Happiness and freedom in direct action: critical mass bike rides as ecstatic ritual, play, and temporary autonomous zones

Dana M. Williams

Department of Sociology, California State University, Chico, USA

ABSTRACT

Most leisure research does not consider collective action and social change, while most social movement research overlooks carnivality and spontaneity. A counter-example is the alternative bicycling movement critical mass (CM), a rebellious, liberatory leisure and cultural event. CM is goal-oriented and a libidinal expression of participant desire. This paper investigates CM’s production of happiness and freedom via three heterodox theories. Ecstatic rituals are repetitive, cathartic collective events that people engage in to express joy and flaunt convention. Political theories of play interpret individual’s physically-embodied, creative, and performative actions. Temporary autonomous zones are spatial locations of resistance to authority that evade state detection and suppression. CM – unlike standard bike races or conventional movement protest – transcends the limitations of physical exercise, lackadaisical leisure, and militant direct action. Instead it is a hybrid form of collective action, combining premeditated ritual, rebellious play, and mobile freedom-seeking.

Introduction

Despite the centrality of happiness and freedom for both leisure activities and social movements, such concerns have been under-theorised by researchers. For example, research has overlooked global justice movements’ adoption of direct action that prioritises happiness and freedom during volatile marches, street barricades, and guerrilla theatre. Goal efficacy is crucial to most radical direct action (Graeber, 2009; Juris, 2008), which is usually planned and executed by highly-organised, albeit small and decentralised, activist groups. Less studied is structureless, leisure-oriented direct action that prioritises spontaneity, such as the pro-bicycle movement known as Critical Mass (CM). A key element often absent in the sociological study of social movements has been this attention to desire and spontaneity, particularly after the ‘rational turn’ following the Sixties. While an increasing emphasis on emotional content (e.g. happiness) has re-emerged in this scholarship, demonstrating emotions are clearly requisites and consequences of protest (Blocq, Klandermans, & Van Stekelenburg, 2012; Gould, 2004; Jasper, 1998; Saunders, Grasson, Olcese, Rainsford, & Rootes, 2012), this sociological literature is minor.

While some collective leisure activities occur for presumably non-political purposes (e.g. athletic or musical events), others involve kernels of political consciousness and resistance (Shaw, 2006). A growing leisure studies literature has focused on social movements and flexible spaces generated by creative activism. Protests are social occasions facilitating the emotional construction of identity (Golova, 2015), not always distinguishable from festive parties (Dowson, Lomax, & Theodore-Saltibus, 2015; Garland, 2015). Bicycles within movements’ oppositional cultures carry ‘green’ visions and lifestyles articulating an alternative society (Horton, 2006).
CM’s temporal, urban character reflects recent concerns from pop-up geographies and do-it-yourself (DIY) urban design. Urban phenomena created by non-state, non-profit actors involve mobile place-making (Aldred & Jungnickel, 2012), reimagining space-time ‘in the cracks’ via flexible practices (Harris, 2015). Such ‘tactical urbanism’ (Lydon & Garcia, 2015) is often strategically deployed in movements, as with the Londoners on Bikes campaign that ‘popped-up’ to influence cycling culture and infrastructure (Aldred, 2013). The DIY nature of these interventions aims to creatively make cities more just and democratic (Iveson, 2013), especially in response to government inaction and failure (Douglas, 2013). For example, the DIY urbanism of Time’s Up NYC used direct action to reclaim public space (Shepard, 2014). While DIY urbanism’s amateurism invites marginality (Deslandes, 2013), cyclists already exist ‘outside’ car culture, and thus urban bike-riding provides ‘freedom’ (Aldred 2010).

CM is often considered a chaotic, trouble-making bike ride. Yet its participants are motivated by the self-meaningful, cathartic, ecstatic experiences acquired while creating temporary autonomous zones through play. These collective, leisure activities have a conscious orientation towards happiness generation and freedom extension. I explore and synthesise multiple theoretical frames that offer the best opportunity to analyse collective activities meant to be – all at once – empowering, political, cathartic, and transformative. I posit that CM accomplishes its collective goals via the conscious and subconscious creation of spontaneous order and emotional expression that is central to the very design of the CM event, as well as necessary for happiness and collective freedom. CM’s organising processes and outcomes are detailed and analysed in the following militant ethnographic and participatory research, which clarifies the meanings of ‘happiness’ and ‘freedom’ for CM participants. I argue that the desire for happiness – created in the form of ecstatic ritual in certain spaces – is the core, driving force of CM. Happiness is generated in pursuit of temporally-limited freedom.

Critical Mass and structureless direct action

CM is, according to a co-founder, an ‘organised coincidence’. Bicyclists gather monthly to ride together on public streets during early evening hours (known to car commuters as ‘rush hour’). Riders pedal slowly and socialise, decelerating surrounding automobile traffic (Carlsson, 2002). Some advocates innocently characterise CM as a ‘bike parade’ (Crimethinc, 2004). But Klett (2002) offers a nuanced assessment:

“[Critical Mass] is many things to many people, as varied as its participants. It provides a rare experience of democratic self-organisation within a constantly changing mass of people… [It] is the inevitable byproduct of a leaderless, open event defined anew every month by hundreds and thousands of people coming together freely without a formal agenda or structure. (p. 93)”

Accordingly, CM is characteristically anti-categorisation: an ‘event as protest’, as well as ‘protest as event’ (Garland, 2015). If CM is many things at once – i.e. its nature and meaning changes depending on who offers definitions – then multiple perspectives are needed to situate its totality. This complexity is noted by Blickstein and Hanson (2001) who describe CM as a

decentralised network of organisers and…[uses] both traditional and cyber-facilitated methods of communication. Critical Mass’ open form allows movement issues to be framed in ways that encompass multiple geographic scales and that mobilise supporters with a wide range of motivations for participating (p. 352).

