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Global Protests and Local Space

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Anyone who has looked at the activist videos from Seattle to Prague to Göteburg and Salzburg (there was an opportunity to do so at the Diagonale in Graz this year), will repeatedly find the same images recalled: the dancing crowd in pink and silver, figures dressed in black costumes following the ironically martial Infernal Noise Brigade, white overalls, young faces in the sun-drenched demo parade, colorful banners. Then the turnaround - robocops marching out in full force, rubbish bins turned into barricades, orgies of beatings. It is rare that the viewer gets an insight into the preparations for these large-scale protests, whether on site or in the various scenes in cities all over Europe. There is the impression of a movement, whose expressions have merged into a unified protest culture, regardless of the specific social structures of their regions of origin from North America to southern Spain - a form of expression that can be employed in front of the scenery of North American Seattle, the old central European city of Prague and southern Genoa equally well. Expression of a globalized activism in a globalized world, expression of a nomadic movement that can dispense with ties to a real social location?

The appearance of a flood of images that always look the same is deceptive. The example of the form of action "Reclaim the Streets" that emerged in London in the early 90s shows the close ties between a tactic that has since been successfully employed around the world, and the concrete local circumstances, from which it initially developed.

The basic concept of the Reclaim the Streets Party that can be applied anywhere, is essentially quite simple: the temporary appropriation of public space using bodies, creativity and music - too congenial and cheerful to be surrounded and evicted without further ado, yet simultaneously effective enough, as a disruption of traffic and everyday consumerism, not to be integrated, like the Love Parade in Berlin, for instance, in the rounds of adventure society culture events.

In London, the slogan "Reclaim the Streets" and the criticism of motor vehicle traffic are embedded in a dense interweaving of sub- and popular culture, political, economic, and everyday culture connotations: from environmental protest against road construction to the car as a symbol of urban impositions, from the subculture of free parties to the repressive instrument of the Criminal Justice Act, from official traditions like the celebrations for the anniversary of the coronation of the queen to the collective trauma of early capitalism, and back again to the everyday life of the contemporary metropolis.

In the early 90s, the implementation of an extensive road construction program was started in England - leading to a series of protest camps in remote landscapes, whose forms of action sometimes seemed strange to outsiders: someone showed up, furnished a treehouse and thus claimed "squatter's rights"; people dug tunnels under the construction sites, chained themselves to cement blocks and waited to be evicted. [1] At best these camps were able to delay road construction, their success was often measured in financial damage (eviction costs, costs for damaged machines or "liberated" building material). What is perhaps longer lasting is their impact as a field of experimentation for ways of living and acting together in solidarity outside the "rat race", the permanent pursuit of the cash needed for survival in the city. With the creative occupation of the building site for the meanwhile opened access road to the M11 motorway straight through a residential area of north-west London in 1993, the protest moved from the country into the city. With it, social concerns moved into the foreground alongside ecological ones. With an amalgamation of art, bodies and media techniques, a

handful of activists succeeded in holding a months-long permanent performance in constantly occupied Claremont Road. Art objects were installed and rearranged as barricades as needed. Sofas, chairs and various other things found in living rooms were brought from private interior space to the public sphere of the street. Even during the inevitable eviction in November 94, the protesters remained on top: 1300 members of the riot police danced on the occupiers' stage, a theatrical performance that cost the state over two million pounds. An activist explained: "We always knew that one day all this would be rubble, and this awareness of impermanence gave us immense strength - the impossibility of failure - the strength to move this Temporary Autonomous Zone on to somewhere else." [2]

Reclaim the Streets actually succeeded in adapting the action form of anti-road protests in a rural environment to the circumstances of the metropolis, transforming the protest against environmental destruction into a protest against "the car" as a symbol of the capitalist disciplining of urban life by connecting to everyday experience in London.

The economy of London depends on people accepting having to drive for hours to their working places - and thus accepting massive limitations to their quality of life. [3] The average speed of traffic is approximately the same as at the end of the 19th century, the famous "rush hour" takes place permanently, and local public transportation is, despite all the endeavors of Mayor Ken Livingstone, too expensive and too old. Against this background, it was possible to make the concerns of unregistered street parties plausible to the bourgeoisie media and thus to a broader audience.

The Reclaim the Streets parties in London made use of a choreography similar to that of the Free Parties [4] of the rave communities since the late 80s: the parties were not registered; the location was propagated at the last moment through clandestinely circulating telephone numbers or word-of-mouth; whether in a defunct storehouse in the urban no-man's-land of the north of England [5] or in the busy streets of a city district of London, the parties could break out suddenly and to the complete surprise of any keepers of the peace that might be present. What is said in the excellent book "DiY-Culture" [6] about the radical environmentalists from Earth First!, applies equally well to Reclaim the Streets: road protester becomes airport protester becomes The Land is Ours urban squatter becomes rave-goer becomes EF!er "ad infinitum, simply through her/his presence on that particular campaign or demo. It is impossible, then, to talk about (for example) EF! and the roads protest movement as if they were separate entities: individuals flow in and out of both and in many cases would not define themselves in terms of either group."

