR. HEAVILY TRAFFICALLY JUST MEANT TO HELP YOURSELF WHO IS DAMNED BY THIS VEHICLE.

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| 1 |   | PARKING IN PUBLIC LANE<br>225000 VC                                    | 200     | 7  |   | ROAD BLOCK<br>23350A VC                                       | 357     |
| 2 |   | TALKING ON A CELLPHONE WHILE DRIVING<br>221033 VC                      | 411     | 8  |   | STUCK IN DROCKLOCK ON A BEAUTIFUL DAY<br>23350A VC            | 500     |
| 3 |   | PARKING ON THE SIDEWALK<br>225000 VC                                   | 175     | 9  |   | POLLUTING THE AIR & WATER<br>38390A VC                        | 275     |
| 4 |   | BRAUNWASHED BY TELEVISION<br>010101A VC                                | 9.95    | 10 |   | WARNING ABOUT HIGH GAS PRICES<br>23450A VC                    | 1514    |
| 5 |   | DRIVING AN SUV<br>38300 VC   | 350     | 11 |   | MAKING THE EARTH A WORSE PLACE FOR YOUR CHILDREN<br>32450C VC | 850     |
| 6 |   | TRYING TO MAKE UP FOR YOUR LOW SELF ESTEEM BY DRIVING AN EXTENSIVE CAR | 999     | 12 |   | CONSPIRACY FOR YOUR UNLAWFUL SHORTCOMINGS<br>012105A VC       | 4.5*    |

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DO NOT WORSHIP CASH  
SEEK ENLIGHTENMENT

HUMAN'S SIGNATURE: GNC

STAT NO. \_\_\_\_\_

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Swirling round the traffic circle, August 1999.

JOSH SWITZKY

(or wanting) authority figures to constantly tell us how to act, feel and think. I've been a regular mass rider since the 2nd SF Crit Mass (in 10/92) and have been on over 50 of 'em altogether. Obviously, not everyone on every ride has acted like an angel, but for the most part, Crit Mass riders know the difference between right and wrong and act accordingly—with or without police presence.

Critical Mas is an organic, spontaneous, inspiring, anarchic thing of beauty. VIVA LA MASS!

## HOW CRITICAL MASS CHANGED THE (AMERICAN) WORLD

BY ANNA SOJOURNER

Critical Mass is not a protest but a demonstration, in the simplest sense of the word. It is a demonstration of social space, the rarest bird in America. It works, because people automatically feel it's right, though many of us have never before experienced free public space. Critical Mass cuts through the noise and inertia of the American transportation system and teaches us to carve a wedge of our city for ourselves. It feeds us a reality we use to create a vision.

With no knowledge of history or sense of possibility, we assume that the way things are is the way things ought to be. Just because our home is friendlier to autos than humans doesn't mean it ought to be that way. Critical Mass gives us knowledge and a sense of possibility bigger than any rhetoric, any architectural model, any developer's ad campaign, or any promise. We humans want social space, we need it, take to it like ducks to water. After 10 years of massing, we found out that the society we want isn't so unobtainable after all. That's liberation. Thanks, Mass.

## CYCLING UNDER THE RADAR—ASSERTIVE DESERTION

BY CHRIS CARLSSON

*"An unusually loose netwar design—one that is eminently leaderless yet manages to organize a large crowd for a rather chaotic, linear kind of swarming—is found in the pro-bicycle, anti-car protest movement known as Critical Mass (CM) in the San Francisco Bay Area."*<sup>1</sup>

—David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla  
*Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*  
Rand Institute

*"Anarchist spontaneity, anonymity, leaderlessness, and ubiquity are a mischievous mirror of the fluidity and omnipresence of capital in its most advanced post-industrial form. . . a counterpower whose morphing, mobile affinities speak back against a financial command that is vaporous, nomadic, and strikes across all points on the social horizon."*<sup>2</sup>

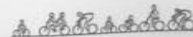
—Nick Dyer-Witherford  
*"Global Body, Global Brain/Global Factory, Global War: Revolt of the Value-Subjects"* [www.thecommoner.org](http://www.thecommoner.org)

Bicycling is a particularly solitary activity. Not everyone rides a bike; in fact, it's a rather small minority. And of people who do choose to bicycle, an even smaller minority choose to participate in Critical Mass. At first glance bicycling seems an unlikely place to find a political movement of people animated by a passion to change how we live. But the fiercely individualistic folks who choose to bicycle AND ride in the monthly Critical Mass are among those at the forefront of today's social revolts.

Even though bicycling in modern cities is extremely isolated and dangerous, every day thousands of people choose to embrace the bicycle as their means of personal transportation. Why? What does it mean that so many people are willing to choose something so discouraged by the structure of society—both its physical layout and its psychological assumptions? What is the meaning of this limited and largely invisible form of social opposition, this growing desertion from the hyper-exploitation of the car/oil nexus? And how does Critical Mass take this expression and deepen its meaning and power?

Famously, the motivations of Critical Massers are as numerous as the number of riders. Ask anyone why they are on a Critical Mass and you'll get a response from a long list of possible answers. But what people think they're doing is less interesting than what it means that a specific fraction of the population has found a form of political and social expression in the Critical Mass phenomenon.

In Critical Mass we discover partial and beginning answers to questions most



of us haven't even begun to ask. Some have called our times the "end of history," others a "New World Order," still others the emergence of something beyond any nation-state called "Empire," or "globalization." Whatever one might call it, the assumptions and dynamics of society are undergoing dramatic change, a change that the popular press has done little to explore or explain beyond clichés and platitudes derived from looking in the rearview mirror. Critical Mass has grown alongside the emergence of a new global system as one manifestation of its flipside, a new form of social opposition.

Nobody asks for your ID, your money, your soul or your brain at Critical Mass. It is a living, collective affirmation of the human drive for authentic, unmediated community. People arrive, excited to join a temporary, mobile occupying army of noisy rolling revelers, relishing the sounds of people laughing and talking, hooting and whistling, tinkling bells and spinning gears. You are invited to talk to strangers and they usually answer with sincere enthusiasm. The Critical Mass experience is contrary to "normal" life thanks to the absence of buying and selling, and the equally important lack of a hierarchical structure.