CM advocates often summarise CM’s diversity of goals, meanings, and tactics, such as Slingshot (2009) ‘tutorial’, which recommends: ‘ride slow, talk fast’, smile and wave, adjust ride tactics depending on size, and dress up and decorate the bikes. These leaderless rides involve decisions made democratically and power wielded through voting or individual initiative which others can follow (or not), allowing every participant to feel empowered to contribute. If someone endangers the ride – e.g. being a ‘jackass’ – riders ask them to change their behaviour or collaborate to marginalise their influence (Critical Mass San Francisco, 2009).
CM is a direct action movement, aiming to immediately manifest its objectives – collective riding in a safe space – without pressuring powerful actors indirectly through intermediaries. Unlike other direct action movements, far less meticulous planning occurs and concrete political objectives are avoided. CM differs from a formal organisation: there is no decision-making body outside of monthly rides, nor officers or spokespersons, nor does a central office endorse local rides. Consequently, CM lacks organisational infrastructure that most movements and leisure activities typically possess (e.g. labour unions or soccer leagues, respectively). Critical Mass is structureless, and strongly affiliated with anarchism and other strands of anti-authoritarianism (Carlsson, 2002; Williams, 2017). Individuals must bring the necessary skills, knowledge, and other resources, since there is no formal organisation to acquire, consolidate, and deploy these necessities.

A governing principle in structureless direct action is that the very act of opposition is enjoyable and has merit, regardless of goal achievement. This sentiment is enshrined in the widely observed slogan: ‘resistance is the secret to joy’. The performative, emotive, and aesthetic characteristics of rebellion serve as the organising principles of such direct actions, and serve to make them attractive to potential participants (Graeber, 2009; Notes From Nowhere, 2003). Structurelessness can have numerous downsides; for example, participant discontinuity between rides leaves many new riders unaware of established CM social norms. Additionally, the open nature of CM rides permits any physically-able person with a bike to participate, including deliberately disruptive, macho, hostile, or violent individuals, who may introduce risk into the event, targeting fellow riders or car drivers. However, problems caused by discontinuity and disruptive individuals within other, routine situations is mediated by the empowering and joyful nature of communal rides.

CM attracts a diverse range of riders who bring varied interests, values, and intentions. Many CM constituencies originate in sub-cultural scenes and alternative movements, thus influencing CM’s counter-hegemonic character. Some constituents include DIY enthusiasts, environmentalists, anti-war activists, anti-authoritarians, counter-culturalists, and urban quality-of-life advocates. Each are typically involved in political campaigns or lifestyle practices exchanged horizontality amongst participants, thus permeating CM rides, aesthetics, and cultural norms. An embedded, ethnographic and participatory approach is the best strategy to assess CM’s varied influences.

Methodology

This paper is based on a decade of ethnographic research (from 2003 to 2012), including participant observation as a CM organiser and participant. The analysis uses hundreds of first-hand observations, conversations, and documents pertaining to activities personally participated in, including approximately 60 CM rides in five cities across three US states (Ohio, Georgia, and California). These rides are the primary unit of analysis, and ranged across all months of the year, occurred in conditions that ranged from hot sun, pouring rain, snow, wind, flat and hilly routes, and involved as few as four cyclists to over one thousand. I use my notes, essays, and personal communications recorded after rides, as well as other materials created before and in preparation for rides, summaries written afterward by others, as well as other documents and media (e.g. photos, videos, and newspaper articles). Experiential repetition facilitated an on-going refinement of the following analysis. I provide numerous examples from personal experience as evidence in support of the applied theories.

Since I have been a non-neutral CM organiser and supporter of its objectives, this research can be characterised as militant ethnography (Juris, 2007) or autoethnography (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Anderson & Austin, 2012). As such, in the following analysis I reflect upon my own emotional experiences and values, acknowledging that this analysis may serve to further CM’s mission. This methodology is appropriate given leisure studies’ concern with the embodied, emotive, and participatory experience of people during leisure. I attempt to blur
the boundaries between activist and academic analysis, and pursue embodied practical knowledge (Schlembach, 2015). My unique status as an ‘organiser’ offered me perspectives, conversations, and experiences that casual CM participants likely lack. While my biases predispose me to be a CM partisan, I am not naive about shortcomings I perceive in its strategies, nor am I unfamiliar with others’ criticisms. The following analysis attempts to interpret the feelings and meanings (both individual and collective) generated by CM rides. While such ethnography is inherently subjective in some regards, it also establishes a clear perspective, in which the collective theories work to model and explain CM as a phenomena more complicated than a mere bike ride.

