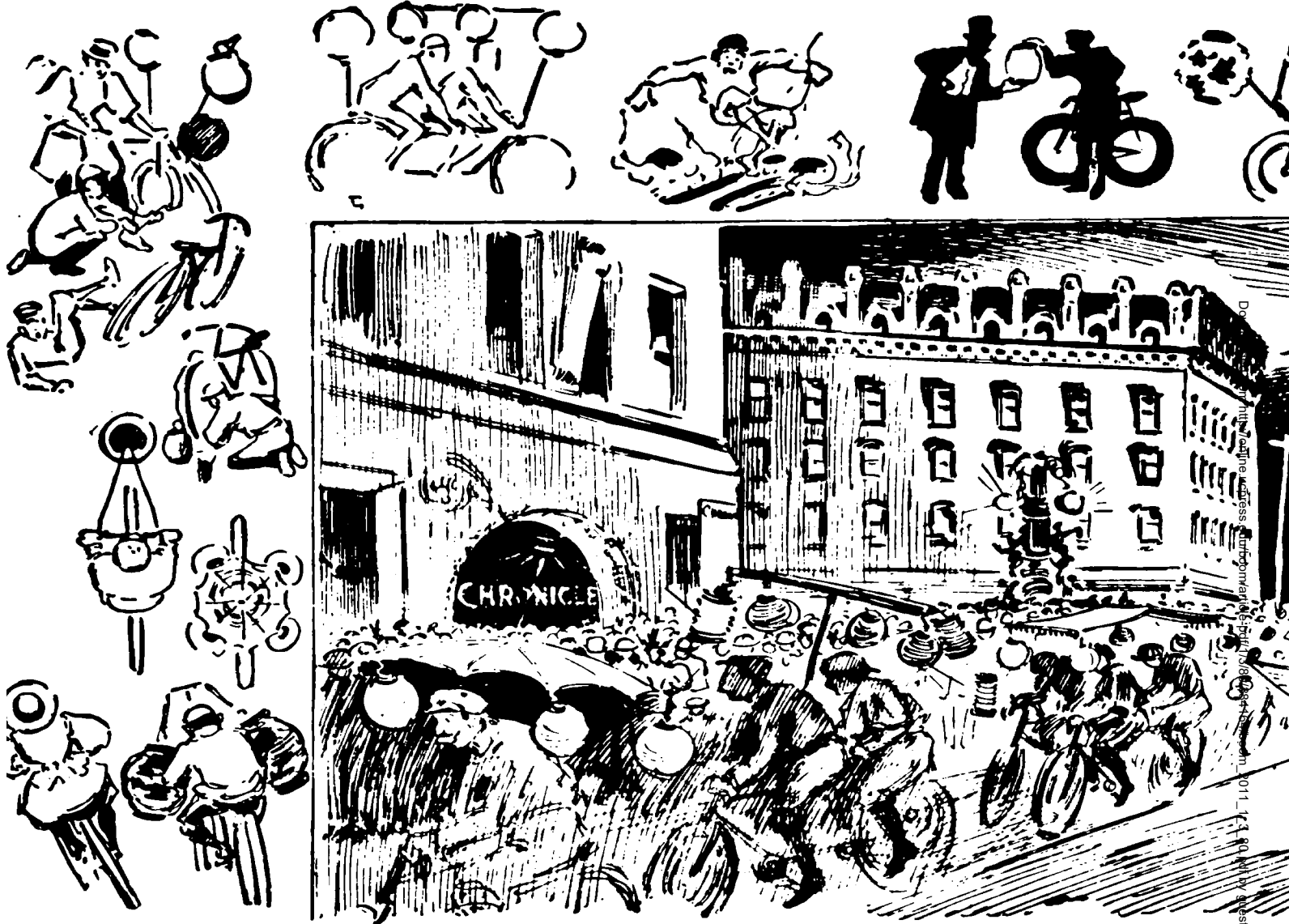


The Desire for Smooth Roads as Exemplified in the Various Moods of



Cyclists rally for better streets in San Francisco, 1896.

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of a Wheeling Pageant.



CHRIS CARLSSON

King of the Road

A movement founder explains the deep roots of Critical Mass

“If the increase continues, the time is not very distant when not to own and ride a bicycle will be a confession that one is not able-bodied, is exceptionally awkward, or is hopelessly belated.”

