

Riding on Empty: External Abeyance Structures and New York's Critical Mass

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Introduction

Scholars have devoted more attention to collective action and mobilization during the early and mature stages of social movements than to later stages. Some movements decline and disappear, while others decline but persist at levels of low mobilization and lesser impact than in their heyday. The question addressed in this paper stems from the latter phenomenon: Why do some social movement groups continue to operate at low levels of mobilization, rather than disappear altogether? Why do activists not move on to other activities? What are the causes and processes of movement continuity?

Verta Taylor, borrowing from Mizuchi (1983), labeled this phenomenon “abeyance” and defined the process of abeyance as one in which “movements sustain themselves in nonreceptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another” (Taylor 1989: 761). Taylor’s explanation for why abeyance was possible focused on how a social movement group is organized and the type of membership that its organization helps to maintain. More specifically, Taylor suggested that a social movement organization was more likely to survive in abeyance when it was highly centralized, maintained a small and exclusive membership of long-term and highly dedicated activists, and offered those activists a cultural depth that was larger than the movement itself (Taylor 1989; Rupp and Taylor 1990).

The main argument presented here is that the abeyance structure identified by Taylor is but one possible organizational form that can lead to group continuity. The empirical findings suggest that different patterns and configurations of movement organization can provide different paths toward the same outcome. Indeed, different organizational forms—looking primarily at the centralized-decentralized and exclusive-inclusive dimensions—represent strategic tradeoffs, activating certain group advantages while foreclosing others (Jasper 2006).

While exclusivity and centralization contribute to the maintenance of what will here be called “internal resources”—meaning a small, devoted and ideologically driven cadre of activists—other “external resources,” for example, first-time participants and new members, are necessarily excluded. Conversely, though, inclusivity and de-centralization can activate and attract external resources, in the form of a continual stream of curious, casual, and unattached first-timers, which, in the end, can keep a group functioning and active. There is, in short, more than one path toward post-peak continuance—more than one type of abeyance structure. While previous research points toward the existence of internal abeyance structures this paper suggests an alternative: external abeyance structures.

The research findings presented here are derived from a case study of Critical Mass in New York City, a group which is decentralized, highly inclusive, and comprised of numerous casual participants and tourists. Moreover, it is these very characteristics of the group that have contributed to its continuance, despite the fact that its levels of mobilization and general public impact is much lower than it was eight to ten years ago.

Finally, this alternative path toward successful abeyance leaves open the question about how externally located activists, not only from New York, but from other cities throughout the United States and abroad, come to learn about Critical Mass and choose to participate, even under present circumstances. The answer offered here focuses on the group’s reputation: the group is well-known not only for its inclusive and democratic organization, but as a “party on wheels,” a carnivalesque spectacle that, simply put, is fun. This creates an impetus for a continual stream of new participants while a highly inclusive and decentralized form of organization easily accommodates them, thus keeping Critical Mass going.

The Factors of Abeyance: Internal Abeyance Structures

Previous efforts to explain abeyance processes have focused on groups' organizational principles and the ways in which group organization relates to the constitution of its membership. The organizational principles that have proven to be the most effective are those that are internally oriented, helping to produce a smaller but more effective and focused core membership; hence the dubbing "internal abeyance structures."¹ Verta Taylor, in examining the National Woman's Party (NWP) as an abeyance organization, highlighted two important factors about its organization that she claims enabled it to survive during a period latency in the women's movement from 1945 into the 1960s: its exclusiveness and its centralization (Taylor 1989; Rupp and Taylor 1990).

By exclusiveness, Taylor is referring specifically to a group's insistence on a small, uniform, and homogenous membership. While groups might seek maximum inclusiveness during periods of peak mobilization, abeyance requires the opposite. Increasing exclusivity, whereby organizations "attempt to expel or hold constant their membership," helps to produce "a relatively homogenous cadre of activists suited to the limited activism undertaken" (Taylor 1989: 767-8). Conversely, Zald and Ash argue that inclusive organizations are much more susceptible to "the ebb and flow sentiments" emanating from the larger society, thereby making such groups more likely to "fade away." Like Taylor, they suggest that exclusivity helps to ensure stability and staying power of personnel over the long term (Zald and Ash 1966: 331, 334).

According to Taylor, exclusive organizations make for a smaller overall membership, but one that is particularly well suited for survival during tough times and movement decline. Most notably, high levels of exclusivity relate to what Taylor calls "purposive commitment" among

¹ See table in appendix for internal versus external abeyance structures.

the groups' members, or a willingness to make tremendous personal sacrifice without many rewards. While this is an important characteristic for all social movement organizations, Taylor argues that it is a necessary condition for abeyance. High levels of purposive commitment in the NWP was aided by the group's exclusive membership and enabled its members to focus more on ideological purity rather than on organizational development, or pragmatic political goals, thereby making its members more willing to make the personal sacrifices "to maintain a collective challenge" (766).