Herein, I apply three diverse theories to show how CM’s urban recreation facilitates spontaneous, passionate participation without resorting to systematic planning or deliberate organisational structure. These theories – which I argue are illuminating for leisure studies – include Ehrenreich’s (2006) theory of ecstatic ritual, that inspires a frenzied excitement and possesses subversive undertones; Shepard’s (2011) theory of play, where people engage each other politically, but without dire humorlessness; and Bey’s (1991) TAZ theory, which conceives of impermanent spaces of resistance to mainstream, hierarchical society. Ehrenreich argues ecstatic rituals are ludic events, providing opportunity to challenge authority and build politicised solidarity. The ritualised, regularity of embodied resistance channels the oppositional energies of event participants. Collective ‘strength’ created cannot be simply rationalised, nor does it merely result from ideology or social networks. Shepard considers ‘play’ as a political strategy for movements. Playfulness creates pleasurable activism and successfully advances those struggles because adversaries have difficulty forcibly opposing play. Bey emphasises rebels’ desire to gain independence from state and capital, even if only briefly and to set their own rules in a liberatory environment they control. These TAZs exist despite state opposition, and persist when they evade detection and suppression. Each perspective describes behaviours of people lacking much social power, and how they physically and collectively create spontaneous order that resists the state and other authorities. Implicit in each theoretical perspective is the assumption that freedom is pursued through activities involving happiness, as such means fit those ends. The following analysis synthesises these theoretical frameworks to interpret CM.

**Critical Mass as premeditated ecstatic ritual**

In her book *Dancing in the Streets*, Ehrenreich (2006) argued that participation in collective events involves the loss of individuality, passionate and emotional fervour, expressive physicality, and group empowerment – which she refers to as ecstatic rituals (defined on pp. 17–18). Numerous events are ecstatic rituals: religious ceremonies in communal societies, Medieval European carnivals, riots, and rock music concerts. Key to ecstatic ritual is culture’s capacity to inform and guide participants through their experiences of happiness and ecstasy.

According to Ehrenreich (2006), music is key to ecstatic ritual. Appropriately, the most dynamic and pleasurable CM rides typically involve bikes equipped with stereo-systems. The San Francisco (SF) ride exemplifies this: at one ride, at least five such music bikes participated. Since this ride was so large, different ‘regions’ within the approximately 1000-person ride were listening to different music. On subsequent SF rides, I noticed that the ride itself did not start until music bikes initiate the ride – incidentally, always with the same song (‘Bicycle Race’ from rock band Queen’s 1978 album *Jazz*). This also affirms McKay’s (2007) observation about street and protest music, and how music serves as an invigorating element of people’s collective experiences. Additionally, music can consolidate participants’ shared movement identity (Robertson, 2015). To a lesser degree, amusing ‘music’ is also created by riders ringing bike-bells, sometimes in unison.

Another important feature of ecstatic ritual is feasting. As with any party, music and food are essential elements; and while not overtly a food event, food distribution and consumption happens around CM. ‘Dumpstered’ (diverted unspoiled food) bagels were handed out before
some rides. Before a SF ride, a man arrived on his bicycle with an attached grill (he cooked and ate seafood). After rides in Akron, Ohio, cyclists would regularly travel to an Italian restaurant that lacked bike parking. CM participants simply locked their bikes to the each other’s bikes in front of the restaurant, forcing everyone to leave together after feasting. Post-ride meals in Akron also included potlucks at a local park, co-hosted by a vegetarian cooking organisation. While many riders drink water during rides, a few individuals bring alcoholic beverages, just as during stationary parties. One SF rider brought a 12-pack of beer; although consuming only a few during the ride, he shared with others.

CM also creates an opportunity for the ecstatic ritual of costuming. The most popular CM ride happens right before and sometimes on Halloween (the last Friday in October). During an Akron Halloween ride, people dressed as rabbits, zombies, Sonic the Hedgehog, and a ‘slacker’ wearing a bathrobe. While most costumes did not completely conceal identities, finding acquaintances became fun. CM spectators (pedestrians or drivers) usually enjoy seeing costumed people riding bicycles, and thus clap or cheer in support. In SF, a form of reverse-costuming happens. Due to SF’s rich counter-cultural history which involves both Hippie and gay rights movements (Armstrong, 2002; Hoffman, 1968), there are regularly naked riders (often older men). During my first SF ride, I was surprised to witness a half-dozen naked riders, yet realised this was their ‘costume’.

Ehrenreich (2006) argues masking is related to costuming. Halloween costuming involves a form of masking, where faces are hidden, obscured, or decorated. But, masking also occurred during the immediate aftermath of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Many political radicals participated in Akron rides, and due to increased police repression of anti-war protests, these activists had begun masking their identities by wearing bandannas across their faces (Ruiz, 2013). The cross-over between CM and anti-war protest seemed intuitive (given radical bike culture’s critique of ‘oil wars’), so a number of activists wore masks, partially to protect their identity from police who were starting to notice and follow CM rides, but also in a display of solidarity with the anti-war movement’s resistance to authority.

Dancing is often a component of ecstatic rituals, but not typically expected of people riding bicycles. While it’s relatively difficult to ‘dance’ on bikes, various forms of dance – both theatrical and interactive – do occur on CM rides. Faster-moving riders sometimes ‘danced’ by dramatically slaloming and weaving between slower-moving riders. One SF rider regularly stood-up on his bike frame – while moving at a considerable speed – riding it like a skateboard. His standing body stood out, causing him to be watched, like audience members watch dancers. SF’s ride sometimes engaged in another physical display resembling dance upon entering an intersection. A circle of bicycles would begin to move counter-clockwise, blocking the four sets of waiting cars. Other riders sometimes stopped, dismounted their bikes, then hoisted the bikes upside overhead. When raising their bikes, riders cheered loudly in celebration of this display of strength and non-convention. In Ohio, a CM ride swarmed a traffic circle and riders continued to ride along the 360-degree, circular road, similar to how people in groups may dance in circles – a particular characteristic Ehrenreich associates with ecstatic ritual.