People who seek personal autonomy find each other on bicycle at Critical Mass. It is a breeding ground for people who are ready to start living in a world shaped to facilitate cooperation, generalized prosperity, and ecological sanity as opposed to cutthroat competition, war and the barbarism of worldwide famine and environmental devastation. Critical Mass is a place to taste the imaginary (but suddenly and briefly real) power of collective spirit, to feel you are alive and aware as you help create a true and uncorrupted sliver of autonomous, self-directed public space. You taste a radically public and directly democratic potential in the euphoric sharing of a freely created convivial space predicated on individual engagement.

## The New Shape of Class Conflict

Critical Mass participants are largely members of what has been termed the "Cognitariat," the human "know-how"—technical, cultural, linguistic, and ethical—that supports the operation of the high-tech economy.<sup>3</sup> This includes programmers and secretaries, office managers and account executives, but also waiters, bike messengers, students, gardeners and musicians. Most San Francisco riders work in the cubicular world of corporate America, shuffling information and maintaining software and hardware for the globe-spanning corporations that most benefit from the new shape of the world, or the ubiquitous nonprofit corporations that have sprung up to address the yawning chasms left behind by capitalist development.

Our era is characterized by a rapid enclosure of human life within the boundaries of buying and selling, i.e. the world of commodification. Commodification has expanded into new realms and more and more of life: from childcare and psychotherapy to personal trainers and dogwalkers, the markets never close anymore with supermarkets open 24/7 and financial markets trading at all hours across the planet. The side of this that we are usually aware of, at least in part, is shopping, where we get the goods we need to live by exchanging money for them. But shopping is also an arena in which our choices can define our identity and sense of self,

where we make our individual mark on the world. We seem oblivious to the side of commodification in which we are the commodity, wherein our ability to work is the only real product we have for sale and where our creative contribution to making the world is sold to purposes beyond our choice or control.

What this omnipresent Economy also represents is a radical expansion of the terrain of exploitation. Classical revolutionary analysis focused on work, especially factory work, as the site of maximum exploitation—hence the point at which revolutionary opposition (by workers) was most likely to erupt and where it would find the most power to counter the power of capital and its owners. While it is still true that profits are derived from the coercive relations of wage-labor in workplaces across the planet—and it is still a crucial area of social and political conflict—our era is better understood as one in which a general level of profitability is maintained through a system of "social labor"—a real enclosure of all living activity into the logic of buying and selling. As I write this in mid-March 2002, the U.S. press trumpets the end of the economic downturn that followed the dotcom bust and Sept. 11 attacks. Enron, Global Crossing, Arthur Andersen—individual businesses teeter and collapse, but the incessant participation of U.S. consumers, endlessly expanding their debt load, blindly trusting the fundamental reliability of the modern Economy, keeps the system from falling into an historically familiar abyss.

*"This is a new proletariat and not a new industrial working class. . . 'proletariat' is the general concept that defines all those whose labor is exploited by capital, the entire cooperating multitude . . . In the . . . context of Empire, however, the production of capital converges ever more with the production and reproduction of social life itself; it thus becomes ever more difficult to maintain distinctions among productive, reproductive, and unproductive labor. Labor—material or immaterial, intellectual or corporeal—produces and reproduces social life, and in the process is exploited by capital. . . Th[is] progressive indistinction between production and reproduction . . . also highlights once again the immeasurability of time and value. As labor moves outside the factory walls, it is increasingly difficult to maintain the fiction of any measure of the working day and thus separate the time of production from the time of reproduction, or work time from leisure time. . . the proletariat produces in all its generality everywhere all day long."*<sup>4</sup>

—*Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

People working in corporate America often change jobs. These days, dissatisfaction or oppression does not lead people to get organized and fight back. Instead, people quit and look for a new job. The dramatic transience in workplaces and neighborhoods has eroded a sense of community, and undercut the belief that we all share similar predicaments and experiences. Efforts by companies to ameliorate a modern life drained of genuine sociability with the fake life of the "corporate family" don't fill the void. Flight from the inequities of work life leave Americans more isolated, confused and ignorant of class dynamics than ever.

Incongruously, as the totality of life has become increasingly absorbed in social-



ized economic activity, our personal experience (at least in the modern metropolis) is one of increased isolation. We are far less likely to know our neighbors or have lasting connections with co-workers than was common in previous eras. We feel alone in an ever more integrated system of making our world together. We are driven by the accelerated pace of daily life to a state in which we have no time—no time to socialize, no time for our kids or our lovers, no time to stop and think. Between working and shopping, and expanding periods of transit between every economic activity, we hardly have time for anything beyond sleeping.

Our atomization as individuals leaves us helpless in the face of a system that incessantly proclaims itself as the best of all possible worlds. If we are not satisfied, something must be wrong with us, because everyone else agrees, or so the absence of visible dissent seems to indicate. But this hollow consensus is extremely shallow. It is undercut by real life experiences every day. As long as those experiences are understood as personal failures rather than systemic necessities, we continue to participate “willingly”—lacking any alternative, trapped by bills, debts and fear of falling.

The contagious pleasure of a movement like Critical Mass threatens the precariousness of today's world, which depends on cooperative participation by the majority of people as workers and consumers. Critical Mass is an unparalleled practical experiment in public, collective self-expression, reclaiming our diminishing connectedness, interdependency and mutual responsibility. CM provides encouragement and reinforcement for desertion from the rat wheel of car ownership and its attendant investments. But even more subversively, it does it by gaining active participation in an event of unmediated human creation, outside of economic logic, and offering an exhilarating taste of a life practically forgotten—free, convivial, cooperative, connected, collective.

