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The habitus of emotional sovereignty

The following conversation occurred among a small group sitting in a private bedroom at approximately 3 a.m. at a squatters’ party.

**Samuel:** Well, you know how Lianne is. She’s really shallow. She’s very annoying. That woman is impossible. There’s something kinky about her though. I want to dominate her skinny ass and fuck the hell out of that mean bitch.

**Nazima:** What is so appealing about her? What does she have?

**Hermance:** Well … I asked Hans once, you know Hans, breaker Hans, with the big hands and the tools, he lives in a big legalized squat in the West. The two of them have had a thing for years. I asked him, why doesn’t he let her go after all of these years? He said that she likes to have the kind of sex that he likes.

**Nazima:** What does that mean? What kind of sex?

Hermance shook her head in a gesture of playful ignorance along with the other two women beside her: I don’t know. I didn’t want to know. I just ended the conversation there.

From across the small room, Lucy, a British squatter, drunk and laughing, yelled: Don’t pretend you don’t know what it means. You’re not fooling anyone. It means she likes it fast, hard, and up the ass.

We all laughed.

In the squatters’ subcultures, only “real” or authentic squatters can inhabit positions of authority. Since being an authentic squatter is already fraught with unstated behavioral and stylistic expectations, I contend that to hold a position of disavowed authority, the criteria for which I will detail presently, is even more contentious. As stated earlier, achieving authenticity as a squatter is a double process of exhibiting a number of skills and competencies that accumulate squatter capital in addition to being recognized by others as “real” or authentic by exhibiting mastery and rejection of acknowledged systems of taste and values as well as by negatively identifying against various groups.
Similarly, to inhabit authority entails the double process of an individual demonstrating a set of competencies and being recognized by others as a figure of authority through a vicious and dismantling discourse. The first section of this chapter focuses mainly on the types of skills, competencies, habitus, and performances that constitute authority. The second part concentrates on how squatters distinguish authority figures by eviscerating the individuals in question through gossip, and examines the significance of the attention that is paid by squatters to the sexual practices of those in positions of authority, as illustrated by the opening anecdote.

Previously, I presented a matrix of skills and styles of identity-making performances necessary to enable a sense of inhabiting the ideal of the authentic squatter. Squatter capital, specific skills and the differential prestige that one gains by excelling in such skills, describes the unspoken value system of the internal social world of the squatters movement, what Bourdieu describes as understanding the subcategories of practice that pertain to distinctive properties of a field. To achieve a sense of authenticity, one must demonstrate that one has mastered and rejected tastes and values, both mainstream and those associated with the radical left. In addition, one should render invisible and natural a long, arduous, and self-conscious process of socialization and skill acquisition. Thus, regardless of the diversity of reasons why squatters squat, their political motivations, attitudes and their structural differences, the silent ideal of “a real squatter” exists. This archetype haunts those who are invested in belonging to the community, making many squatters feel inadequate and pushing them to perform this ideal, resulting in a social world full of discomforting contradictions.

In this chapter, I explore these discomforting contradictions further and describe how authority functions in a subculture that rejects authority. I argue that squatters who hold authority have (1) mastered over time many of the skills that comprise squatter capital, especially the prestigious skill of strategic manipulation; (2) hold positions of cultural centrality in the Mainstream; (3) should comfortably assert a persona in the movement as an articulate, assertive, and aggressive public speaker both within the movement and in the Mainstream; and finally (4) perform an emotional sovereignty and social autonomy from the movement and the community. Such a performance communicates that a person appears to sovereignly choose participating in the movement rather than being so marginal in the Mainstream that they have no other choice but to exist within the squatter subculture. With these criteria in mind, squatters who have authority often, though not exclusively, are highly educated with middle to upper-class backgrounds.

Furthermore, with the understanding of these criteria for holding authority in this subculture, I consider the ambiguity of the characteristics that comprise the position of being “cultural central.” I argue that the classification of culturally central requires deeper ethnographic
understandings of centrality and marginality, since the terms mutually define each other. In the context of a social movement organization, understanding the impact of participants’ backgrounds on the activities of the movement allows one to examine the invisible logic of why and how more culturally central people, who possess a number of resources needed by a movement, accumulate capital and become authority figures. What Bourdieu classifies as the invisible logic of political participation, in which people who are structurally disadvantaged often abstain or delegate their opinions to those who feel more entitled to participate, is revealed when a culturally marginal person attempts to take a position of authority in a squatters’ defense campaign.

To illustrate these points, I present the case of Shirin and Jenny, two “authentic” female squatters from opposite cultural and class backgrounds who were members of the same squatters group. Residing in different living groups within a squatted complex, they could have avoided each other entirely. However, due to both women’s ideological commitment to fight the eviction of their house, they were forced to work together on the house’s defense.

Despite the energy and extensive time that she had invested in the house’s defense, Shirin, the child of working-class, Muslim immigrants lacked authority in the group due to her cultural marginality that stemmed from a lack of skills and uncontrolled aggression. In contrast, Jenny, who espoused a commitment to anti-hierarchy and anti-authority, was the de facto person in charge of the houses’ legal defense. This status derived from Jenny’s cultural centrality via her substantial skill-set and her sense of ease in the world, originating in part from her upper-class Dutch habitus.

To complicate Bourdieu’s overly deterministic argument that fuses the ability to participate politically with one’s class and gender, I also present two cases of working-class, white, Dutch, culturally central squatters who have status as authority figures in the movement. Both were socialized in the movement and mastered all elements of squatter capital. Furthermore, they mobilized their working-class Dutch habitus to form a bond between themselves and Dutch politicians as well as surreptitiously critique the tacit middle-class assumptions of the backstage of the squatters’ scene.

Furthermore, in a community that rejects authority, a fundamental characteristic of having authority is to fervently deny that such informal hierarchies exist. In fact, anyone who proclaims themselves an authority is most likely a marginal figure. Authority in an anti-authoritarian community can only be acknowledged circuitously via gossip rather than explicitly and transparently. As a result, gossip is the most effective means to identify who has the most authority and serves to reify rather than undermine authority.

Gossip, and particularly gossip about sexual practices that is expressed in an anti-romantic modality, reveals a homosocial dynamic and a transaction of desire that is compelled by a habitus of emotional sovereignty that authority figures possess. This emotional sovereignty is an essential element
in asymmetrical and non-reciprocal relationships that authority figures have with members of the movement. This asymmetrical relationship is characterized by the dynamic in which authority figures receive love and are needed by all members of the group but only require and express love for the total group collectivity rather than any single individual.

Moreover, anti-romantic sexual gossip enables a misogynistic homosocial dynamic. The ethnographic portraits of two so-called kraakbonzen (squatter bosses), Dominic and Damien, both from upper-class backgrounds, their biographies, their habitus of emotional sovereignty, the gossip that surrounds them, and the aggression targeted towards their girlfriends, illustrate these points.

The last part of this chapter relates the story of Ludwic who serves as an example of a failure of authority and a foil for the portraits of successful authority. Ludwic, an authentic squatter, possesses many of the skills that comprise squatter capital, but never learned to master and reject with the middle-class grace required to receive respect in the movement. Despite his squatter capital, a number of factors such as his working-class taste and habitus, his cultural marginality, his proclamation of himself as an authority figure, and his obsessive gossiping about the other kraakbonzen, reduce his credibility and prevent his recognition as an authority figure.
Cultural marginality and centrality

Shirin and Jenny were members of a group of thirty squatters who occupied four houses in a row, each house containing three apartments and a ground floor space, known eventually in the squatters’ scene as the Motorflex block. These houses were originally social housing apartments owned by a housing corporation that had decided to demolish the houses to build more spacious, luxury condominiums. The process of relocating the original tenants to empty the houses lasted a number of years. By the time all the apartments were emptied of renters, the housing corporation covered the apartment doors and windows in metal, known as sitex, to prevent them from being squatted. They were squatted anyway.

Due to the enormity of this block of houses, the number of doors that had to be broken open simultaneously with motor flexes (handheld circular saw wheels that cut through metal), and the high possibility of police violence, the squatting action required the presence of an unusually immense group of people to protect the people breaking open the door and to dissuade the police from interfering since the majority of the apartments had been empty for less than a year (rather than for a year or longer, per standard practice). With over one hundred people present, the action succeeded smoothly and without delays. Four breakers with handheld motor flexes cut through the sitex and opened the doors within minutes. With the noise and the sparks from the motor flexes cutting through the metal, the door breaking was highly performative and, “so cool,” extolled Stijn, a nineteen-year-old squatter who was learning how to be a breaker.

