

Critical Mass, Urban Space and Vélobility

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ABSTRACT *Critical Mass is an international, monthly event where bicyclists briefly take over city streets to celebrate bicycling, demonstrate their collective strength and send a clear message to the public: 'We are not blocking traffic, we are traffic!' In this essay, I explore how Critical Mass functions as both a performative critique of motorized space and a critical response to automobility. Rather than offering an empirical account of Critical Mass, I discuss the politics of Critical Mass through the lens of the Situationist International, or situationists – a group of avant-garde artists and architects that developed a unique program of spatial politics in the 1950s. Using the situationists as a reference point, I also explain how Critical Mass impacts the progress of formal bicycle advocacy and I contextualize vélobility within a paradigm of utopian urbanism.*

KEY WORDS: mobility, vélobility, automobility, bicycles, critical mass, situationist, space

Introduction

Materializing freedom means beginning by appropriating a few patches of the surface of a domesticated planet. (Kotányi & Vaneigem, 1961, p.67)

In 1992, bicycle commuters in San Francisco began to converge at rush hour on the last Friday of every month in order take over the street, demonstrate their collective strength, and send a clear message to the public: 'We are not blocking traffic, we *are* traffic!' Conceived as part celebration and part protest, the 'organized coincidence' (Carlsson, 1997) known as Critical Mass has simultaneously caused incredible amounts of controversy and helped transform public perceptions about bicycling. Like anti-roads protesters (McKay, 1996, pp.127–158; Aufheben, 1998; McCreery, 2001) and Reclaim the Streets organizers (Jordan, 1998; Ferrell, 2001, Duncombe, 2002), Critical Mass bicyclists use spontaneity, playfulness, and decentralized

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organization as ways to raise fundamental questions about the nature of automobility, the polemics of car culture, and the (mis)use of public space.

In this essay, I explore how Critical Mass functions as both a critical response to automobility (Flink, 1975, 1988; Urry, 2000, 2004; Sheller, 2004; Sheller & Urry, 2000; Miller, 2001; Wollen & Kerr, 2002) and a *performative critique* (Borden, 2001) of motorized space. Rather than offering an empirical account of Critical Mass, I discuss the politics of Critical Mass through the lens of the Situationist International, or situationists: an *avant-garde* political collective that argued for the ‘revolution of everyday life’ (Vaneigem, 1983). Using the situationists as a reference point, I also describe how Critical Mass both impacts the efforts of bike advocates and contextualizes mobility within a utopian paradigm (Pinder, 2005).

(Dis)Organization

Critical Mass emerged from the collaborative efforts of cyclists in the San Francisco Bay Area who had been 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 (Reilly, 2000; Culley, 2001). Based upon the suggestions made by at San Francisco Bike Coalition meetings, the Commute Clot – as it was initially called – was planned as a ride where bike commuters could get together once a month, collectively make their presence felt, and ride home together (Dyer, 1993). These monthly gatherings quickly began to draw more cyclists, despite the fact that the rides were not organized by specific leaders and participants were not bound by an overarching dogma. Without a charter, a centralized network, or formal affiliation with any organization, Critical Mass has spread to over 200 cities throughout the world and rides have seen up to as many as 30,000 participants, or ‘massers.’¹

Critical Mass has simultaneously garnered a notorious reputation among public officials, police forces and drivers who are either aggravated by the temporary seizure of ‘their’ roads, or upset by the antagonistic nature of some participants (see Klett, 2002; Bodzin, 2002). Undoubtedly, part of Critical Mass’s infamy stems from the difficulty faced by those who attempt to define, or even document, such an outwardly simplistic endeavor. Blickstein and Hanson note that Critical Mass has been called ‘a protest, a form of street theater, a method of commuting, a party, and a social space’ (2001, p.6). This amorphous definition is both embraced and compounded by participants who also describe Critical Mass as a ‘pro-bike, anti-car monthly action’ (Blaug, 2002), a rebellion (Higgins, 2000), a movement (Time’s Up!, n.d.), a revolutionary act (Krassner, 1997), and, conversely, ‘just a bike ride’ (Rose, 2005). The inability for participants and observers to accurately pinpoint what Critical Mass *is* does not necessarily reflect confusion as much as disagreement over its meaning, purpose, and function. Strangely enough, these disagreements are not merely coincidental. Critical Mass was/is specifically designed to be interpreted, shaped, and actively defined by participants –regardless of whether or not they agree. Critical Mass advocate Jym Dyer (1993) states: ‘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!’

The decentralized framework of Critical Mass fosters a flexible rhetorical space where participants actively produce and disseminate discourses and alternative media (Duncombe, 1997; Downing, 2001; Atton, 2002; Couldry & Curran, 2003). *Xerocracy*, or ‘rule through photocopying’, is the dominant paradigm of Critical Mass and it rests on the premise that anyone can print, photocopy, and solicit media that advocate and/or explain the ride. Xerocrats print flyers, stickers, posters, missives and zines (Duncombe, 1997) that are distributed among participants, handed out to bystanders during events and circulated online. This is a key feature of Critical Mass because participants ‘channel the energy and focus of the mass in various directions’ (Klett, 2002, p.90). In this way, cyclists attempt to use the participatory framework of xerocracy to mirror the decentralized organization of the rides. Cyclists who circulate political ideas and images frequently connect bicycling to issues of ecology, autonomy, and public space through techniques that stand in direct contrast to those of the centralized, corporate institutions of automobility. Therefore, xerocracy is not only a means to shape participant and public perceptions about the act of biking (through facts, statistics, images and personal narratives), it is also part of a larger communicative shift where cyclists celebrate their vision of preferable alternatives; namely xerocracy over corporate media, and ‘bicycling over car culture’ (Carlsson, 2002a, p.237).