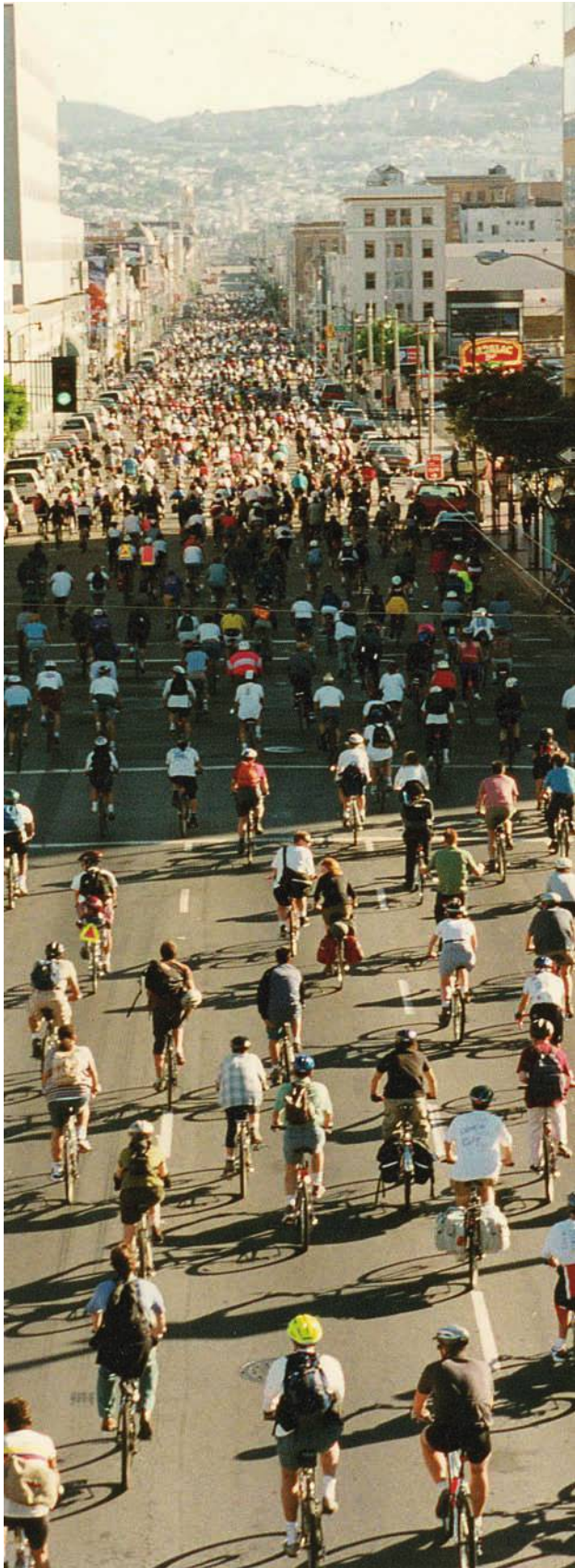
—“The Bicycle Festival,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1895

California is world-famous as the home of car culture, the place that gave birth to freeways, cruising, hot rods, and the whole mash-up of beaches, girls, convertibles, and teenage fun. That’s one story and it has some truth to it, but it’s a story of the twentieth century. The successful marketing of this image in films and literature—branding California as a car-obsessed state in which life unfolds mostly behind the wheel—has profoundly shaped the aspirations of people around the world. But it has also obscured another story that both precedes and succeeds the rise of the private automobile—the bicycle.

Given the rising tide of climate chaos rooted in fossil fuel combustion, it’s urgent that we tell ourselves other stories about our lives here in the Golden State. Such stories can point us toward viable alternatives that, coincidentally, are well-rooted in the state’s own history.

In September 1992, after months of tentative and speculative conversation about bicycling and politics among a couple of dozen friends (only a year and a half after the bombastic but fragile New World Order emerged in the first Gulf War), the first Critical Mass took place in San Francisco. I was one of those first forty-eight riders and had been intimately involved in the informal discussions that gave rise to it. The first ride didn’t yet have the name; they called it “Commuter Clot.” Two months later, the more compelling “Critical Mass,” taken from a casual description of Chinese traffic patterns in Ted White’s documentary “Return of the Scorcher,” was adopted. The ride began with a simple goal: to fill the streets with bikes so completely that they would

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Summer 1996, looking west on Howard Street across 4th Street.

displace cars, and in so doing would create a new kind of mobile, temporary public space. The obvious irony of the concept lay in the fact that the streets of our cities are the closest thing we have to a genuine public space, but they are so dominated by the parking and movement of private automobiles that the use of the space is predetermined and markedly antisocial.