CM’s quasi-legal (or quasi-illegal) nature also invites the regular flaunting of convention, an element of ecstatic ritual according to Ehrenreich (2006). Riders regularly use CM’s safe space to engage in non-normative or deviant public activities. For example, an older man at SF CM often wandered around before the ride began and bellowed at the top of his lungs. His random shouts were clearly a cathartic expression, but also a beacon for riders arriving at the ride. Screaming also occurs when (as mentioned before) riders lift bikes above their heads while blocking intersections, but also whenever travelling through tunnels. The consistency of this latter practice is revealing: regardless of location, riders screamed while in tunnels (it seems almost an intuitive behaviour), enjoying the excitement of going through a tunnel on bike and the loud, echoing roar that joint screaming creates. I have witnessed and smelled cannabis smoking before rides. One man in Berkeley, California ran shirtless alongside bicyclists, holding numerous American flags in his hands as he ran during a June ride a few days before the holiday celebrating American
Independence (July 4). Then, at various points along the ride, he set these flags afire, leaving them burning in the street. CM’s flaunting of convention is usually accepted or tolerated by other riders, although not by police. Elites and law enforcement consider CM an annoyance at best, criminal at worst. Police attempted to control CM rides and riders, monitoring, following, or stopping rides in every city. While police may try to exert control over the flaunting of convention, they seem unable to convince riders of cessation’s moral value. The force and size of SF’s CM is so strong that police tolerate rowdy rides and have for years simply accompanied rides (motorcycle police flank the ride), but do not stop riders, even when law-breaking occurs.

Other explicit norm-violations involve the breaking of traffic rules. Sometimes rides travelled the wrong direction – in the opposite lane of traffic or the wrong way on one-way streets. On a late-night SF ride travelling through a tunnel, riders snuck underneath a chain separating opposing traffic, then entering that traffic. Motorcycle police following the ride were surprised and had to travel considerable distances to resume following the ride. The most commonly bent traffic rule involved taking up all the lanes of traffic (while moving slowly) and continuing to go through traffic signals after they have changed to red (‘Stop’). When cyclists follow each other through intersections after the signal changed, some riders stop in the middle of the road, make eye-contact and talk with drivers in the front cars of on-coming traffic, and discourage these drivers from entering the intersection. This practice of blocking traffic until the Mass has passed through an intersection is called ‘corking’. Although corking is a norm-violation during typical traffic conditions, during CM rides it is actually the norm. Ferrell (2011) describes corking as self-governing behaviour that create ‘order’ on CM rides, even if that order is only intelligible to other riders (and appears as law-breaking to non-riders). Corking is a direct action tactic to create a smooth, safe, and stop-less ride, that seeks friendly relations with surrounding car traffic.

For people in disadvantageous social positions, liberatory community-building events (like CM) can provide safety, self-expression, and common cause (Lewis, 2015). As such, ecstatic rituals are participatory activities and all CM riders are active participants during rides. Thus, CM is a ‘levelling’ activity, in which anyone with a cheap bicycle and minimal physical abilities can join. Also, a ride’s collective will is enforced, since people are doing the activity together, and with each other’s contributions and implied consent. Consequently, riders seem emboldened by CM’s participatory nature, thereby encouraging further norm-violating behaviours (which can become contagious).

As with any other ecstatic ritual, CM rides are intended to be happy, celebratory affairs. All are invited to participate and encouraged to have fun. The ride tends to be liberating, as people can explore parts of a city they have never been to before and tour it with a large number of other people, thus enhancing the experience. As a structureless event, lacking leaders, the CM’s occasional rowdiness creates a mood akin to parties where attendees cannot predict their fellow partiers’ behaviours, thus creating an element of surprise and anticipation. Spectators who witness the rides (either from cars or sidewalks) often appear thrilled to see so many cyclists together in one place – especially when people are costumed or doing norm-flaunting behaviour. Spectators regularly cheer, laugh, call-out, smile, and talk to passing-by riders.

The communal, fun nature of CM suggests a strong affinity with carnival. CM events aim to celebrate, in an unpredictable fashion, the novelty of opposing something mainstream (see Notes From Nowhere, 2003). According to Crimethinc (2004), carnivality is key to structureless events that can be festive or confrontational, or switch back and forth between the two. A bicycle parade can bring together locals for a fun community event, or draw attention to a particular issue (local transportation policies, global environmental concerns, the crushing monotony of city life), or interfere directly with something objectionable by serving as a slow-moving barricade – or provide a blank canvas to which each participant can bring her own intentions. Last but not least, riding bicycles is fun. (p. 100)

Moreover, as with ecstatic rituals, CM constitutes a tabula rasa where existing order is challenged and overturned. Interactions between the powerful and powerless are changed through direct
action during ritual. Bicycles are typically the weakest and most at-risk vehicles, but CM ‘turns the tables’, as police and car drivers must tolerate bicyclists’ larger-than-usual numbers. The resulting interaction between these groups is liberatory for CM participants – cyclists become more assertive of their statuses and rights, during the ride and the following month. I have seen many conventional cyclists – who I’d never expect to angrily challenge an aggressive car or ignore police orders – be emboldened by fellow empowered riders and change their normal behaviour. Consequently, one of CM’s longer-lasting outcomes is the willingness of more cyclists to use roads (and not sidewalks), assert their rights, and ride regularly. This individual freedom is sought and obtained through collective action.