Power is a central concern with Critical Mass because participants frequently, and proudly, reflect upon their ability to maintain a non-hierarchical ‘leaderless’ structure in their events: ‘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’ (Klett, 2002, p.90). Klett’s distinction between leader and organizer is a useful one because it points to the active role that participants are supposed to play in the organization and promotion of the events. For example, most Critical Mass rides begin with a meeting where bicyclists collectively decide upon the route that will be taken, and people either vote on proposals that are verbally made or ones that have been circulated in the form of maps. Critical Mass does not have laws or rules, *per se*, but the faux-anarchist rhetoric of ‘no rules – whatever happens, happens’ (Bicycle Austin, n.d.) overstates the role that spontaneity actually plays in many rides. Critical Mass has always been informed by spontaneity but many participants go to great lengths in order to organize rides and address/discuss issues that take place during, and after, events. Through these processes, there have been different codes of conduct, or social rules, established by participants in different cities. For example, numerous massers in San Francisco have described their efforts to dissuade the aggressive, macho behavior of certain male cyclists that frequented Critical Mass during the 1990s. The ‘testosterone brigade’ (see Ferrell, 2001, pp.114–121), as they were known, were told in no uncertain terms that their behavior created problems for other participants and unnecessarily increased tensions between cyclists and drivers. Similarly, there have been lengthy debates on the Chicago Critical Mass listserv about whether massers should be allowed to drink alcohol on rides and whether participants have the right to make informal policies about such behavior (October 2006). These dialogues reveal how Critical Mass is actively shaped by collaboration and discussion rather than simply determined by ethereal whims of participants who ‘spontaneously take control’ (Mallen, 2005). This point is relevant because massers have the tendency to uncritically equate impromptu participation

with ‘genuine democracy’ (Wilson, 2002, p.95) when there are obvious limitations to the prospects for authentic non-hierarchical participation in a relatively unorganized event. Steven Bodzin makes this point in a recent essay: ‘At Mass, everyone is a leader, but some people are more leaders than others’ (2002, p.103).

The inability for Critical Mass participants to create the perfect synthesis of theory and action is certainly not grounds for condemnation, nor should it justify hasty claims about the efficacy of their tactics. Rather, Critical Mass should be ‘read’ primarily as collective attempt to publicly disrupt the binaries that demarcate celebration and protest, participation and leadership, organization and spontaneity. Chris Carlsson, one of the co-founders of Critical Mass, alludes to this praxis:

Critical Mass is an unparalleled practical experiment in public, collective self-expression, reclaiming our diminishing connectedness, interdependency and mutual responsibility. Critical Mass 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. (Carlsson, 2002b, p.78)

Carlsson’s assessment of the ‘subversive’ nature of Critical Mass is not without precedent (see Ronfeldt & Arquilla, 2001), nor is his claim that Critical Mass functions outside of economic logic (i.e. mediation through buying and selling). However, the idea that Critical Mass is ‘unparalleled’ is not disingenuous, but it is highly problematic. There are expansive, well-documented histories of direct action demonstrations and insurgencies that dramatically transcend the ‘collective self-expression’ of Critical Mass.² Carlsson is not only aware of such histories, he has actively helped to document/shape them (see Brook *et al.*, 1998). Within this context, it is irresponsible for him to claim Critical Mass’ exceptional status. On the other hand, Carlsson’s notion of Critical Mass as an *experiment* is a productive way of contextualizing the dialectics of theory and action that shape the communicative and organizational dimensions of the events. This experiment positions bicycling as a form of *hermeneutic mobility* that is intentionally designed to encourage a re-interpretation, and possible revaluation, of both the ideological norms that govern car culture and the practice of bicycling itself.³ Critical Mass actively experiments with sociocultural dynamics of both automobility and *vélomobility* (Horton, 2006), but it does so primarily through an intervention in urban space. In the following sections, I specifically explore the nature of this *performative critique* (Borden, 1998) and how it fits into a wider spectrum of ‘spatial practices’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p.8) articulated by the Situationist International.

Performative Critique

When Critical Mass takes over a street it creates an obvious presence of cyclists in an environment that otherwise marginalizes biking and restricts activities that hamper motorized transportation. City streets/roads are technically part of the public domain, but they are ideologically constructed to encourage certain forms of

mobility while they inhibit others. Roads are the fundamental prerequisite for the system of automobility (Urry, 2004) and they are deeply implicated in the maintenance of class relations (Aufheben, 1998) and institutionalized racism (Bullard, 2004; Freilla, 2004). For these reasons, roads have recently become a focal point for social movements and protest groups that struggle for *transportation equity* (Bullard, 2004, pp.24–27), and the preservation of both communities and ecosystems (Aufheben, 1998; Plows, 1998; McCreery, 2001). By the nature of their technological exclusivity, roads/streets create an extended matrix of *motorized space* that dominates cities throughout the western world.