Similarly, exclusivity helps ensure another crucial membership criteria for abeyance: temporality of participation. In order for an organization to survive in abeyance, says Taylor, it must be able to hold the very core of movement activists. If the most experienced and devoted members quit during tough times, presumably there would be nobody to take their place. This means that the small, exclusive, ideological focused membership of an abeyance organization will consist of people that have been around for a long time and have made the movement their life's work. Perhaps the "most striking characteristic of the NWP," in this regard, according to Taylor, "was advanced age" (766).

In addition to its exclusivity, abeyance structures, says Taylor, are characterized by a high degree of centralization. Centralization refers to a clearly defined hierarchical command structure, whereby a single individual takes on nearly all of the responsibility for decision making and planning. Centralization, Taylor says, "has the advantage of producing the organizational stability, coordination, and technical expertise necessary for movement survival" (768). Moreover, it makes possible a more singular and definitive agenda.

Movement culture can help us to better understand processes of mobilization and demobilization, and might even be thought of as a "resource" in its own right (Johnston and

Klandermans 1995: 23; Fine 1995: 131-132). Moreover, the ability of a social movement organization to produce a distinct, deep, and alternative culture has been identified as a factor for abeyance (Taylor 1989; Taylor and Whittier 1995: 165-7; Holland and Cable 2002).

Taylor argues that a successful abeyance organization must offer its members a cultural framework that serves as a viable alternative to the dominant culture of the larger society. Like the other four factors of abeyance that she identifies, culture works to stabilize and maintain internal membership, insulating participants from the inhospitable social and political environment of the outside world. Taylor argues that an “elaborate alternative cultural framework” produced by and for the group “provide[s] security and meaning for those who reject the established order and remain in the group” (Taylor 1989: 769). For the NWP this culture was articulated within the confines of the Alva Belmont House, which was not only an organizational headquarters, but a domicile, a place that enabled and facilitated “mother-daughter or sororal relationships” of love, companionship, and nurturing (769). Taylor argues that social movement groups that “cultivate and sustain rich symbolic lives” can “enhance their abeyance function by helping to hold members” (770). Put differently, cultural depth contributes to continuity by offering a sort of sustenance and nurturing to long-term membership, thereby stabilizing and maintaining core activists by insulating them from the external environment.

The five factors of abeyance discussed above—exclusiveness, purposive commitment, temporality, centralization, and culture—have been the starting point for other studies of the abeyance process. Notably, they are all internal characteristics of a group and its membership. Indeed, Taylor’s model and its variations suggest that the groups best able to survive and continue in hostile environments are those that effectively insulate the core of the group from it, such that the main cadre can nurture itself until a more opportune moment arises in which

remobilization can occur. This means that a social movement group must be organized in such a way that its internal resources—in the personage of its most devoted long-term activists—must be kept alive and active, even at the expense of larger external impact and interaction, including at the expense of potential new recruits. Indeed, research has shown that successful abeyance tends to go hand-in-hand with limited political effectiveness precisely because it is so inwardly oriented (Sawyers and Meyer 1999). Likewise, Zald and Ash argue that movement maintenance depends largely on the ability to “maintain membership in the face of changes in the larger society,” that is, to insulate activists (Zald and Ash 1966: 330).

Social movement scholars have also identified frames that are unique to the abeyance process and are effective during decline precisely because they favor internal over external resources. One study finds that successful abeyance requires the adoption of a “retention frame” (Marullo et al. 1996). A retention frame is a narrowing of the plurality of frames that exist during periods of mobilization, helping to better define “the common core of beliefs among core activists,” thereby “leading to convergence or collapsing of previously distinct frames” (Marullo et al 1996: 20). The result of retention framing is “to keep active those who are more deeply committed to the fundamental purposes of the movement,” thereby contributing to the abeyance process by holding existing members in place at the expense of attracting new ones, which might be accomplished through the inverse: broader and more externally appealing frames. Similarly, Mooney and Hunt identify “restrictive master frames” as those from among a broader “repertoire of interpretations” that operate during periods of abeyance (Mooney and Hunt 1996: 190-1).

In a more recent study of abeyance structures, internal processes were found to be even more important for local grassroots SMOs, whose levels of mobilization are generally more closely tied to internal organizational factors than is true for the larger national groups that are

the focus of other studies (Holland and Cable 2002). In short, existing literature treats abeyance structures as deriving from the ability to retain or reduce the existing membership of a social movement group, rather than attract new ones from the external environment. The following case study of New York City's Critical Mass, though, suggests an alternative model: an abeyance structure that is based upon inclusiveness, decentralization, an externally oriented culture, and a continual stream of short-term and casual participants; that is, it is an external abeyance structure, achieving the group's post-peak continuance by activating a nearly endless stream of new participants from the outside, rather than retaining those on the inside.