In the social factory, resistance can erupt in arenas outside the traditional sphere of the workplace. When old-style leftists despair over falling rates of unionization and strikes, they are failing to appreciate the wider terrain of class conflict taking shape in this new period of history. Critical Mass underscores the primacy of transit as an arena of contestation. Bicyclists have withdrawn from the exploitative relations of car ownership and the degrading second-class citizenship (and waste of time) imposed by public transit. But this revolt is personal and invisible—until the creative eruption of Critical Mass proclaims these myriad isolated acts to the world as a shared act. It is a public declaration that suddenly reveals individual choices as social, political and collective responses to the insanity that passes as inevitable and normal. In creating a moving event, celebrating and being a real alternative, Critical Mass simultaneously opens up the field of transit to new political contestation, and pushes it to another level by pioneering swarming mobility as a new tactic.

When someone becomes a daily bicyclist s/he makes an emphatic break with one of the basic assumptions and “truths” of the dominant society: that you must have a car to get around. The actual experience of urban cycling refreshes the cyclist mentally and physically. That experience in turn inoculates the bicyclist

against the disdain heaped on cyclists by “normal” people, often while they're driving. In addition, it begins to undermine all sorts of received truths, packaged and delivered by entertainment conglomerates with a vested interest in maintaining our dependence on steadily consuming their products in pursuit of an elusive happiness, or at least a satisfaction that we can't seem to get.

Bicyclists remove themselves, at least while riding, from the overwhelming saturation of the media. Instead of being told about traffic and weather, celebrity traumas, spectacular crimes, government proclamations, the latest scores and the whole seamless web of marketing and entertainment that calls itself ‘news’, the cyclist sees the dark clouds gathering, speaks to the neighborhood grocer, chats with the local kids on the corner. The bicyclist is experiencing life directly, avoiding the calculated mediation foisted on citizens by the ever-present babble of TV and radio. Short-circuiting the self-referential presentation of an edited and finally false “reality,” the cyclist's critical attitude, already strong enough to get her on a bicycle, begins to reinforce itself.

Bicyclists reject “simulatory conditioning. Revulsion against the power of a commercially driven media to saturate consciousness, structure social interactivity and standardize creativity has become a major theme of the new dissidence, for which culture jamming, ad-busting, and subvertisements are familiar forms.”

## The Empire Strikes Back

*“Whether such movements will remain only a spectral, haunting, deconstructive discomfort to capital, or develop the substantial capacity to make ‘an exit to the future’ is uncertain. The more vital they become, the more reality their projects assume, the more hollow and wraith-like will the market values they oppose appear, and the more lethal the force it will bring against them.”*

—Nick Dyer-Witherford

It's not surprising that in cities and towns across the world, but especially in the U.S., whenever a group of ten to fifty bicyclists (or more!) have appeared on the streets, riding in a leisurely social atmosphere, the police have responded with a predictable and disproportionate fury. The mighty forces kneading our lump of earth into a shape that assures their wealth and power cannot ignore Critical Mass. Wherever it erupts, with few exceptions among the 250-odd cities and towns across every continent where groups have ridden as “Critical Mass,” local and state police have responded quickly and punitively. Many individual cops are personally offended by cheerful bicyclists thumbing their noses at the automotive debt ball-and-chain they themselves have embraced so ardently. But the visceral hatred of a few zealous police is just the local manifestation of a much larger systemic fear of rebellion.

We can perhaps understand the individual motorist who quickly turns his everyday road rage against these visible rebels on bicycles, trapped as he is in a vehicle that symbolizes his freedom while actually imprisoning him—in debt and anxiety, but at that moment, in a metal box in a traffic jam. He has traded a great deal of his life to “own” this car—and now a contingent of revelers, by their simple pres-





ence, shatters the untenable illusion of his freedom. It is an illusion that he is already struggling to maintain against all evidence even before the bicyclists started shouting about the emperor's obvious nakedness. Needless to say, the motorist is outraged.

In a contrasting scenario, the motorist sympathizes with the passing bicyclists but as she waits through one, two, maybe three traffic light cycles, her time is slipping away. Her tension soars as impending appointments with family or job are delayed. Trapped in gridlock, exasperated by free-spirited bicyclists who don't seem to care about her situation, her mood darkens. She, too, resents the visible cause of her delay, and joins the more belligerent motorist in wanting to at least reprimand the cyclists—who they see as childlike, unrealistic, irresponsible—that There Is No Alternative!

So the local police dispatcher gets a barrage of complaints by cellphone from angry motorists—people who have come upon a disruption, an unauthorized procession of people who are filling the always congested thoroughfares with bicycles—what's more, they're having fun! The offended motorists are in a hurry—as always—but for once there is an identifiable culprit behind their daily humiliation. As if the pressure of work, bills and family weren't enough, now they're stopped in traffic by a boisterous bicycling traffic jam.

The police, facing another routine Friday of fender benders and flat tires, spring into action. Highways hold more cars than they were meant to, the daily traffic jams being a public version of the thickening arteries and slowing blood flow of the obese commuter/consumer who keeps the body politic wheezing along, dependent on cars and malls, wars and work. But the police, like the citizens trapped in their cars in another routine traffic jam, know that something more dangerous is happening than just a few dozen bicyclists riding home together.

The police recognize their duty to raise the personal cost of participating in such an affront to social consensus. Tickets, arrests, harassment, even police violence, have all been applied to Critical Mass participants from Austin, Texas to Portland, Oregon to Minneapolis, San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. In city after city, authorities do their utmost to contain and quarantine the contagion. This includes a range of responses from police repression to attempts to create CM leadership structures through negotiation, even up to official permission and sponsorship. But so far, Critical Mass has eluded these familiar techniques, still rolling free in dozens of locales.

In many places, including San Francisco, police have gone through periods of ignoring Critical Mass, assuming it will either peter out on its own without the antagonistic energy provided by police repression, or just become so routine that boredom drives away the personalities who originally cracked open the social space for Critical Mass to flourish. Periods of benign tolerance have left the event room to grow and expand, but have also absorbed the event into the "normal" fabric of life, a once-a-month predictable ritual that changes nothing. If the participants fail to make the experience a dynamic, rejuvenating, visionary happening, slowly and inexorably the power of Critical Mass diminishes. But in many places, San Francisco especially, when Critical Mass is left alone it con-

tinues to inspire new and old participants, providing an incomparable lesson in practical anarchy. It is a leaderless, amorphous reinhabitation of the urban landscape in a temporary community outside of economic logic.

