

# PREFACE

A few months before I left Amsterdam, I attended one of my last squatting actions. A former squatter housemate had organized the squatting of luxury condominiums. They had once been affordable social housing apartments, available for permanent rental to anyone whose number had come up after years on the waiting list. The squatters movement considered the practice of renovating and selling social housing apartments a betrayal to the Socialist ideals that led to the building of such housing a few decades earlier.

My friend was squatting these apartments because most had not sold, after nearly a year on the market following the global credit crisis. Mortgages were hard to come by and the apartments had become unexpectedly unaffordable. It was a confrontational action since squatters typically occupied abandoned spaces rather than luxury apartments. My friend felt unsure of how the police and the neighbors would react, so he organized hundreds of people to attend. The more support, the less likelihood of violence.

He planned well. By the time I arrived, the squatters had broken open the apartment doors and moved in, and the police had inspected the spaces and left. Hundreds of black clad punks in attendance milled around chatting in the newly squatted apartments, on the street, and on the sidewalks. It was a festive atmosphere.

However, a white Dutch couple in their late fifties who had purchased one of the condominiums was unhappy. They were now sandwiched in between squatters in the apartments above, below, and in the buildings on either side. I watched the husband lean out his window, stare craggily at the sea of white punks who had taken over the street, and say, repeatedly: “Fucking Muslims. Fucking Muslims.”

This book is full of strange and contradictory stories like this one. I focus on micro-social interactions that reflect larger tensions around power, authority, belonging, and identity in the squatters movement specifically, and in urban life generally. These stories emerged from observations, interactions, and interviews during three-and-a-half years of anthropological research in a squatters community in Amsterdam. During this time, I resided in four squats where I was a member of living groups. I regularly attended squatting actions, political actions, worked as a cook in a squatted restaurant, worked on anti-gentrification campaigns and house defenses, and generally hung out in the citywide squatters’ scene. I was evicted twice and jailed once.



Figure i Squatting Action Amsterdam, 2008

In addition to narrating stories, I systematically examine what people say versus what they do, and what these contradictions mean. Why did the older Dutch man curse Muslims when no Muslims were visually present nor responsible for the squatting? What does this incident reveal about an environment where it is acceptable to articulate xenophobic statements when feeling angry, powerless, and “surrounded?”

Since this book is about the squatters movement in Amsterdam, I focus on taboo dynamics that have yet to be examined in social movement literature. How do people silently practice hierarchy and authority in an anarchist community that rejects hierarchy and authority? How does that paradox structure every aspect of social life in this movement?

My tone and perspective differ radically from social movement literature, which often represents activists romantically. In contrast, my observations of this subculture are influenced by women/gender studies, queer theory, and subaltern studies. Hence, I view people in this movement as ... people, rather than heroes. Activists tend to consider their spaces and practices as, “heterotopias,” that is, existing outside of hegemonic norms. I have found otherwise. I have witnessed activists unwittingly reproducing and being embedded in the very social and cultural norms that they verbally reject. Such contradictory practices are universal rather than hypocritical because people – all of us – are flawed and complicated. This is also what makes life interesting.