Case Background: The Rise and Fall of Critical Mass in New York City

Critical Mass was started in San Francisco in 1992 and quickly spread to cities across the United States and around the world. On the last Friday of each month, participants of Critical Mass gather on their bicycles, at a designated meeting place in their respective cities, and proceed to ride through the streets together, taking over the road and preventing what would otherwise be considered the normal flow of traffic.

By disrupting the normal routines of city traffic, Critical Mass participants demand the attention of drivers, pedestrians, and city officials and highlight some of the issues of concern to urban cyclists and environmentalists. These issues generally revolve around, but are by no means limited to the following: the lack of bike lanes and other infrastructure, safety for cyclists in inhospitable urban environments, changing the understood and accepted uses of public roads, and promoting environmentally friendly forms of transportation.²

² As will be discussed in detail below, the precise goals of Critical Mass are ill-defined and no list is exhaustive or definitive. Indeed, one of the central arguments presented here is that the lack of any clearly stated collective objectives, which itself stems from the group's completely decentralized organizational structure, is an invitation for people to participate for any reason that they choose.

The first ride in New York City was held in April 1993. Between 1993 and 2004, it grew substantially. In the period between 2000 and 2004 there were an estimated 3,000 – 5,000 participants attending each ride.³ When the ride proceeded, automobile traffic along the Critical Mass route, and on nearby cross-streets, came to a standstill. According to one police officer, the Critical Mass ride, in its heyday, “gridlocked all of lower Manhattan...everything.”

New York City officials, initially caught off-guard by Critical Mass, started giving it serious attention in the summer of 2004. As part of a larger police action targeting protesters during the 2004 Republican National Convention, the NYPD arrested 264 of the estimated 5,000 Critical Mass participants on the Friday preceding the Convention (Democracy Now!). All of the rides thereafter were heavily policed, with large numbers of police officers assembling alongside protestors. Participants were regularly arrested and ticketed and the city passed new laws enabling the police to more easily disrupt the rides.

Aggressive policing coincided with a steep drop-off in the levels of participation. By 2005 the average size of a Critical Mass ride in New York City ranged from between 4 – 125 people, a size that remains typical.⁴ A significant police contingent still accompanies every ride and is sometimes larger than the ride itself.⁵ A smaller group makes it even easier for the police to punish minor traffic violations; indeed, the smaller and more recent rides are often orderly and non-confrontational. One might say, with some exceptions, that they have been successfully

³ Estimates based on newspaper reports and interviews with participants. One police officer, who claims to have been on duty at every Critical Mass ride since 2003, estimated that the largest group he ever saw was 6,000. From a stationary position, the officer said that it took over twenty minutes for the entire group to pass by—they were taking up all lanes of traffic and “moving at a good clip.”

⁴ Estimates based on personal observation and interviews with movement participants.

⁵ During an interview (January 2012) one police officer joked that “we disrupt more traffic getting here than Critical Mass does.”

policed.⁶ Despite a nascent self-conscious awareness by participants to obey the basic laws of traffic, the police remain ready to distribute tickets for the slightest legal infractions, which are virtually un-enforced outside of the Critical Mass event—for example, riding without a bell, or riding after dark without proper lighting.

While vigilant policing has caused a significant decline in ridership, Critical Mass continues to occur on a regular basis, on the last Friday of every month. That is, people continue to show up and participate. It is not uncommon to find, among those in attendance, one or two persons who used to participate in every single ride but who have not attended in years. The reason most commonly given for the long hiatus was that the police crackdowns had grown too severe.

Simultaneously, the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) has undergone a major transformation, itself becoming one of the city’s largest proponents of urban cycling. In addition to building 200 miles of new bike lanes, the DOT has developed a host of programs designed to make cycling safer and more convenient, including, for example, the expansion of indoor bike parking (the “Bikes in Buildings” program).⁷ Moreover, the city has organized a variety of group bike rides and routes, filling at least one of the niches served by Critical Mass.⁸

The new bike-friendly stance of the city has led many in Critical Mass to declare victory. TIMES UP!, a self-described “direct action environmental organization” and the single largest promoter of Critical Mass in New York City, described the changes within the DOT as the direct

⁶ These exceptions appear to have everything to do with size, suggesting that there is literally a “critical mass”: the smaller rides simply can not take over the road and are so vulnerable to police monitoring that even riding outside the bike lane can result in the ride being stopped. When rides grow larger, though, at approximately 75 people, minor infractions are more difficult to detect, individual participants have more anonymity, the ride is more difficult to control, and it is more disruptive, for example, taking over the entire road.

⁷ See New York City Department of Transportation, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/bicyclists/bikemain.shtml>

⁸ In fact, “Bike Month NYC,” an event sponsored by the DOT and Transportation Alternatives, is described in terms analogous to those used by Critical Mass, as a “celebration of bicycling” (see <http://www.bikemonthnyc.org/>).

result of Critical Mass activists. In their narrative, Critical Mass was responsible for the transformation of the city's bicycle landscape: "after much persistence and global media embarrassment, the bicycle community got their way and New York City hired a new and bike friendly D.O.T. commissioner who had vision," and, as a result, we now have a "greener, safer and [more] bike friendly city" (TIMES UP!: "Critical Mass").

