

The first Car-Free Sunday

The international oil crisis led to the first car-free Sunday in the Federal Republic of Germany. Because the gasoline reserves were slowly being drained – there was only enough for a few months – the Germans had to go without their cars on November 25, 1973. Three further Sundays without cars would follow. The decree applied to approximately 13 million car owners. Exceptions were made only for certain professions, including taxi drivers and doctors.

- Bavarian Broadcasting Service (Bayrischer Rundfunk): “The year 1973, the Ban on Driving.”

The obligatory Sunday excursion into the forest of Hunsrück – made back then in a bright red Ford GXL with black leather trimmed sunroof – was on the Car Free Sundays replaced with bicycle tours on the new bypass, for example the freeway that was otherwise closed to bicycles. In our family, nature was sought out with the car; and with the bicycle, the new transportation structure. Both of these were emancipatory acts of proletarian recreation. On the one hand, the age-old conquest of nature through a new technology (that until then had been dominated by the bourgeoisie and middle class). The other battle made use of natural human energy and physical mechanics to reconquer public road space – although back then it seemed more like a slim-fit program accompanied by a gung-ho moog anthem. Perhaps it was also already an inevitable part of the beginning of the collective eco-ego-trips that were to abound later ...

I remember these tours along the bypasses like a strange symbolic dream that is so close to reality that the boundary between the two intermesh in a fully unspectacular way. (Typical terrain for wild self- and societal analysis.) My father rode ahead of me with an old bicycle from the 1930s that he dug out from the basement and refurbished on the Saturday before, which otherwise would have been reserved for the car wash at the river close by. It was a linden-green women's bike, had belonged to my Grandmother and bore the brand name "Fatherland". I pedaled second with my dark metallic green collapsible bike from Neckermann that we had bought to take on car trips. This plan had been abandoned rather quickly, because it proved to be too complicated a procedure and only made the car trunk dirty. That is the story of my first bicycle. Carefree, we rode slalom on the fresh band of asphalt that belonged to us alone – the street had been finished and christened just a few months before. (This was done without my father, by the way, who had been employed as road construction supervisor and who had overseen the work on the street.) The slalom biking along the freeway is one of my few childhood memories, in which my father still had something childish about him.

At the very moment, as can happen at times of reckless and ecstatic abandon, we both lost control of our bicycles and crashed into one another. I hit the black, grainy asphalt with my agape mouth and chipped off a piece of tooth (which is still discernable today). Blood gushed onto the asphalt: it was a real accident. My father was full of guilt (similar to when a few years before he totaled our new chocolate colored VW and we luckily emerged relatively unscathed?). For our first vacation he should have taken us on a trip to Lido di Jesolo but he had only made it as far as an intersection in Kaiserslautern.

The mental image I have for both accidents is light red, quickly turning dark red blood on gray-black asphalt. I think that what I learned from this early experience is that the beach may lie underneath the plaster (that's what my father had trained to be, a plasterer), but that the asphalt that covers it is pretty hard. And that it's always materials from society that are best apt to symbolically describe societal conditions. (In addition to, of course, the immaterial aspects of the material.) By the way, it was years later in Heidelberg, that I experienced my first street fights with so-called "plaster"-stones (cobblestones), in the pedestrian pathways of the old town center that had been repaved for tourists. Throwing rocks is another true appropriation of street space, but is so laden with immaterial notions of the politic that it could only function as a medial logoaction and metaphysical vent. Streets are the wooden paths of the 20th century. Immaterial scouting – on the wooden pathways of information – is just fine, but the path itself remains a material end. In this sense, gasoline-driven single capacity vehicles should be banned from all inner cities. (Thomas)

Reclaim the Street

Reclaim the Streets refers to a movement to utilize public space without commercialization and advertisements. The RTS activists have a common goal: the right to a non-colonialized living space. Free access for all people.

How does something like that Function?

Email mailing lists or text messages are sent announcing a specific time and meeting places on the day of the action so as not to attract police attention.

Before everyone is due to arrive, a truck equipped with a sound system is parked discreetly at the site. A car accident or other convincing road-blocking situation is staged to hinder police and other car access.

Another technique is to build two seven meter-high three-legged stands ... in the middle of the street, and hang one brave activist between them. The feet keep the cars from passing through, but allow pedestrians to enter.

Every RTS party is locally organized and able to immediately document their actions online with digital cameras and web cams. In this way, new street blockade tactics, links to important websites or information on individual participants can be exchanged over the World Wide Web quickly, in large quantities and without financial overhead.

Carbusters

World Carfree Day

In 2000, we initiated the world's first global carfree day, a victorious day of actions on four continents reclaiming our streets and our lives from the automobile. Every September, people around the world join together for World Carfree Days, including (since 2002) the European Union under the guise of European Mobility Week.