Three different living groups resided in the Motorflex houses. Self-identified punks who were referred to by their neighbors simply as “the punks” – both crusty and baby – resided in the two center houses. They shared a living room and kitchen between the two neighboring buildings. The members of this punk living group had considerable squatter capital. Most were veteran squatters who could build, break, and especially excelled in non-instrumental acts of bravery by enthusiastically participating in confrontations with the police and faithfully attending actions for radical left causes (anti-fur, animal rights, anti-fascism, women’s rights, immigrants’ rights, refugee support). The punk squatters were not expected to have organizational or strategic manipulation skills. “The expertise of the punks in the Motorflex was rioting and they did it well,” joked Marie, a squatter with extensive campaign experience.

Within a week of squatting the block, the punks had built a punk bar in one of their storefronts, named “Motorflex,” with lettering in the style of a 1980s heavy metal album cover. Open two nights a week, this bar was renowned for “old school” punk behavior: all night usage of drugs, drinking, partying, and among the more aggressive, crusty punks, bar fights. When the
Surinamese take-out restaurant of one of the building’s store fronts vacated, the punks immediately squatted it to create a new voku, named, “Op-Roti” (Roti is a popular Surinamese take-out food in Amsterdam and Rot Op means Fuck off). According to Jop, an ex-squatter active in the scene for fifteen years, “The Motorflex house is great. It’s old school. We need to have that kind of thing around these days with all the *vertrutting* going on, even in the squatters’ scene” (*vertrutting* refers to gentrification as well as a larger societal shift towards more restrictive and conventional morality and behavior in the Amsterdam public sphere).

In the outer two buildings of the housing block, resided living groups whose lifestyles were decidedly not punk. One group consisted of a number of veteran squatters with squatting capital with a range of capabilities and were all known as “active” squatters. Marlous, a member of this living group, teased the punks’ reputation for violent and noisy partying: “Our group lives in the building on the outer edge in order to serve as a protective sound buffer between the punk houses and those of the neighbors.” Jenny, another member of the group for whom this was her first experience as a squatter, joked, “We have about six people living in this group, versus next door. I have no idea how many punks, girlfriends of punks, and random guests are living there. Its chaos over there.”

Each member of this living group possessed different elements of squatting capital. Most had squatted several times in the past or at least were “active” in the scene by attending radical left political actions, parties, and hanging out in squats. The veteran squatters in the group had organized and participated in various squatter campaigns and action squats. They had experience managing the press, the legal landscape of squatting and strategic manipulation, and reveled in non-instrumental acts of bravery. Despite their squatting capital, most of the group felt uninterested in investing effort into “defending the house” when it was threatened with eviction. Along with the punks, most of this group felt satisfied with allowing the lifetime of the Motorflex block to depend on a series of legal actions, understanding that eviction would follow after losing the court cases. “The people who lived in the Motorflex block were political, very political, although the house wasn’t,” remarked Damien, a veteran squatter from the kraakspreekuur. “The Motorflex block project was a failure,” criticized Jeremy, a member of the squatter’s research collective. Marie scoffed at the Motorflex block squatters:

It’s fake politics. There was no coordinated defense of that block. They didn’t campaign. They never worked on the actual problem of that house as a symbol of the housing corporations selling off social housing and turning them into yuppie condominiums. They depended on a series of court cases filed by a guy who has a foundation that tries to preserve working-class architectural monuments. Eviction was inevitable. That’s not politics, that’s laziness.
Damien explained further, “The Motorflex houses were politically useless. They were just a bunch of loud punks.”

The fourth house on the outer edge of the Motorflex block was characterized by the presence of Shirin. Shirin grew up in Turkey and immigrated to Germany as a young girl. Her family had moved to Dusseldorf, an industrial city, when she was a small child. They left her in Turkey to be raised by her grandparents while they established themselves in Germany as skilled manual laborers. At twelve, Shirin reunited with her family in Germany. In the late 1970s, Turkish migrants were highly visible and unwelcome in Germany. Despite her light skin and features in which she easily passed as German, Shirin developed a strong immigrant identity.

When Shirin became older, she became involved in the emerging industry of website design. According to Shirin, she burned out due to her excessive success. Eventually, she moved to Amsterdam to create a new life. She became involved in squatting because she could not find an affordable apartment and felt compelled by its alternative cultural underground. She did not look like a “real squatter.” She was older, in her early forties, and she dressed Mainstream or even “yuppie” with clean and fitted clothing.

Shirin was often unemployed and struggled financially. She refused to work in her field despite her past success. Identifying as an artist, she struggled to find employment but then rejected jobs that she felt were beneath her capabilities, such as in call centers. She incessantly talked about being broke and yet, spent cash immediately upon receiving it, never saving or paying off her debts. Although physically pretty, her body language and manner of moving had a harsh edge to it that others found aggressive and off-putting.

Shirin was a “real squatter,” having earlier squatted a house that had been attacked by fascists. The kraakspreekuur invited her to become a member based on her involvement in the squatting of the Motorflex. Shirin felt honored by the invitation since it implied squatter capital and high levels of competence. She dedicated herself to the squatter community, dutifully attended squatting actions, and participated in strategic meetings of the neighborhood based squatters group.

Despite her involvement in the wider squatters’ scene, Shirin was socially isolated from the Motorflex block. The punks resented her for not allowing more people to live in her house and for failing to develop the ground floor of her building into a social or a housing space. The punks’ houses were full of residents: punks, their girlfriends (this particular group of punks were all men), plus a number of guests, resulting in eight or more people per building. In contrast, out of four floors, Shirin’s house had at most three residents, and often only two, because she ritually threw guests out. Socially, she behaved unpredictably, lashing out at others.

Because Shirin was a member of the kraakspreekuur and given that no one else in the Motorflex group was interested, she took charge of the defense of the house with sincerity and dedication. However, her management of the
house’s defense further alienated her from the rest of the group. The attitude of the punks towards the house defense was mild interest and support. That is, they were happy that someone in the block took charge of it and would help when presented with a clear plan for their participation. According to Marlous, “The punks are sick of her. If she wants to do something, and she asks for help, they’ll do it. Instead, she wants to sit all day in these fucking meetings. The punks hate that.”

Shirin’s style of management frustrated them because she organized endless meetings to discuss the defense but never presented coherent information or a plan of action. She often dominated in meetings and enjoyed speaking in public, but her interventions proved not pertinent to the topic of discussion. I have sat in meetings with Shirin with other Motorflex squatters in which she made random points. The punks yelled during her comments, “Irrelevant, let’s move on,” while everyone else in the room groaned when she began to speak. “I cringe every time Shirin speaks. I find her incredibly irritating,” says Tamala, who works on a squatting group project with Shirin. After a number of such meetings, the rest of the Motorflex squatters stopped attending Shirin’s meetings altogether.

In Shirin’s case, having been a member of the original group that squatted the house, Shirin “belonged” automatically. But the nature of that belonging proved problematic because she lacked nearly all the skills that comprise squatter capital and was not respected by the rest of the Motorflex group. Even worse, in the area where she claimed expertise, in strategic manipulation, she simply lacked the capacity to handle the situation which included the ability to understand that, given the complicated nature of the task, it was necessary for her to ask for help from someone who possessed enough skills to assist her.

For over a year, the status of the Motorflex block’s defense lay in the hands of Shirin, who busily worked on it but who could not explain its elements, status nor did she have a plan. This changed when the owner, a housing corporation, announced that they were going to file for eviction. Jenny, one of the residents of the other non-punk living group, decided to work on the defense to win the court case.