In short, the major improvements in bicycling infrastructure have made the issue of cyclists' safety less urgent, while the regularized and predictable policing activities have made participation in Critical Mass more costly. Nevertheless, the ride continues on a regular basis, often with fewer than fifteen people. The purpose here is not to explain why Critical Mass participation has declined so precipitously, but to ask why the ride continues to occur at all. Why haven't participants moved on to do other things? Why do people continue to show up and participate?

External Abeyance Structures:

The abeyance structure at work in the case of Critical Mass is different from the one described in the existing literature, suggesting that there is more than one path toward continuity during tough times. More specifically, Critical Mass is highly inclusive and decentralized. Both of these characteristics help secure a continual stream of new participants, who are "casual" rather than "purposive," and, in the temporal dimension, are as quick to leave as they were to show up. Indeed, a large contingent of participants at any given Critical Mass ride are tourists, visiting New York from cities throughout the United States, and the world. This suggests that just as exclusiveness capitalizes on a group's existing (internal) activist base, helping to secure

them in place, inclusiveness can attract and temporarily capture new members from the external environment, keeping a movement going even at a state of almost perpetual latency.⁹

In this sense the inclusive-exclusive and centralized-decentralized dimensions are strategic tradeoffs resembling the “organization dilemma”—more hierarchy can be more effective, but is less inviting for grassroots activists; and the “extension dilemma”—the larger a group gets the less coherent its goals (Jasper 2004: 7; 2006). In short, organizational principles shape different kinds of memberships and there is more than one type of membership that can lead to abeyance. The remainder of this section will explore these dimensions in the Critical Mass setting and the effect that it has on the constitution of its membership. But, before proceeding, it is important to point out that inclusiveness and decentralization alone do not necessarily result in successful abeyance. The effect of these factors on new recruitment—that is, their ability to capitalize on external resources—is mediated by culture and reputation, as will be discussed in the final section of this paper.

Case Study

Critical Mass is organized according to two key principles: inclusiveness and decentralization. Moreover, in both of these dimensions, Critical Mass operates at an extreme. With regard to inclusiveness, anyone can participate and everyone is welcome to. In fact, as will be discussed below, the precise boundary between “inside” and “outside” is murky and continually shifting, even during the course of single ride. As opposed to a “small elite vanguard,” Critical Mass membership is completely heterogeneous, capturing diversity even in political ideologies and objectives.

⁹ See Table 1 in appendix outlining the differences between internal and external abeyance structures.

Diversity and inclusion are not incidental to Critical Mass. Rather, they are central characteristics and members are proud and self-conscious of them, as manifested in a variety of symbolic representations. Participants often arrive in colorful costume, capes, masks and bandanas, a tradition that is celebrated at its fullest during the annual “Halloween ride,” on the last Friday in October. There one might witness elephants, mad scientists, the grim reaper, and all varieties of monsters riding alongside ordinary people of all ages, college students, men in business suits, grandmothers, and even children. One observer of a previous Halloween ride described it as a “phantasmagoria on wheels” (Horan 2001: 37). Yet, the Halloween ride merely an embellishment of the typical Critical Mass ride, which is always part “phantasmagoria.”

The bicycles that people bring to Critical Mass are themselves evidence of membership diversity and inclusion. As an observer of one ride described it, there were “twenty-dollar beaters, two-thousand-dollar road bikes,” and “four-thousand-dollar Y-frame mountain bikes” (Culley 2001: 69). Moreover, this evidence of diversity is often self-consciously embellished. The tandem bicycle—or, bicycle-for-two—while rare on the streets, is common at Critical Mass. In one instance, someone had rigged his bicycle such that the seat and handlebars were raised nearly five feet into the air, with the chain reconfigured vertically so that he could still ride it. In addition, non-cyclists often participate. Some attend on rollerblades, others ride skateboards, a few might simply try to run on foot, at least for stretches. In one instance, at a ride in New York observed as part of this research, a young man rode a gasoline-burning motorbike. He was welcomed like anyone else. In short, the group’s inclusion and diversity is celebrated, and put on display. From the spectator’s point of view—and there are many—it is a motley group.

Membership consists simply of those who decide to show up at a given ride. This even includes some who never intended to. Curious spectators, who might only happen to be in the

area during the day and time that a ride is soon to occur, sometimes end up participating. In one case, a man stumbled upon the ride having never heard of it and was convinced to try it out. In another instance, a girl on a bicycle happened to be turning on to Broadway Avenue at the moment Critical Mass was passing by, already en route. Taking note of the group, she asked, “is this Critical Mass?” and, upon being given confirmation, she excitedly joined the ride for the rest of its duration, postponing arrival at her original destination, if there was one.