Nineteenth-Century Bicycling

The second bicycling club nationally and the first on the west coast was the San Francisco Bicycle Club, founded on December 13, 1876. The club petitioned the Park Commission for permission to ride their new-fangled devices in Golden Gate Park. The park commissioners, overcoming their astonishment that there was actually a club for wheelmen, allowed them to “enter Golden Gate Park at the Stanyan Street entrance to the South Drive before 7 A.M. only.” Intensive self-policing kept the wheelmen within the bounds of the variance, and before too long the “privileges were extended.”¹ But it was in the next decade that bicycling began its precipitous takeoff. In the words of one contemporary:

The first competition for the SF Bicycle Club was “The Bay City Wheelmen,” founded in 1884. It raised enthusiasm to the highest pitch. Each man was eager to find opportunities for the keenest rivalry, for the honor of his club was at stake, and in those days wheeling was a clean sport. Sport for the true love of sport. There were none of the sordid motives which follow in the train of professionalism. To become a professional was to place one’s self outside of the social pale.²

The mass of nineteenth-century cyclists in San Francisco were not narrowly focused on bicycling alone. They became the backbone of a broad movement for improved streets and “Good Roads.” On July 25, 1896, thousands of cyclists filled the streets in the largest demonstration seen in the city’s history. In that century’s last decade, San Francisco was a muddy, dirty town, long past its glory years as a boomtown, but still one of the ten largest cities in the United States. The streets were full of horseshit, and between the ubiquitous cable car slots and the tangled web of streetcar rails, pedestrians and bicyclists had a hazardous course to traverse en route to their destinations. After months of organizing among the thriving bicycling clubs of the city, a huge parade was organized that drew as many as 100,000 spectators. Hank Chapot re-creates the scene:

“A five-year wheelman named McGuire, speaking for the South Side Improvement Club stated: ‘The purpose for the march is three-fold; to show our strength, to celebrate the paving of Folsom Street and to protest against the conditions of San Francisco pavement in general and of Market Street in particular. If the united press of this city decides that Market Street must be repaved, it will be done in a year.’ Asked if southsiders were offended that the grandstand would be north of Market, McGuire exclaimed, ‘Offended! No! We want the north side to be waked up. We south of Market folks are lively enough, but you people over the line are deader than Pharaoh!’”³

The movement for Good Roads would dovetail with the early progressive efforts to recalibrate government to provide services to the citizenry. After decades of parsimonious government expenditures in a climate that eschewed taxation in favor of privatization through franchises to provide public benefits (water, electricity, telephones, streetcars, etc.), new political actors in the 1890s turned against the big corporations and trusts. San Francisco politicians embraced the bicyclists’ demand for Good Roads along with a growing interest in public water, electricity, and transportation.

Meanwhile, in Southern California, an elegant bikeway was built along the Arroyo Seco corridor north of the Los Angeles River in 1900. It was the keystone of a plan to link Los Angeles and Pasadena with an eight-mile “great transit artery.” Pasadena Mayor Horace Dobbins dedicated public funds to an elevated, multilane, wooden cycleway, including streetlights and gazebo turnouts. The fifteen-cent toll didn’t dissuade hundreds of cyclists who showed up to the opening, going on to ride through a beautiful pre-urban Los Angeles landscape. More than 20 percent of the population were already regular bikers in 1900, and of course the weather was ideal. Cycleways were going to crisscross the area and provide a stylish and modern system for personal transport.⁴

As the twentieth century unfolded, the automobile rushed into the picture. Within a few years, bikeway expansion was scrapped and even the Arroyo Seco Cycleway was soon turned into a motorway (now better known as the Pasadena Freeway). As thousands of Californians became motorists, patterns of city life began to change. The chaotic crisscrossing of pedestrians, horses and horse-drawn wagons, streetcars, cable cars, and steam railroads, already joined by increasing numbers of bicyclists, now saw an influx of private automobiles.