## Critical Mass: An Exit to the Future?

*"...the classic formulation that sees action on the streets as more real than its symbolic forms is wrong: in this case, it is the street action that is symbolic. But to recognize this is not to say such movements are insignificant: on the contrary, they are the constituent moments of new identities and agents, the big bubbling cauldrons out of whose mists emerging subjects defect from capital's value schemes in scores of directions, transformed by their confrontation with capital's security forces, by their combination with other[s]."*<sup>7</sup>

—Nick Dyer-Witherford

*"Autonomous movement is what defines the place proper to the multitude. . . . Through circulation the multitude reappropriates space and constitutes itself as an active subject. . ."*<sup>8</sup>

—Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

Critical Mass since its beginning has identified itself as a celebration more than a protest, and is for many of its participants a prefigurative experience, both calling attention to and actually creating a taste of a different way of life. The vibrant grassroots culture is the best proof of this. Costumes, flyers, posters, art shows, concerts and parties all have promoted and extended Critical Mass into areas of life beyond mere bicycling, and have given creative voice to hundreds of riders. The wildly popular Halloween ride has brought out a profusion of clever costumes every year in many cities. Critical Mass participants often bring art to the streets outside of the social ritual of Halloween. Dinosaurs have popped up in a number of cities, especially along the west coast of North America (from Vancouver to LA), making the obsolescent car/oil system the butt of a sharp visual pun.

Critical Mass is also a practical lesson in direct action for all its participants, focused on the moment and the immediate experience rather than towards representatives, government, politicians or demands. Critical Mass has often provided participants a breathtaking experience of

*"inherent risk. [The] excitement and danger of the action creates a magically focused moment, a peak experience, where real time suddenly stands still and a certain shift in consciousness can occur. Many of us have felt incredibly empowered and have had our lives fundamentally radicalized and transformed by these feelings. Direct action is praxis, catharsis and image rolled into one."*<sup>9</sup>

—John Jordon

Critical Mass is an experience that goes beyond symbolic action, in spite of its enormous symbolic importance. It is a public demonstration of a better way of moving through cities. But during the time it is underway, it is more than a demonstra-



tion. It is a moment of a real alternative, already alive, animated by the bodies and minds of thousands of participants, who are not waiting for the world to be changed... They are changing it. The world CM'ers live in is already different because we participate in Critical Mass. We have harnessed a mysterious but simple and direct social power to invent our own reality. At this moment, our choice to bicycle leaves the realm of mere refusal and becomes a creative act, a mobilization of what we might call "collective invention power." Tellingly, collective invention escapes the rules and limits of the market entirely.

Bicyclists refuse the nonsensical "necessity" of driving as a first step in a series of personal choices that taken as a whole, represent a new type of political contestation, not only oppositional, but visionary. It is an act of desertion from an entire web of exploitative and demeaning activities, behaviors that impoverish the human experience and degrade planetary ecology itself. Bicycling is simultaneously a withdrawal from an important sector of economic activity. Time spent making money to pay for a car is now freed up for other parts of life. Though miniscule, each individual's active disengagement with the expectations of economic self-enslavement is a material and psychological blow for human freedom.

Apart from the individual psychological explanations, clearly as a new form of leaderless, mobile temporary occupation, Critical Mass strikes deep fear into the system. It represents a desertion from one piece of a coercive order that keeps us working for them AND trapped in an individualistic worldview. It also manifests a positive reinhabiting of an ever-more degraded urban landscape. And most threatening to the system, CM is tangibly fun, nourishing a human capacity for sharing pleasure unmediated by buying and selling, and as such it is a dangerously exciting precedent.

## Footnotes

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7. Dyer-Witherford, *op.cit.*, p. 29.
8. Hardt and Negri, *op.cit.*, p. 397.
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## A QUIET STATEMENT AGAINST OIL WARS

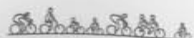
BY CHRIS CARLSSON, FROM A FLYER DISTRIBUTED AT SAN FRANCISCO CM, OCT. 2001

Critical Mass has not seen a lot of xerocracy (opinionated flyering) lately. And yet, just by its persistence, it continues to define and keep open an important social and political space. Now that we are once again faced with open war, hot and murderous, our mass bike-in automatically takes on a greater political meaning.

Over the past nine years, Critical Mass has been a steady, important rejoinder to the madness of the car/war society that depends on oil and other fossil fuels. Uprisings in Mexico, Nigeria, Venezuela, and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East all underscore the permanence of war in our era. Critical Mass is our way of gathering publicly to repudiate the insanity of the Orwellian world we live in, where War is Peace.

We all feel some kind of pressure to "do something" either along with the patriotic campaign, or against it. But part of bicycling together is the calming and contemplative experience it inherently provides. As fear and panic have been exacerbated by the crescendo of militaristic posturing, what better response can we make than to calmly ride our bicycles through town, discussing world events and our part in them? We must stand our ground, clear our minds of the fear that is being intensively marketed to us, and resist the social control the authorities try to maintain with it.

We have to think creatively, not just about the distorted "facts" we're being fed, but also about the uses governments make of war. One of the crucial functions of a war hysteria is to drive all other thoughts out of our minds. No longer are we to concern ourselves with ecology, alternative transportation, alternative sources of energy. War is a direct assault on the painstaking effort to create new cultural norms, new ways of being together, new social values that transcend the banal barbarism of life reduced to commodities for sale.



Now more than ever we need to talk to each other, to share what we know, what we believe, and what we can imagine. Riding in Critical Mass we are already taking a small, simple step towards a better world, a place of abundance, security and camaraderie. In the months ahead—of ongoing war against mysterious “internal enemies”—we may find that bicycling will become an even more important tool in preserving and extending our abilities to resist a blindly repressive state. During the last open war, the Persian Gulf War of 1991, local bicyclists played an important role as highly mobile scouts for the huge anti-war demonstrations that crisscrossed the city for several months.