While exclusivity helps produce ideological purity, allowing a group to function in abeyance by ensuring narrow and focused group behavior, inclusivity means that people can participate for whatever reason they choose. This is even the more the case in groups that are less centralized. Critical Mass, in addition to being inclusive, is highly decentralized. If there is any acknowledged organizing principle at all it is that there is no formal organizational structure or leadership. One participant-writer champions its “anarchic nature,” pointing out that “no one leads it, no one controls it, no one plans its routes and no one is the spokesperson” (Blaug 2002: 73).

Those who have participated in Critical Mass since its inception refuse to acknowledge themselves as leaders, even if they sometimes take on quasi-leadership roles. For example, it is regular practice, just before a ride is to begin, for a more experienced participant to address the group as a whole so that newcomers can be told what to expect. This address usually begins in the following way: “I’m not the leader, I’m just someone who’s done this before...”¹⁰ This non-leader then proceeds to explain that there is no regular or planned route. In addition, he or she will explain the basic rules of traffic, what can be expected from the police, and how to avoid getting a ticket.

¹⁰ This is a direct quote, taken from an observation of one specific ride, but the sentiment is typical and regularly expressed.

In the only observed instance of route planning, the route was determined by vote. At the September 2011 ride, members of Critical Mass collectively decided to ride directly down Broadway Avenue to Zuccotti Park, in order to join the then-nascent Occupy Wall Street protests. This was one of the largest rides observed during this research—an estimated 125 people. The police that followed the ride were quick to guess its destination, and, anxious to prevent its success, set up a roadblock ahead of the group.

The manner in which Critical Mass riders dealt with this situation further exemplifies its decentralized structure. Everyone shouted out the strategies that they believed were best and, in the end, different people followed whatever option they wanted: some stepped off their bikes, walked past the blockade on the sidewalk, and then continued down the road on their bicycles. Others turned the corner and rode down a parallel street, re-entering Broadway behind the blockade. Others still tried negotiating with the police in a kind and friendly manner. Haphazardly and leap-froggingly, without any central direction or organization, the group ultimately reached its destination.

While this anecdote helps illustrate a specific example of Critical Mass' decentralized, anarchic nature, there are many ways in which this has larger effects, which work as a factor for successful abeyance. Not having a leader or a hierarchy, Critical Mass also lacks a definitive agenda or collective goals. While the group is loosely founded and based on the core principles of cyclist rights and environmentalism there is no formal organization or leadership to promote these goals at the exclusion of others. The result is that each participant determines this on his or her own, meaning that anyone can participate for any reason that they choose or imagine. The upshot is that Critical Mass casts a broad net—almost anyone can find some reason that it's a good idea and so almost anyone is a potential member. Chris Carlsson, one of Critical Mass's

earliest participants and proponents says that “the motivations of Critical Massers are as numerous as the number of riders. Ask anyone why they are on a Critical Mass and you’ll get a response from a long list of possible answers” (Carlsson 2002b: 75).

Indeed, in interviews with participants in the New York City Critical Mass confirm this. One woman was motivated to attend after her father was killed in a cycling accident so that she could ride “in solidarity with bikers against car violence.” Many ride as an overt protest against oil dependency and all of its imaginable effects, ranging from the lack of bike lanes in New York City, to environmental degradation, to U.S. foreign policy and the war in Iraq.¹¹ And some define their actions in Critical Mass in broader terms still: as a protest against consumer capitalism.

Yet, at the same time, many participants in Critical Mass have no political agenda. Numerous participants cite safety as their main motivation. They like Critical Mass because it gives them the opportunity to ride through city streets without fear of being hit by a car. Some flatly deny that Critical Mass has any political purpose at all and participate simply because it’s fun,¹² while others occupy a middle ground, seeing the main appeal of Critical Mass in the fact that “it’s fun while at the same time overtly political.”

Some participants even hold political views that seem to conflict with one of Critical Mass’s ostensible purposes. Despite the large number of environmentalists that regularly attend Critical Mass, and its association with the environmental movement, one participant was openly hostile toward environmentalism. Destruction of the earth, he said, “is part of civilization” and

¹¹ In 2002-03 Critical Mass was highly mobilized by anti-war sentiment, attracting many anti-war protestors. Yet, even in 2011 several participants claimed that this was one of their main motivations for participating. Anti-war stickers and placards affixed to bicycles, as well as anti-war t-shirts remain regular fixtures.

¹² Based on the research conducted for this paper, this is a fairly common sentiment. Moreover, even those with overt political objectives sometimes utilize this a-politicism when dealing with the police—in one example, a long-time Critical Mass participant and activist reassured some first-time riders just prior to a police action by saying: “We’re not doing anything wrong—we’re just riding our bicycles.”

our only alternative is to “go back to the cave.” He mocked environmentalists as naïve, and proclaimed global warming to be a hoax. Yet, at the same time, he was a regular attendee, having missed only a few rides over the previous two years. He reconciled the apparent contradictions between his own views and what might be seen as the views of Critical Mass by stressing that Critical Mass was about fun and camaraderie, not politics. He said that Critical Mass was an opportunity to make new friends and valorized the fact that so many different people can all get along together: “I’ve never seen anything better,” he said. In short, each member of Critical Mass “is equally capable of offering a perspective, a definition, a manifesto, a purpose”—there is no central organizer, no agenda, and no structure (Carlsson 2002a: 7).