Jenny grew up in an upper-class family from one of the wealthiest sections of Holland. Conversations with Jenny revealed that she felt loved and supported as a child and continues to share a strong bond with them as an adult. She moved to Amsterdam to study Film Theory while living in student housing. Jenny became acquainted with the squatters’ scene through one of her closest friends at university who was a squatter. Bored with student housing life, Jenny joined the group in the squatting of the Motorflex house. She was tall, slim, and beautiful with a simple way of dressing that was not punk nor conventionally feminine. She displayed charisma and walked with an air of confidence. Her ability to hang out with crusty punks with as much ease as with her university friends spoke to a sense of inner comfort that
appeared unusual within the class landscape in Holland. Jenny enjoyed the squatters life, commenting to me once on our way to a squatting action, “I had no idea it was this much fun. Hanging out, going to brunches and parties, going to actions. It’s cool, right?”

When Jenny decided to become involved in the house defense a year and a half after the squatting action, a war erupted between Jenny and Shirin. Shirin had invested time and energy managing the defense and felt territorial, resenting Jenny’s interference. Yet, within a few days after taking over, Jenny – intelligent, quick-witted, analytical, and articulate – managed the whole case more efficiently and strategically than Shirin had in over a year. Once, after spending a few hours looking through the files that Shirin had compiled and organized, Jenny said to me, exasperated, “Based on what I have just seen, I fear the structure of Shirin’s mind. I am very, very afraid.”

Almost immediately after becoming involved, Jenny was the point person for anyone who had questions about the Motorflex defense. Jenny described the various court cases, provided summaries, analyses, legal context, and long-term strategy, all in a well-framed and logical narrative. In contrast, Shirin described the defense in a confused and vague manner that prevented ascertaining concrete facts and information. Jenny’s articulate manner of speaking, her memory, and her attitude all commanded respect. She emitted confidence in her detailed knowledge about the case whereas Shirin often reacted to questions with poses that ranged from defensive, aggressive, to evasive. The Motorflex group respected Jenny and supported her leadership. When Jenny organized meetings about the defense, all the residents of the houses attended. If they had resisted her leadership, they would have dismissed her by labeling her as “authoritarian.”

Clearly, Jenny possessed a number of organizational, analytical, and social skills whereas Shirin lacked capacity in these areas. Despite Jenny’s relative lack of experience and minimal investment into the squatters’ community compared to the sincerity and dedication of Shirin, her skills and actions enabled her to quickly accumulate squatter capital. Meanwhile, Shirin failed to accumulate any capital due to her social marginality and lack of capacity. What further differentiated Jenny from Shirin was that Jenny displayed and was recognized as being emotionally sovereign and socially autonomous in a way that Shirin was not nor ever could be.

Jenny’s habitus was productive of and communicated her cultural centrality resulting from her upper-class background and her high skill level. It also conveyed a sense of social autonomy via her temporariness, that is, that Jenny participated in the movement as a phase and that she eventually would move onto another stage of her life appropriate to her class, skill, and education level. Jenny perceived and represented her activities in the squatters movement as marginal to her main interests as a student. For example, Jenny felt conflicted about the amount of time that she invested in the house defense compared to her studies, complaining to me, “I don’t know why I’m
even doing this. I have better and more important things that I should be spending my time on.” In comparison, Shirin never complained, felt proud to handle the house’s defense, derived a sense of emotional self-worth from the project, and worked on it with commitment, despite the complexity of the project being beyond her skill level. Jenny transmitted an attitude that she clearly chose to squat and could easily leave the movement for other options. If she had felt the lack of respect that Shirin had experienced, Jenny would simply have left the community.

In contrast, Shirin needed the squatters’ community for social and economic reasons. Since she was unable to financially support herself, it would have been impossible for her to exist outside of the squatters’ community without its free housing and its network of mutual aid. Emotionally, Shirin lacked the confidence and sense of wellbeing that Jenny emanated since Jenny held a position of authority without demanding it nor even acknowledging that she possessed it. In Shirin’s interactions with others and her activities within the movement, she persistently sought respect with the result that she never received it.

Shirin’s self-doubt and insecurity most likely developed for a number of reasons that she revealed to me over the course of a few months: because she grew up as an immigrant in a country that detested immigrants, because she felt unwanted by her family since they left her to grow up without them in Turkey as a child, because she never began her university education, and because she could not find a job in Amsterdam despite her dream of the type of life that she felt was impossible for her in Germany. She often asked me, “Will I ever be able to “make it” here?” For Shirin, every difficulty became another rejection and then, another form of exclusion. From the rejections for waitress jobs to the social snubbing of her punk neighbors in the squat, they all fit into a schema of a world that opposed her and that functioned so as to oppress her. She then expressed her insecurity and self-doubt in a socially “unacceptable” way. She treated others aggressively, rejecting others before they could reject her. She reacted defensively, acting territorially regarding issues that she did not possess and acting emotionally in situations where rational argumentation was the accepted norm.

By presenting this portrait of Shirin as emotionally dependent, I do not claim that Jenny was more emotionally independent or did not need the subculture of the squatters movement for emotional reasons. Rather, understanding the hidden codes of middle-class habitus and socialization that dominate in the squatters movement, Jenny more adeptly concealed her dependence, demonstrating her independence according to the gradations of squatter capital, and self-consciously revealing her emotions more strategically. During a private conversation with Jenny, she advised me to hide certain information because, “it makes you look really bad.”

Trying to add further insight into this case with the help of social movement studies proves challenging. In social movement studies, there is a
dearth of information on micro-level social dynamics within social movement communities. The writing that exists about individuals’ participation is often abstract and superficial. For example, McAdam (1986) prefers to discuss the impact of friendship networks on political participation rather than consider larger structural reasons that may gird their participation, such as class or gender background.

The European new social movements approach, in contrast to the American-dominated resource mobilization and political process theories, has been more willing to examine how larger structural issues may attract or hamper individual participation in new social movements. Alberto Melucci and Claus Offe consider how one’s class and social position impact one’s participation in new social movements. Borrowing heavily from Claus Offe (1985), Melucci argues that new social movements are typically comprised of individuals from structurally diverse positions which he defines as:

(a) the new middle class or human capital class, that is, those who work in the advanced technological sectors based on information, the human service professions and/or the public sector (particularly in education and welfare), and who have achieved a high educational status and enjoy relative economic security; (b) those in a marginal position in the labour market (e.g. students, unemployed, or peripheral groups such as youth, retired people, middle class housewives) ... The core group of activists and supporters is to be found in the first group. (Melucci 1989: 53)

Melucci then considers why individuals from these locations in particular participate in new social movements. With regard to the “new middle class,” Melucci divides them into two groups: new elites, who are motivated to challenge the established elites; and human capital professionals who experience both the surplus of opportunities and the constraints of the system. The profile of the new middle class is that they are well integrated into social activities and institutions such as households and communities. In terms of political and social organizations, the new middle class have experience in more traditional politics and social networks such as voluntary associations, self-help groups, and social welfare organizations.

This type of social profile then indicates cultural centrality because it demonstrates that these individuals identify with “modern values” and are integrated into society regardless of their oppositional stance towards the Mainstream. They relate to essential structures of society from a position of substantial cognitive resources, such as educational achievement, professional skills, and social abilities. Their skills and their “modern values” explain how members of this group often easily shift from a position of conflict in relation to “the Mainstream” to that of “the counter-elite.”
Melucci divides “the peripherals” into two groups: the affluent and the actual marginals. Affluent marginals include students and middle-class women who work at home and therefore have access to social and cultural capital. Offe claims that middle-class housewives find themselves excluded from public spheres due to institutional sexism which then motivates participation in new social movements. Both argue that students become involved in social movements resulting from a combination of flexible time schedules and experiencing a discrepancy between the critical thinking skills that they derive from their education and the types of jobs that they can then access in an increasingly limited and competitive job market. As Melucci elucidates:

With the youth and student movements, for instance, we can see the impact of the diffusion of education, widening areas of autonomy and the extension of resources for self-training and self-determination. We can also observe that these processes are negated by the structure of the labour market and actual employment conditions, which are unable to absorb the inflated possibilities created by education. And we can see that the adult system of labour markets, career structures, and professional politics seems incapable of fulfilling the very expectations of flexibility and autonomy which it has nourished through its tolerance of a separate youth culture. (Melucci 1989: 54)

With regard to the factual “marginals” of the peripheral group, Melucci provides few details, compared to his lengthy description of the new middle-class and affluent marginals. He only states that they are comprised of unemployed and elderly people and that their motivations to participate derive in reaction to a crisis. He thus constructs a relative deprivation argument for the participation of “marginal” people. Consequently, he privileges articulate middle-class people and their ability to represent themselves in his analysis, leaving little critical analysis of such partial and privileged perspectives. The privileging of articulate voices is mirrored in subcultural studies, in which scholars have traditionally privileged the perspective of articulate, middle-class men and their experience in subcultures whose views mirror those of researchers (Thornton 1996).

