

June 18, 2007

Is Paris becoming Amsterdam?

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. Bare bums on bikes? Cops torn between gawking and guiding, thousands of nude bike-riders swirled through over 60 cities on World Naked Bike Ride Day (June 9) to protest dangerous, polluting motor-vehicles in cities. Fantasy and irony for the French: they claim they invented the car (Étienne Lenoir, 1862), and now, with Paris choking with micro-organisms only a cancerologist could love, many want to ban it.

Who started the biking-in-the-buff movement? Why, those sexy Spaniards – whose Mexican cousins offer toasts to “love, pesos and fat women on bicycles.” Normally French authorities welcome any excuse to party. From spring till fall, not a week slips by without some official fête: music, Internet, chocolate, cinema, gardening, journalism, comic books, and probably historic thumb-tacks. Now bare bikers.

Surprisingly, Paris -- where sex sells everything from coffee to scotch tape -- saw cops banning the Lady Godiva-style protest. They arrested five cyclists (accidentally including a stunning blonde) for “sexual exhibition.” In a city where sex clubs abound and national leaders prance through a tell-all book called *Sexus Politicus*, this perfectly fits La Rochefoucauld’s definition of hypocrisy: the homage vice pays to virtue.

But nude cycling is just part of a much bigger story. Health, safety and the environment are galvanizing the French. Just-elected President Nicolas Sarkozy is making the environment a cosmic priority, with tax and labour reform. After Sarko’s jogging-buddy Prime Minister François Fillon, the new government’s senior minister is Ecology and Sustainable Development Minister Alain Juppé. A former PM, Juppé caught the environment bug while on sabbatical in Quebec. Now a preacher for many things Canadian, he rides to cabinet meetings on a bike – no limos with siren-blaring police. With Sarko, he will chair an action conference on the environment by October.

Until four years ago, Frenchmen greeted environmental dangers with at best indifference and fatalism, and at worst denial and ridicule. France’s green movement split into cliques, achieving nothing. The “romance” of cars also blinded people: pride in excellent French-made cars and a network of superhighways dismissed traffic fatalities (7,242 in 2002) as inevitable road-kill. Jacques Chirac as Paris mayor (1977-95) made cars king of the road, adding underground parking everywhere, and laughing at bicycles as quaint.

The main drivers of today’s environmental reform? A murderously hot 2003 summer (15,000 elderly dead), TV eco-star Nicolas Hulot, Hurricane Katrina, U.S. Cassandra Al Gore, and a devastating United Nations scientific consensus. Now the just-ended G8 of major industrialized nations (with George’s Bush’s U.S. foot-dragging) urges faster action.

Although Paris's inner city hosts little industry, it drowns in cars, trucks and noisy, filth-spewing motorcycles and scooters. Buildings get so grimy that by law owners must have their façades sand-blasted every 10 years – an eyesore lasting up to six weeks.

Adding up costs for health, sand-blasting, accidents and traffic-jams, critics claim motor vehicles bloat city budgets. They argue that bikes could bring cleaner air, easier parking and a gentler, quieter lifestyle.

Finally, bikes are about to change Paris. Already Socialist mayor Bertrand Delanoë has extended bike paths to 376 km. and closed many streets for bikes on Sundays. He encourages members of bicycle club *Paris Rando Vélo* to explore the city in a river of self-policing hundreds (police-protected roller outings engage over 15,000).

Last week he launched a program, pioneered to spectacular success in Lyon, to put 20,600 almost-free bicycles under Parisian bottoms. A deal with Cyclocity, a subsidiary of the gigantic billboard company JCDecaux, is paying to install 1,450 high-tech bike stations throughout Paris where a person can take off on a *Vélo-lib'*, then leave it at any other station. Annual fee for unlimited use: Can. \$41 – cost of a two-week Paris subway pass. Trips of under 30 minutes are free.

JCDecaux is investing Can. \$122 million in start-up costs, paying 285 full-time employees to run the computerized system. It will reserve half its billboard space for the city, plus pay the city a yearly fee of Can. \$4.56 million. JCDecaux then gets to collect all revenue from the 1,628 city-owned billboards.

Dodging around Paris on a Dutch city-bike, I find the prospect of thousands more fellow-cyclists exhilarating. First, it will cut pollution: a year after Lyon signed with Cyclocity, its vehicle traffic dropped 4 points. Second, extra bikers will even the odds against motorized Parisians who curse us cyclo-peasants as absurd intruders – even though we share some “bicycle” lanes with buses. Now at least we can smirk back.

Paris as Amsterdam? Hardly. Sarko and Co. are banning smoking in restaurants (next Jan. 1), multiplying photo speed-traps, praising hard work, jogging and cycling, discouraging drinking, pushing law and order and traditional values. Now they're arresting *cyclonudistes*. Could the future be – *mon Dieu!* -- Paris as Ottawa?