



CANADIAN COUNTERCULTURES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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“Vive la Vélorution!": Le Monde à Bicyclette and the Origins of Cycling Advocacy in Montreal'

Daniel Ross

Montreal loves the bicycle. In 2013 the *Copenhagenize Urban Cycling Index* ranked it the most bike-friendly city in North America, and eleventh worldwide. On the island of Montreal, 36 percent of adults and 57 percent of children cycle at least once per week, and a hundred bike shops sell upwards of ninety thousand new bikes every year. Even more striking is the high level of support the City of Montreal has shown for urban cycling in recent years. As a result, the city boasts one of the largest networks of bike lanes and paths in North America—over six hundred kilometres—and a hugely popular system of five thousand public bicycles (BIXI) that, since its founding in 2009, has been exported to nine other cities around the world. While the car may remain king in North American cities, Montreal seems to be one of the places where the humble bicycle stands the best chance of challenging its reign.

But the status of the bicycle in Montreal has not always been so sunny. In the mid-1970s, Montreal cyclists were frustrated. Despite

the growing popularity of cycling for transport, riding a bike on city streets was difficult and dangerous. At city hall, the Civic Party administration showed little interest in changing its pro-car stance to accommodate cyclists. In response, in 1975 a small group of cyclists banded together to found Canada's first major urban cycling advocacy organization, Le Monde à bicyclette (MAB). Drawing on a wide range of influences, including the 1960s and 1970s counterculture and the environmental and urban reform movements, the MAB adopted a distinctive mix of tactics and ideas centred on the social and environmental benefits of the bicycle. In choosing the bicycle as their form of resistance to car culture and consumer capitalism, the MAB grounded a countercultural critique in everyday practice, while adding an element of spectacle to its demonstrations. The group quickly became well known for its creative and provocative street theatre pieces (cyclo-dramas) and its calls for a *vélorution* ("*vélo*" being French for "bicycle") that would end the dominance of the private automobile. Operating within a growing network of cycling organizations in North America and Europe, the MAB were early proponents of what scholars have recently called "the cycling counterculture."² A closer look at the group's origins and activities sheds light on Montreal's vibrant culture of dissent in the 1970s and the local and international influences that helped to shape it. Today, the story of Le Monde à bicyclette is more relevant than ever: Montreal's current cycling renaissance owes a great deal to plans first put forward by the group, which many in the 1970s considered marginal, radical, or just plain crazy.

BIKE BOOM

A number of cycling scholars have described how North Americans went bike crazy in the last decade of the nineteenth century.³ The founding of the MAB in 1975 came on the heels of another, equally dramatic, boom in popular interest in cycling. After a decade of steady growth, in the early 1970s sales and ridership increased dramatically in both Canada and the United States. Between 1970 and 1972, bicycle sales in the United States doubled to nearly fourteen million, and for

the first time, bikes outsold cars; in Canada during the same period, sales reached a record two million.⁴ A certain enthusiasm accompanied the rush to buy bikes. One Montreal newspaper, noting in 1972 that the city's bike shops had doubled their sales, exclaimed that it was "The return of the good old days!"⁵

Several factors seem to have contributed to this bike boom. Technological change was one, just as it had been in the 1890s. This time, however, it was not mass-produced pneumatic tires that made cycling more attractive, but the availability of cheap, lightweight, multi-speed bicycles, often imported from Europe or Asia. Demographics also mattered; by the 1970s the baby boom generation had graduated to adult bicycles, providing a huge market for the new technology. And from 1973 onwards, skyrocketing gas prices and fears of fuel scarcity caused by the oil crisis made the bicycle a more attractive alternative to the automobile.⁶

People also adopted the bicycle for the individual and social benefits it promised. The bike boom owed something to the growing popular interest in physical fitness and health that characterized the period and helped to move dieting and activities like bodybuilding, jogging, and aerobics from the margins of North American culture into the mainstream.⁷ And, in an era of growing environmental consciousness, the bicycle was one of the greenest transport choices available. All of these factors contributed to a historic bike boom in the 1970s that put many new riders—including record numbers of adults—on the streets of North American cities.

