

**Bart Van der Steen, Ask Katzeff, Leendert Van Hoogenhuijze, eds..** *The City Is Ours: Squatting and Autonomous Movements in Europe from the 1970s to the Present.* Chicago: PM Press, 2014. 336 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-60486-683-4.



**Reviewed by** Geoff Eley

**Published on** H-Socialisms (June, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

The volume under review presents a fascinating mosaic of urban squatting and “autonomous” politics in Europe since the 1970s. After an excellent scene-setting introduction, the volume comprises nine discrete case studies, each authored by scholar-activists directly familiar with the respective histories on the ground. They range from the better-known cases of Amsterdam (Nazmir Kadir), Copenhagen (René Karpantschof and Flemming Mikkelsen), London (Lucy Finchett-Maddock), and Berlin (Alex Vasudevan) to far less documented instances like Athens (Gregor Kritidis), Barcelona (Claudio Cattaneo and Enrique Tudela), Poznan (Grzegorz Piotrowski), and Vienna (Robert Foltin), supplemented by a chapter on the much smaller Brighton with its rather different urban polity (Needle Collective and the Bash Street Kids). The essays vary somewhat in form and quality. Those in the first cluster and the one on Barcelona reap the benefit of building on far more elaborate existing literatures, enabling a more densely contextualized and more analytically substantial account. Lacking the same advan-

tages, Kritidis, Piotrowski, and Foltin have to build up their narratives from scratch, writing the events for the first time into history without being able to deliver the generalized meta-commentary available to Vasudevan, Kadir, or Karpantschof/Mikkelsen. In contrast with the far thicker micro-political treatments of the other essays, to mention another difference, Kritidis devotes more space to the deeper historical context, beginning from the legacies of the Greek Civil War, while focusing on the breadth of the current anti-austerity activism rather any particular set of squats or autonomist center. The Brighton chapter is again rather different, using its far smaller scale to develop an arresting micro-political account of activist rhythms at the level of the town per se.

What emerges out of this important collection? First, it falls somewhere between the agitational corpus of the squatters and autonomists themselves and the engaged academic scholarship generated around the New Social Movements (NSMs) in the 1980s, which itself then graduated into a fully institutionalized field of the sociology

of contentious politics and collective action. Powerfully shaped by a handful of key influences, including Charles Tilly, Alberto Melucci, and Sidney Tarrow, the sociological literatures have proliferated all but unmanageably in the meantime, seeking to map systematically the incidence, effects, and generative circumstances of social movement politics, with an emphasis on cycles, repertoires, and opportunity structures.[1] While certainly informed by these perspectives, the present volume opts instead for a more concretely bounded, case-based approach, which emphasizes rather the aesthetic possibilities, especially the pleasures and excitements, and spatial ontologies of living inside the city, including the experience of becoming an activist, which sociologists rarely pause very long to consider. In that sense this book gets us much closer to “the subjective factor.” It provides valuable access to an arena of Left politics no longer captured by most of the parties still claiming to carry the name. As such, it belongs with George Katsiaficas’s singular survey, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (1997) and George McKay’s brilliant anthology, *DiY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties’ Britain* (1998), still the best single account of the new political forms of the 1990s.[2]

Second, the transnational quality comes through strongly in the accounts. It consists partly in chains of equivalence--replications and repetitions of idioms, forms, ideas, and practices--and partly in demonstrable direct influences, in the concrete circulation of ideas, people, and texts, and in the demonstration effects of events and actions traveling from one place to another, relayed via the immediacies of the new electronic media and methods of communication. This can be shown in some ways most clearly inside a particular country--the Kreuzberg Squatters’ Council and Autonomist Plenary were modeled directly on those in Hamburg, for example. But the broader northern European connections were also close, for example with *Fristaden Christiana* (Freetown