Critical Mass as rebellious play

Shepard (2011) describes in *Play, Creativity, and Social Movements* the central qualities that ‘play’ embodies for social movements. Play is a process that involves ‘an impulse towards unfettered freedom’ (p. 7). While difficult to define, Shepard (2011) characterises play as a ‘spirit, which encompasses theatrical presentation as improvisation, motion, and an ethos of action’ (p. 8). Thus, primarily, play involves affect and emotional needs. As such, CM rides combine the expectant experience of waiting for a party to begin (before a ride starts), and feelings of belonging to an exclusive group of people who share similar interests. CM rides satisfy emotional needs and generate new emotions. Various emotions are expressed legitimately on rides, including contentedness, exuberance, or even anger. Riders generally know they will be able to express such emotions and thus anticipate CM meeting their emotional needs.

Play typically involves humour. CM rides, while sometimes serious affairs (i.e. dealing with confrontational police or automobile drivers), also involve much humour. People regularly laugh – at fellow riders' funny costumes, tell jokes, use ironic comments about drivers or police, and sometimes laugh without discernible cause. The latter laughter's source seems to derive from humorous joy generated when interacting with many people, in a new place and manner. As described earlier, riders may dress in unusual, creative, shocking, or amusing ways, creating humorous situations and encounters. Since riders have many sudden experiences during CM rides, an immediate response is often surprised laughter. According to Shepard (2011), play also involves monotony-disrupting pleasure. Someone can attend CM and find instant, free entertainment. CM rides may be many things – whimsical, dangerous, or joyous – but they are rarely boring. Consequently, a CM ride is typically stimulating and pleasurable. When large numbers of people collectively feel pleasure, this ‘disarms systems of power’ (Shepard, 2015, 19). Happy, enthusiastic people who share a bond are more likely to flaunt authority – and do so with a smile and laugh.

Play is embodied in a performative spirit, where happiness, expression, and freedom are not just central goals, but also the principal means. CM involves this performative spirit, particularly as a public act with many willing, joyful participants. CM participants know they will become an audience touring new places and will themselves be performers – for fellow riders and others who encounter CM. This spirit attracts people who wish to perform and transforms those disinclined to perform once they join the ride. CM’s theatrical ‘presentations’ involve improvisation, since no script exists for participants to follow. The presentations are set in motion: not mere dialogue, but also physical action. Structureless CM rides roam around urban environments, constantly relocating performances and performers to the presence of new audiences, whether on sidewalks, roads, or even those observing from building windows. Being ‘on display’ generally provides thrills for CM riders, just as actors feel thrilled in their theatrical performances.

As with Ehrenreich’s ecstatic ritual, play involves an erosion or inversion of social status. People who usually enjoy high status tend to lose it during play, while others lacking such standing accumulate more status and power. Typical hierarchies in urban spaces are changed during CM. Bicyclists – usually relegated physically and socially to a road’s margins (or pushed off altogether) by automobiles – suddenly became dominant actors. CM participants gain status as
drivers lose status. Diminished driver status can be perceived in cyclist’s ideological proclamations of the moral or environmental inferiority of automobiles (e.g. one Berkeley CM rider loudly exhorted nearby drivers to stop using their cars), but also through the real, physical marginalization drivers experience due to CM. Even small rides (as few as 10 bikes) take a substantial portion of road; riders then constitute a formidable presence that drivers must contend with. Thus, Shepard (2011) argues that play potentially results in ‘topsy-turvy’ social relations.

Play is part of a continuum experienced between work and leisure, and pleasure and games. Play is not exclusively any of those things, but hovers somewhere between. CM’s play is in clear opposition to certain negative experiences, CM is a diversion from life’s undesirable emotions and states of mind. The pain, misery, and tedium that play distracts people from is also omnipresent prior to a CM ride. Many – possibly all – repeat riders looked forward to the end of the month and their chance to ride in a large group of cyclists. As CM occurs on Friday evenings, it marks the end of the average employee’s work week and provides the opportunity to ‘unwind’. CM’s playfulness helps generate a non-occupational and non-commercial environment. As Linn (2009) argues, play and ‘make believe’ are crucial aspects of people’s lives (especially for children), and are rare in commodified and privatised spaces, like roads.

Play involves pranks and pleasure; taking oneself too seriously, being inflexible and humourless, and permitting boredom suppresses play. As mentioned earlier, CM riders regularly – occasionally unconsciously – tried to fool police by leading them on impossible-to-follow routes. Numerous Ohio and California rides went down narrow alleys or paths that police cars could not follow cyclists. Or, as in some cases in California, rides have deliberately taken unpredictable routes; SF’s motorcycle police were caught off-guard by quick route changes that required them to turn around catch-up to a ride’s front. In many of these cases, cyclists actually discussed – and laughed about – how best to lead police on cat-and-mouse-style chases. But, CM also involves pleasure – not just trickery. CM rides incorporate real feelings of joy. I have seen and spoken to dozens of people during a CM ride’s first moments, whose faces were beaming with pleasure and happiness. Typically these cyclists are CM first-timers, and are having a unique, collective bike experience. The immediate feelings generated by rides cause infectious smiles. Such pleasure also involved catharsis, an eruption of bottled-up emotions. People sometimes shouted with joy and enthusiasm. On numerous rides, I witnessed people visibly sigh and breathe-out heavily, signifying a release of tensions. People have explained to me that ride attendance served to distract themselves from their responsibilities and to ‘live in the moment’. The overwhelming abundance of rider happiness is evidenced in nearly every publicly-available ride photograph, wherein most riders possess content, smiling, or laughing expressions.