PEDAL AT YOUR OWN RISK

In Montreal, as in other large North American cities, cyclists quickly discovered that the infrastructure needed to make cycling for transport safe and viable was sorely lacking. By 1975 several Quebec municipalities—including Longueuil, across the river—were experimenting with urban bike paths. However, despite having a high population density that made it ideal for cycling, the island of Montreal did not have a single bike lane or path. This forced riders into direct

competition with drivers for street space, provoking accidents and confrontations. As Marc Raboy, a cyclist in the 1970s and one of the earliest members of the MAB, remembers, to bike for transport in the city meant “literally taking your life in your hands.”⁸ Across Quebec, an average of sixty-eight cyclists died on the road each year during the early 1970s, rising to a peak of eighty-four deaths in 1974—more than five times today’s numbers, despite the doubling of ridership since the 1970s.⁹ Montreal had no system of bicycle parking stands or posts, and with bikes barred from buses, the metro, and all but one bridge over the St. Lawrence River, there were precious few options for crossing between the island and the South Shore on two wheels.

These daily frustrations were compounded by the unresponsiveness of the municipal government on the issue. By the mid-1970s, Mayor Jean Drapeau and the Civic Party had been in power continuously for more than a decade. Years of centralization had concentrated decision-making power in the hands of the mayor and his inner circle, a group of men who saw the future of Montreal in terms of large-scale modernization projects, including highways, stadiums, shopping malls, and apartment towers. They were willing to invest in a costly Vélodrome as part of the Olympic Games complex (now the Montreal Biodome) but were dismissive of plans to create space for cycling on city streets. In this closed-door political culture, cycling did not have a lobby at city hall. Provincial cycling organization La Fédération québécoise de cyclotourisme concentrated its efforts on lobbying for rural touring routes and changes to provincial law. Independent attempts to promote the issue—such as that of traffic safety advocate Gilles Roger Prevost, who in 1972 presented the city with a report calling for an ambitious 2,400 kilometres of urban bike lanes—were met with inaction. When questioned on the subject in May 1975, the head of Montreal’s traffic department, Jacques Barrière, summed up the dominant view among the city executive: “Bicycles are not a priority at the moment. If we encourage the bicycle too much, will we put the cars in our pockets?”¹⁰ To attract attention to their needs, cyclists realized that they would have to organize outside of municipal politics.

FOUNDING A MOVEMENT

In this context of growing “cyclo-frustration” (a word coined by the group), *Le Monde à bicyclette* was founded. In April 1975, a small notice appeared in the *Montreal Star* announcing a meeting of a group tentatively called the Montreal Bicycle Movement. The notice went on to say that the movement had plans to “organize joyful cycling events” and “press city authorities for facilities.” Anyone interested in cycling was welcome to attend.¹¹

The announcement in the *Star* gave substance to informal discussions about cycling among a few young cyclists and activists based in the neighbourhoods just east of McGill University and Mount Royal: Milton-Park, Mile End, and the west Plateau. Those neighbourhoods were home to a vibrant mixture of French- and English-speakers, immigrants, workers, students, artists, and intellectuals. Their proximity to the downtown core and Montreal’s universities, as well as the availability of low-cost rental units, made them key sites for the city’s 1960s and 1970s counterculture; these areas were dotted with communes, co-ops, alternative bookstores, and art studios.¹² They were also hotbeds for political and community activism: Milton-Park, for example, was the site of a highly publicized confrontation between local residents and developers over plans to tear down several blocks of houses and replace them with an upscale residential/commercial complex.¹³ In the 1974 municipal election, the St. Louis electoral district, which included the three neighbourhoods, elected three councillors from the Montreal Citizens’ Movement (MCM), a coalition of progressive Montrealers formed to unseat Drapeau and renew Montreal’s services and urban environment.

Over the next month a core of a dozen or so members began to meet on a weekly basis. As Raboy recalls, all but one of these early joiners were Anglophones, and meetings took place in English. Most of the group knew one another from involvement either in the 1974 MCM campaign or in local organizations like the St. Louis Health Food Co-op. The meetings took place in co-founder Robert

6.1 Thousands of cyclists take over Saint Catherine Street during the MAB Bike Week parade in 1976. Source: MAB Archives.