Christiana) in Copenhagen originally founded in 1971, or with the Dutch *kraakers* in Amsterdam and elsewhere, whose actions went back to 1968. *The City Is Ours* might have done more to explore these transitive connections. Autonomist militancy arguably flowed from the Italian actions surrounding the Metropolitan Indians’ Manifesto of March 1, 1977 (interestingly unmentioned), eventually detonating northwards via the Zurich youth protests of 1980-82 toward the northern cycle of radicalization in German cities, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, London, and elsewhere. Showing how these transnational circuits actually worked would require building a more detailed narrative than this volume provides, one that reconstructs the active biographical, textual, and organized connections as concretely as possible. A chapter specifically addressing this transnational dimension would have greatly enhanced the volume.

Third, the generative relationship to “1968” is completely apparent--whether as specific antecedents, a source of positive inspiration, or the trigger for complicated reaction formations. Few of the essays develop an argument very extensively in this regard. Kadir briefly mentions the Dutch Provo movement and *Kabouters* (Gnomes), active in the late sixties and early seventies; Kritidis gives considerable space to the earlier context of student activism and anarchism in seventies and eighties Greece. Yet overall the deeper contextualizing remains thin. The lines running from 1967-69 down to 1977-82 were extremely complex and crooked, requiring much careful reconstruction and analysis. The Metropolitan Indians’ Manifesto showed this very well, for example. It demanded squats of all empty buildings as a means of creating alternatives to the family, along with free drugs, destruction of zoos, destruction of patriotic monuments, destruction of youth prisons, and the “historical and moral reevaluation of the dinosaur *Archeopterix*, unfairly constructed as an ogre.”[3] Such rhetoric directly marshaled issues and ideas from the earlier time, but the tones were already different: angrier, more flamboyant,

militantly uncompromising, less interested in dialogue. Many of the actions captured in *The City Is Ours* expressed the countercultural agitprop strand of the radicalism of “1968”—the politics of spectacle that arrived especially through Women’s Liberation and the Gay Liberation Front. But others picked up a different thread, that of the street-fighting maximalism. This occurred first in the pitched battles in Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Berlin, the actions of the Danish BZ-movement, and the long siege warfare in Amsterdam, all in the 1980s. The British direct-action cycle followed in the early 1990s: from the Poll Tax resistance of 1989-90 to the campaign against the Criminal Justice Act of 1994, along with massed anti-roads protests, animal rights blockades, and the cultural activism of the acid house/rave scene, northern warehouse dances, and free parties. In yet a third dimension, the squatting and autonomist movements carried forward the legacy of the Situationists, the most self-consciously resonant of the efforts of the 1950s and 1960s at constructing connections between anticapitalist politics and the public disruptions of an aesthetic avant-garde. Embedded in the detail of the volume’s various chapters is a large amount of fascinating evidence for each of these strands.

Fourth, a sociology of the European social-movement militancy of the past fifty years will need to explore a central contrast. The activism of the 1970s and 1980s presumed a mass of young people who found themselves marginal to mainstream society, whether socially by lack of employment and predictable career paths or culturally by a kind of existential disaffection: highly educated, yet displaced from career paths and partially employed, they were stylistically rebellious, while living and working inside distinctive collective arrangements and informal economies, often with bohemian or multicultural links, as in the Hafensstraße in Hamburg’s St Pauli or Kreuzberg in West Berlin.[4] This was a transitional society, one still subsisting on the long aftermath of the affluence of the postwar prosperity, before the ne-

oliberal onslaught of privatization had dismantled the only recently institutionalized machinery of income supplements, social services, unemployment benefits, retraining schemes, work creation, and public subsidies for the arts, museums, and local cultural initiatives. In the starkest of contrasts, the new sociology of the contemporary metropolitan scene, already coalescing during the 1990s, confirmed in the 2000s, and made spectacular since 2008, reflects a fundamentally different set of labor markets and career prospects for the young. Whereas in the 1970s young people were able to postpone the future of a completed and settled adulthood for a variety of consciously chosen reasons, the time of “youth” today has been brutally elongated, disabled in its relation to a future now indefinitely deferred. Most of the book’s chapters offer much helpful material in fleshing out this contrast.