While we can still ride openly together, let's renew our friendships and our trust, knowing that our social bonds are under assault and will need the strength to bend so they won't break. Wars destroy humans and the physical infrastructure of human societies. They also disrupt and destroy human communities, not just elsewhere, but here. In those disruptions are also openings and opportunities. Amidst the hysteria of the past six weeks have also been extraordinary openings to revisit assumptions, explanations, and our sense of how life came to be this way.

Many people are understandably concerned about our safety in the wake of the developments since mid-September. Much to the horror of anyone not predisposed to a simplistic, patriarchal authoritarianism, the U.S. government has taken the bait and is following precisely the worst course of action it could have possibly chosen in the wake of the attacks.

We have to step back from the frenzied hysteria that has been cultivated to gain popular support to “do something” with our expensive and brutal military machine. When we take a deeper look at the context of current events, we can see that the government's strategy is only rhetorically interested in combatting terrorism. The effort to subdue Afghanistan (a mission fraught with disastrous historical precedents) has more to do with central Asian oil and narcotics than terrorism, which is only a convenient excuse for a military campaign that the Bushies came into office determined to pursue.

If it was terrorism that the Bush gang wanted to uproot, a much different policy would be on the agenda, one that included a transformation of our material relationship to oil and our political relationship with Middle Eastern countries. Counting on the political and historical ignorance of Americans, the men propping up Dubya arrogantly assume they can militarily defeat any opposition to U.S. efforts to control world oil and narcotics supplies. They even dare to use the pretext of a national emergency to force through restrictions on civil liberties, to railroad new trade legislation, and open Alaska's National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling. (The sad fact that there is a de facto one-party state in the U.S. is another topic altogether.)

Grassroots opposition can expect to be visited by government surveillance and repression. Meanwhile, intelligent political discussion is only available on alternative radio programs and internet sites far from the one-note mass media that most people rely on for “news.”

In the face of one of the worst propaganda onslaughts in U.S. history, we must demand the truth. Let us ask ourselves, who decides? Who benefits? Who loses? Why this and not that?



## Of Oil Wars and Leaked Memos

BY CHRIS CARLSSON, FROM A FLYER DISTRIBUTED AT SAN FRANCISCO CM, SPRING 1997

In 1991, over 100,000 San Franciscans participated in anti-Gulf War demonstrations, often on bicycle. Well, as we ride along in our typical Critical Mass, we are still connected to wars elsewhere. The connections between our symbolic and active protest against the consumer end of the auto/oil industry and the hot wars in Mexico and Nigeria are considerably less immediately visible than the Gulf War, but in many ways, the concealed struggles are more interesting. The Zapatistas are fighting for a new model of social power, based on bottom-up democratic communities and extensive discussion and consultation before decisions are taken. Their struggle, centered in the Mexican state of Chiapas among Mayans uprooted by centuries of colonization and marketization, is adjacent to Mexico's large oil reserves, a fact well known to all who live and work in that part of the country. Meanwhile, in neighboring Tabasco state, over 20 oil facilities were besieged for weeks by angry peasants and oil workers in mid-December 1994, protesting fraudulent elections, a corrupt government, and widespread pollution. Not surprisingly, Chase Manhattan Bank sponsored a report to a group of large investors in mid-January, in which it was openly suggested that the Mexican government had to eliminate the Zapatistas to regain the confidence of investors, and that the ruling party, decades-long dictators in a one-party state, should seriously consider the ramifications of allowing real elections to erode their power. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin's former firm, Goldman Sachs, has also chimed in with conservative advice for the Mexican government. The walls of San Francisco's Financial District surely obscure banal everyday acts just as horrific as these calls for mass murder emanating from Wall Street.

A Greenpeace letter quoting from a restricted memo authored by the Chairman of Internal Security, Rivers State Nigeria: “Shell (Oil Co.) operations are still impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken for smooth economic activities to commence.”

Shell has been drilling for oil in the Niger Delta for 36 years. The Ogoni people have been protesting to protect the Earth and their lives. Their non-violent protests have resulted in 1,800 deaths, Greenpeace reports—because money is at stake. Over 80% of Nigeria's revenue comes from oil, and Shell is the big money generator.



1991 Bay Area Bike Action ride against the Gulf War



PETER MEITZLER



## Ken Saro-Wiwa Murdered by Nigerian Military Dictatorship

The Nigerian military dictatorship murdered Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists in early November 1996. Fake murder charges have failed to disguise their real "crime": organizing the Ogoni people to demand a cleanup of the ecologically devastated Niger River delta (football field-sized pools of waste oil litter the landscape with the consequential cancer and health epidemic in their wake), and to demand that Shell Oil compensate the Ogoni people for the \$30 billion of oil pumped from their lands since 1958.

In spring 1994, oil workers, gov't. workers, college students and most of Nigeria went on strike and fought running battles with the military. When European oil companies cut production by 40% in sympathy, San Francisco-based CHEVRON and New York-based MOBIL flew in additional foreign workers to keep the oil flowing from their wells and increased production to 120%. This saved the life of General Abacha's dictatorship.



San Francisco, California

Chapel Hill,  
North Carolina



Worried about terrorism?  
Want to know what you can do?  
Help fight back, ride a bike!

Where do terrorists get their money?



If you buy gasoline, some of it may come from you!