It's planning time: World Carfree Day 2004 will take place Wednesday, 22 September, and it's time to start organising activities surrounding this day. Europe will once again celebrate Mobility Week (this week's theme is 'Safe Streets for Children'), so no one is limited to just one day.

Car-free and Fun

The memory of the car-free day is still there: on that day I was allowed to walk home from the movies all by myself.

On Sunday afternoons in Oldenburg there was always the children's' film at the movie theater on Cloppenburger Street, which was a major traffic road. We didn't live too far away from the movie theater – about a 15-minute walk, but even on Sundays Cloppenburger Street was heavily driven. It was always like a border, a river that I wasn't allowed to get too close to.

Back then there weren't any play streets or home zones that were closed to cars, but our street was more or less a cul-de-sac and there were always children with go-carts, roller-skates and bicycles. I also played quite a bit in the street.

In the very beginning, one of the parents always accompanied us into the movie theater, later they just brought us there and picked us up when it was over. But as a six year-old I was never allowed to go by myself.

On that car-free Sunday everything was different. My parents were pretty much car freaks – even back then we had two cars – I still remember how much they talked about that Sunday. As usual, we walked to the movie theater, and this time the streets were full of people, mostly whole families. Everyone was enjoying the exceptional circumstances somehow, though at the time, I didn't really understand why they were suddenly all out and about.

The day was extra cool, because after the Winnetou film was over, I was allowed to go home alone – straight down the middle of Cloppenburger Street. What I don't remember is whether it was the "Oil Prince" or "Treasure in Silver Sea" that I saw... (Torsten)

The history of the Sunday Initiative

Summary: Car Free Sundays were introduced in the 1970s in reaction to the oil crisis. In 1988, a grass-roots movement proposed the Sunday Initiative. The Federal Assembly rejected the proposal. A counter-suggestion by the National Council to have at least one Car Free Sunday was eventually rejected by the Council of States. In a national referendum on May 18, 2003 37.6% of the Swiss people voted *for* the Sunday initiative. The history of the Car Free Sundays goes back to the year 1973, the time of the Oil Crisis. As an imperative economic measure the Federal Assembly introduced three Car Free Sundays. Many people, middle-aged and older can still recall vividly the feeling of liberation on the streets and plazas. Big and small, young and old, dog and cat were out and about on those November Sundays.

Since that time the dream of Car Free Sundays has lived on for many. It continues to appear in petitions, initiatives, parliamentary debates and letters to the editor. In 1994 the Youth Parliament proposed Car Free Sundays – unfortunately without success.

In Germany, Car Free Adventure Days have become a regional tradition. In Italy, Car Free Sundays were introduced in 2001 in response to environmental concerns – with great success!

The EU initiative “A City without My Car?” declares September 22 as a Car Free day. Approximately 1000 cities participated in 2001, including many Swiss cities!

A Four-Year Trial: One Car Free Sunday per Season

Dear Swiss, Young People and Young-at-Heart, Nostalgic and Up-to-Date, Sporty and Light-of-Heart!

The last countrywide Car Free Sundays in Switzerland took place 30 years ago, late in the autumn of 1973. Everyone who took part back then can recall these event-filled Sundays with joy. The Sunday Initiative would like to bring back the joy of those Car Free Sundays.

Car Free Sundays offer fun and games on 4 out of 365 days. The fun-packed recreational experience starts right outside your door. 84,000 kilometers of road space are at your disposal for walks, bicycle riding, roller-skating, skate boarding, hiking and much more. Street cafés, parties or religious services are offered new areas to convene. Public transportation should be the primary means of longer-distance mobilization. Taxis and other transporters can be used as seen fit. Cars may be used if needed for work, in emergencies or due to physical handicap. As demonstrated in 1973, Car Free Sundays can happen without bureaucracy or injury – and with many happy people. Car Free Sundays also appeal to tourists. This may be seen in the increase in visitor numbers on Car Free Sundays at Murtensee and Bodensee. The EU Steering Committee has confirmed that Car Free Sundays go along well with the European Transportation Policy. Who doesn't want to rediscover our beautiful surroundings together with friends? The extraordinary atmosphere will enthuse young and old alike. Car Free Sundays give us back the Sunday as a day of rest and offer the possibility to step away from everyday stress. After the four-yearlong trial you can decide for yourself if you want to continue to experience Car Free Sundays!

We were Outside for the Whole Day

I still remember the yellow Ford Granada we had back then. I remember it well, because I would always get carsick. We often drove long distances; I hated it. That's why I can still remember well that we were supposed to drive to my grandmother, who lived 4 hours away. Instead we were outside for the whole day and played on the street. There was a special feeling outside. All the neighbors were out – it sounded different: everyone was talking. Our car stayed in the garage for the entire day. (Birgit)