Critical Mass is part of a wider terrain of urban struggles waged against this process of spatial homogenization, for the purpose of creating more participatory public spaces (Jordan, 1998; Ferrell, 2001; Duncombe, 2002). But unlike activist groups that attempt to physically change motorized spaces through direct action or sabotage, Critical Mass cyclists reclaim public space to ‘assert a positive vision of how things should be in order to expose the current injustice of car dominated public space’ (Burton, 2001, p.21). This experiment attempts to expose the motorway as a *dominant* space of automobility – one that has been transformed and mediated by the automobile and the practice of driving (Lefebvre, 1991, p.164). As a mobile intervention, Critical Mass events have similarities with the practice of skateboarding, which Iain Borden describes as an ‘appropriative negation of the space which precedes it’ (2001, p.211). In *Skateboarding, Space and the City*, Borden brilliantly describes skateboarding as a critique of dominant architecture and space that advocates pleasure rather than work, use values rather than exchange values, and activity rather than passivity (2001, p.173). Borden states that skateboarding’s representational mode is not that of writing, drawing or theorizing, but of *performing* – of speaking their meanings and critiques of the city through their urban actions:

Here in the movement of the body across urban space, and in its direct interaction with the modern architecture of the city, lies the central critique of skateboarding – a rejection both of the values and of the spatio-temporal modes of living in the contemporary capitalist city. (Borden, 1998)

Borden’s notion of *performative critique* is an apt way of describing what it is that Critical Mass ‘does’ when cyclists take to the streets, because cyclists not only use the street for a non-utilitarian purpose, they call attention to the ideological norms that dictate both the prescribed function of the environment and the manner in which such environments can be traversed. One important distinction between Borden’s examples and Critical Mass is that skateboarding is an individual spatial practice that is not ‘consciously theorized’ (Borden, 2001, p.173) and Critical Mass is a collective spatial practice intended to amplify a wider political and cultural critique:

Bicycling is generally a very individual experience, especially on streets filled with stressed-out motorists who don’t think cyclists have a right to be on the road. But when we ride together in Critical Mass, we transform our personal choices into a shared, collective repudiation of the prevailing social madness. The organic connections we’ve made (and continue to make anew, month after month) are the root of a movement radically opposed to the way things are

now. As we continue to share public space free from the absurd domination of transactions and the economy, we are forging a new sense of shared identity, a new sense of our shared interests against those who profit from and perpetuate the status quo. (Carlsson, 1998)

To restate this, one of the goals of Critical Mass is to initiate a break with dominant ideology through a direct intervention in the spaces where such ideologies are materialized. This tactic echoes the spatial politics of the Situationist International, or 'situationists', an *avant-garde* political cadre that sought to politicize everyday engagements with material space as a means to break through the capitalist ideology that inhibits revolutionary struggle. In the following section I will briefly reflect upon the situationist project because their ideas provide a theoretical framework to contextualize the possibilities of Critical Mass and the prospects for activist groups to effectively utilize situationist tactics in the twenty-first century.

Situationism

In 1957, artists previously involved with the *avant-garde* groups, COBRA, Lettrist International and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, formed the Situationist International with the goal of creating a 'revolutionary program in culture' (Debord, 1957, p.18). Situationism was founded upon the basic belief that 'general revolution would originate in the appropriation and alteration of the material environment and its space' (Sadler, 1998, p.13). Following the theoretical trajectory of COBRA, the situationists formulated an extensive critique of the material world called *unitary urbanism* that served as the centerpiece of their critique of the 'spectacle' of capitalism (Debord, 1983). According to the situationists, the process of urbanism solidified a passive, consumer-oriented way of life and rendered alienation tactile (Vaneigem, 1961). In order to disrupt the patterns of life promulgated through specific urban settings, the situationists argued for the revolutionary potential of 'everyday life'. According to Guy Debord, the situationists' self-appointed leader, the process of such revolution was initiated through the construction of 'situations,' or moments of everyday life that could be transformed into 'a superior passional quality' (Debord, 1957, p.22). Simon Sadler (1998), author of *The Situationist City*, explains Debord's theory of *situationism* that was advocated most passionately in the mid-to-late 1950s:

One only appreciated the desperate need to take action over the city, situationists felt, once one had seen through the veil of refinement draped over it by planning and capital. If one peeled away this official representation of modernity and urbanism – this 'spectacle,' as situationists termed the collapse of reality into the streams of images, products, and activities sanctioned by business and bureaucracy – one discovered the authentic life of the city teeming underneath. (Debord, 1957, p.17)

As a means of uncovering the 'beach under the pavement',⁴ the situationists utilized the technique of the *dérive*, a method of exploration where small groups of people 'drifted' through urban spaces in order to 'notice the way things resonate with states

of mind, inclinations, and desires' (Plant, 1992, p.59). Although the technique was influenced by the Surrealists and the flâneur tradition in Paris (see Hollevoet, 2001), the *dérive* was not based on a submission to the unconscious; rather, it was used to creatively explore those aspects of the city that had not been totally incorporated by the spectacle. *Dérives* were typically conducted during a period of hours or days, where one or more people would 'drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they might find there' (Debord, 1956, p.50). By studying the maps and notes taken from lengthy *dérives* – a practice called *psycho geography* – the situationists formulated different ideas about how one could, or more precisely, *should* strive to disengage from the spectacle through 'the self-conscious construction of new subjective environments – an unfolding of art through space ... involving spatial exploration and celebration of the essentially subjective unalienated areas of life' (McCreery, 2001, p.241). The main idea of the *dérive* was threefold: it was used as a tool in order to analyze and understand the city as is, it was used as a means to imagine the possibilities for a built environment, and it was a playful technique intended for use in a world where 'leisure is defined in terms of commodified time ... and the realm outside work is increasingly to province of alienated relations' (Plant, 1992, p.23).