The crowded, diseased, and dangerous streets of the nineteenth century were an additional motivation for progressive



Critical Mass poster for the 10th anniversary ride in 2002

leaders who sought to ameliorate these conditions through efficient city planning, then a new discipline. As city centers choked with traffic congestion and automobile injuries and deaths soared, a struggle to reshape city streets took place. Police and parents wanted to control speeds to promote safety. Highway engineers wanted to widen and streamline city streets to promote through traffic at higher speeds. Auto companies promoted the “freedom of the open road” and claimed that street improvements must properly be directed to bettering driving conditions, since most of the money for road building and maintenance was derived from gasoline taxes. Bicycles and pedestrians were the obvious losers in this

era as highway engineers—reinforced by auto industry propaganda—focused on widening streets, increasing parking, and creating parkways and highways (later freeways), while society subtly shifted the blame for car-related fatalities to careless pedestrians and cyclists, or individual bad drivers.⁵

In the late 1960s, after decades of car ascendancy, with the bicycle reduced in popular imagination to a children's toy or an obscure sport, the bicycle began to assume its modern significance. An early breakthrough came in the bucolic university town of Davis, California, where in 1965 five locals formed a vaguely named "Bicycle Safety Committee" to save the imperiled cycling community. Davis was growing by 10 percent a year, and bicyclists were diminishing as the population was growing. The committee mapped a bike lane system for Davis, and after being thwarted by a hostile City Council managed to elect a pro-bicycling Council in 1966. Davis's reputation as California's best-known cycling town dates from that time, when local government gave a green light to a new network of bike lanes. Interestingly, during the first few years of trial and error, a separated bike lane between parked cars and the sidewalk was tried and discarded as unsafe, a system that has been successfully implemented in Copenhagen, Berlin, Amsterdam, and other European cities.⁶

A few years later, in 1969, hundreds of cyclists gathered in the first "Smog-Free Locomotion Day" demonstration on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. For the next few years, this ecological protest bike ride rolled through the East Bay before sputtering out in the wake of the first oil crisis and the slow unraveling of the protest era.

In the 1980s, bicycle activism hit a low ebb until the end of the decade when San Francisco bike messengers organized a mass ride to encircle City Hall. The messengers were protesting the mayor and police threats to crack down on scofflaw messengers and force them to register and become licensed. The protest succeeded, and the plans to license messengers were abandoned. In 1990 a new group, Bay Area Bike Action, organized a bike ride through Golden Gate Park to advocate for a "park, not a parking lot!" During the first Gulf War in 1991, dozens of cyclists appeared at the periphery of large antiwar demonstrations in the city and pioneered a role for themselves as scouts, rolling ahead of marchers to see where police might be waiting for them. Finally, a group of fifty cyclists rode together from Santa Cruz to San Francisco during this same period, protesting the invasion of Kuwait and the bombing of Iraq.

Critical Mass Is Born in San Francisco, 1992

From these many threads through time, the first Critical Mass rode in San Francisco in September, 1992. While few of the first riders, if any, knew of their complicated legacy, they were resuming an honorable, century-old tradition of combining bicycling with politics. The several dozen Critical Mass initiators had different tastes, ideas, politics, and experiences. Some of us had been active in ecological efforts, others in antiwar and antinuclear campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, a few were bike messengers, while others still were people who simply chose bikes as their preferred transportation. We made no effort to arrive at a consensus explanation for our action, but hoped that in the space we planned to open, many ideas could flourish and many purposes find their expression. We all agreed that the maltreatment and second-class citizenship we suffered as isolated everyday cyclists deserved a robust response; and if nothing else, by gathering and riding en masse, we would make our presence felt as it hadn't been felt before.

It was obvious that if any formal organization took responsibility for the event, city authorities would most likely insist they have a permit and probably liability insurance, so we proceeded anonymously. We chose not to approach the police or the local government, defining the gathering as "an organized coincidence." That proved to be a fortuitous decision, since no one could be held personally responsible for the gathering of dozens, then hundreds, and eventually thousands of citizens, all determined to use the public thoroughfares to "ride home together," paralleling the utterly banal and normalized traffic jams that clogged the streets every day with cars. The slogan that emerged after awhile was "We aren't blocking traffic, we ARE traffic!" (This also became the title of Ted White's 1998 documentary on Critical Mass.⁷) Moreover, since no individual or organization "owned" the ride, it was easy for anyone to feel it was theirs as much as anyone else's.