Compared to the majority of social movement studies, which ignores the demographics or social position of individuals who participate in social movements, Melucci and Offe’s interventions helpfully provide a broad, though abstract and slightly vague overview of the diverse populations who inhabit social movement communities. However, when trying to understand the relationship between cultural centrality and authority, it becomes clear that the concept of cultural centrality – which encompasses the new middle-class and the affluent marginals in Melucci’s framework – is vague without a context to understand what conditions locate an individual as being “central.” Melucci’s definition of cultural centrality via a description
of the “new middle class” and their “cognitive resources” is still too abstract to understand the consequences of such positions and skills on movement subcultures. One cannot understand the components of cultural centrality without having a sense of what behaviors constitutes cultural marginality.

There is a tension between marginality and oppositionality in the squatters’ community. Oppositionality is a tacit value that requires a habitus of “autonomy” to be performed convincingly. Marginality is an unspoken status that should be avoided because of its dominant presence in the subculture through alcoholism, drug addiction, excess aggression, depression, and an unwillingness or inability to manage the hundreds of minuscule negotiations that constitute daily life in a wealthy, highly bureaucratized, multicultural northern European city with global pretensions.

Some squatters talk about the prevalence of cultural marginality in the “scene” openly while most avoid the topic because it is uncomfortable to articulate. Ludwic, having squatted for over ten years, said, “Anyone who has been in the community for a long time has something wrong with them. Everyone. Germaine, me, even you. Don’t kid yourself.” Marina, from Serbia, having squatted in Amsterdam for four years, commented, “It’s hard to tell the difference between rejecting society and being rejected by society”. Lara, a squatter with substantial squatter capital in that she possesses and masters all squatters skills and runs a successful freelance IT business in the Mainstream, told me, “Not everyone can be autonomous. The scene is full of losers. A lot of people who are losers in society come and find out, hey, I can do this. I can do this well. Maybe it’s building. Maybe it’s occupying. Whatever. But they are still losers.”

Hence, the struggle between new middle class, culturally central Jenny and marginal and unemployed Shirin reveals a situation with multiple layers of conflict, on the level of habitus, group dynamics, identity, and recognition. Only by fully exploring the habitus of centrality and, specifically a sense of the behaviors that constitute marginality, can these concepts be usefully employed as interpretative tools to understand the relationship between cultural centrality and authority.

In Melucci’s framework, Shirin is classified as marginal simply because she is a member of “the unemployed.” Hence, her participation in the social movement is interpreted as a reaction to the crisis of structural unemployment. But in fact, Shirin’s participation is as multi-layered as Jenny’s. The same boredom and alienation that Jenny felt that motivated her to move from student housing to go squatting, inspired Shirin to leave her life of subletting. Despite Shirin’s marginality, her choice to become a squatter was as motivated by conviction as Jenny’s, and in fact, her conviction pushed her to sincerely become as involved in the squatting world as possible, even when it was inappropriate such as her work on the house defense.

Melucci and Offe present overviews of these different groups but fail to discuss the interactions between individuals from such different backgrounds.
and how their interactions and internal hierarchies reflect the class and structural positions of the individuals in the Mainstream. Furthermore, they fail to address whether and how mainstream hierarchies are reproduced within movement cultures. Shirin’s marginality extended beyond her chronic unemployment, her unabated aggression, and her lack of cognitive skills to manage the legal defense of the Motorflex houses. Her marginality included her inability to understand that this whole terrain of skill was beyond her field of competence, and accordingly, within the norms governing proper conduct within the subculture, she should have asked for assistance or delegated the task to someone who had the capacity to handle it.

In Chapter 1, I considered why few squatters engage in strategic manipulation despite its rewards. I concluded that the hierarchical process of knowledge transference when learning strategic manipulation skills was unappealing and intimidating, leading most squatters to claim that strategic manipulation is “too much work.” As a result, squatters who engage in strategic manipulation often, but not exclusively, are highly educated and originate from middle or upper-class backgrounds because they already possess and feel comfortable in skills such as research, writing, and analytical thinking. Strategic manipulation is not the only area in squatting that requires analytical thinking; other skills, such as acting

Figure 2.2 Squatted building alongside a canal in the Jordaan neighborhood, 2006
as a police spokesperson, building, organizing, and breaking also require extensive cognitive ability and social skills. However, in strategic manipulation, there is clear responsibility for cognitive action. One has to strategize, make decisions, and take responsibility for decisions which the backstage of the squatters’ scene will scrutinize and eventually criticize negatively when a house is evicted. Mistakes from such cognitive-based actions seem more intimate than errors in other areas, revealing an inner weakness or – even worse – stupidity on the part of the campaigners, which the backstage of the community judges harshly. It seems then that the pressure and intensity of scrutiny on campaigning decisions often intimidate a number of squatters, especially those who are less educated and/or originate from working-class backgrounds.

I have only heard critique about squatters’ campaigns. Inevitably, all campaigns end with the evictions of the houses and so anyone can find reasons to criticize the strategy of a house’s residents (see earlier story listing the critique of the Motorflex houses). Successful squatters campaigns (such as the long-term delay of an eviction by months and/or years, or in rare instances, legalization) are never openly recognized as the result of dedication and hard work on the part of those involved. Instead the acknowledgment of a successful campaign is made apparent in that the capital of the campaigners accumulates as a result of their work.

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu discusses the connection between entitlement and political opinion. He examines large-scale political opinion surveys, focusing on how the content of the opinions relates to the class, gender, and professions of those who participated in the poll. He further analyzed the link between the abstentions and the class and gender of those who abstained. Finding that women and working-class people, by and large, often professed ignorance or answered questions in a way that did not serve the intentions of the polls, Bourdieu argues that with regards to politics, the capacity to articulate is intertwined with a sense of entitlement that is class based:

To understand, reproduce, and even produce political discourse, which is guaranteed by educational qualification, one also has to consider the (socially authorized and encouraged) sense of being entitled to be concerned with politics, authorized to talk politics ... Technical competence is to social competence what the capacity to speak is to the right to speak, simultaneously a precondition and an effect ... Only those who ought to have it can really acquire it and only those who are authorized to have it feel called upon to acquire it. (Bourdieu 1984: 409–10)
Within this Bourdieuan framework, Shirin and Jenny’s story highlights the invisible and naturalized assumptions for the types of skills required to enable the practice of campaigning. Shirin’s marginality revealed the invisible logic of this practice because she failed to judge herself in this hierarchy of competencies and pull out of managing the campaign. Most squatters without an educated, middle-class habitus will naturally self-censor themselves and their participation in such campaigns. Either they opt out or they delegate the decision-making power to squatters who have an educated habitus or who already possess squatter capital attained through successful strategic manipulation. As Bourdieu writes, this process of delegation is common:

The authorized speech of status-generated competence, a powerful speech which helps to create what it says, is answered by the silence of an equally status-linked incompetence, which is experienced as technical incapacity and leaves no choice but delegation – a misrecognized dispossession of the less competent by the more competent, of women by men, of the less educated, of those who do not know to speak by those who speak well. The propensity to delegate responsibilities for political matters to others recognized as technically competent varies in inverse ratio to the educational capital possessed, because the educational qualification (and the culture it is presumed to guarantee) is tacitly regarded – by its holders but also by others – as a legitimate title to the exercise of authority. (Bourdieu 1984: 414)

The story of Shirin is not an example of the types of social ruptures that occur when a working-class person finds themselves in a field where they do not belong. Instead, it reveals the invisible logic of campaigning practices, in which squatters, especially from working-class families, will exclude themselves from learning the skills required in strategic manipulation. This exclusion then reproduces a dynamic in which the same types of people possess prestigious skills based on cognitive abilities. Bourdieu refers to this process of natural censorship as a sense of one’s place in which:

Objective limits become a sense of limits, a practical anticipation of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits, a “sense of one’s place”; which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, person, places, and so forth from which one is excluded. (Bourdieu 1984: 471)

By limiting his analysis of politics to opinion polls, Bourdieu neglects to understand the day-to-day practices of making politics, especially for activists. By examining practices, one sees that these social reproductions, although disturbing, have an underlying pragmatism. In a stressful and time limited situation such as defending the imminent eviction of a house, it is
crucial that tasks are executed by the most skilled and productive people, as seen in the case of Jenny and Shirin.