Practices such as the *dérive* and *psycho geography* were developed in conjunction with the media-based practice of *detournement* – an appropriative technique that transforms 'present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu' (Situationist International, 1958, p.45). The hope was that, through such manipulation, the *detournement* could deny the implicit value of a cultural artifact (its authenticity) in order to demonstrate the futility of the spectacle and the shallowness of capitalism. One can see the principle of the *detournement* in the work of contemporary culture jamming groups like the Billboard Liberation Front (2000), Adbusters (Lasn, 1999) and the Guerilla Girls (1998, 2003). Ultimately, the *dérive* and the practice of *psycho geography* were conceived as embodied versions of the *detournement* – one's everyday life could serve as a *living critique* of the spectacle through the creation of situations, or experiments in behavior intended to change the way participants understand and negotiate their surroundings:

The main achievement of contemporary city planning is to have made people blind to the possibility of what we call unitary urbanism, namely a living critique, fueled by all the tensions of daily life, of this manipulation of cities and their inhabitants. Living critique means the setting up of bases for an experimental life, the coming together of those creating their own lives on terrains equipped to their ends. (Kotanyi & Vaneigem, 1961, p. 66)

The basic premise of the living critique is similar to Borden's conceptualization of the performative critique in that one's actions (i.e. one's *art*) was meant to be expressed through a direct engagement with the material environment. In both cases, the idea is to invert the function of a space while at the same time producing a new relationship to that space – even if the experience is temporary. Through such experiences, or experiments, one has the capacity to realize that materiality and culture are not static, and this effect cannot be underestimated in terms of mobilizing

people for political action. On this point, Debord says ‘the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectator’s psychological identification with the hero so as to draw him into activity by provoking his capacities to revolutionize his own life’ (Debord, 1957, p.25).

To restate this quote, one might be able theoretically understand how life could transform in a different political or cultural milieu, but it is almost impossible for one to work towards radical change if they have never *experienced* life outside of the paradigms of capitalism and consumption. What Debord refers to as an experiment in culture or what Borden refers to as *performative critique* are analogous means to initiate a break with the function and ideology of the lived environment – a way to see beyond the confines of ‘the society of the spectacle’ (Debord, 1983).

Critical Mass and ‘Situations’

Like the situationists, Critical Mass cyclists astutely recognize that one of the major obstacles impeding the transformation of the city (and by default, the transformation of ‘spectacular’ consciousness) is the infrastructure and ideology of the automobile. The main problem, as the situationists saw it, is that urbanism is exclusively concerned with the ‘smooth circulation of a rapidly increasing quantity of motor vehicles,’ and this paradigm leads to the construction of urban environments where automobiles and capital replace the citizen as the focal point for design (see Debord, 1955, p.5). When cyclists take over the street during a Critical Mass event they send a message that, despite laws and norms that say otherwise, the streets are public domain and should be used accordingly. They point to the idea that *people* should be the focal point for urban design, and public spaces should suit the needs of communities, as opposed to automobiles:

Streets are our largest and most important piece of public open space in the city. They account for up to 30% of the total surface area of the city, yet we consider them only as afterthoughts. Streets are everyone’s open space. We fret and tussle over every precious inch of our grassy parks, yet we overlook the massive wasted public spaces right outside each of our front doors, accessible to each and every resident. Streets could be our main stage. (Switzky, 2002, p.189)

Debord clearly blamed the urbanists and capitalists for the proliferation of automotive ideology, but he also recognized the deeper problem posed by the acceptance of auto-based design – a widespread belief in the ‘permanence of the present society’ (Debord, 1959, p.58). In other words, the material infrastructure of the automobile was not simply deplorable for its rigid parameters, but also because it negated the possibilities for people to metaphorically see past the automobile – it solidified a consumer-based life that allowed the fluid interconnections of automobility (Urry, 2004) to progress exponentially.

At the heart of Critical Mass lies the same attempt to break the ‘topological chains’ (Debord, 1959, p.58) of spectacular consciousness in order to contest the civil society automobility – a markedly capitalist arrangement that involves the ‘transformation of public space into flows of traffic, coercing, constraining and

unfolding an awesome domination which analysts of the urban have barely begun to see' (Sheller & Urry, 2000, p.755). The site in which Critical Mass intervenes – the street – is a place where bicyclists can literally demonstrate a viable, but admittedly partial,⁵ alternative to the domination of automobility:

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 demonstration. It is a moment of a real alternative, already alive, animated by the bodies and minds of thousands of participants. (Carlsson, 2002b, pp.81–82)

For Critical Mass cyclists, the automobile is not 'an evil in itself' (Debord, 1959, p.57), but it is a direct reflection of capitalist propaganda and a 'sovereign good of an alienated life' (Debord, 1959, p.56). This alienation is felt at a deep level by many who spend a great deal of their life in commuter vehicles, separated from their environments and one another (Kay, 1998, p.14). However, alienation is a complex phenomenon that is not exclusive to, or embodied by, a particular transportation technology. Those who 'dwell-within-the-car' (Urry, 1999, pp.16–17) frequently do so by themselves, but this isolation is not simply reducible to alienation. In addition to the emotional attachments that people have to their vehicles (Sheller, 2004), there are many who explicitly prefer the isolation of the car because they enjoy both a sense of control over their privatized (acoustic and/or technological) space (Bull, 2004, pp.248–249) and the experience of private contemplation (McCreery, 2002, p.311). On the other hand, when the isolated practice of driving is analyzed as part of a wider socio-cultural shift towards the privatization and individualization of public spaces, the workplace and the home, it is difficult to deny the alienating impetus of automobility:

In the age of private content-controlled, enclosed malls and sidewalk-less, single-use, subdivision pods, the only public space we know in common is that which we traverse by car. But in our cars we are usually alone, even if together on a 'crowded' road. We peer at each other through tinted glass or stare at taillights, or sometimes we get out of the car to stand in line together to buy something. (Switzky, 2002, p. 188)

Bicyclists do not magically transcend the alienating impulses of capitalism and consumerism through their transportation choices, and in certain ways bicyclists are actually alienated from the entire high-tech, high-speed reality of modernity.⁶ Bicyclists do, however, develop a unique connection with, and perception of, material space that is impossible to achieve behind the wheel of a car (Furness, 2002, forthcoming). Critical Mass amplifies these individual experiences and it creates an entirely new *social* space through collective mobility. The creation of a mobile street party is an attempt to directly subvert the utilitarian function of motorized space and the norms that disrupt the 'dialectic of the human milieu' (Debord, 1959, p.58). As 'a unique laboratory for experimenting with group dynamics' (Klett, 2002, p.90) Critical Mass creates spaces of resistance where people can celebrate and

communicate face-to-face. Not only does this defy the norms of motorized space, it also gives people a chance to pause and reflect on the act itself:

Putting ourselves and our bicycles on the line, confronting automotive dominance through direct action, we invent the impossible: an island of safety, calm, and conversation in the middle of a busy street. And, in fine reflexive fashion, we inhabit this island with talk of Critical Mass rides in other cities, strategies for surviving encounters with motorists, sabotage in the workplace, anarchist history, and other subversions. (Ferrell, 2002, p.124)

Often, this type of reflection and communication forges important bonds for activists who might not otherwise meet one another or understand the depth of their community. Through Critical Mass, activists share stories and common experiences, and use this as a basis in order to develop new activist networks and new modes of resistance. In this sense, the event functions like a 'situation' because it is both 'made to be lived by its constructors' (Debord, 1957, p.25) and it can potentially sow the seeds of revolutionary discontent:

Such 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. Herein lies the undoubted importance of Critical Mass; it is a tool not only for enhancing the activist identities of the individuals, but also for building a wider sense of political community. (Horton, 2002, pp.63-64)

Functions of Mobile Dissent

The logic behind the creation of situations is not only to encourage participants to break from their conditioning of the city, but also to recognize the potential that can arise when such breaks are initiated. Through direct action, Critical Mass creates what Hakim Bey refers to as a Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ): 'an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhere, *before* the State can crush it' (Bey, 1991). Within the literal or metaphorical domain of the TAZ, the typical norms that apply to an environment are negated and people have the capacity to rethink their relationships to one another and their environment. Cyclist Charles Higgins (2002, p.2) notes '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'. This experience can forge new networks of like-minded people, it can enhance one's identity as an activist, and it can potentially initiate a break with capitalist ideology. Moreover, Critical Mass or other incarnations of the TAZ, can arise anywhere at anytime.

From a political standpoint, the obvious problem with the model of the TAZ is that temporary ruptures of resistance do not provide a viable model for sustainability or widespread political enfranchisement. Murray Bookchin's scathing denunciation of 'lifestyle anarchism' specifically takes issue with Bey's model of insurgency:

Like an Andy Warhol 'happening,' a TAZ is a passing event, a momentary orgasm, a fleeting expression of the 'will to power' that is, in fact, conspicuously powerless in its capacity to leave any imprint on the individual's personality, subjectivity, and even self-formation, still less on shaping events and reality ... The bourgeoisie has nothing whatever to fear from such lifestyle declamations. With its aversion for institutions, mass-based organizations, its largely subcultural orientation, its moral decadence, its celebration of transience, and its rejection of programs, this kind of narcissistic anarchism is socially innocuous, often merely a safety valve for discontent toward the prevailing social order. (Bookchin, 1995)

Bookchin's critique is especially instructive because of his life-long investment in anarchist politics and social ecology (Bookchin, 1990), but his critique rests upon the assumption that activists will wholly substitute the TAZ for collective, strategic political organization. The TAZ is clearly not a basis for sustained political action, but the creation of a temporary cultural insurrection can serve important pedagogical, communicative and/or symbolic functions that can be used as a *means* to an end – not as the ends themselves. Critical Mass is not *the* solution to the problems of automobility by any stretch of the imagination, but the anomaly of cyclists swarming a street immediately changes the dynamics of that space – at once, everything ceases to function normally for the cyclists, drivers, or people passing by. It is not merely significant because the typical patterns of the environment are disrupted, but because the experiential insurgence gives cyclists a moment in which they are able to 'live the impossible' (Ferrell, 2001, p.115). Cyclists who participate in Critical Mass frequently testify to the power of this experience because it transcends the mere act of bicycling. Activist Matthew Roth, of Time's Up!, states 'it is one of the few authentic experiences that I've had in a group setting' (Bond, 2005) and Isral DeBruin, a college student, says

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. (DeBruin, 2006)

The 'temporary autonomous zone' of Critical Mass is means for people to collectively exercise some of the ideals they would like to see manifested in the world, but it is not merely a charade. Rather, the intervention can give participants a taste of what social/cultural transformation feels like – a glimpse at 'the possible'. Perhaps most importantly, this convivial environment creates a space where dissent is palatable and *visible*. Sarah Boothroyd states 'Graffitiists write their discord across

perpendicular cement space, while Critical Mass cyclists ride their insurgence across horizontal cement space; and both employ a form used worldwide – a mode *du monde* [of the world], hanging their missive to the masses between the ocher-sky and slate-ground of urban public space’ (2002, p. 23).