Putting aside issues of political effectiveness, inclusiveness and decentralization both make Critical Mass well equipped to capitalize on a large and diverse population of potential participants who see in Critical Mass whatever they want. It means that anyone can participate for any reason that they choose to, and even for no reason at all. The result of this is that Critical Mass regularly draws in large numbers of new participants at each ride—this perpetual stream of new arrivals is, in large part, why the ride continues to persist, even if many never return.

At one of the largest rides observed as part of this research (approximately 100 people), a person addressing the group just prior to the ride asked how many of those there were participating in Critical Mass for the first time. Approximately half of those in attendance—an estimated 50 people—raised their hands. This is typical and merely served as a confirmation of what was already being observed. For all the participants that were randomly approached during this research, the chances were more likely than not that they were attending Critical Mass for the first time.

If exclusiveness and centralization help to secure a core membership that exhibits “purposive commitment,” then inclusiveness and decentralization help draw in a perpetual stream of outsiders, a changing membership constitution that exhibits “casual curiosity” and fun-seeking. While previous research highlights the role of the former in producing abeyance, the findings here suggest that these are both viable paths toward continuity.

The following anecdote helps highlight just how noncommittal participation in Critical Mass can be, drawing a stark contrast with the “purposive commitment” element of the internal abeyance structure. In one instance, a man showed up having only seen a flyer for Critical Mass earlier that day. Even after having made the commitment to arrive at Union Square by 7 o’clock, this almost-participant was still not sure if he would join the ride. As he explained, he lived on the Upper West Side, and only intended to join Critical Mass if it headed in that direction. While this anecdote points toward an extreme level of non-commitment it exemplifies a casualness and capriciousness that is highly typical. Indeed, there are several instances of people who come to Union Square but remain “maybes” until the very last minute, only because they might prefer to catch a movie or meet up with friends somewhere else.

In addition to the casual participation of local first-timers, every Critical Mass ride is host to a significant number of out-of-town visitors, many of whom are in New York as tourists. I interviewed people from New Brunswick, Philadelphia, Boston, Tallahassee, Minneapolis, Chicago, Greensborough, Washington DC, San Diego, as well as several other US cities. In addition, there are always tourists from abroad—Vienna, Berlin, Rome, London, Madrid, Montreal, and other places. Not only was this their first time participating in Critical Mass in New York City, but they were the most unlikely returnees.¹³ Past research on the mass

¹³ It must be noted, though, that, unlike first-time participants that lived in New York, those visiting from someplace else generally participated in Critical Mass in their home cities.

mobilization period of Critical Mass focused on its ability to achieve geographical scale—covering both the local and the global—as its main strength (Blickstein and Hanson 2001). This can be described as a period of dual expansion, whereby increased levels of mobilization in each city was accompanied by an increasing number cities holding Critical Mass rides. During the abeyance period, though, geographic scale plays a different role. It serves as an external pool of activists that can be incorporated into a ride in any given city, in this case New York. There is always some contingent of Critical Mass tourists in New York, meaning that there is a source of new participants that is continually being renewed. It is a contingent population that always exists, yet whose individual members are, by definition, transient and externally located.¹⁴

A regular and self-refreshing stream of participants is part of what enables Critical Mass to continue and its inclusive and decentralized form of organization accommodate and even facilitate their incorporation, even if temporarily. In the internal abeyance structure, exclusiveness and centralization insulate and preserve a devoted core of elite activists with a clear agenda, thus enabling continuity through its internal personnel. In the external abeyance structure, inclusiveness and decentralization open the door to first-time participants, who are casual, curious, or simply seeking a fun time.

Critical Mass also exhibits a unique and distinct culture, but it is one that attracts outsiders and is inviting to the curious spectator. Some of Critical Mass's more carnivalesque features have already been noted and, in fact, many describe it as a “carnival,” “party,” or “celebration,” and one person calls it “punk rock on two wheels” (Ferrell 2001: 125). Many participants arrive in costume, wearing capes, bandanas or masks; others wear colorful our

¹⁴ In this sense, Critical Mass is akin to Theseus's ship from Plutarch's “Life of Theseus”—in this well-known story Plutarch presents us with the image of a ship that has been repaired and refurbished, plank by plank, over a period of many years, such that, in the end, not a single of the ship's wooden planks was part of the original ship. Putting aside the paradox of whether this is still Theseus's ship, we can use the story's imagery of continual renewal as an analogous process to what is being described here.

outlandish clothing or makeup. Others still wear their ordinary clothes, maybe having come directly from work. Some bring blinking lights and neon glow sticks.