Bourdieu’s argument, furthermore, can be overly deterministic. In a paradoxical milieu where a classless ideal prevails although competencies and skills that derive mainly from class background result in the accumulation of capital, it is still possible for people to obtain skills if they are determined. A number of working-class squatters who were successfully socialized in the movement by learning a number of squatter skills and gaining capital, also learned how to excel at strategic manipulation. Furthermore, they strategically use their working-class habitus to their advantage in a radical left environment, where an unspoken and predominant assumption exists that most people are middle or upper class and ashamed of their background. Moreover, during interactions with the state and with the media, culturally central, white, Dutch, working-class squatters with squat capital mobilize their working-class Dutchness to gain strategic advantages.

Tall, blond, blue-eyed, and broad-shouldered Fleur was raised on a houseboat in a sailing community in north Holland – a member of the, as she calls it, “respectable working class.” Although at the time of writing, houseboats are fashionable in the Netherlands, when Fleur was a child, houseboats connoted “trailer trash” with its own community-based subculture. She grew up in a tight-knit, social democratic family in which both her parents worked as captains of tourist boats. Fleur disavows anarchism and proudly proclaims her membership in the social democratic party. Among anarchists, it’s an insult to be called a social democrat.

Fleur moved to Amsterdam to study sociology and through various networks, became involved in squatting. She mastered squatter skills: building, breaking, organizational, non-instrumental acts of bravery, and strategic manipulation. At a certain point, she dropped out of university to pursue a commercial sailing and naval career where she excelled. During her brief periods in Amsterdam, she lives as a squatter and often serves as a media spokesperson. Her habitus exudes skills and capabilities but also an authentic working-class Dutchness that aids her role as a spokesperson. Once, she participated in a debate on a national news program regarding squatters and their use of violence in which her opponent was a right-wing politician in his mid-fifties. After the debate, he told Fleur how impressive he found her and that she reminded him of his daughter. In this case, despite their opposing political standpoints, Fleur’s entire way of being moved this politician. Her blondness, her profession as a sailor with its cultural resonance in a country which defines itself as traders and fighting to survive above water, her working-class habitus, her intelligence, and her skills as a strategic interlocutor for the squatters movement impressed the politician to metaphorically embrace her in a show of nationalistic pride.

Tall, slim, and blond, Coen – another culturally central, working-class, white Dutch squatter with significant squat capital who uniquely campaigned to defend his house from eviction – mobilized similar subconscious
elements to his advantage both within the scene and in his strategic manipulation tactics with the Mainstream. In contrast to the other squatters who I have profiled, Coen is not university educated and works as a flexible manual laborer, in sanitation and in factories. He uses his working-class background to convincingly critique practices such as dumpster diving in the squatters movement. He told me, “I grew up with a single mother in a family of seven children. We were forced to find food from the garbage. I’m not going to do that as an adult when I have money. I like nice things and I like to buy new things, not just old, used crap.” In Coen’s case, his openness about his poverty as a child only served to increase his capital in a subculture where class background is not discussed, both to maintain the fiction of classlessness and since many assume the dominance of a middle-class banality. His ability to show pride in his poverty, shames the disavowed middle-class assumptions of those around him, and his rejection of the entire process of mastery and rejection that underlies such an act as dumpster diving, grant him authority.

When he campaigned to defend his squat, Coen mobilized similar subconscious elements. When he spoke in the neighborhood council to prevent the eviction of his house, he impressed the council members with his articulate working-class self, emotionally touching the disenchanted and bored former leftist activists who comprise the neighborhood council. Similarly, in one of the houses where I lived as a squatter, we deliberately worked with our working-class elderly neighbor to mobilize the blueprint of sympathies on the part of the Mayor’s Office and the neighborhood council to publicly show solidarity for a member of the endangered species of white, working-class, and elderly Amsterdammers.

These are examples of white, working-class Dutch people having successfully mobilized a historical solidarity between people of their class and more elite Dutch politicians, especially on the left. However, this unspoken solidarity is predicated on a background of racial and religious tension in Dutch urban life. The right-wing politician found Fleur impressive because of the contrast with the media’s image of crusty, violent, and disrespectful foreign squatters. Fleur, Coen, and the elderly neighbor would never consciously participate in a racist act, but tacitly, subconsciously and ominously, they mobilized via an unspoken solidarity constructed on race and nationality.

The constitutive practice of gossip

Thus far, I have focused on the types of skills, competencies, habitus, and performances that lead to a squatter being recognized as an authority figure. These ethnographic examples focused on how, in the context of squatter campaigns, squatters achieve recognition as figures of authority through a combination of their skills and personal characteristics.
In this section, I portray two *kraakbonzen*, who are recognized as authority figures on the scale of the entire squatters movement. *Kraakbonzen* is a term that translates literally as squatter bosses. In the scene, the term is an ambivalent joke that acknowledges the existence of “bosses” in a community that defines itself as anti-authoritarian. This term must be expressed as a joke because to transparently concede without irony that authority figures exist in such a community produces excessive anxiety. Although the kraakbonzen who I profile in this section are men, a number of women are also bonzen.7

In a subculture that fervently denies authority ideologically, authority is then conferred on a micro-social level both in terms of the ability to produce actions and via the circulation of gossip around particular figures. When authority cannot be discussed openly, an ethnographer must observe and listen to understand who has authority. In meetings, watching who proposes a plan, who speaks, who is listened to, and which plans are actually enacted and by whom reveals authority figures.

Accordingly, squatter skills that accumulate capital, and in particular, skills related to strategic manipulation and the capacity to implement plans and produce actions, lead people to receive silent recognition as authority figures. I emphasize skills in particular because of the five authority figures who I highlight (Jenny, Fleur, Coen, Dominic, and Damien), three originate from upper-class backgrounds and with the exception of Coen, all are highly educated. If they lacked skills, then squatters would dismiss them as rich kids playing revolutionaries or slumming. The capabilities that they contribute to the movement form the basis of their authority.

The skills, and in part, the upper-class background of these figures, adds to their habitus of emotional sovereignty. Richard Sennett, in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, describes such a habitus as an “inner, self-sufficing power,” which highly educated and highly trained professionals possess. Sennett elaborates:

> The power of professionals lies in their ability to give or withhold knowledge, they are in positions that by and large are not questioned by others; they are “authorities” themselves, “authorities” unto themselves. It is precisely the endowment of a professional with this inner, self-sufficing power that gives him a higher status than men with economic power. For the autonomy makes him seem “market proof,” in that he can perform his functions no matter what is happening to others around him. His nurturing power appears as an ability that he brings to people; they need him in a way that he does not need them. It is in this sense that he is the only truly independent man in a class society – he is needed more than he needs. (Sennett 1977: 227)

For these authority figures, the combination of skills and a performance of emotional sovereignty makes them elusive, attractive, respected, and the
subjects of abhorrent gossip and curiosity. Emotional sovereignty is a way of performing a totalizing emotional and structural independence. These figures project a sense of never requiring others emotionally, of not caring what others think, as well as an understanding that they have access to opportunities outside the movement that would welcome them and their skills. Their totalizing individualism and their ability to convey that they privilege the movement with their presence brings them respect in a community that paradoxically preaches communal living, solidarity, and interdependence as superior to an individualist mindset and lifestyle.

The writing of European new social movement scholar, Francesco Alberoni, on charismatic leaders in social movements, elucidates the complicated role of authority figures in social movement communities and the ensuing intense emotional reactions of group members, in this case through eviscerating gossip, to these authority figures (Alberoni 1984). Alberoni argues that the ephemeral magic of these leaders lies in their metaphorical function as priests who mediate between extremes on two levels.