Communicative Dynamics

The experiential process of Critical Mass undoubtedly facilitates ‘meaningful connections with public space’ (Mallen, 2005) but the symbolism of the event is one of its distinguishing characteristics. In Critical Mass, bicyclists symbolically challenge the cultural, technological, and spatial dominance of the automobile while they simultaneously demonstrate the symbolic power of both bicycles and bicyclists. This symbolic transference of power is threatening not because it changes material conditions or undermines the power of automobile/oil corporations, but because it challenges the dominant ideology of automobility – the notion that cars can provide maximum flexibility, uninhibited movement and individual autonomy (Dunn, 1998; Sheller & Urry 2000; Featherstone, 2004; Hagman, 2006). For example, traffic is an unintended consequence of automobility that implicitly disrupts the illusion of freedom (Hagman, 2006) promised by the automobile, but traffic caused by Critical Mass is an unacceptable situation for drivers – particularly those in the United States. Why? One reason could be attributed to aggressive Mass participants, as there have been in various rides throughout the country. However, these individuals are always in the minority of an already small group of cyclists. A more likely reason why Critical Mass elicits such negative responses for blocking traffic is because Americans are not comfortable with the idea that bicyclists have the power to control what drivers can and cannot do. This ‘power’ is obviously not authentic, seeing as how bicyclists can only exert it once a month for a short period of time, but it is symbolically relevant because bicycles are considered inferior forms of transportation, typically utilized by people who are seen as ‘too poor to own a car, ‘anti-auto,’ eccentric, or deviant’ (Pucher *et al.*, 1999, pp.21–22).

Mass media has significantly altered the stakes of Critical Mass at different points in the past 14 years because they magnify and selectively distort the symbolic power the event – particularly the idea that Mass participants are chaos-loving anarchists (Storozynski, 2004), criminals (Gutierrez, 2006), or potential terrorists worthy of undercover police surveillance (Goodman, 2005). Due to this situation Critical Mass directly impacts the efforts of bike advocacy, but the exact nature of this influence is, and has been, a contentious subject for debate among cyclists since the early 1990s. Interestingly, some of the most heated exchanges regarding the prospects/problems of Critical Mass have erupted not on the streets, but online, via messageboard and blog posts by Critical Mass supporters and opponents. This feud is exemplified by a 1999 ‘flame war’ (see Critical Mass Flame War, n.d.) that featured lengthy debates between proponents of Critical Mass (mainly participants) and proponents of *vehicular cycling* – a paradigm that argues ‘bicyclists fare best when they act, and are treated in return, as drivers of vehicles’ (Forester, 1984). *Vehicularists*, as they are often called, firmly oppose Critical Mass on the basis that it breaks laws and allegedly gives a bad name to cyclists.

The intensity of the 1999 debate cannot simply be attributed to personal differences or poor *netiquette* (Shea, 1994), although these factors certainly shaped the tone of such exchanges. Rather, cyclists disputed – and continue to dispute – the function of Critical Mass because they intuitively recognize how it affects the process of bike advocacy and the ways that bicycling is both presented and represented to the public. This is an interesting phenomenon because, at face value, most arguments about Critical Mass focus on the legality or illegality of its tactics, but upon closer inspection the debates are essentially about *the communicative function of bicycling* (Furness, forthcoming). As a result, a binary approach to the question of Critical Mass is largely unproductive because it fundamentally ignores the positive rhetorical influence that Critical Mass can have, even when it draws negative attention from news media and the police (DeLuca, 1999). Dave Snyder, the former executive director of the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition, describes how these dynamics influenced his approach to advocacy in the wake of a notorious 1997 Critical Mass ride where police confronted 5,000 cyclists in the streets of San Francisco:

The bicyclists' demand for safer streets for riding got more positive coverage in the media around the July 1997 meltdown than any other time in the past 100 years. Sure, it came with more negative coverage, too, but if you look at the coverage carefully, you'll notice that the negative coverage was about the ride. 'Crack down on the unruly bicyclists!' When the media got to covering our agenda, it was overwhelmingly positive. All the opinion columnists felt they had to take sides, and even the most rabid car advocates had to admit, 'sure, the bicyclists deserve more space on the roadway.' When your enemies cede you that point, you know you have won! (Snyder, 2002, p.112)

Snyder asserts that Critical Mass is one of the best things to happen to bicycle advocacy because he recognizes how the media attention garnered by Critical Mass gives his organization – and others like it – the unique opportunity to publicize an issue that is typically ignored by mainstream news in the United States. The perceived 'radicalism' of Critical Mass also gives formal cycling organizations a distinct amount of rhetorical leverage, because they appear to be more 'moderate' in the eyes of the public. Critical Mass functions as a distinct pressure point for discourse, and this encourages transit and transportation agencies to increase their dialogue with 'moderate' cycling groups (Blickstein & Hanson, 2001, p.360). Snyder says 'it was thanks to Critical Mass that we got to put such a bold demand [for a bicycle network] on the official agenda. Critical Mass forced the politicians to ask us "what is it you folks want?"' (2002, p.115)

The process described by Snyder is what social movement scholars have termed the *radical flank effect* (Gamson, 1975; Haines, 1997; Isaac *et al.*, 2006), a scenario that arises when the more moderate elements of a movement directly benefit from the pressure applied by radical activists. Radicals change the terms and/or nature of political dialogue by making less-radical activists appear more moderate, thus more reasonable from the standpoint of negotiators. Bike advocacy is a not social movement *per se*, but the same sort of communicative dynamics are at work. Amy Stork (2004), one of the co-founders of Portland's *Shift*, affirms this position:

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.