**CRITICAL MASS**  
LAST FRIDAY OF EVERY MONTH  
5:30 AT WEST WASHINGTON & THE SQUARE

Madison, Wisconsin

Boston,  
Massachusetts



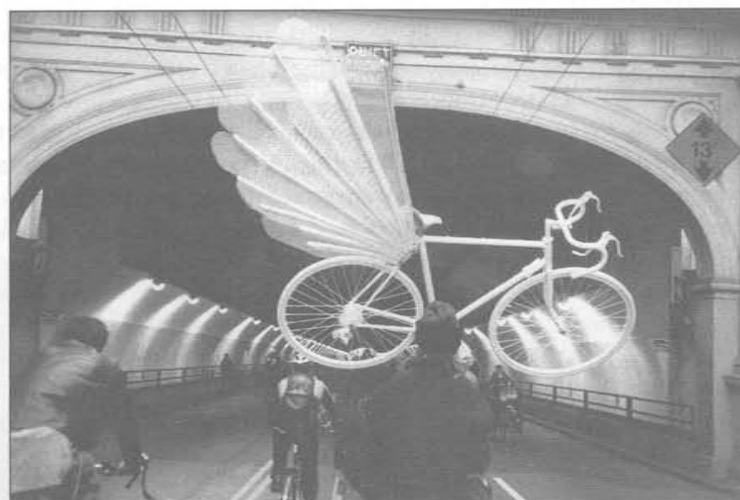
## FROM THE GROUND UP

By BILL STENDER

"Hey, I don't WANT to drink and drive, but how else am I gonna get my F-ING CAR HOME?" said the late comedian Sam Kinison. It was very funny to me, at least the way I heard it...I think the joke was that he doesn't consider the notion of not drinking. But maybe it was supposed to be about the even more outrageous notion of not driving. Why is drinking and driving so righteously condemned when the number of lives taken by the mistakes of impaired drivers represents only a tiny fraction of the total taken by the car overall?

The devastating impact of the automobile upon our planet, our nation and our communities has been well documented, and ignored. The end of oil and the harsh economic effects that will follow have also been well presented and yet the US Senate, ironically amidst a Middle East war, recently rejected the call for increased fuel efficiency standards. Conservation or alternative energy is given mere lip service or dismissed out of hand. Denial and double-speak are the answers we get to questions of global warming, dependency on foreign oil and spiraling traffic congestion. If Sam Kinison were a politician, he might say; "Hey I don't WANT to lead the world down a dead end, but how else am I gonna get my F-ING CAMPAIGN FINANCED?" The corruption and co-optation of our democracy by big money is common knowledge, fodder for comedy routines.

Popular indifference allows this to continue and has been made possible by the relative comfort of the Average American. Gas brings us a lot. But this indifference will crumble if it were to run out. And what then? Will society turn into a scene from Mad Max, with rampaging desperados racing down the road pillaging each other's precious drops of gasoline? Oil is synonymous with economic



The Bike Angel enters Stockton Tunnel as part of Critical Mass in summer 2001.





progress, expansion, performance and power and is even equated with Freedom itself by advertising. Are there no alternatives? Will prosperity and happiness disappear along with the oil?

There will be no clear demarcation of the "end of oil," so there will be no cataclysmic restructuring of society. As the price of a particular lifestyle goes up, more and more people choose different ones. Fortunately the development of different and more fulfilling lifestyles has been ongoing alongside the dominant lifestyle brought to us by our sponsors.

Critical Mass is, among other things, a prototype for a different one. Most notably, Critical Mass is an experiment in a true democracy—an experiment with what a society could be like—and it is exciting! It appears to the motorist, stuck in their congenital traffic-jam, as simply an affront to their right to proceed. While it does challenge this perceived right, CM is really challenging impediments to something much deeper—the right to proceed with an alternative vision for life in general, the right to choose a life worth living—a vision jammed by a recalcitrant central government promoting policies and enforcing ethics created in the interest of a small group of very rich benefactors.

Critical Mass does not directly articulate any challenge to the status quo, it simply exists alongside the state of things. CM recognizes no authority within its ranks, has no central goal, bylaws or dues. There are no requirements to join Critical Mass beyond enjoying yourself and behaving as a good citizen (of Critical Mass) and even that enjoys wide latitude. The biggest crime against the gathering is an insistence on some central program; a route, rules of the road or insisting on allegiance to a singular political cause.

One might expect this lack of leadership and organization to be a short-lived experiment but instead it seems to be the secret to its success. With the subtle pugnacity of a sapling, the movement has grown and enjoys firm roots in the traditions of democracy and social libertarianism. It may be difficult to perceive, stuck in the traffic jam that we have inherited, that eliminating centralized command and control is a potential solution to the most vexing problems facing the



JAMES R. SWANSON

nation and world. Yet the organization of CM demonstrates the potential of self-organization in place of central authority.


The best solutions to all kinds of problems across the nation have long come from the ground up. Communities take their problems in hand and find a solution. Grassroots organization, as in tackling the problem of drinking and driving, eventually forced the laws to change at the top, one state at a time. As we watch the erosion of middle class prosperity, once insulated by cheap oil from the harsh realities of relentless expansion, we'll see people looking more closely at viable alternatives, new ways to make things work. And it is almost guaranteed that the answers will again be found by groups in one's own community rather than on Capitol Hill.

Critical Mass resonates with so many because it exemplifies this very act of taking matters into one's own hands. It does not protest for change, it simply changes. Critical Mass doesn't try to force anyone to join or do anything, it simply does its thing. The police have often responded with arrests and harassment of the participants, but this has only encouraged CM to grow. There is an instinct to protect the right to freely assemble. Perhaps it is an *inalienable* right. CM takes that right at face value and exercises it. Critical Mass challenges Authority by ignoring it.

Or perhaps it doesn't so much 'ignore' Authority as render it irrelevant. No pledge of allegiance nor singular goal is necessary. In the recognition of our commonality, in voluntary and enjoyable participation, everyone gets back what they put into it—there is pride of ownership. Organization from the ground up allows maximum individual expression as well as a cohesive group. Expectation for leaders to make things better is removed (and reduces the disappointment when they fail).

"Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..." so says the Declaration of Independence, but the next step is the common recognition that there are no 'just powers' of government, there's only the consent of the governed. While governmental bodies may serve specific logistical purposes, they needn't be confused with a need for Overseers.