Silverman's apartment, much to the chagrin of his landlord, who complained about the pile of bicycles parked outside his front door.¹⁴

From the start, Silverman played an important role in the group. Older than most of the early members—he was forty-two in 1975—his life experience was wide and eclectic. Born in Montreal, he had (briefly) attended both English- and French-language universities,

had worked as a taxi driver and an English teacher, and for a short time had run an alternative bookstore. In the mid-1960s he had organized demonstrations against the Vietnam War with the Trotskyist *Ligue socialiste ouvrière*. With characteristic ideological commitment, since discovering the bicycle in France in 1969, Silverman has refused to drive a car. He was responsible for cultivating the MAB's connections with international cycling organizations and was one the group's main theoreticians and spokespersons.

From the initial meetings at Silverman's apartment came the group's name: Citizens on Cycles, in English, and *Le Monde à bicyclette* (meaning both "the people on bikes" and "everyone get on a bike!"), in French. They made plans to launch the organization city-wide at the end of May 1975 with a series of public events called Montreal Bicycle Week and the publication of a cyclist's manifesto. The MCM quickly lent its support to the idea, as did several other organizations; from early on, the MAB benefited from the willingness of other local environmental and community groups to work together on important campaigns.¹⁵ Inspiration came from south of the border, too. On a visit to Washington, DC, in April, Silverman tapped into the network of cycling organizations that had sprung up in the eastern United States. His principal contact was John Dowlin of the Philadelphia Bicycle Coalition (PBC), a group that had been promoting urban cycling since 1971. The enthusiastic Dowlin sent Silverman a sheaf of material, including back issues of the PBC newsletter and news clippings about their activities.¹⁶

Montreal's first Bicycle Week, from May 26 to 31, 1975, was a dramatic success. Its popularity suddenly made urban cycling an issue in Montreal and was the impetus behind the MAB's transformation into a large, mass-membership organization. All of Montreal's major French and English newspapers commented on the MAB's "Bicyclist's Manifesto." The events organized by the group—the theatrical presentation of a bicycle to Montreal's city council; a commuter race between cyclists, drivers, and transit users; and a two-wheeled parade on May 31—captured the attention of the press and the public. Even the organizers were astonished by the three thousand cyclists that

joined the Saturday afternoon parade as it rolled and shouted its way through downtown Montreal.¹⁷ Less than two months after its founding meeting, the organization was on its way to becoming a fixture in public debates over transport and the environment in Montreal. By early 1977 the group had welcomed dozens of new members—membership would soon peak at around four hundred—and, thanks to a federal Local Initiatives Program (LIP) grant received in the winter of 1975/1976, had an office and its own newsletter dedicated to cycling culture and the environment.¹⁸ As with many other activist organizations operating in the late 1960s and early 1970s, federal funding played a crucial role in sustaining the MAB.

With growth in its membership base, the composition of the MAB came to reflect not just the Plateau/Mile End area, but the city of Montreal as a whole. Of the dozens of environmental organizations founded in Quebec in the 1970s, the MAB was one of the most successful at acquiring new members.¹⁹ Cyclists of different ages and walks of life joined from neighbourhoods across the city; most were Francophones. In changing from a small core of English-speakers to a larger group dominated by French-speakers, the MAB mirrored several other activist organizations formed in 1970s Montreal, including the MCM.²⁰ One new member was Claire Morissette, an environmentalist with an interest in cycling and other green technologies. While only twenty-five, she was already experienced in public outreach and active in the alternative St. Louis scene: she was a founding member of the Friends of the Montreal Botanical Garden and helped run the St. Louis Health Food Co-op, the first of its kind in Quebec. Morissette's organizational and literary skills, environmental vision, and creative energy would be tremendously influential within the MAB.

STOP THE JUGGERNAUT! VIVE LA VÉLORUTION!

From the start, the MAB combined a countercultural critique of mainstream society and culture with a willingness to pursue more modest, immediate goals. Two major themes ran through the group's ideology: the environmental and social destructiveness of the car, and the revolutionary potential of the bicycle. These ideas provided inspiration for the MAB's demands and turned riding a bicycle on city streets into a subversive act.