This leads to a fifth point concerning periodization. In their introduction, Van der Steen, Katzeff, and von Hoogenhuijze distinguish an earlier “heroic” phase of militancy in the 1970s and 1980s from the more variegated practices developing between the 1990s and today. With its propensities for direct-action violence, rhetorical provocations, and confrontational challenges to authority, it is the earlier time that more commonly shapes perceptions, they suggest. As they say, citing Kadir’s reportage of the Amsterdam movement in particular, many activists and researchers remain too easily in thrall to “a linear narrative [based] on one specific protest cycle that covers the years 1979-1988” rather than seeing the more complicated dynamics of development since: “The 1980s movement is idealized and projected onto the imaginations and desires of activists who envision the perfect movement as massive, militant, and capable of spectacular occupations and street fights. The image of the movement has thus become static, blind to the movement’s evolution, and the cause of many of the current activists’ experience of a ‘schizophrenic’ world, in which the real movement and

its myth continuously clash” (pp. 7-8). While the temporalities certainly overlap, with frequent reversions to confrontationalism and violence, not least in response to changes in policing, new fields of political maneuvering and negotiation have been opening over the past two decades. These involve conflicts over gentrification, urban renewal, homelessness, and preservation of public space, but also opportunities for creative planning and design and new institutional forms that make use of protections under the law. Vasudevan in particular sees the new politics crystalizing from the spatial practices and aesthetics of contemporary city living, with “the micro-practices of squatting” giving access to “wider debates about the *practice* of urban politics and the emancipatory possibilities of the built form” (p. 133). Using the example of Kastanienallee 77 (K77), an abandoned three-story building in East Berlin’s Prenzlauer Berg occupied in 1992, he shows activists creatively claiming and redefining urban space, so that “principles and practices of cooperative living intersected with juggled political commitments, emotional attachments, and the mundane materialisms of domesticity, occupation, and renovation” (p. 132). On a larger political scale, Cattaneo and Tudela show contemporary struggles over urban space in Barcelona articulating with politics at the levels of both the city and the regional state. In the London chapter, Finchett-Maddock is especially interesting on the subject of legal activism, where advocacy and engagement with local and national government, in the guise of SQUASH (Squatters Action for Secure Homes) and ASS (Advisory Service for Squatters), produce a quite different field of negotiated political relations. As these examples make plain, the politics of emancipation and popular interest have no easy or straightforward boundary. The tensions between the more militantly “heroic” and separatist forms of autonomism and the more “realist” reform-oriented social-movement advocacy—for example between building institutional resources around a legally recognized social center and on the other

hand declaring a TAZ (Temporary Autonomous Zone)—can be extreme.[5]

Finally, autonomism attains its highest significance once placed in the widest setting of its times. Most palpably, the autonomist militancies of 1977-86 coincided with far wider popular rebelliousness. Thus West German extraparliamentary action peaked over exactly the same period, notably in the massively spectacular antinuclear movements at Whyll, Kalkar, Brokdorf, Gorleben, and Wackersdorf, in the Frankfurt runway protests, and in the peace movement climaxing in 1981-84; inside that larger context, West Berlin’s 1978 Tunix festival and the organized densities of the big-city alternative scenes supplied one among these other strands. Likewise, the British miners’ strike, the peace movement, and the urban riots of the early 1980s linked back to the Rock Against Racism carnivals of 1977-78, the punk explosion, and the Free Festivals dating from 1971-74, all complexly interconnected with the rise of the new urban Left of the Greater London Council and other city governments in the early 1980s. This was a politics simply not legible for the existing mainstream Left. It collided violently with the latter too: the Italian autonomist upsurge of 1977-78 defined itself via huge confrontations with the PCI in Bologna and Rome. It was a politics of refusal, with at best an ambivalence against parliamentary politics, at worst a profaning of democratic values. The new extraparliamentary activists had few affinities with older Left parties, which in the 1980s seemed exhausted, despite a capacity for continuing success in elections—a Eurocommunism (Italy, France, Spain) that failed to break through; a sclerotic social democracy (West Germany, Low Countries, Britain) stuck in its accommodations to capitalism; and a technocratic socialism (France, Spain, Greece) shedding all relation to labor movements.