The non-commercial raves with their hedonist ideology and their contrariness to the logic of capitalist profit obviously represented a massive threat to public order. In 1994 the law known as the Criminal Justice Act was introduced. Among other things, this gave the police the authority to break up rave parties. "Rave" was defined as "music wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats".

The CJA was used to evict innumerable parties as well as to end the occupation of Claremont Road. At the same time, though, this law led to the politicization of the raver community and to a sense of solidarity among various subcultural and political scenes. The message of a rave DJ to the government: "Cheers, thanks a lot for bringing us all together. We're a lot more networked now than we ever were." [7] The "March for Social Justice" that was propagated by Reclaim the Streets in 1997 was regarded by the rave scene as "the best illegal rave or dance music party in history" [8] and "one of the most remarkable free parties since Castlemorton in 1992." [9] And in June 2002, right in time for the tenth anniversary of this remarkable party, people were raving again in Castlemorton despite the massive police presence.

In addition to current political and cultural connotations, Reclaim the Streets also refers to a national collective memory, not only with reference to the appropriation of public celebrations such as the coronation anniversary of the queen.

The use of the term "enclosures" [10] in RTS diction refers to a trauma of original accumulation that is latent in the collective subconscious of the United Kingdom: Beginning in the 16th century, land that was accessible for the "common good" was fenced in for raising sheep, i.e. enclosed. With the rise of capitalism, textile production became more profitable than agriculture. As the land was enclosed, people were closed out. According to the logic of Reclaim the Streets, today the streets are enclosed. What was "the commons of the city" in a mythic past, commonly utilizable space for discussions and exchange within a social community, has been removed from this use today. Whereas in the past it was sheep that led to the privatization of land, today it is cars that take urban public space away from use by the inhabitants.

For those who were able to read the connotative text of the flyers, the protest against the impositions of motor vehicle traffic was not a single issue campaign from the beginning. Instead, it contained an implicit criticism of capitalism long before Reclaim the Streets explicitly "outed" itself as "anti-capitalist" on June 18, 1999 in conjunction with the global action day in the financial centers of the world (thus giving rise to wild speculations about Reclaim the Streets' alleged terrorist activities on the part of the media and police).

It is not a coincidence that Reclaim the Streets had this anti-capitalist touch from the beginning - less the result of reading Capital than of the strains experienced everyday in a thoroughly capitalized metropolis. Everyday life in London is probably more permeated by capitalism than in any other major European city: living space is not only an object of speculation for investors. A cinema ticket costs two minimum wage hours - three with a public transportation ticket into the city. Community centers, where events could be independently organized at a low cost, were largely done away with under the Thatcher government. What is left for affordable (activist) conviviality is the constantly changing scene of open squats that rarely exist for longer than a few months. Not only the meeting points are in a permanent state of flux, the actors also change - because London is only a temporary home for many. The transience of everyday life in London is mirrored in the temporary, unregistered occupation of public space with the means of crowds, music, carnival and dance.

The Reclaim the Streets Party action form has been used in many cities around the world, changed, adapted to the given conditions. Many of the connotations that were generally familiar in Great Britain have become invisible in the process, new ones have been added. In London, it has grown quieter around Reclaim the Streets since the wave of repression following the global action day on June 18, 1999. Instead of resting on the laurels of past interventions and instead of exposing themselves to criminalization, the actors are concentrating on other areas, moving into new groups and contexts and adapting their forms of articulation to the present political and social conditions. A fortuitous by-product of this is that Reclaim the Streets has remained true to itself: a disorganization that has no use for speakers or heroes - but: "We are Everywhere!"

[1] Cf. Going underground. Some Thoughts on Tunneling as a Tactic. In: Do or Die 8 (1999), p. 60-61.

[2] John Jordan: The art of necessity: the subversive imagination of anti-road protest and Reclaim the Streets. In: George McKay (Ed.) DiY Culture. Party & Protest in Nineties Britain. London 1998, p. 129-151, here p. 139.

[3] Cf. Patrick Field: The Anti-Roads Movement: the Struggle of Memory Against Forgetting. In: Tim Jordan/Adam Lent (Ed.):Storming the Millennium. London 1999, p. 68-79.

[4] Cf. Rupa Huq: The Right to Rave: Opposition to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. In: Tim Jordan/Adam Lent (Ed.) Storming the Millennium. London 1999, p. 15-33.

[5] Drew Hemment: The Northern Warehouse Rave Parties. In: George McKay (Ed.): DiY Culture. Party & Protest in Nineties Britain. London 1998, p. 208-227

[6] George McKay (Ed.): DiY Culture. Party & Protest in Nineties Britain. London 1998, here p. 159.

[7] Rupa Huq: The Right to Rave, 1999, p. 24.

[8] Mixmag 73, June 1997, p. 101

[9] Muzik 25, June 1997

[10] In an early flyer, for instance, it said: "The point is to reconquer the streets as a public, inclusive space and liberate them from the private, `enclosed' use by cars."