

1. Projects



The analysis of cycling protest movements in North America: Mexico City, San Francisco and Vancouver

Finished research

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Car culture dominates throughout North America. Cyclist movements challenge this cultural and spatial dominance, hoping to acquire more space for soft mobilities in congested cities. Critical Mass, which first appeared in San Francisco in 1992, is the most famous of these mobilisations, during which cyclists ride in large numbers throughout the city streets. Such protests, based on the occupation of public space, have spread throughout the world and have evolved by taking on various forms depending on the contexts, how their members relate to authority and their demands. Throughout their history, cycling appears as much a cause to be defended as a tool and a symbol of major contemporary struggles.

Research participants

- Matthieu Gillot
- Patrick Rérat

Covering over 30,000 kilometres, from Ushuaia to Vancouver, Matthieu Gillot cycled up the Americas. During the first part of his journey he studied cycling mobilisations in South America and this has already been the subject of an article on our website, presenting the case of Santiago de Chile. The second part of his journey covered North America and was an opportunity to conduct a field survey intersecting three cities with strong identities: Mexico City, San Francisco, and Vancouver.

This research made it possible to study cycling movements in these three cities and to compare their demands and modes of action, particularly in relation to the cultural, urban (geography, public space, etc.), historical and political characteristics of each.

	Mexico	San Francisco	Vancouver
Population	21 million	884,000	2.5 million
Surface	1485 km ²	100 km ²	115 km ²
Geography	Flat surrounded by mountains	Hill in the middle of a bay	Flat surrounded by and mountains
Urbanism	Uncontrolled	City of neighbourhoods	American and As influence
Main mode of transport	Minibus	Automobile	Automobile
Modal share of cycling	2% 5% for commutes between home and work	4% 9 to 10% in dense, flat areas	7%

Overview of each city's context

In each city, Matthieu Gillot conducted interviews with key actors in these mobilisations. A wide variety of cycling activists were interviewed: members of collectives, mechanics, protest organisers, mobility researchers, etc. The interviews were supplemented by an analysis of documents and visual materials produced by these movements (flyers, logos, posters, etc.) and by participant observation with the subjects during the mobilisations.

This enabled him to distinguish different mechanisms in these mobilisations, according to their individual types of demands (linked to cycling, the environment, gender, etc.), how conflictual they were, where they occurred (in the public space or not) and the target audiences

Conflits dans l'espace public à San Francisco - Les mobilisat...



Conflits dans l'espace public à Mexico - Les mobilisations c...



Conflits dans l'espace public à Vancouver - Les mobilisation...



Imposing a power struggle: mobilisations for cycling and the environment

The first forms of mobilisation were created outside of any legal framework. Still present in the three cities studied today, their demands are primarily aimed at the right to travel safely in the city. Participants use a tactic called "Corking," which involves a few cyclists blocking traffic on secondary roads so that the entire Critical Mass can pass through red lights freely and without interruption. The movement's original slogan is "We don't block traffic, we are traffic." The protesting nature of the Critical Mass movement is reflected in logos with a raised fist or making reference to it.



Logo of Critical Mass in San Francisco



Logos of “Ni Un Repartidor(a) Menos” in Mexico City

These movements, that demand the right to cycle safely, occupy public space with varying degrees of conflict. Some movements encroach on the space reserved for cars (Critical Mass, Bike Party), shout slogans (La Otra Movilidad), or even cause material damage (Viernes de Furia). In Mexico City, where infrastructure is still inadequate and there is significant traffic violence, the protests are more conflictual than in San Francisco or Vancouver, where serious accidents have decreased since the 1990s. For example, in Mexico, the workers collective of delivery riders (bicycles and scooters) called Ni Un Repartidor Menos (Not One Delivery Rider Less, that can also be feminised), was created following the death of a delivery worker, José Manuel Matias Flore. The same goes for “Viernes de Furia” (Fury Fridays), created on November 20, 2020 in support of Mario Trejo, a delivery worker who was hit by a truck. Like the Critical Mass, Fury Fridays is a movement that gathers in large numbers, looking to create conflict, mainly with motorists who are parked illegally on cycle lanes.

These movements can also be accompanied by environmental demands, such as promoting cycling as an alternative to cars, especially in a city like Mexico City which is regularly affected by significant pollution peaks, or during the first cycling mobilisations in 1992 in Vancouver where groups of cyclists wore gas masks on Clean Air Day. Today, mobilisations in Vancouver mainly aim to protect the old growth forests.