Collective play also involves community-building; for example, Shepard (2011) points to the establishment of neighbourhood-based guerrilla gardens. CM is a place for like-minded people to meet. Attendees see each other monthly and expand their social networks. Even when only episodically attending rides, I usually saw people from previous rides, which precipitated interesting conversations. Clearly, many riders were very good friends due to their joint CM participation. Some friendships extended beyond CM, while others were only experienced monthly. CM strongly resembles a street-party, albeit a highly mobile one. As with parties, people mill about, chat with and meet new people, and listen to music. No real objective exists, except to be in others’ presence, in a pleasurable setting. As with counter-cultural ‘camps’ that facilitate community construction (Jones, 2010), CM is an activity juxtaposed against the dominant culture, aiming to create a resilient, alternative community.

Critical Mass as a mobile temporary autonomous zone

Bey (1991) describes a TAZ as ‘an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to reform elsewhere/elsewhen, before the state can crush it’ (p. 101). As such, TAZs appear in
unpredictable places, and evade state detection and control. Numerous phenomena can be classified as TAZs, including ‘maroon’ escaped slave communities, intentional housing communities, pirate ‘utopias’, Medieval festivals, nightclubs, anarchist conferences, ‘forest conclave[s] of eco-saboteurs’ (p. 106), black markets, or rebel encampments. TAZs are typically conceived of as ‘freedom from’ an oppressive, hierarchical institution, but they can also be ‘freedom to’ some alternate way of life.

A TAZ is best understood in action. TAZs exist because people consciously do something to create them. Thus, CM appears to be a TAZ since it is an active affair, in-motion, and non-stationary. In fact, CM can only be said to ‘exist’ when people who identify with CM ride together, establishing its existence with conscious and reflexive riders. When riders cease to ride, CM disappears, too, as with other TAZs. Consequently, CM is less protest, than a free, liberatory space (Bruzzone, 2012).

TAZs are ‘pirate utopias’, or places of refuge for rebels, rejects, dreamers, and those who would attack ‘the system’ (Bey, 1991, 79). A TAZ is a safe space for planning and staging these ‘attacks’ – which are rarely violent – upon the dominant culture, by raiding or subverting it. Likewise, authorities view CM as an offense to order. The state considers places occupied by pirates (including CM participants) enemy territory – thus, as spaces for law enforcement to reclaim. Yet, using localised knowledge, crowd anonymity, and ride size, CM participants assert their presence and pursue collective goals, despite the state’s desire to crush their TAZ. CM claims road space and subverts roads’ purposes through direct action. CM rides commandeers road not for transportation, but ludic resistance and leisure (Aldred & Jungnickel, 2012).

TAZs, like pirate utopias, prioritise autonomy. CM is concerned with maintaining its independence: from automobile and consumer culture, the state and its agents of law and order, as well as non-profit advocacy organizations who are interested in lobbying for specific demands (e.g. more bike-lanes). In addition, CM’s autonomy illustrates and motivates its desire to control its own event. Therefore, outside forces that tell CM to ride or not ride, to go here or there, or even self-appointed authorities operating within the ride itself, are generally ignored on principle by riders. Although a group activity, CM’s approach to leisure is to encourage ‘care for the self’ and ‘care for the other’ through healthy exercise, fun, and mutual aid (see Rojek, 2005).

TAZs are temporary uprisings against the existing order, arising suddenly (‘guerrilla’-like: p. 101), that disappear before the state can crush them (Bey, 1991). CM rides are only created when like-minded cyclists gather together. Then, in a flaunting of convention (and often traffic laws), cyclists ride together, changing road users’ typical experience within car culture. CM rides may appear briefly on a road, then turn and disappear; thus, many drivers who witnessed CM only observed it for a few moments and then quickly lost sight of it. As also suggested by ecstatic ritual and play, CM rides may flaunt authority by evading police who seek control. On numerous occasions in Akron, police tried to stop riders, only to be ignored as cyclists fled away. By making repeated turns, police had a harder time trapping the rides. Often these rides deliberately fragmented into multiple groupings of cyclists on different roads. Police could not pursue everyone, leading police to isolate and ticket a few riders. CM’s brief ‘exit’ from capitalist and state control mirrors temporary exile communities (Grubačić & O’Hearn, 2016).

CM creates a space which can ‘flower’ like other TAZs. Rides have the potential to temporarily transform a road or neighbourhood – from an empty street, or a busy road with fast-moving, noisy, and smelly automobiles – into a unique, sociable, and relaxed space. When CM clogs streets and slows traffic, pedestrians or residents have greater opportunity to engage those on the road, changing social interaction patterns. CM allows people to express themselves and create (and renegotiate) CM-based norms, as the ride ‘polices’ itself via less-violent forms of social control: smiling, listening, and social pressure (cf., Niman, 2011).