It is impossible to accurately measure this rhetorical influence because moderate bike advocates must actively *make use* of the flank effect, lest they become lumped together with the 'radical wing'. Noah Budnick, of Transportation Alternatives, articulates this anxiety when he suggests that the 'conflict' of Critical Mass discourages support for bicycling (Moore, 2004).

The prospect of being associated with conflict and/or rebelliousness is obviously a legitimate concern for Budnick, but the position he supports fails to account for how these factors may be some of the very reasons why Critical Mass consistently attracts participants throughout the world, or why participants are more prone to bicycle as a result of their Critical Mass experience (Blickstein & Hanson, 2001, p. 360). What I am suggesting is that Critical Mass not only contributes to bike advocacy through its flank effect, it also transforms ideological perceptions about the act of bicycling itself. In short, it presents bicycling as something *other* than an exclusive, competitive activity (professional cycling) or a rationalized, utilitarian choice (commuter cycling). Whether participants are simply attracted to the rebelliousness, or *perceived* rebelliousness, of Critical Mass is actually irrelevant. The point I want to make is that Critical Mass does not attract everyone to bicycling, but it is attractive to people that would otherwise be uninterested in bicycling. Charles Komanoff, a renowned cycling advocate and former head of Transportation Alternatives, asserts the value of this ideological shift:

Critical Mass is generating new energy for cycling. Bringing in new riders. Providing training wheels, if you will, for cycling wannabes who find solo bike-riding too daunting. Creating a buzz for cycling. Providing a venue to dress up one's bike – a 'pimp my ride' for cycling. Getting cycling out of its geek ghetto into someplace more appealing to the 99% of people who don't consider themselves 'cyclists'. (Komanoff, 2005)

Komanoff raises some significant points in this short rant, particularly the idea that Critical Mass appeals to a different crowd, or audience, than would be reached through formal advocacy. His reference to the MTV program 'Pimp My Ride' suggests that Critical Mass might appeal to a younger crowd, or a demographic that values the aesthetic/stylistic dimensions of 'cool' (i.e. non-geeky) transportation above utilitarian concerns. In this sense, Komanoff addresses some of the disparate reasons *why* potential cyclists might not be swayed by pragmatic appeals to environmental health, community ethics or physical fitness that are commonplace in formal bike advocacy (see League of American Bicyclists, n.d.). This is not to discredit the validity or importance of such appeals, but to simply state the obvious: not *all* people are going to start bicycling on the basis of sound, rational arguments. That assumption would be as ridiculous as saying that one's decision to drive is exclusively based upon the automobile's utility as a transportation device.⁷

Komanoff's tacit point is that ideology plays a key role in one's decision to bike and Critical Mass contributes to both a transformation in ideological perceptions of bicycling and the construction of new identities for cyclists.

Conclusion

If Critical Mass is judged by its ability to live up to the revolutionary rhetoric of its most vocal participants, then it can hardly be considered politically relevant. The fabric of automobility cannot simply be unraveled through will power, even if the discourses of Critical Mass participants adequately address the practices, social values and mechanicals that comprise the *sociotechnological ensemble* of the automobile (Bijker, 1995, pp.273–275). Paul Rosen, a technology scholar and bike advocate, suggests that struggles against the automobile in western culture are particularly problematic because of this complexity: 'To disembed the automobile from Western culture would entail disembedding each of these different elements from the overall *ensemble* – an extremely difficult task' (Rosen, 2002, p.156). Given these difficulties, one could dismiss Critical Mass as a novelty, or a token gesture akin to a 'pie in the face'.⁸ On the one hand, Critical Mass *is* simply a joyous prank on car culture, but like other types of 'culture jamming' (Holland, 2004) it is meant to highlight unequal power dynamics and/or inherent problems with a specific institutional arrangement. Carlsson notes that in the creation of a moving, celebratory event, Critical Mass 'opens up the field of transit to new political contestation, and pushes it to another level by pioneering swarming mobility as a new tactic' (Carlsson, 2002b, p.78). In other words, Critical Mass not only reaffirms the idea that transportation is political (Bullard, 2004, p.20), it demonstrates a specific way that people can *do something* to express their dissatisfaction with our current transportation system. The tactic pioneered by Critical Mass may or may not be appropriate for other forms of transportation activism, but it provides new ideas for direct action strategies/tactics that could be employed in political struggles over mobility.⁹