What none of us could know in that dry autumn and winter of 1992–1993, as the police took no notice of us and our numbers swelled toward a couple hundred riders by February, was that the idea had become a classic meme, spreading from person to person through phone calls, through letters, through visitors who rode with us and took the idea back to their hometowns. (A Polish expat in San Francisco told his old friends in Poznan, Poland, who may have had the first ride in Europe.) About eight of us put together a small pamphlet,



San Francisco Critical Mass riding south on Vermont Street in August 1999, photo taken from the 20th Street crest of the hill looking north.

“How to Make a Critical Mass,”⁸ which we sent out to anyone who requested it, only a couple of dozen by the end of 1993.

Coincidentally, 1993 was also the year that the World Wide Web began to have a real presence in our lives, especially in San Francisco, so email, listserv discussions, and eventually websites began to proliferate. Other Critical Mass rides were started across the bay in Berkeley; in New York; in Austin, Texas; Madison, Wisconsin; Portland, Oregon; and Montreal. The idea began to snowball that year, and people in dozens of other cities and towns started their own Critical Mass rides. They all followed similar ideas to the ones that animated our San Francisco ride from the beginning: no leaders, ideas communicated by way of “xerocracy” (using ubiquitous photo-copying machines, anyone could put their ideas out on a flyer and have influence over the culture and experience of the local ride); sticking together in dense masses of bikes, even if it meant running red lights, for it was safer to stick together than to get spread out and mixed with autos; “corking” side traffic by having one or a few cyclists stop in front of rows of cars to prevent them from encroaching on the Mass; and so on.

In time, dozens of major cities around the world would have Critical Mass bike rides, from Rome and Milan in Italy

(along with twenty other cities), to London (and two dozen other United Kingdom locales), Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego, São Paulo, Toronto, Vancouver, Budapest, Berlin, Sydney, Melbourne, Paris, Lyon, Madrid, Barcelona, Mexico City, Guadalajara, Quito, Santiago, and many more. Each city’s ride took some of the wider concept and made it their own, adapting as needed to local conditions. Some were tightly organized, others less so. Chicago contributed the “bike lift” to the culture, which was later best demonstrated in a Budapest ride of over 40,000 cyclists, all holding their bicycles aloft while cheering wildly. (Budapest had a recent history as a heavily policed “Communist” city, therefore, organizers chose to negotiate with the authorities rather than risk a violent confrontation and decided to hold Critical Mass rides only at the end of April and September, twice a year. This has led them to hold the record for most riders, recently topping 50,000.)

Everyday Cycling Returns

Critical Mass was, and is, just a starting point. It’s a place where people meet and further projects begin to find adherents, often but not only bicycle-related. In the last decade, dozens of bike “zines” have been published (*Mudflap*, *Bike*



Critical Mass riding in Los Angeles, March 2011

Love, *Chainbreaker*, *Sin on Wheels*, *Mercury Rising*, to name a few). Lately such quality periodicals as *Bonshaker* magazine from Bristol, England, *Bike Monkey* from Santa Rosa, California, *Dandyhorse* from Toronto, and *Momentum* from Vancouver, Canada, have given the new bicycling culture aesthetically beautiful, editorially thoughtful media of its own.

Do-it-yourself bike shops, anchored by volunteer labor, have proliferated, too. In Los Angeles, the triumvirate of the Bike Kitchen, the Bike Oven, and the Bikerowave, has helped thousands of Angelenos become daily cyclists. Most recently, the Los Angeles Bicycle Coalition helped spawn La Bici Digna, a do-it-yourself bikeshop for Spanish-speaking day laborers in metropolitan Los Angeles. Similar kinds of efforts are running in San Francisco, Toronto, Chicago, and New York, and they have really taken off in Italy, where they're called "ciclofficine," and have found ready homes in the network of squatted social centers around the country (Rome alone has at least six such spaces, providing tools and spare parts to all comers to

fix—or make—their own bikes). Another half-dozen free bike spaces have emerged in squatted buildings in Madrid.

In recent years, other kinds of rides have also begun, sometimes as deliberate efforts to start social bike rides that don't have Critical Mass's anarchistic reputation. This reputation, proliferated by the mass media, is sometimes deserved: a San Diego Critical Mass on Black Friday 2010 rode into a mall and through the aisles of a Target store. Midnight Ridazz in Los Angeles attracts huge crowds of middle-of-the-night riders. A San Jose Bike Party, designed to be law-abiding and respectful while fun and social too, started only a couple of years ago and is attracting thousands of riders to its monthly 8:00 P.M. rides through various Silicon Valley burghs. The East Bay and San Francisco have inaugurated Bike Party rides, in 2010 and 2011 respectively.