Since Bey (1991) views TAZs as antithetical to the nuclear family, other forms of social relations, intimacy, and needs predictably arise. ‘Family’ is defined much more broadly during a CM ride. Many riders have known each other – sometimes only from previous CM rides – for many years and have a strong affinity with and affection for each other. This ‘family’ is far larger than a procreative family. Importantly, anyone who chooses to ride is allowed to join the family.
Riders regularly establish ‘in-group’ relations with each other, even with strangers, and treat them as new friends, reinforcing CM’s structurelessness. The family also defends itself from threats (just as nuclear families do), protecting each other from hostile cars, police, or other road troubles. However, families are apt to occasionally have disagreements and conflicts; for the CM ‘family’, these problems – whether practical, political, or both – are sometimes interpersonal, but sometimes involve disruptive conflict between one person and many riders.

Bey (1991) compares the TAZ to a festival (also reflective of ecstatic ritual) or a dinner party that has no authority, what Dowson and colleagues (Dowson et al., 2015) call a ‘freeparty’ – just conviviality and celebration. CM is a leaderless event that intends to connect people’s physical activities to emotional and psychic pleasure, thus constituting a festival. Music also plays a central purpose for Bey, serving as an organizational principle. Many CMs, including the aforementioned SF ride, prioritise the presence of music, insofar as bicyclists with stereo-systems assume responsibility for making entering traffic to initiate rides. Beyond festive pleasure, there is a subtle (and sometimes articulated) design of utopianism, too, in which everyday life takes on an intensification and idealised quality. Riders seek safer roads, and thus pursue that more ideal world in the present, syncung their aspirations with actions, just as festivals or dinner parties can represent communal ideals.

A TAZ involves a form of psychic nomadism or rootless cosmopolitanism. Cyclists carry their CM biographies with them, from place to place, re-enacting CM experiences previously had or heard of, and bringing other life experiences to rides. Cyclists choose to converge (or not) together; thus, CM connects participant psyches. Personally, I have witnessed and participated in comparable CM events in numerous cities, even though I am the only one with those exact CM experiences. Thus, riders feel like they are part of a global CM culture that can effortlessly transplant global CM values.

TAZs are horizontalist, anti-authoritarian, and web-like, just as is CM. The transmission of CM culture occurs via networks. People may know each other, but even new riders usually know no one is in control of a CM ride or of what CM itself is. This assumption generally prevents an individual from assuming leadership within CM; such cooptation typically fail, as rides lack any formal structure or authority system. People who attempt to speak on CM’s behalf are often ridiculed and marginalised. Most individuals who explain CM to the curious outsiders will contextualise their answers, typically stating their answer is only theirs and does not represent all other viewpoints. Happiness seems to persist when all can possess their own opinions. Thus, participants are able to maintain a rough equality of worthiness. Riders communicate (or not) as desired and no individual is presumed to have greater sway. Thus, CM rides can only grow organically, spreading via social connections: participants invite their friends, neighbours, and others to participate in future rides. Consequently no true centre exists to CM networks, since no single person’s absence would prevent CM. Even the spread of CM across space (i.e. establishing new rides) is done via web-like connections by past CM participants, or those who know of CM and wish to emulate it locally.

Importantly, CM has a temporary location and space; it exists briefly and then is gone. It isn’t everywhere in a city, but in one particular place (although, given the size of a ride, it may take up substantial space). CM doesn’t always exist – instead it occurs at regularly timed intervals, with advanced notice so people can congregate when planned. Like other TAZs, CM has existed in the past, it exists in the present, and will likely exist in the future, too. It is reasonable to assume that CM rides (or CM-like rides) will continue to occur for some time, popping up here and there, even if under different names or banners, since forces influencing their formation – unsafe roads, car culture, oil wars, etcetera – still exist. Yet, TAZs are also tactics of disappearance, too. CM disappears when riders disperse. Many rides never officially ‘end’; a ride’s size eventually becomes so small – as individuals leave – that remaining participants decide to do something different. Likewise, CM can also re-appear whenever riders re-converge and self-identify as ‘Critical Mass’. During one SF ride, one portion of the ride split-off and eventually merged back once they found
a shortcut, regaining the original ride’s size. Other rides end at predetermined times or when a particular destination is reached. Ultimately, the non-permitted use of urban spaces constitutes ‘space hijacking’ and disrupts the totalitarian and profit-oriented uses of space, practices reflective of TAZs (Gilchrist & Ravenscroft, 2013) that permits spheres of licensed transgression (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Roley, Morey, & Szmigin, 2016). As with ‘roving bandits’ of canoeists, CM’s TAZ is best understood as a mobile space of ludic freedom (Gilchrist & Ravenscroft, 2012).

Discussion

CM is many things to many people – its populist charm results from its adaptive and free nature, causing it to change appearance depending on vantage point and the moment of inquiry. But, from the perspective of riders, CM has been a place to find community, escape everyday life, to dream, act out, and be rebellious – thus the repetition of themes above (costuming, tabula rasa, humour, community-building, festival, and police evasion). Thus, CM participation is often a transformative experience, especially for first-time riders. For many urban-dwellers, these experiences create immediate joy and temporal happiness. Unlike conventional bike rides or races, CM invites spontaneity and rebelliousness. Unlike much other physical activity or exercise, and despite its official structurelessness, CM features normative practices that violate typical conventions, location of activity, and expected outcomes.

