

City Slicker

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We are the vulnerable ones, the eternal losers. Whoever reads this report by the vanquished will agree with me. Whether he belongs to the victims or to the victors, he knows what I mean.

Over the last ten years, I've had four accidents. All lost. And hundreds of near- accidents. All of which I would have lost. Because car drivers, those heavy-foot athletes who are out to get me, the notorious bicyclist, the noiseless one, the emission-free one, the unsuspecting one, and ruin my health (my life?), always emerge as winners. Always unscathed, always without blood stains and battered knees.

I am (as a smoker) totally for the rights of non-smokers to not be constantly polluted. But why isn't there a sticker on every bumper – like the one that reads "smoking kills" on every pack of cigarettes - which reads "driving liquidates men, women and children!" Why not?

I will never understand the joy of those who squeeze into their Faraday cage and use the gas pedal to creep into the city. And to creep behind others. One more lonely than the other. One more frustrated than the other. One more greedy than the other in search of a parking space. I will never understand that inflated ego which is fed by the delusion that more metal means more man, that he could be more elegant and more impressive because his hood is more expensive than the one in front and in back of him.

There are the moments – at traffic lights, in the middle of traffic jams, at accidents, in the morning or evening rush hour, in the middle-of-it-all rush hour – when we cyclists drive by the frustrated and by the chrome flashers with their butt cheek heaters, in triumph. We're the winners now. But silent, emission-free and unsuspecting winners. Winners with flying hair, with a sidelong glance at the sky, with a feeling of lightness and grinning regret, we leave all of those behind us who invested a lot of money to go nowhere in a lot of places where they did not want to stay put. At least all of those nowhere goers and creepers have the chance to listen even longer to a moronic radio program by Ö3 anchors who - according to Karl-Markus Gauß - were hand picked from among the top idiots. To not move from the spot and then to be bombarded with stupidities– that's tough. Obviously, car drivers can take it.

I remember a talk by a European economic minister who shouted enthusiastically into the microphone: "We need more growth, more growth, and more growth again!" The three growths went well with his triple chin. What, one might ask the fool, should happen to us who are

not allowed to stop growing? To become a fat slob like him? With a quadruple chin? Should Europe start looking like Philadelphia, in the American state of Pennsylvania, where the mayor placed scales in all corners of the city? So that a population which had lost total control over their super size bodies should start weighing themselves and agree to go to a fitness studio? In order to lose those kilos from pigging out, on city hall's bill?

Is that our future? When pedestrians can only go by foot with the help of a vehicle? Where we bitterly fight to protect the habitats of automobiles? Because lobbyists and profiteers have already sullied (not washed!) our brains. Because we have become too lethargic and sluggish to resist?

No – it doesn't have to be that way. A glance at Paris can raise our spirits. Here was a mayor in mid-2007 with an idea: Vélib, which is short for bicycle and freedom: There are now 25,000 bicycles in the French capital, spread over some 2000 stations, which anyone can borrow at any time for a small fee. Tendency rising. (In this case wild growth is quite welcome). An idea with phenomenal success. Supported by another epiphany, "les couloirs de bus," the bus lanes. Downright revolutionary. The auto plague is reduced – at least one third of the road now belongs to public transportation – and to bicyclists

What do we conclude? Here is a politician who is thinking, while others elsewhere are still tenaciously and stubbornly bludgeoning the city with new and even newer highways and other dead-end streets.

I am a City Slicker. That's what they call someone in New York who likes the big city, someone like Woody Allen who says "when I smell the country air, I get a headache." That's why all of us who love the city should make sure that our living space remains intact. As a place to stroll around – per pedes, per wheel, to hear stories, to flirt, to brood and to read in coffeehouses, to raise our eyebrows and look around and watch how "la vie" around the coffeehouse goes by. The city should remain a "sensual place" – a place of the senses. Where we can nourish our senses. Where our proximity to one another isn't perceived as a threat, like hoods, but as a gain to our own selves.

Finally a little love story. In an Australian hick town I saw a missing object notice hanging on a bulletin board: "Have you seen this bicycle? It's everything that I have. It's my home. Please write me." Underneath, the address of a friend. The young kid didn't even seem to have his own address. But it was not that, it was the metaphor of the bicycle as a home that was so moving. If Nick had showed up at that moment, I swear I would have bought him a brand new one. Because all cyclists are my friends.