Le Monde à bicyclette saw the private automobile as a destructive force and the embodiment of the principal wrongs of Western society under capitalism: the alienation of the individual, the triumph of rationality and profit over well-being, and the systematic degradation of the environment. The MAB's publications are peppered with angry indictments of the damage done by the car:

It destroys our homes, our green spaces, and our heritage, to build parking lots; it attacks our health, our lungs, our eardrums, our nervous systems; it empties our wallets and enslaves Quebecers [financially].²¹

The MAB focused in particular on deaths caused by cars and the damage cars did to the environment. For example, a press release protesting the 1976 Montreal Auto Show calls the car "public enemy number 1," adding that "since 1900, they have killed 25 million, more than were killed in all the wars of the 20th century. . . . It is our domestic Vietnam."²² Meanwhile, the "Bicyclist's Manifesto" rails against cars for filling the air with "poisonous fumes," robbing the earth of raw materials, filling dumps with tons and tons of useless metal, and polluting the oceans with oil spills caused by their insatiable demand for fuel.²³

Yet, to the MAB, the problem of the car is not just its social and environmental costs, but its cultural embeddedness. The radical ethos of the group drew on countercultural imagery that challenged the economic assumptions behind automobile use. Like the mythical

Hindu Juggernaut, the car is worshipped by those it destroys. The automobile has become so central to the dominant culture that people have ceased to recognize the possibility of an alternative. Car companies fill the airwaves with advertising and pressure governments into the “open squandering of millions” for highways and oil exploration. Owning and driving cars has alienated people from their bodies, their surroundings, and each other. Trapped behind steel and glass, drivers see pedestrians not as fellow human beings, but as obstacles. Furthermore, the car drives a wedge between the sexes, giving men control over women’s mobility while the female body is used to market new killing machines. In sum, “[t]he automobile pollutes our values, tastes, ideals, in fact our very souls. It not only robs us of valuable raw materials, it steals our integrity as human beings.”²⁴

The MAB was not the first group to point to the private car as a symbol or agent of the ills of Western society; for many within the North American counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, the car was a key component of a technocratic culture that threatened individual freedoms and human sensibilities. As early as 1961, social critics and urban theorists Paul Goodman and Percival Goodman published a serious plan for banning the car from the centre of New York City; from 1967, *Whole Earth Catalog* founder Stewart Brand and others called for a move from large, damaging machines and systems toward “appropriate technologies” on a human scale.²⁵ In Quebec, the ideas of the American and European counterculture were widely available in French through alternative media like the magazine *Mainmise*, which published seventy-eight issues between 1970 and 1978, as well as a French-language catalogue inspired by Brand.²⁶

Likewise, urban reformers and environmentalists opposed both the car and the system that it represented. As historian Danielle Robinson has pointed out, urban dwellers across Canada organized in the 1960s and 1970s to oppose expressways in their cities, arguing much like the MAB that auto-centric planning destroyed urban communities and damaged the environment.²⁷ From the late 1960s onwards, air pollution was one of the main problems around which environmentalists in North America and Europe mobilized. In



6.2 MAB members in one of the group's largest die-ins, on Saint Catherine Street in 1976. The banner reads "Bike for life," and in the background a cyclist is being carried off on a stretcher. Source: MAB Archives.

Quebec, the first wave of the new environmental movement—more radical than its conservationist predecessors and unafraid to draw links between environmental and social problems—was spearheaded from 1970 by anti-pollution groups (and MAB allies) La Société pour vaincre la pollution and the Society to Overcome Pollution (STOP).²⁸

What was novel about the MAB was the way it provided a single solution to the problems symbolized by the private automobile: the adoption of the bicycle. This position was heavily influenced by social theorist Ivan Illich, author of *Energy and Equity* (1974). Illich proposed an inverse relationship between the energy a society consumed and the equity of the distribution of wealth among its members: in his words, "high quanta of energy degrade social relations just

as inevitably as they destroy the physical milieu.”²⁹ On the other hand, “convivial” technologies such as the bicycle have a revolutionary potential to liberate the individual and create a more equitable society. This was the intellectual grounding of the *véloration*.³⁰

Compared to the car, the bicycle is cheap, accessible, and ecologically and socially harmonious. It is also a symbol of the possibility of a different way of life: “For that vehicle of death, we must substitute the vehicle of life: the BICYCLE. . . . [Our movement] endeavours to persuade those now dependent upon automobiles to become independent upon bicycles.”³¹