The ride is accompanied by loud and raucous noise and music. Some people shout chants while others scream out loud. People bring whistles, kazoos, horns, bugles, sirens, air-horns, and handheld loudspeakers. At one ride a person had rigged his entire person and bicycle with dozens of bells, so that every movement jingled. Often people strap portable stereo systems to their bicycles, blasting music of all kinds. In one instance some people brought what they called a “sound bike,” which was nothing more than a bicycle carrying a fairly large trailer, which housed a loud stereo system. Add to this cacophony the ubiquitous bicycle bell, which participants ring indulgently, simply to participate in the moving soundscape. In some respects, Critical Mass is as much a grassroots street orchestra as a group bike ride.

Bicycling in itself is a fun activity. For many, bicycling is even more fun in large groups and, indeed, there are numerous types of recreational group rides, in addition to Critical Mass, that regularly occur in most cities. Critical Mass, by embracing carnivalesque features described above, creates a distinctive party-culture, whereby participating in Critical Mass feels much like going to a party. Unlike the typical party, which requires an invitation to attend, the Critical Mass party itself is an open invitation for all who see it.

To the observer, these features produce a spectacle. Indeed, Critical Mass builds an ad hoc parade route whichever direction it turns—curious pedestrians line the sidewalks, take pictures, shoot video, join the chanting, and clap. Spectators, in a sense, become participants, further breaking down the barriers between the internal and external, sparking curiosity, and perhaps arousing desires that will eventually develop into actual participation.

Lest the “party on wheels” becomes strictly metaphorical, TIMES UP! regularly sponsors and promotes actual after parties for Critical Mass. TIMES UP! volunteers print post-card size fliers and then hand them out to all those gathered at the outset of the ride. In one typical example, the after-party was held at a bar and featured bands, DJs, and “valet bike parking.”

This culture goes some way in explaining why some participants do not see themselves as engaging in a political protest, and why nearly all participants describe the experience as “fun.” In order to attract casual participant, drawn by curiosity, the ride must provide something worth being curious about and its production of a carnival-like culture accomplishes this. But, even then, the question remains: how do outsiders, beyond immediate spectators of the ride, learn about these attributes?

Reputation

The effectiveness of exclusiveness, decentralization, and culture as factors of abeyance depends on their ability to attract first-time participants. The incorporation of first-time participants, even if temporary, requires a group organization with these attributes, but it stands to reason that there would be no participants exhibiting casual curiosity, or others seeking out fun, if they remained unaware of such a group’s existence or, more importantly, if they had no definitive impression of what might occur if they were to show up. A group’s reputation is the means by which this information is transmitted to the nearly limitless audience of potential participants—it is the mechanism by which people first come upon the idea that there might be something fun to seek out, that there is something that sparks curiosity. Reputation, in effect, activates external abeyance structures.

Gary Alan Fine defines reputation as “a socially recognized persona: an organizing principle by which the actions of a person (or an organization that is thought of as a person) can

be linked together” (Fine 2001: 2). Reputations are intersubjective, consisting of shared images, meaning that they are “embedded in social relations.” Therefore, “reputation is connected to the forms of communication embedded within a community” (Ibid. 3).

There are a variety of arenas in which reputations are produced and disseminated, among them, networks. When asked how they first learned of Critical Mass, most first-time participants claim to have learned from a friend. Of these, a subset are embedded in networks that might be particularly conducive to the spread of information about cycling-related events: pedi-cab services, bike racing groups, and bike shop employees. Many are regularly engaged in other forms of activism and learn about Critical Mass while participating in other kinds of protest.

Importantly, though, reputations are often transmuted through historical knowledge (Fine 2001: 5). Historical knowledge might be close to an objective reality, or it might be self-consciously manipulated. Another possibility is that historical reputation is socially constructed, resulting from “the socio-political motives of groups that gain resources, power, or prestige by the establishment of reputation” (8). Historical knowledge is in some sense constituted by these images and creates a vessel whereby they can be moved through time, such that the present image reflects a reality that has past.

In this way, a group’s reputation might serve to preserve group characteristics of a previous time, giving them a meaning that might no longer pertain. Casual first-time participants arrive expecting Critical Mass to be inclusive, decentralized, a little bit wild and fun. The allure can be so powerful a police officer, after cataloguing the ways in which Critical Mass had been a perpetual headache for the NYPD, suggested that it’s worth checking out: “you *have* to come see the Halloween ride!” In addition, though, newcomers expect to find the Critical Mass from its heyday period: large and unruly. That is, first time participants arrive at Union Square

expecting to see thousands of cyclists spilling over into the street and they expect, when the ride proceeds, that it will take over the road, and break all of the normal rules of traffic.

This points toward a general feature of reputations that is intuitive, but little noted in the literature. A reputation consists of both content, and reach (i.e., how many people have heard it?). Moreover, these two qualities are generally interactive: the more widespread a reputation, the less likely that its content will reflect reality. Reputation, like anything else, takes time to travel. The farther it reaches, the more likely its content will represent the past. For Critical Mass, at least part of the content of its reputation is now historical.