Critical Mass can claim success. It has grown and spread worldwide. It has served the end of bicycle activism, environmental activism, of generating social awareness and building community. It has done so without any leaders or agenda or mission statement or membership. Yet it enjoys the strongest of allegiances and wisest of leadership. It is therefore a model and a harbinger of a new way for the brave new oil-less world. Critical Mass says; don't fight the power—BE the power! It's funny, basking in that power, Kinison's joke appears quaint.

|                |   |  |   |   |  |
|----------------|---|--|---|---|--|
| <b>ASSHOLE</b> | Name _____<br>Address _____<br>City _____ State _____ Zip _____<br>PHONE ENCLOSED: _____<br>COURT DATE REQUESTED: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO<br><input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO | <b>YOU WERE OBSERVED:</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> Speeding<br><input type="checkbox"/> Driving With No Common Sense<br><input type="checkbox"/> Driving With No Regard For the Lives of Others<br><input type="checkbox"/> Not Using Your Turn Signal<br><input type="checkbox"/> California Stop<br><input type="checkbox"/> Road Raging | <b>YOU ARE:</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> Parked Illegally<br><input type="checkbox"/> Blocking Pedestrians<br><input type="checkbox"/> Obstructing A Fire Hydrant<br><input type="checkbox"/> Impeding The Flow Of Traffic<br>DEPARTMENT OF MANNERS<br>Your NOT Special! | <b>WOULD YOU RATHER:</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> Drive Friendly?<br><input type="checkbox"/> Get A Real Ticket?<br><input type="checkbox"/> Be Charged with Vehicular Homicide?<br><input type="checkbox"/> Ride YOUR Bike?<br> |
|                |   | DEPARTMENT OF MANNERS<br>Your NOT Special!<br>//328753-FU2 850295//  |   |   |  |



# A UNIQUELY DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENT

BY MICHAEL KLETT

Critical Mass is democracy at its best. As the participants change, so does the nature of the beast. It changes from month to month and season to season just within the same city. Each ride is different from city to city, depending on the size of the ride and the attitudes of the riders and the authorities. The ride constantly synthesizes the amalgam of desires and allows for collective and individual responses to motorists, pedestrians, bus riders, authorities, and the various neighborhoods through which it passes. 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.

Slackers, geeks, and a good dose of the old and new left fill the ranks of Critical Mass riders. In a society where riding a bicycle to work is seen as almost subversive, once a month the subversives create a structure which works well. The seductive freedom of a Critical Mass ride is a powerful attraction to many people, but it is definitely not for everyone.

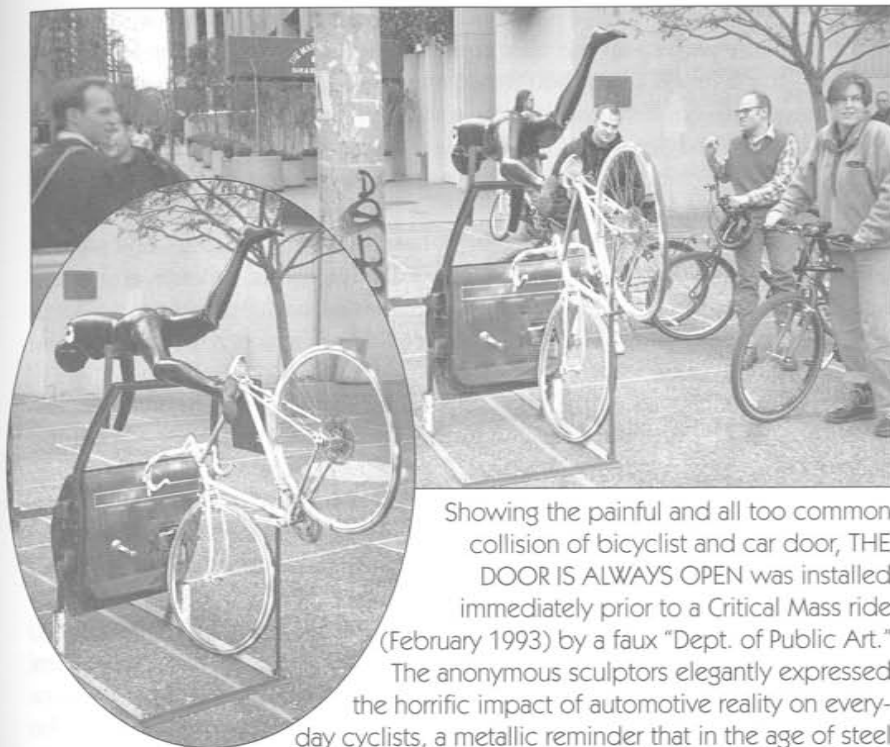
In San Francisco, the riders have refused to let the media, police or mayor define us. People have consciously tried to channel the energy and focus of the mass in various directions through xerocracy. Over the past ten years various events, memorials and protests have been included in the themes and routes for the Mass. Political issues have been proposed sometimes but were rejected or ignored by the majority of the riders. Some rides in San Francisco split into two groups, one with a political mission and one without. It can be quite stunning to see the literal flow of a true democratic process.

During rides there has been some coordination among a few to lead to a suggested destination. Discussion and cajoling percolate through the Massing crowd. Often a small group of 'leaders' will have to turn around and rejoin the 'mass' that has decided to turn a different way.

Critical Mass is a unique laboratory for experimenting with group dynamics. The tendency of a group to act like a herd can lead to a dull ride. Luckily, the wide variety of people usually creates enough of a carnival atmosphere to get people interacting on a level rarely seen downtown. Someone dressed as a well-sponsored professional racer has a good laugh with someone who finally got around to pumping up the tires of the bike that sat in the back of the garage for ten years. Self-appointed bicycle diplomats banter with the people waiting for a bus.

Routes were intentionally designed to cover different parts of the city for the first several years, visiting the tunnels occasionally. San Francisco's Broadway and Stockton tunnels are both typically filled with cars and exhaust. When Critical Mass takes over one of these tunnels for a few minutes, it underscores the stark contrast between the destructive atmosphere of cars and the playful sprawl of bicycles. The downhill directions are especially fast and fun in the tunnels.