For the MAB, choosing the bicycle liberates the individual in a way that riding the bus or subway—both green and equitable technologies compared to the car—do not. The cyclist moves at her own pace through the city, free from participating in the destruction caused by car capitalism. A critical mass of cyclists—the *véloration*—would change social relations, politics, and humanity’s relationship to the environment. Instead of society being divided into those who have cars—and control the streets—and those who do not, urban space would be equally accessible to all, under their own power. Government resources wasted on auto-centric development could be used for public transit and social services. As Silverman starkly put it, “the Juggernaut will die and we will all be better for it.”³²

The MAB was an intellectually heterogeneous organization, and the core themes of opposition to the car and promotion of the bicycle do not capture the full range of ideas held by its members. Members differed, for example, in where they saw the bicycle on the continuum between mode of transport and revolutionary tool and in the extent to which they linked cycling activism to other social movements. In March 1977, a founding convention was organized in an attempt to reconcile the different ideological orientations proposed for the MAB. As Claire Morissette remembers, this was

no mean task, since [the choices were] to subordinate cyclists’ demands to the class struggle, to lobby from inside “the system,” to preach by example by creating cycling

services, or to celebrate the bicycle while poking fun at the contradictions of the establishment!³³

While the “poetic-vélorutionary” position put forward by Morissette and Silverman had wide acceptance, there was never doctrinal unity in an organization that prided itself on being anti-authoritarian.³⁴

Despite its big thinking, the MAB always brought at least a kernel of pragmatism to the table. The cycling counterculture it elaborated was accompanied by concrete demands aimed at ending the cyclo-frustration that had led to the group’s founding.³⁵ From 1975 onwards, the MAB called for a bicycle commuting system made up of both physically separated north-south and east-west bikeways on major arteries and painted bike lanes on minor streets. They also demanded theft-resistant bicycle parking stands installed across the city and public education on cyclists’ rights. To solve the problem of crossing the St. Lawrence River, they called for bike access to bridges and tunnels as well as to metro trains outside of rush hours. Recognizing that cycling was not ideal in all situations, the MAB argued that cycling improvements had to be accompanied by a massive expansion of Montreal’s public transit system. Finally, the group envisioned a city-wide system of public bicycles:

The City of Montreal must buy 10,000 bicycles and put them at the disposal, as community property, of the people of our city. So as to make them visible at night the city will paint them orange and for identification they will all be branded “M” and stamped with the seal of the city of Montreal. These bicycles would be kept in municipal storage centres throughout the city. To ensure that no antisocial person would steal community property, a deposit and identification would be required when taking out a bicycle.³⁶

The MAB’s demands were strongly influenced by ideas coming from other cities. While cycling advocacy was still in its infancy in other Canadian cities, allies like the PBC and New York City’s Transportation Alternatives had been demanding cycling facilities

since the early 1970s. Meanwhile, the “orange bicycle plan” was inspired by the European counterculture. In 1965, an eclectic Dutch group called the Provos (short for “Provotariat”) presented a series of plans for improving Dutch society. Along with free birth control, shared parenting, legalization of squatting, and a tax on polluters, they drew up a “white bicycle plan” that they later attempted to put into action. The group painted fifty bicycles white and left them, unlocked, on the streets of Amsterdam for public use. Unfortunately, the Amsterdam police confiscated those bikes that had not been stolen. In 1967, Silverman met with several members of the Provos in Amsterdam—an experience that led directly to the MAB’s championing of a similar, if more elaborate, plan for Montreal.³⁷ More than three decades before BIXI, MAB’s 1975 “Bicyclist’s Manifesto” marked one of the first appearances in North America of the idea of a public bicycle system.

These international influences reflected the fact that the MAB saw the *vélorution* as something larger than their own local struggle, consistently linking their own actions to the work of cycling organizations around the world. Every issue of the association’s newsletter contained a section dedicated to international cycling news, and in 1978 the MAB was one of thirteen groups that founded the Cyclists’ Internationale at a meeting in New York.³⁸ Also represented was the smaller Toronto City Cycling Committee (TCCC), the only other Canadian urban cycling group active at the time.

