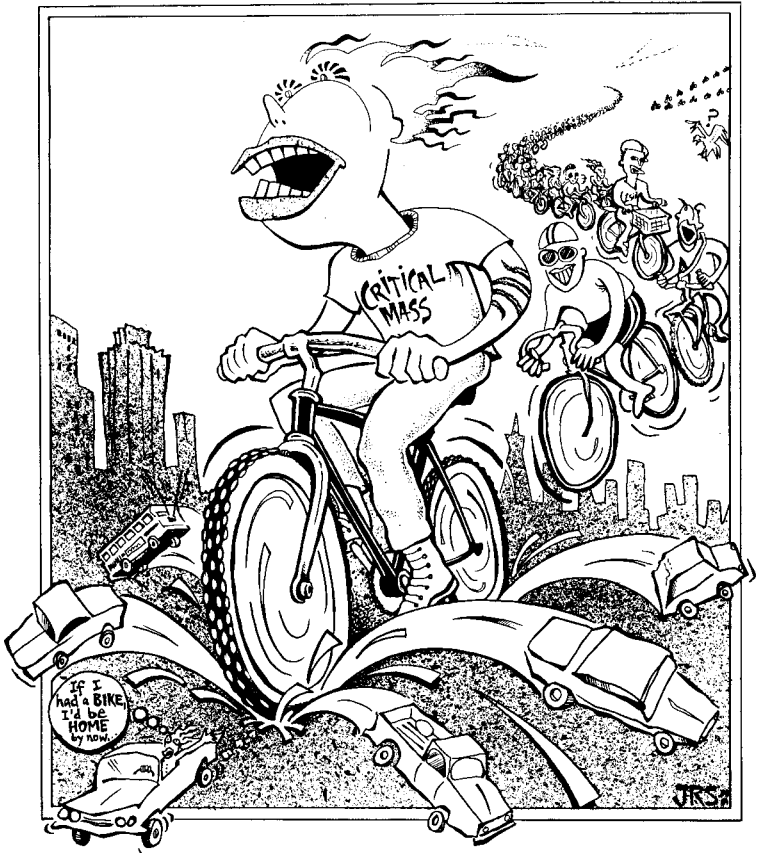


INTRODUCTION

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





CHRIS CARLSSON

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



LIZ HAFALIA

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