The initial thrills of reclaiming tunnels from cars soon wore out when riders led



D.S. BLACK

Showing the painful and all too common collision of bicyclist and car door, THE DOOR IS ALWAYS OPEN was installed immediately prior to a Critical Mass ride (February 1993) by a faux "Dept. of Public Art." The anonymous sculptors elegantly expressed the horrific impact of automotive reality on everyday cyclists, a metallic reminder that in the age of steel and glass, we careen each day from blow to blow.

Critical Mass back the same way month after month until it became aggravating and boring. This same pattern was repeated with Pacific Bell Park. During baseball season, ride after ride would be steered to the park despite the disruption of the Mass through all the ballpark traffic. As route planning and xerocratic map publishing subsided in the past few years, the cyclists who found themselves at the front often didn't have any idea of where to take the ride for maximum fun and political impact. Experienced city cyclists have had to rush to the front to assertively direct the ride from time to time to avoid the problems of repetition and boredom.

Unfortunately, the conduct of the police can often set the mood for each Mass. It takes a lot of discipline among the participants to think ahead of the police tactics. The most effective methods have been to keep everyone upbeat and polite. Kash once said, "Inside every car, there's a person trying to get out." Critical Mass works best when it is *for* bicycling rather than *against* cars, when the group as a whole feels cohesive and creates its own mood and agenda.

It became apparent early on that it was pointless to directly confront authorities blocking our paths. We tried a route that would split between a mellow route and a more challenging hilly route and then rejoin at a later point. This was to prevent the ride from being too boring for the hammerheads, too difficult for less experienced riders and to limit the fragmentation of the ride. The police



overreacted and set up a huge phalanx blocking one intended route at the split. After raucously protesting, the mass continued in one group but the lesson was learned—the cops were fixed and we were mobile. The ability to go somewhere else, and quickly, has been exhilarating and expedient.

Belligerent and aggressive individuals (nicknamed in the early months the "Testosterone Brigade") involved in the rides have been confronted about their behavior, especially when mob psychology starts to take over. Threats and mistreatment from motorists and police have been met with solidarity and patient good humor whenever possible. The non-intrusive use of cameras and video recorders is very effective in diffusing heated situations. Angry or bewildered drivers have often done stupid and dangerous things which have incurred the wrath of a group of riders.

Each participant is urged to be responsible for herself or himself. As the monthly rides got bigger and bigger, Critical Mass in SF got to be the hot thing to do. Many people would come down to the start of the ride and look for a map or a leader to tell them where to ride. They were uncomfortable with the idea of group decisions and the fluidity of everything. After being asked where the ride was going time after time by new people, I began to respond with 'Where do you want it to go?' and 'Didn't you make a route?'

Critical Mass has successfully avoided external cooptation for ten years. Attempts by people to sell things, except for a few home-made t-shirts, have been thwarted more by indifference than outright hostility. This has helped allow us to avoid the trap of being branded as this year's model. Of course people come to be seen at a hip event. One of many examples is Roberta Achtenberg, a 'liberal' politician who came to court votes—now vice president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce!

For a while we had the corporate scouts like *Wired* magazine come by looking for a way to package the next hip thing and help sell ad pages. For the most part we were too amorphous and unpalatable for them to co-opt. The major corporate media tried their best to portray CM as a dangerous group of anarchists. Funny thing was, that seemed to attract more and more riders. Every time Willie Brown, the mayor, tried to smear the event, he made himself look ridiculous.

A significant detractor to the image of Critical Mass (and the pleasure of participating for many riders) is the insufferable self-righteousness of some of the participants. Nothing turns people away faster than the attitude of many "principled" people. There isn't much point in screaming "CARS SUCK" at someone sitting in a traffic jam on a Friday night. They don't want to be there.

They won't stop and consider taking mass transit or bicycling if they feel that someone is depriving them of their rights. If, however, they are delayed by a cohesive, fun-loving group of revelers, they might decide that on the last Friday of the month (if not other times), it would be better to take the bus or train. Decades of car-oriented city planning won't be reversed overnight. Critical Mass powerfully demonstrates an alternative to current reality. In-your-face taunting and posturing only hardens people's positions and increases defensiveness and reflexive hostility.

Someone could do a long study of the psychology of bicyclists, who see themselves as a wronged and threatened group, suddenly finding themselves in the majority while on a Mass. But let's put things in perspective—a bike is usually just a tool. It can be a means of self-identity, but hopefully a rider's identity extends to more than being a cyclist. We want to completely change the world and people's fundamental ways of interacting with each other. To let the discourse degenerate to an us-versus-them situation, bicycles versus cars, allows the media and others to reduce Critical Mass to constituent or lobbying politics. In their world, society is divided into groups fighting to grab a piece of meat, where one group only wins by denying something to another group.

Bicycles are liberating by nature but it is not all sweetness and light. The commodification that this society injects into any form of enjoyment pervades cycling as thoroughly as anything else. Mountain bikes have probably sold more SUVs than anything else. The image of bicycle riding is everywhere in advertising, promising the freedom that comes from one more purchase. The titanium industry arose from war. Shimano is the leader of disposable parts and planned obsolescence. *Bicycling* magazine runs more pages of car and trucks ads than content.

It is difficult to remain cynical when riding a bike, if only for the duration of a ride. The alienation of the daily grind, the lack of any real choice or control most people have in their lives, gets put aside for an hour or two. At other times, of course, we are too wise and hip to permit ourselves the luxury of relaxing our masks of indifference.

There has been a decade-long process of Critical Mass in San Francisco defining itself. It is many things to many people, as varied as its participants. It provides a rare experience of democratic self-organization within a constantly changing mass of people. Any particular ride is never predictable even when it turns out to be less than exciting. That is the inevitable byproduct of a leaderless, open event defined anew every month by hundreds and thousands of people coming together freely without a formal agenda or structure.

San Francisco (or your town) is well worth a Mass.