First, on the level of the movement, in which he (and in Alberoni’s text, it’s always a he) mediates between the movement’s “centrifugal forces.” Such forces describe the continuum from those who are more willing to negotiate with the external world outside the movement and are somewhat compelled to reintegrate into the Mainstream to those who advocate for a radical break. The charismatic leader, who forms the ethical center of the group, provides a source of unanimity in a movement that is continually on the verge of breakdown due to the tensions and conflicts between these extremes (Alberoni 1984: 141–2).

The second level where charismatic leaders mediate is within the individual and their participation in the movement, which Alberoni frames as, “a dialectic between individual and group in which the necessity of unanimity must coincide with the need for authenticity” (Alberoni 1984: 139). On the level of the individual, Alberoni argues that a constant tension exists between an individual’s desire to maintain a sense of authenticity versus the overwhelming and strategic pull to fuse with the group. This dilemma between remaining true to oneself, one’s values, and one’s ways of understanding the world through the prism of one’s experiences versus conforming with the group in the context of a social movement is itself a betrayal, according to Alberoni. In order to resolve this sense of betrayal and guilt, the charismatic leader offers both an absolution and a sense of unity and unanimity:

The leader is he who has the power to absolve from guilt ... an ethical leader, a strategist of moral behavior. There is nothing magical or mysterious about his behavior ... He is able to ensure salvation and social cohesion among the group’s members and to overcome danger from without. (Alberoni 1984: 143–4)
Beyond the function of the mediating priest who provides a sense of coherence among the cacophony of tensions within social movements, Alberoni further points that the relationship between the charismatic leader and the group is based entirely on an asymmetrical love relationship, in which those in the group love the leader but the leader loves them only as the total group collectivity, not as single individuals. Thus, no reciprocity exists in the relationship between individuals in the group and the leader:

There are ... cases of asymmetrical, unilateral falling in love, in which the one who loves inevitably ends up by being entirely dominated by the other, who delights in being loved but does not respond in the same manner. This is the type of falling in love that takes place in the consolidation of charismatic leadership. What in the couple is a failure, a distortion of love and a source of unhappiness for the one who loves, is the basis of the stability of the leader's power. (Alberoni 1984: 148)

Returning to the squatters movement, with its fraught and contradictory relationship to authority figures in mind, gossip has two functions beyond verbal evisceration. First, it serves to recognize authority figures. Second, it serves as a means to transact contradictory and ambivalent feelings of love, dependency, and jealousy through aggression.
Alberoni argues that the power of charismatic leaders is their ability to mediate various tensions in the individual and on the larger movement level. This leads to members of the group to project a sense of power and charisma onto these figures, which then induces an asymmetrical and non-reciprocal relationship of love between the charismatic leader and the members of the group. In the squatters movement, where the dominant mode of daily performance is hostility and where the existence of authority figures can only be acknowledged circuitously, the ambivalent and contradictory feelings of love and dependency provoked by the presence of charismatic leaders is expressed aggressively via negative gossip, especially in the realm of sexuality and sexual practices.

There is an ideal of open and non-judgmental discussion of sex, sexuality, and sexual practices in the squatters’ subculture in comparison with a relatively more conservative and repressed view of sexuality in the Mainstream. Samuel remarks, “In the community, everyone is very open about these things. You can say and do anything and no one cares.” Although a value of sexual openness prevails, the practice of exorbitant gossip about sexuality indicates that people in the community do, in fact, care.

Lara, a veteran squatter with high squatter capital, told me about a squat party at which, late at night, she went to bed with one of the men who lived in the house. An acquaintance of Lara’s searched through the house for her. Eventually, she entered the room where Lara was in bed with her lover, spent some time in the room without their noticing, and then left to report to the party what she had seen. Lara, having learned about this reporting afterwards through rumors, said to me, laughing, “This is the scene. Everyone is in the room with you and watching while you are fucking.” To emphasize her point, she rocked her hips forward and backwards rhythmically. We both laughed. Lara’s comment illustrates the pervasive practice of gossip in the subculture. However, I noticed that gossip reflects status and hierarchy in which only a relatively limited number of people are gossiped about; authority figures in the movement or people who are excessively charismatic and talented, or both, such as Lara. The sexuality of marginal figures like Shirin is not discussed.

The manner in which squatters discuss sexuality and sexual practices suits the process of mastery and rejection that prevails in every point of practice within the movement, from breaking open doors to the dominant mode of stylistic choices. An anti-romantic mode is predicated on a mastery and rejection of mainstream middle-class mores which promote hetero-sexual normativity and heterosexual marriage and restrict female sexuality. Hence, a mode of anti-romanticism that values sexuality and sexual practices without emotional bonds, with multiple partners, and that celebrates female sexual assertiveness dominates. Furthermore, anti-romanticism is displayed by openly discussing practices that may seem taboo in the Mainstream. In an unexpected twist, this style of sexual gossip then enables a
misogynist, homosocial dynamic betraying the feminist ideals from which such anti-romanticism partially originates.

The ethnographic portraits of the kraakbonzen, Dominic and Damien, illustrate these dynamics specifically. First, I will relate their biographies, then describe their skills within the framework of squatter capital, followed by their habitus of emotional sovereignty. I then recount the gossip around figures and the misogynistic homosocial dynamic that reveals itself through the aggression targeted at the girlfriends of these figures.

Dominic

Dominic, tall, Dutch, handsome and articulate, is in his early 30s and has squatted for almost ten years. He grew up in an upper-middle-class family in a wealthy town in the Netherlands. I knew him for over a year before he told me the occupations of his parents, although I had heard from others that he was a “rich kid,” which they had guessed based on his habitus and small clues. According to Germaine, a former housemate of Dominic, “He once told me the name of the town where he grew up and no one in that town is poor.” He evades questions about his age, his name, and personal details. He moved to Amsterdam to attend university where he became involved in leftist politics. He lived for years in various configurations of housing, from student housing to illegal subletting. Through involvement in leftist activism, he slowly became a squatter. He resided in a number of squats and evolved into becoming a “professional squatter,” mastering various skills such as building, breaking, organizing, strategic manipulation, attending confrontational actions, and consequently, accumulating squatter capital.

He continues his involvement in prestigious squatting institutions such as the kraakspleekuur, the squatters’ research collective, and the press group. He is a well-known press spokesperson and skilled in how he manages the press. As a strategic manipulator, he formulates house defense strategies, adeptly negotiates with owners, smoothly lobbies politicians, and possesses ample knowledge about housing law, city policies, and administrative procedures, which can derail any eviction attempt. In addition to his activities in the backstage of the squatters’ scene, he is a homebody who enjoys cooking and communal living. Given his embodiment of nearly all the ideal qualities for a squatter, I have heard endless gossip and critiques about him.

Dominic’s squatter capital is based on his having lived in a number of well-known squats in the scene, either because they were vibrant and populated social centers or because they had well-formulated and extensive campaigns which were the fruits of Dominic’s labor. One squat that helped build his reputation, known as the Looiersstraat, had exactly the elements of a campaign with high status in the scene. The owner was reputed to be a mafia figure who launders money through real estate speculation. At one
point during this campaign, the squatters organized an action in front of the owner’s house. The squatters drenched themselves in fake blood and laid across his front door with a banner proclaiming the owner to be a corrupt mafia figure who arranges contract killings.

This action and a number of others from this house campaign featured widely in the press with Dominic acting as the articulate, middle-class, Dutch press spokesperson on behalf of the squatting group. Dominic was quoted in newspapers, interviewed on local and national television, wrote a number of the press releases published on indymedia, developed much of the strategy, and lobbied politicians. The riot police evicted the house twice. After the first eviction, the squatters reoccupied the space with sixty others dressed in black, wearing balaclavas (black ski masks), and helmets. They had built barricading using bricks from the street and scaffolding from the building, and succeeded in blocking the entire area against the police. The media coverage featured photos of squatters in helmets, dressed in black, standing dramatically in rock star poses on the scaffolding of the building.

Maria is a young squatter woman in her early twenties, who some squatters dismiss as a baby punk while others extol as “a hero” due to her totalizing dedication to the movement. According to Maria, who worked on the campaign, Dominic enjoys the role of the authority figure and spokesperson but proves unreliable for less glamorous and nitty-gritty jobs, often carried out by women. At the eviction of the Looiersstraat, at the point when the squatters were going to barricade themselves inside the building to the extent that once inside, no one could exit until the police broke through and arrested everyone, Dominic disappeared after a television interview. They tried to reach him via his mobile phone but he did not answer. Anna, who had organized the barricading, said, “I was really angry. I did all this work organizing the barricading and making sure everything was ready for the ME [riot police]. He talks to the press and disappears. Why does he get all the credit? He abandoned us.” This incident was not unique. In general, a number of squatters critique Dominic for acting unreliably by avoiding conflict in groups, withholding information, and suddenly leaving for a holiday without notifying anyone when others need him.