Fighting discrimination: the convergence of struggles

The Critical Mass' mode of action, which is conflictual in the public space, enables certain movements to use cycling as a way of fighting against discrimination (LGBTQ+, feminist, ecological, racial). In San Francisco, for example, the Safe Street Rebel collective organised the Queer Pride Slow Ride during Gay Pride in 2022. Black Girls Do Bike, as its name suggests, takes the same approach, highlighting black women from the outskirts of San Francisco by offering to “share positive images of women and their bikes to assert that black girls do indeed ride bicycles.” Their outings in the public space seek visibility rather than conflict.



Cycling movements are also joining national protests. Hundreds of cyclists joined the Black Lives Matter movement on June 5, 2020 in San Francisco, for a George Floyd Solidarity Ride.

In Mexico City, there is a focus on the issue of women's safety in the public space. For International Women's Day, feminist cycling groups go out en masse in the streets, wearing green headscarves (a symbol for the right to abortion) and purple headscarves (a feminist colour), seeking greater visibility and not conflict, and participants respect the rules of the road.

In Vancouver, where women feel more secure, demands include LGBTQ+ issues. The Chill Rides Vancouver thus present their bike outings as "[...] a safe and inclusive space for cyclists," based on the observation that "cycling has historically been dominated by cisgender and heterosexual men. As a result, there are plenty of spaces for these cyclists, but fewer spaces for others."

Lutter contre les discriminations - Les mobilisations cycliste...



Creating the conditions for dialogue: legal action without occupying the public space

Some cycling movements focus on promoting cycling in a less confrontational way and through dialogue with authorities. Their aim is to change public policy in favour of cyclists (by developing cycle paths, developing a cycling system and challenging the place of cars), and to promote cycling among diverse audiences. In San Francisco and Vancouver, cycling advocacy is led by two organisations with similar profiles: the SF Bike Coalition (SFBC), created in 1971, and HUB Cycling, created in 1998 (originally called the Vancouver Area Cycling Coalition). Their mission is to encourage more people to practise cycling more often and safely. They participate in the creation of cycling infrastructure, organise cycling courses for adults and children (Bike to School), hold promotional or awareness-raising events (Bike the night), and offer resources (route maps, tips for riding safely in the city, etc.), all in a more 'festive spirit' than the Critical Mass.



Bike to School Week organized by HUB cycling

In Mexico City, the advocacy style of the Bicitekas movement has evolved over time: after a period of street protests between 1997 and 2012, and now with increased legitimacy, its members have become more professional and now work with the government to influence decisions concerning urban mobility.



The Bicitekas logo goes counter to the reading direction, “because it is a counter-cultural movement, that goes against the hegemony of oil as the main source of energy.”

Mobilising through autonomy: the bicycle as a tool for empowerment

Some forms of activism take place outside the public space, via bike workshops, which focus on individual autonomy. This, for instance, is the goal of the Vancouver Community Bike Shop Network (VCBN), a coalition of community bike shops in Vancouver that work together to share resources and build the capabilities of a more diverse and inclusive cycling community.



These community bike shop are characteristic of cycling movements as a form of mobilisation in Vancouver. In contrast, such workshops are not well developed in San Francisco, while in Mexico, Casa Bicitekas does offer a repair shop but it is not free of charge. It operates with professional mechanics and is not aimed at improving cyclists' autonomy. However, just like the Vancouver workshops, it does promote values (ecological, social, etc.) that go beyond cycling demands: for example, Uber bikes that were meant to be destroyed were salvaged, repaired and given to women (mainly mothers) to provide them with an opportunity for mobility and save on the cost of public transport.

Conclusion

There are various forms of mobilisation that intersect in the three cities studied. While for some movements, such as Critical Mass, dialogue with the authorities is akin to compromise, for others, it is essential for change. For everyone, it is a matter of creating the conditions for building a complete, safe and inclusive cycling system.

However, cars remains hegemonic in the three cities, and the space devoted to soft mobilities and to cycling in particular remains small compared to the infrastructures dedicated to cars. San Francisco and Vancouver remain ahead of the curve on the subject, while Mexico is closer to the issues facing South American cities. The analysis shows that the demands of cycling movements highlight inequalities in people's ability to travel safely depending on social class, gender, sexual orientation, but also on mode of transport. Cycling can be used to challenge structures of domination (with regards to mobility/automotive system, gender/patriarchy, economic system/capitalism and its environmental consequences, etc.) that perpetuate these inequalities. In general, these movements have shown that cycling is therefore woven into a wider context, acting as a symbol of a sustainable, safe and socially just mobility, and also offering a means of implementing it and therefore of taking part in urban life.

Le vélo comme instrument de lutte - Les mobilisations cycli...



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Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Alternative mobilities
- Aspirations
- Living environments

Policies

- Civic Action
- Ecological transition
- Cycling & Walking

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