Critical Mass makes bicycling a public issue by facilitating (or forcing) dialogue and debate, but it also thrusts the politics of transportation into the forefront and encourages people to create 'meaningful connections with public space' (Mallen, 2005). There is a pragmatic function to this process, an expression of what Lefebvre called the *right to the city*: 'the right to participate in urbanity, the right to appropriate the city not merely as an economic unit, but as a home and as an expression of lived experience' (quoted in Merrifield, 2002, p.156). However, there is also a distinctly utopian impetus to Critical Mass that should not be denied or transgressed. For short durations of time, cyclists disrupt the automobile's domination of urban space to point out the possibilities of life outside the 'iron cage of modernity' (Urry, 2004, p.744). Cyclists demonstrate a positive vision of two-wheeled mobility and 'human-scale community' (Higgins, 2000) but they also push people to question the functionality, design, and ideology of urban space – they ask crucial questions about what *could* be (Pinder, 2004, p.794). Critical Mass participants work as *insurgent architects of mobility*, or subversive agents that 'desire, think and dream of difference' (Harvey, 2000, pp.237–238). Their experimentation with mobility may not usher in the post-automobile era, but their

utopian vision is fundamental to a strategic, radical reassessment of both automobility and the privatization/criminalization of public space (Ferrell, 2001, 2005). Experimentation is an important step in this direction, and Critical Mass creates space for people to imagine how resistance can be *mobilized* in new ways.

At the very least, Critical Mass demonstrates creative dissent and hope in an era of cynicism and neoliberal exploitation. David Pinder rightfully argues that the ‘ability to challenge dominant ideologies in these circumstances is therefore crucial for a politics of hope’ (2004, p.792). Even if the moments of dissent are fleeting, they can still give participants a chance to realize that one can use their voice, their body, and their bicycle to disrupt the smooth function of automobility and the dominant norms that support it. In addition, it reveals how people can create forms of dissent that are vibrant, inclusive, non-dogmatic, and non-hierarchical. At its best, the spaces of resistance created by Critical Mass can expose the futility of ‘spectacular society’ (Debord, 1983) and provide the impetus for people to work towards radical, utopian change in the world. As a pedagogical experiment in alternative mobility, Critical Mass is a small reminder that ‘revolution is not “showing” life to people, but making them live’ (Debord, 1961, p.312).

Notes

1. Blickstein and Hanson (2001) note that most Critical Mass events consist of less than 150 people, but there have been numerous rides in San Francisco, New York, and Chicago that have been attended by thousands of cyclists. In April 2006, approximately 30,000 cyclists participated in Critical Mass, making in the largest in history. See European Cyclist’s Federation (2006).
2. The Paris Commune of 1871 (Tombs, 1999; Shafer, 2005), the Spanish Revolution in 1936 (Peirats, 1990; Ackelsberg, 2004) and the May 1968 protests in France (Dark Star Collective, 2001; Ross, 2004) are merely a few examples of radical, collective self-expression that negate Carlsson’s claim about the ‘unparalleled’ nature of Critical Mass.
3. I use the term *hermeneutic mobility* to designate a mobile practice that is, or can be, strategically used as an analytic tool to critically interpret geographies, sociocultural norms, gender constructions, spatiotemporal dynamics, and the fluidities/fissures that exist between each, or all, of these categories. Experimentation is central to this concept, as is the goal of critically interpreting mobility *itself* – regardless of which mode of transport (or locomotion) is being investigated.
4. The phrase ‘*Sous les pavés, la plage*’ or ‘Under the paving stones, a beach’ was used by the situationists as an allusion to the authenticity and beauty of life that exists beneath the veneer of capitalism. During the May 1968 revolts in France, the phrase was spray-painted on walls throughout Paris.
5. Chris Carlsson persistently notes that bicycling is, at best ‘only a small but important part of a larger cultural, political, and economic transformation’ (1999; my emphasis).
6. This astute point was raised by one of the anonymous reviewers who read an earlier draft of this paper. However, this point is also complicated by Horton’s study of bicycling in the environmentalist community. He notes that the car and the television – two of the most dominant cultural symbols of technological modernity – do not figure into environmentalists’ vision of a ‘green’ future (Horton, 2003, quoted in Horton, 2006, p.42). However, he also explains how the computer – arguably *the* symbol of modernity – has become central to green politics (Horton, 2004, quoted in Horton, 2006, p.42).
7. Recent scholarship on automobiles and automobility reveal the multitude of reasons why people drive, aside from the utilitarian functions of automobiles. See Pauline Garvey (2001), Michael Bull (2004), Simon Maxwell (2001) and Mimi Sheller (2004).
8. For an interesting political assessment of pie throwing, see the Biotic Baking Brigade (n.d.) – a group of activists Speaking Pie to Power!

9. To date, the tactic of ‘swarming mobility’ has not been utilized by transportation activists, but it has been incorporated in political protests through the use of *bike blocs*. Bike blocs are groups of cyclists that are strategically used at street protests because they ‘have the advantage of being able to break up and reform ... participants are able to easily move through the streets without the needing leaders or a decided route’ (Time’s Up!, 2004). Bike blocs have become popular because they can give protesters a wider range of flexibility with their demonstrations, and they can provide logistical support to demonstrators who are on foot (Time’s Up!, 2004). Moreover, the incorporation of bikes in street protests create creates a ‘festive’ atmosphere that arguably softens the perception of protesters (Chung, 2004). New York City activist organization Time’s Up! coordinated the use of bike blocs in the Republican National Convention protests of 2004, and activists have also experimented with bike blocs at anti-war protests in New York, Pittsburgh, Houston, Richmond, and San Francisco, to name just a few (Bikes Not Bombs, n.d.).

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