Ludwic, a squatter in his mid-forties, obsessively disdains Dominic, “He is arrogant. He thinks he’s the boss of everyone. He thinks he knows so much.” Maria, who had an affair with Dominic, also calls him, “an arrogant asshole,” reiterating his reputation in the scene as “an authoritarian egomaniac.” After their affair, Maria worked with Dominic on a campaign where they wrote text describing the ideals and goals of the movement together. Maria felt that Dominic mocked her ideas, silencing her to the point where she did not believe that she could propose ideas without being ridiculed.

During an eviction wave, Maria’s boyfriend, an eighteen-year-old baby punk, newly arrived in Amsterdam, had locked himself into a building
scheduled for eviction. Locking down is a tactic in which those resisting an eviction barricade themselves into a room and then attach themselves to the utilities, such as gas pipes, to prevent the police from reclaiming the building as cleared of squatters. During this eviction, the riot police accidentally broke the gas pipes and created a gas leak. The squatters who stood outside the building, listening to police radio, heard sudden orders for the riot police to evacuate because of imminent danger. Maria felt terrified as the squatters, including her new boyfriend, had locked themselves inside, making it impossible to escape a building with a gas leak. In the end, nothing dangerous occurred. When Maria spoke to Dominic about the incident, she was offended by Dominic’s attitude. She felt that he mocked her and her friends as stupid, little, baby punks who had created a bigger problem than they could manage. Despite resenting Dominic’s condescension, Maria still sought his approval of her political activity and found it frustrating that he responded by dismissing her squatting group as baby punks who were merely interested in violence and rebellion as a thrill but who, ultimately, were not “really committed.”

Habitus of emotional sovereignty.

Dominic lives in a well-known activist squat where the living room serves as a popular social space. Among the buzz of various conversations, music, and ringing telephones, he often sits behind a computer, in his own aloof world of research and strategy. In social situations, he tends to have quiet demeanor that doesn’t appear to result from shyness or social discomfort. Rather, his attitude is one of rejection of others that seems to come from boredom or even, a sense of deserving a more stimulating and profound level of conversation. If such content is unavailable, he removes himself from social interaction. During internal squatters’ meetings and his interactions with the media and the state, he’s confident, militant, and dogmatic. He speaks about squatting with a self-assuredness that others view as arrogant and patronizing.

He also carries an air of mystery. As I wrote earlier, he provides almost no information about himself including his age, where he grew up in the Netherlands, his parents’ occupations, his name or even how to spell it. In the squatters’ scene, such secrecy is typical due to leftist activists’ concerns that the state surveils their activities. However, I suspect, that his level of discretion derives from a feeling of class shame. Only after a year of living in the same community and occasionally prodding him, did he reveal his parents’ upper-class occupations to me. Dominic’s guardedness reflects a shame of banal middle classness, or even worse, being upper or upper-middle class among the radical left, and how such a class background somehow de-legitimates someone from achieving the status of authentic squatter. This
shame is ironic given that the fiction of classlessness exists simultaneously alongside both a dominant middle-class habitus and an assumption that most people are middle class in the squatters’ scene.

As a well-known womanizer, inordinate gossip surrounds Dominic and his relationships with women. A friend of Dominic’s asked me playfully, astonished, “How does he do it? How does he get all these gorgeous women in bed with him every night?” Often, it seems that he has slept with every woman in the room. The gossip concerns his past with women, the number of lovers that he juggles at the same time, how he openly cheats on his girl-friends, and the naivety of his current girlfriend to sincerely believe that he is monogamous. This is the more benign gossip.

The following is a compilation of gossip that I have heard about Dominic from a number of women. To be clear, I cannot confirm the veracity of this gossip and in my personal encounters with Dominic, he has always treated me kindly and with respect:

**Fleur:** He has a big dick and he knows how to use it.

**Germaine:** He is supposed to be really good in bed. Apparently, he knows how to fuck. He’s got the skills. Lianne has slept with him and told me all about it.

**Alexandra:** The first time, it was in his room at the Brouwersgracht, this huge seventeenth-century attic room. There I was having multiple orgasms in this incredible room. He’s amazing in bed.

**Maria:** He’s an asshole. It’s nice to have sex with him. He can be very sweet. But he’s an asshole. I slept with him a few times and then, I was sitting next to him at a voku, and he was kissing another girl. That’s an asshole thing to do, right?

**Lucy:** He’s slept with everyone. Be careful around him. There’s a trail of abortions and Chlamydia following this guy all over the world.

There is a magazine produced internally by and for the squatters’ scene with a section called “Gossip.” When I initially began fieldwork in this community, this section related how Dominic had actively tried to seduce me at a party but had failed. None of this was true and months later I learned that the writer had invented the story due to lack of material. I relate the details of this gossip to illustrate that in a community of a few hundred, a number of people enjoy talking about Dominic in particular as a figure: critiquing him and his role as a kraakbonz, discussing his sex life, his sexual skills, and his treatment of women.

Dominic holds a position of authority and respect regardless of such stories that might potentially de-legitimate him. He seems oblivious to gossip and derision. One aspect of the emotional sovereignty required of having authority in this community then, comes from the ability to disregard the gossip and continue in the movement with self-respect. It’s this, “inner,
self-sufficing power,” which Sennett (1977) describes that enables individu-
als like Dominic to exist in a social minefield without ever feeling affected
by the exploding mines.

This habitus of emotional sovereignty is a mode of performing a total lack
of emotional investment in a community where everyone who participates is
emotionally invested. The habitus of emotional sovereignty and the fraught
relationship to authority figures as theorized by Alberoni (1984) then pro-
vokes reactions among other squatters, in this case by calling Dominic arro-
gant and obsessively fixating on his sexuality.

Furthermore, a disturbingly misogynistic homosocial dynamic is then
transacted through this gossip around sexuality. I once sat with Janneke, one
of Dominic’s girlfriends, at the voku, when Willem, a well-known breaker
and one of Dominic’s friends, approached Janneke, inebriated. Willem said,
“You know he’s just fucking you. He doesn’t give a shit about you. Once he’s
done fucking you, he’ll find someone else to give him blow jobs.” Shocked,
I related this incident to Lara. She responded with irritation, “Willem is a fish-
erman’s wife” (meaning a petty, mean gossip, intended to be especially insult-
ing since Willem is a masculinist breaker). Later, I spoke with Janneke about
Willem’s outburst. She said, “I don’t understand why he tells me this and not
to Dominic. He should say this to him if that’s how he feels about Dominic.”

In a subculture where every daily practice is examined and critiqued,
from drinking a beverage considered “corporate” (like Coca-Cola) or listen-
ing to Mainstream music, why is Willem, in this case, able to treat Janneke
in such a blatantly misogynistic and disrespectful manner without social
disapproval?

The anti-romantic style of discourse around sexuality assumes that no
subject is off-limits and that women possess an equivalent sexual agency
to men’s. However, in a subculture that pays lip service to feminist ideals
but has not integrated feminism into daily practice – and thus no mastery
and rejection of feminist ideals actually takes place – the anti-romantic style
backfires and reifies the subordination of women by viewing them literally
as vessels and stand-ins for their male lovers.

Further, Willem’s aggression towards Janneke indicated his jealousy of
her receiving the love of an authority figure as an individual, not merely as
a member of the group, as formulated by Alberoni. Dominic’s promiscuity
conformed with movement ideals that promote sexuality with multiple part-
ners and without emotional bonds. Dominic’s much gossiped about sexual
practices abided by Alberoni’s characterization of the charismatic leader: he
is loved and needed, but only loves the total group collectivity without lov-
ing a single individual. His sexual voracity implied that by loving so many
women indiscriminately, he loved no one in particular. His relationship with
Janneke proved an exception to this and caused jealousy, leading to Willem
degrading her and belittling Dominic’s love for her as exploitation.
Eve Sedgwick, in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), examines the homosocial dynamic in several centuries of English Literature. Sedgwick uses the term “the homosocial” to reconsider the trope of the love triangle of two men and a woman, arguing instead that this love triangle often serves as a form of male bonding predicated on a hatred of homosexuality and the exchange of women to symbolize asymmetrical power relations between men. In these love triangles, although each man engages in an intimate relationship with one woman, they are much more invested in the other man than in the woman.