In the intervening years, between the 1980s and the present, this gulf in the Left has grown ever deeper. On the one hand, long-term capitalist

restructuring has destroyed the infrastructures making the earlier broadly based socialist cultures possible, so that socialist parties have become only shells of their former selves, existing only for the fighting of elections. In extraparliamentary arenas, on the other hand, an inventively vigorous social-movement activism remains alive and well, collectively organized at the grass roots, to be sure, yet highly localized and mainly disconnected from any national party political framework. So we now have two quite distinct Left formations with separate but overlapping existence, each deriving from a different period of the Left's history. If in the first two thirds of the twentieth century the city was the site of the stable working-class formation that sustained the Left's earliest successes, it has now become a fundamentally different space of sociality, employment, everyday practice, and political identification. *The City Is Ours* does a fine job of delineating some of the resulting political boundaries, while describing the new ground where politics can occur. Certain of the essays (for example, Cattaneo/Tudela on Barcelona, Kritidis on Greece) begin to suggest how the bifurcated arenas of contemporary Left politics might be reconnected: Podemos (We Can, founded 2014) and SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left, 2004) each specifically bypass the existing parties, seeking a different ground from which to win support; Ada Colau, newly elected Left mayor of Barcelona, entered politics via housing activism, becoming a leading voice for the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages that was formed in 2009. Given their disappearance as the membership parties of old, their narrowing around a purely bureaucratic and propagandist electoralism, their almost wholly deradicalized centrism, and their dismal showing in recent elections, existing socialist parties are less and less capable of offering any solution. No Left seeking to take their place can ignore the distinctive grounds of democracy and active citizenship addressed by *The City Is Ours*.

## Notes

[1]. The potential citations here are endless. For an indication, see the following summations: Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004); Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and the Needs of Contemporary Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); and Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 3rd rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). For a representative sample of the wider literatures, see: Hans Peter Kriisi, ed., *New Social Movements in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Marco Guigni, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly, eds., *How Social Movements Matter* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Maria Kousis and Charles Tilly, eds., *Economic and Political Contention in Comparative Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005); and Donatella Della Porta and Mario Dani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

[2]. Interestingly, McKay's volume appears in none of the sociologists' bibliographies. Examples of the activist genre include Notes from Nowhere, eds., *We are everywhere: the irresistible rise of global anticapitalism* (London: Verso, 2003); and Claire Soloman and Tania Palmieri, eds., *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* (London: Verso, 2011); also the biographical interviews collected in Tom Mertes, ed., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (London: Verso, 2004). For a recent work thinking across the genres, see Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

[3]. Katsiaficas, *Subversion of Politics*, 39.

[4]. According to Katsiaficas, *Subversion of Politics*, 87-88, 99-100, 128-131, Kreuzberg had an al-

ternative scene of 40,000, along with 40,000 Turks and 50,000 “normals” in 1989.

[5]. See Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1991), 106: TAZs were “‘pirate economics,’ living high off the surplus of social reproduction—even the popularity of colorful military uniforms—and the concept of *music* as revolutionary social change—and finally their shared air of impermanence, of being ready to move on, shape-shift, relocate to other universities, mountain-tops, ghettos, factories, safe houses, abandoned farms—or even other planes of reality.”

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms>

**Citation:** Geoff Eley. Review of Van der Steen, Bart; Katzeff, Ask; Van Hoogenhuijze, Leendert, eds. *The City Is Ours: Squatting and Autonomous Movements in Europe from the 1970s to the Present*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42709>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.