This sense of promoting a cause that transcended national borders may explain why Quebec nationalism was never a dominating factor within the MAB. The issue of language did arise early in the group’s history: in 1977 the MAB moved from a haphazard bilingualism to adopting French as its official working language. While that decision was likely influenced in part by the rising tide of nationalism that had accompanied the Parti Québécois (PQ) victory provincially in 1976, it was above all a pragmatic choice that reflected both the new predominance of Francophones within the group and the willingness of Anglophone members to work in French. The change, like the MAB’s limited support for the PQ government in Quebec City, does not seem

to have caused much tension between linguistic groups, nor did it lead to an exodus of English-speaking members.³⁹

DELIVERING THE MESSAGE: THE CYCLO-DRAMA

While the MAB intervened in formal politics—for example, endorsing the Montreal Citizens' Movement against the Civic Party—its members refused to express their demands through conventional channels. The mistrust that the MAB's radical core felt toward “politicians, bureaucrats, and other cocktail-lovers” (in Claire Morissette's words) was compounded by the group's complicated relationship with the MCM.⁴⁰ Initially the two were close; the founding of the MAB owed a great deal to the MCM's early commitment to encouraging grassroots activism, and the MCM's 1975 pro-cycling council motion was supported by an MAB rally on the steps of city hall. But relations cooled somewhat over the next few years. In the face of Drapeau's tight control of the city executive, reformers failed to achieve clear successes for cyclists. Additionally, the MCM's adoption of a more electoralist stance alienated grassroots groups like the MAB. It became clear that simply lobbying government was not an option.⁴¹ Instead, the MAB's primary means of delivering its message became a provocative brand of street theatre called the cyclo-drama. Attention-grabbing, unexpected, and inexpensive to organize, the MAB's demonstrations spread their message to a wide audience and made them a staple of Montreal's oppositional culture in the 1970s.

One kind of cyclo-drama targeted specific cycling problems or demands. For example, in July 1978, after three years of equivocation by the city on the issue of bike lanes in central Montreal, the MAB took matters into their own hands. Overnight, two bidirectional lanes totalling just over two kilometres were painted on Saint Urbain and Marie-Anne streets, and motorists parked nearby received official-looking warnings from “Montréal: Ville cyclable” (Montreal: Bikeable City) calling on them to support the initiative. Journalists visiting the lanes—one of which was dubbed *Poumon rose* (pink



6.3 Guerilla lane-painting, likely 1980. Claire Morissette is in white. Source: MAB Archives.

lung)—were treated to an inauguration, complete with ribbon cutting, by MAB members.⁴² This guerilla painting was repeated several times, including a 1980 episode in which Silverman and another MAB member were arrested with paint on their hands. They both eventually served a few days in Montreal's Bordeaux Prison, where Silverman recalls being comforted by his view of a nearby park's bike paths.⁴³ Today, Saint Urbain Street boasts a 2.5-kilometre bike lane that includes the portion briefly known as Poumon rose.

Many cyclo-dramas aimed at getting cyclists access to the Montreal metro, a battle that occupied much of the MAB's energies until the group's victory over the Montreal Transit Commission in court in 1983. Cyclists, often wearing gas masks or playing instruments, invaded the metro with their bikes and similarly sized (but permitted) objects like ironing boards, skis, and, in one case, a giant stuffed hippopotamus. Other demonstrations highlighted the absence of viable cycling links across the St. Lawrence: for example, at Easter



6.4 Parting the St. Lawrence River, 1981. Robert Silverman is holding the tablets. Source: MAB Archives.

in 1981 cyclists dressed in biblical-era costumes attempted to part the waters of the river to get across.⁴⁴

A second category of street theatre aimed more broadly at “elevating consciences” by calling attention to the absurd contradictions of auto-centricity.⁴⁵ The group’s parades—which drew thousands of cyclists every year from 1975 onwards, peaking at seven thousand in 1976—fall into this category.⁴⁶ So too do the MAB’s mass die-ins at busy intersections and at the annual Montreal Auto Show. At the largest of these demonstrations, dozens of cyclists covered in ketchup and bandages halted traffic by sprawling across an intersection beside their bikes. Some were pronounced “dead” at the scene and others removed from the street on stretchers. Motorists halted by the die-in were told, “You are in the process of witnessing a hold-up. . . . We’re not after money, we’re after space.” Onlookers were encouraged to lie down and participate in five minutes of silence, and some did. According to Silverman, the main goal of these dramas was to show

observers an alternative to the current reality; for a few minutes cars would stop, silence would reign, and cyclists and pedestrians owned the road.⁴⁷