In the wake of all this social riding, formal advocacy groups are gaining political power. The San Francisco Bicycle Coalition, with its couple of dozen volunteers and occasional meetings in restaurants, is now 12,000 dues-paying members strong, and considered by most to be a serious political force in local politics. Similar advocacy groups in Marin County, the East Bay, Silicon Valley, and Los Angeles, with more modest memberships, have grown in influence during the past decade. Bicycle boulevards and traffic-calmed streets have been established throughout Berkeley and Davis, and are beginning to get attention from larger cities too, including LA and SF. A long-abandoned railroad tunnel linking Mill Valley to Corte Madera has just been refurbished and opened to bicyclists in Marin County.

Riding alongside mainstream groups are many other activists and initiatives, from CicLAvia in Los Angeles to the Bikes on Board campaign on Caltrain along the San Mateo peninsula, and the new Sunday Streets program in San Francisco. Less than a decade ago Bogotá, Colombia, established Sunday street closures, which have spread to dozens of major cities in South America and are now being adopted in San Francisco, too. Bikeshare programs are also being started. From the well-known Vélib program in Paris to similar bike shares in Copenhagen, Milan, London, and other European centers, the idea has taken hold in Mexico City and is slated to open in San Francisco soon.

Critical Mass captures a larger moment in history, a time when great numbers of people are searching for ways to make personal and political changes in their everyday lives in response to the multiple crises of energy, ecology,

“When you have attained a proficiency which enables you to take out your handkerchief, wipe your nose and replace the mouchoir in your pocket without slackening your pace, you have fairly graduated . . . For fun there is nothing like cycling, and before many years two or three family wheels will be as much a part of the ménage as the modern range and sewing machine are now.”
—*San Francisco Chronicle*, 1896

economy, and general anomie. Bursting on the scene in cities across the world over the past nearly twenty years, reinvented again and again by dozens of people in widely divergent geographic areas, Critical Mass emerges from a commonality of experience and resonates with popular imagination in a surprisingly wide range of cultures and languages. Dozens of other organizations and initiatives have been launched, sometimes directly from the milieu of Critical Mass cyclists, other times merely as further independent manifestations of the same shifting cultural zeitgeist of which Critical Mass is such a bright signifier. At its simplest level, Critical Mass has led untold numbers of people to abandon their former commute patterns and embrace the bicycle as their everyday transportation. I’ve heard hundreds of anecdotal accounts over the years, from San Francisco to New York, Rome to São Paulo, of people becoming regular bicyclists after trying it first in Critical Mass. But if Critical Mass seems to be a starting point, it’s vital to remember the great antecedents that took place long before anyone riding now was even alive.

The bicycle is the personal vehicle of the twenty-first century. It is an antidote to oil wars, carbon emissions, the obesity epidemic, and tens of thousands of annual highway fatalities. Bicycling puts us into the life of our streets and connects us to friends, neighbors, and strangers in ways that the car culture has blocked for so long. Thousands of Californians have chosen the bicycle, and millions more

will as we alter our urban landscapes to welcome and facilitate that choice. Citywide and intercity systems of dedicated bikeways are long overdue. Imagine how many more people would ride if there were safe thoroughfares to make bicycling the most pleasant and direct way to get from anywhere in the city to anywhere else—point A to point B, smelling the flowers, the clean air, hearing the birds, and enjoying your friends and neighbors. Why not? **B**

Notes

- ¹ Ida L. Howard, “When San Francisco Was Teaching America to Ride a Bicycle,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 February 1905.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Hank Chapot, “The Great San Francisco Bicycle Protest of 1896,” *Processed World* 2.001. <http://www.archive.org/stream/processedworld2001proc#page/64/mode/2up>. Accessed 11 December 2010.
- ⁴ <http://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/200803/bikeway.asp>.
- ⁵ Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 148–164.
- ⁶ Dale Lott, “How our bike lanes were born,” www.runmuki.com/paul/writing/lottarticle.html. Accessed 31 March 2011.
- ⁷ http://www.tedwhitegreenlight.com/critical_mass_film.htm.
- ⁸ This document appears in the appendix of the book *Critical Mass: Bicycling’s Defiant Celebration*, ed. Chris Carlsson (Oakland CA: AK Press, 2002) and is available online at two or three websites.