Nearly every first-time participant interviewed during the course of this research was disillusioned by the fact that so few people actually attend. When asked how many people they expected to see, many answered “hundreds” or “thousands,” though many others did not have a definitive impression and said something to the effect of “more than this.”

Even at the largest rides attended during this research (between 100-125 participants) first-time participants were under-whelmed, often asking those standing nearby “is this normal or are there usually more people?” This is particularly true about visitors from out of town, who at some point had learned that the New York City Critical Mass rides are particularly big, compared to other cities, which may have been true in the past. One woman, visiting from Berlin was excited to ride at Critical Mass in New York precisely because she wanted to see what a “big” ride was like—the rides in Berlin, she said, were pitifully small, usually around 20 people.¹⁵ Another woman, who normally rides with Critical Mass in New Brunswick, where she estimates that only between 3-30 people usually ride, is excited to participate in the New York ride for the first time because she believes the New York rides are larger and better organized. She

¹⁵ At New York City ride she was attending at the time of this interview, only 10 other people showed up.

is surprised that the ride is about the same size, which, she notes, feels even smaller because the city itself is so large.

There is a category of Critical Massers that attended regularly in 2000-2004 period and are rode in 2011 for the first time since then. Many are shocked and disappointed; while they themselves claim to have stopped coming because of the police, or because they moved out of town and have only recently come back, they generally did not expect to see so few people. Indeed, the only people that find the relatively paltry numbers typical are those that have attended regularly over the past two to four years.

In addition to the overall size of the ride, Critical Mass has a reputation for being particularly disorderly and even confrontational. In one sense this relates to the size of the ride: larger rides are naturally more disorderly while smaller ones are more tame. Aside from the dynamics of size itself, these differences affect individual behavior. The larger the mass the more anonymous and free the individual; the smaller the mass, the easier it is for the police to witness and penalize minor infractions of the law. As the rides have gotten smaller, they have also gotten less confrontational. For many, confrontation and disorder is part of the draw. One participant visiting New York from Boston was disappointed to see that there were only about 125 people at the ride. He thought that there would be “a shit ton of people,” and was disillusioned, coming to the conclusion that New York’s Critical Mass was “weak sauce.” In addition, he complained that Critical Mass was supposed to be more confrontational and disorderly, like it was in Boston. Stopping at red lights, which had become the normal custom in New York, was, according to him, “not my idea of Critical Mass.”

If disappointment alone does not decrease the chances of a participants’ return to more rides, sometimes police harassment will. One woman attended her first ever Critical Mass ride

in October 2010, having learned about it through a circle of friends that were actively involved in street theatre. She was stopped and ticketed by the police almost immediately after the ride began and was so upset by the experience that she did not return to a single ride until a year later, in October 2011. In the twelve-month period that she was absent, other first-timers were there to take her place.

This does not mean that all new arrivals are disillusioned or intimidated. In fact, there are many parts about the ride that still make it enjoyable, some of which have been described here. The important thing, for the purposes of abeyance, is that many new participants show up because they have certain expectations and the organizational characteristics of Critical Mass both accommodate and produce them. As far as the abeyance process is concerned, it does not matter very much whether expectations are met. As long as people show up, the ride continues.

Conclusions

Previous research on abeyance structures points toward the importance of internal factors for preserving group coherence in the face of a hostile social and political environment. The findings offered here, however, suggest an alternative path toward abeyance, one based around external factors. Rather than holding together and incubating a small group of devoted activists, a group might also achieve successful abeyance by temporarily but continuously incorporating a regular stream of newcomers and first time participants. The factors for abeyance, then, represent strategic tradeoffs, rather than exclusive rules. Internal abeyance structures are configured based on exclusivity, centralization, purposive commitment, and temporality. External abeyance structures, in contrast, are configured based on inclusivity, decentralization, casual commitment, and tourism. Whereas the former focuses on its internal resources at the

expense of external ones, the latter capitalizes on external resources without any mechanism for keeping them in place once they've been incorporated.

Not only the presence of an alternative culture matters, but also its content and function. In internal abeyance structures culture helps to insulate core activists and give them sustenance. In external abeyance structures culture can be a lure, sparking curiosity and promising a fun time just for showing up. Reputation, then, is the mechanism that connects a group having external abeyance factors with the outside world, communicating the group's apparent virtues to an nearly infinite pool of potential first-time activists, many of which will show up, even if only once, thus keeping the group operating.

Table 1. Factors of abeyance in internal versus external abeyance structures

Factors of Abeyance	Internal Abeyance Structures	External Abeyance Structures
Organizational characteristics	exclusive	inclusive
	centralized	decentralized
Membership profile	purposive commitment	casual curiosity
	long temporality (life commitment)	short temporality (tourism)
Culture function	inwardly oriented (to insulate and nurture)	outwardly oriented (to exhibit and invite)

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