Despite the intentionally humorous tone of these cyclo-dramas and their participants' attention-grabbing costumes and behaviour, they were nonetheless well planned, particularly when there was any danger of confrontation with motorists or the police. The die-ins, for example, were acted out according to detailed diagrams. Participants were divided into teams with specific roles, there was a minute-to-minute schedule, and after an attempt by a motorist to roll through an occupied intersection in 1976, provisions were made to protect the demonstrators with a "stalled" car.⁴⁸ Although dozens of MAB members were arrested during cyclo-dramas over the years, and in at least one case the arrestee complained of being roughed up, relations with the police generally remained cordial. In summer 1980, a busy moment for the MAB's metro access campaign, the police union refused for a time to arrest cyclists on the metro and expressed sympathy with their demands.⁴⁹

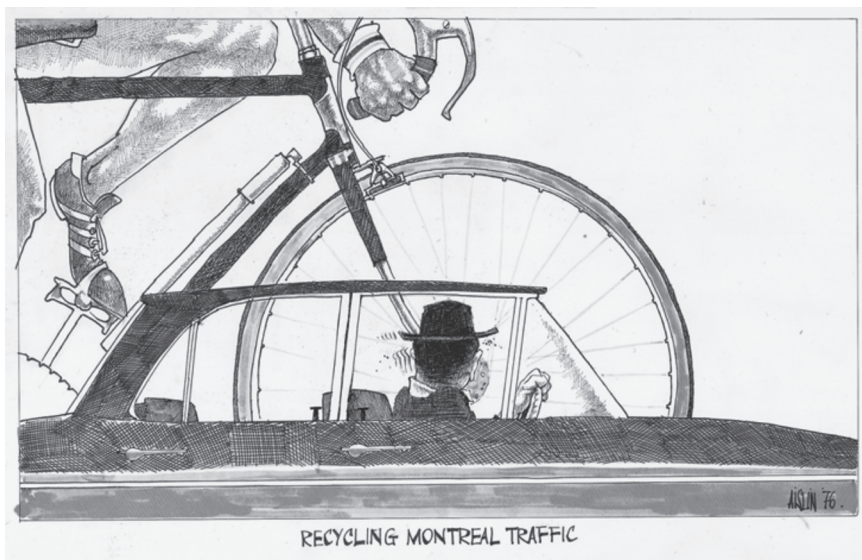
The MAB's *vélorutionary* theatre drew on the tradition of street theatre protest developed in North America and Europe by the 1960s and 1970s counterculture. There are strong parallels, for example, to the theatrical "happenings" organized by the Diggers in New York and Toronto in 1967, in which so-called hippies blocked streets to cars, sometimes carrying cardboard replicas of traffic signs reading "Stop" and "No Parking."⁵⁰ More immediately, the MAB's tactics were inspired by its international networks; for example, one key early influence was a massive die-in organized in Australia in 1972, which the MAB heard about through contacts in Philadelphia. The MAB's strategic and highly publicized use of the die-in made it a model for other radical cycling organizations, and in 1977 one MAB member travelled to Amsterdam to share its strategies with groups there.⁵¹ Since the MAB had been influenced from quite early on by Amsterdam's own Provos, there is an interesting symmetry in that visit. Combining elements of spectacle with a clear political message, the MAB's street theatre proved to be an effective means of reaching a broad audience.

(AHEAD) OF ITS TIME

The immediate reception of the MAB's theatrical demonstrations by the public was generally positive, despite the inevitable honks of frustrated drivers. The press gave ample coverage to the group's activities, partly because some individual journalists supported the MAB's demands and partly because cyclo-dramas made such good photo ops. For example, from May to December 1975, the MAB was featured in over forty newspaper articles in at least eight mainstream and alternative papers. The group also frequently generated debate in the form of letters to the editor. As part of a 1979 *Montreal Gazette* feature on metro access for cyclists, the paper printed sixteen letters on the issue, ranging in tone from supportive to hostile.⁵²