Unlike more politicised direct actions – e.g. blockading a corporate office building, pieing an unpopular politician, or joining a labour strike – CM’s ‘goals’ are more easily reached, with less severe risks, and with greater potential for ‘success’ and happiness. Thus, CM’s possibilities for happiness and freedom-attainment are higher than for direct actions that present greater risks and lower odds of success. Even though structureless, CM constitutes a collective pathway towards happiness – indeed, the lack of rigid structure increases the potential for happiness as people are freed from expectations and capitalist production-consumption cycles (c.f. tribalism in St. John, 1997). Happiness within CM seems best defined as a collectively joyous, playful experience, while freedom can be defined as a temporal and spatial space for experimentation and leisure not bounded by work or consumption. CM’s efforts to transform an individual’s experience from something passive and consumptive to active and creative is an important leisurely intervention. As opposed to engaging with each other as consumers of products or ‘spectacles’, CM riders interact in an embodied, cathartic event meant to subvert suppressive norms and liberate the individual. This analysis of mainstream society and corresponding counter-hegemonic strategy is reflected in situationism (Debord, 1983; Vaneigem, 2012), which involves concerns similar to Shepard (2011) and Bey (1991).

Although leisure activities often avoid overt politicization, communities united by their common interests and shared experiences can create political identities (Wheaton, 2007). CM gathers politicised cyclists, empowering them through group rides. It is difficult to locate a ‘protest’-like activity that facilitates greater happiness than CM, perhaps due to its nature as an ecstatic ritual that provides regular, timely opportunities to experience happiness. The catharsis and subversion of ecstatic rituals generates happiness. Group participation in a fun, often rebellious ritual is not only memorable and socially-bonding, but the communalism also creates positive and happy memories that people seek to repeat. This ecstasy is usually naturally-produced – rarely resulting from drug consumption, like ecstasy – and thus resembles the ecstasy generated at other communal events, like club-parties or raves (Malbon, 1999), albeit without artificial chemical stimulus.

Play is a means to achieve happiness. People – adults included – generally like to ‘play’, especially in public, and enjoy performing for each other. CM involves play, although riders are unlikely to classify their group actions as ‘play’. Like most other physical activities and sports, CM’s play generates physiological endorphins and happy emotions (especially as CM is a non-macho activity; see Powell, Stiles, Haff, & Kilgore, 2005). Exercise generally improves
overall happiness (Rasmussen & Laumann, 2014), but such an effect is surely compounded because of CM’s collective, playful nature.

The TAZ is a space and time in which conditions change, and for CM these changes enable greater happiness. People can feel safe in CM space – even with its unpredictability and open-endedness – increasing the likelihood of happy emotions. The sporadic and opportunistic nature of the TAZ and CM reflects Rojek’s (2000) characterization of ‘wild leisure’. Since roads are often stressful and dangerous places for bicyclists, CM creates a mobile geographical space in which more positive feelings and safer (although still spontaneous) experiences can be had. This autonomy enables play, which is ritualised monthly. The conscious pursuit of leisurely freedom and autonomy, while an under-studied dimension of recreation (Kearns, Collins, & Bates, 2017), seems central to CM.

The many political values, causes, and strategic applications in movement campaigns makes CM useful. Thus, CM serves an important function in radical movements and countercultures, since it tolerates difference, inspires, creates community, and provides authority-challenging experiences that can be transferred to other situations. CM may be used as political protest and a tactic to ‘monkeywrench’ various routines (e.g. navigation of clogged transportation systems). Many individuals enjoy feeling empowered on rides, while others regret how rides make them complicit in inconveniencing other street users. Rambunctiousness that provides thrill, meaning, and happiness for some, alienates others.

CM’s leaderless character facilitates its flexibility and subjectivity, but also reinforces its ambiguities and potential disappointment (c.f. Rojek, 2014). Diverse purposes allows many individuals to discover their interests reflected on rides, which may appear chaotic and formless to others. Consequently, CM has difficulty claiming credit for anything concrete and social, as its clearest results are transformed individuals. Still, CM’s central purpose is consciously broad and vague. As a ‘meme’, CM is easily copied and re-worked for different purposes in different times and places (e.g. Reclaim the Streets, Burning Man, etc.). As an idea, CM cannot be easily prevented, since people who hear about it can recreate it in their own locale. CM possesses certain key, transferrable characteristics – like ecstatic ritual, play, and temporary autonomous zones – that make it difficult for its happy participants to forget.

Notes
1. CM rides occur internationally and have occurred in at least 575 cities (assessment of a crowd-sourced list of contemporary (October 2017) rides: http://criticalmass.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_rides).
2. Despite being ‘leaderless’, individuals do ‘organise’ within CM: arguing goals, creating propaganda, attracting future participants, and providing guidance and suggestion during events.
4. Such ‘costumed’ riders attended during colder months, too, apparently indifferent to temperature.
5. He always returned to the seat safely each time.
6. I spoke to this man, expecting socially awkwardness or signs of mental disorder, but he was friendly and coherent.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor
Dana Williams is associate professor of sociology at California State University, Chico and has research interests in social movements and social inequalities (e.g., class, gender, and race). Published work has appeared in Critical Sociology, Journal of Black Studies, Social Science Journal, and Contemporary Justice Review. Williams’s most recent book is Black Flags and Social Movements: A Sociological Analysis of Movement Anarchism (Manchester University Press, 2017), which is an international, comparative assessment of contemporary anarchist movements.
References


Hoffman, N. V. (1968). We are the people our parents warned us against. Chicago: Quadrangle.