Some columnists and letter writers criticized the MAB, calling the group's anti-car stance radical or unrealistic. For example, the *Sunday Express* scoffed at the idea that "being pro-bike requires that you be anti-car" and suggested that MAB members find something better to do with their time.⁵³ Overall, however, these critics were outnumbered by those who wrote in support of the MAB's demands—if not their tactics or larger critique of the automobile—citing the environmental and social benefits of supporting cycling in Montreal.⁵⁴

While the MAB was successful at starting a public discussion on the place of cycling in the city, concrete government responses to its demands were slow to come. The group had some impressive successes in its early years, including the beginnings of a bike lane network and metro access for cyclists starting in 1983. But it would take decades of campaigning by the MAB and Vélo Québec (the new incarnation of La Fédération québécoise de cyclotourisme) for bike parking, public bicycles, separated lanes, and safe cycling links over the St. Lawrence to make it onto the agenda of Montreal's municipal government. Yet over the past forty-odd years nearly all of the demands made in the 1975 "Bicyclist's Manifesto" have been implemented, and in Montreal the idea that the bicycle is a viable form of urban transport has moved from the margins into the political mainstream. In a way, the MAB was ahead of its time. It was the first mass-membership



6.5 This cartoon, in which a surprised motorist is confronted by a gigantic MAB cyclist, ran in the *Gazette* on June 8, 1976. It expresses well the bewilderment of drivers confronted with bicycle advocates. Source: Terry Mosher/McCord Museum M-988.176.310.

group in Canada to focus its efforts on promoting city cycling, and in its deft combination of theatrical demonstrations and pragmatic lobbying it was as an inspiration for similar organizations across the country. Its calls for a society liberated from the automobile had less influence, perhaps, although echoes of that utopian vision can be seen in today's Critical Mass rides and the activities of groups like Montréal à Vélo. But, as this chapter has argued, the MAB was also very much of its time. Its foundation, ideas, and tactics were shaped by the specific historical context of 1970s Montreal: the vibrant activist networks and counterculture of Mile End and the Plateau, the authoritarian administration of Drapeau that became a rallying cry for oppositional movements, and, as historian Sean Mills has noted of the 1960s, the openness to international influences that characterized Montreal in the period.⁵⁵ In that context, cyclo-frustration, concern

for the environment, and rejection of auto-centric culture all found a creative outlet in the MAB's unique brand of cycling advocacy. The MAB fought on behalf of Montreal cyclists and the environment for two decades, and after it lost momentum in the early 1990s many members continued to champion similar issues with a constellation of new organizations. MAB dynamo Claire Morissette would go on to found both Cyclo Nord-Sud, a not-for-profit that collects bicycles to send to the developing world, and the successful car-sharing service Communauto. Some in the 1970s, including the Civic Party administration, dismissed the MAB's vélolutionary demands as unrealistic or radical; in retrospect, they were the start of a conversation that has led to important changes in Montreal's urban environment.

NOTES

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- 14 Raboy, interview; Robert Silverman, interview with the author, 10 April 2012.
- 15 Robert Silverman, “Bicyclist’s Manifesto,” May 1975, file “Manifeste cycliste,” box 7, MAB Archives, Montreal (private holdings) (hereafter MAB).
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- 18 Silverman, interview; MAB, “Nouveaux projets,” *Bulletin*, no. 1 (1976).
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- 29 Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1974), 16.
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- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Claire Morissette, *Deux roues, un avenir: Le vélo en ville* (Montreal: Écosociété, 2009), 189.
- 34 "Compte rendu du congrès," *Bulletin*, no. 5 (May 1977): 2–6
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- 36 Silverman, "Bicyclist's Manifesto."
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- 40 Morissette, *Deux roues, un avenir*, 191.
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- 51 Silverman, interview; Morissette, *Deux roues, un avenir*, 188.
- 52 "Let Cyclists onto Metro," *Montreal Gazette*, 24 August 1979.
- 53 See, for example, "Hook, Line and Sinclair," *Sunday Express*, 21 March 1976; or "Le métro, pour les piétons!" *Journal de Montréal*, 28 November 1978.
- 54 Louis Fournier, of *Le Devoir* and *Le Jour*, was a particularly staunch ally of the group. See "Le Monde à bicyclette demande: 'Etiez-vous obligé de prendre votre auto aujourd'hui?'" *Le Devoir*, 25 September 1975.
- 55 Mills, *The Empire Within*, esp. 19–84.