The context of the contemporary squatters movement is a far cry from the socio-political-historical context in which the texts that Sedgwick analyzes were written. First, there is no taboo on homosexual sexual practices and a fluid ideal of sexuality prevails. It’s commonplace for men who identify mainly as straight to have sex with men and a number of women who identify as lesbian also often sleep with men. In addition, those who gossip are just as often women as men. However, the model of homosociality that Sedgwick provides is helpful in revealing how the creation of bonds between two people can more easily take place through the vehicle of a third person with less status and authority (and often a woman) who has more value as an object of exchange than in her own right.

These homosocial transactions provide insight into the triangle of: authority figures, those who gossip about them, and the lovers of the authority figures. When Willem spoke to Janneke so offensively, he exhibited his emotional investment in insulting Dominic and, in a roundabout manner, of bonding with him through his aggression against her. The asymmetrical power relationship between Dominic and Willem exists on a number of levels. On the level of the movement, Dominic is silently recognized as an authority for his numerous skills where Willem is recognized only as a breaker.

The asymmetry extends further to Alberoni’s description of the non-reciprocal love relationship between a group and a charismatic leader. Willem loves and admires Dominic without reciprocity. Within the movement subculture, such feelings cannot be expressed nor can the reasons underlying the love be discussed. Willem then expresses his emotions within the aggressive mode sanctioned within the movement, yet he refrains from conveying these emotions to Dominic directly due to the power relations between them. Janneke, as the lover, becomes a stand-in for Dominic. Because she is a woman, defined in relation only to Dominic, and due to her lower status, she is an easier and safer target for aggression than Dominic. I suspect that Willem never speaks in such an offensive manner to Dominic to maintain a good relationship with him. However, even if he were to do so, Dominic would most likely dismiss him carelessly, as conforming to his habitus of emotional sovereignty.
Damien

Damien is another kraakbonz from an upper-class background who is wholly committed to the movement. In contrast to Dominic, who hides his class background, Damien openly admits his bourgeois origins. To the few who ask, he talks about his family, a long line of psychoanalysts, and growing up in an elite milieu in France. He left home as a teenager to experience the countercultural edge of Paris, a world of parties, drugs, and leftist politics. He was expelled from secondary school, not due to his inability to understand the material, but because, according to Damien, he refused to conform to “bourgeois” notions of “being on time” and “listening to the teacher.” After a few years of traveling around the world, he completed his secondary school exams and began university. He succeeded in charming the university lecturers to allow him pass his classes without actually attending them or completing assignments. Eventually, Damien never finished his undergraduate degree, and instead focused on a technical career. In his mid-twenties, he moved to Amsterdam with his then-girlfriend attracted by its underground artistic, cultural, and political scene. After a series of precarious housing situations and the slow death of his relationship, Damien went squatting with a totalizing dedication.

Squatters jokingly refer to him as “el presidente,” “el comandante,” “the general,” or even “the king.” These names’ mock his authoritative manner as well as the squatters who follow Damien’s lead. By calling him these names, squatters identify themselves as non-conformists who refuse to uncritically follow his authority. Jenny, a resident of the Motorflex houses, remarked, “We are the only squatters in this part of Amsterdam who are not under the influence of the King. We are independent from Damien.”

Damien has taken a leadership role in the squatters movement. He participated in the founding of the Anarchist Choir and Indymedia Netherlands, and actively expanded other groups, such as ASCII, the hackers group of Amsterdam. He attends every SOK (citywide squatters’ meetings) and LOK (nationwide squatting meetings). He participates in all Amsterdam squatting actions as well as special nationwide action squats. He is a member of the squatters’ research collective and a founder of one of the most well-organized and productive kraakspreekuren in the city because the actions are thoroughly researched and the houses often remain squatted for at least two years. This is relevant compared to kraakspreekuren that organize many squatting actions but the houses stay squatted only for a few months before being evicted. He developed his house into one of the centers of the squatters movement for political organizing and he has actively campaigned to prevent the eviction of his house for nearly a decade (in comparison to most houses, which exist for a few months to at most, two or three years).
Like Dominic, Damien has also mastered much of the skills that comprise squatter capital. He is mostly well known as a skilled political strategist in his dealings with the press and local politicians. He is French yet speaks Dutch fluently. As a member of the press group, he manipulates and charms journalists. He writes articles in newspapers and news websites under a variety of assumed names. He calls himself an extra parliamentary politician. He delivers speeches at the neighborhood council, lobbies politicians on behalf of the movement, and has ties to relevant politicians and civil servants in his neighborhood. Uniquely among squatters, he maintains relationships with his non-squatting neighbors.

He proudly considers himself an ideologue of the movement and sees himself as a member of its intellectual vanguard. His discourse varies widely, from superficial arguments about political philosophy to complicated, knowledgeable analysis of housing policy and world events. He enjoys debating with others in a competitive intellectual performance. I often find these debates shallow and a mere repetition of various political ideologies that avoid complexity. However, he can switch seamlessly from this superficial, simplistic discourse to one that is in-depth, complex, and insightful.

He is loud, dogmatic, authoritarian, and unapologetic about being this way. At various discussion events and meetings throughout the radical left, he is well known for preaching the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie. He regularly announces, “I believe that every politician and civil servant’s life should be made public, up to the names of their children and where they go to school.” He vociferously proclaims the use of “we” in a community that scoffs at the “we,” preferring instead to use the “I,” to avoid making statements on behalf of others. He makes statements such as, “we believe in common property,” “we are anarchists,” “we provide our labor for free in exchange for a state-free space,” “laws do not apply to us because they are only for subjects of the Queen, and we are not subjects of the Queen.” During meetings, he is arrogant, impatient, dominating, silencing, and he often insults other squatters with viciousness. He treats many squatters with utter disrespect. He accuses them of being “hippies on holidays” who are “not committed to the revolution,” and carelessly humiliates them and devalues their lifestyles.

Damien inspires a mix of contempt and fascination that seems at odds but exists part and parcel in how others perceive him. Squatters enjoy deriding him and mocking him. They ridicule his simplistic political rhetoric, his French accent, his walk, and his awful treatment of others. They enjoy reviewing his mistakes in various campaigns and charging his behavior as “hyper-individualist” and “egocentric.” To be called “individualist” is an insult in this community, although people are fiercely individualistic while maintaining a communal ideal, and hence switching their standpoints when it suits them.

Some squatters seek his approval and a connection. “This guy gives me so much anxiety. It seems impossible to connect to him. I don’t think he...
likes me,” admits Marie, who has worked with Damien on many campaigns. “I’ve never had a conversation with him so I don’t think he thinks much of me,” says Gunther, another member of the squatting group. Other squatters invent connections with him when they don’t exist. Once, I sat with a squatter friend working at an anarchist bookstore. A few squatters were gossiping about Damien, claiming that in his frequent visits to their house, he annoyed them with his stomping and lecturing. I knew for a fact that Damien had only visited their house once a year for their annual parties out of politeness. Another squatter once informed me that she and Damien had argued passionately at the kraakspreekuur and that he was furious with her. Later, I asked Damien about the argument and he did not recall the conversation.

Despite their mocking discourse, the behavior of a number of squatters demonstrates respect and a deferral of authority. In highly tense situations, such as alarms and actions, squatters approach him upon arrival to inform
him what has occurred and seek his advice. If they have complicated problems that require a strategic solution, they ask Damien for help. Earlier, I quoted Jenny, who proclaimed that her squatting group was one of the few who maintained independence from Damien. Months later, during a middle of the night surprise eviction of a squat where Jenny and I resided, I called her at 4 a.m., waking her to inform her that the police had surrounded our house (she was sleeping elsewhere). Shocked, scared, and having just awakened, she repeatedly asked, “Have you talked to Damien? What does he think?”

**Habitus of emotional sovereignty**

When Damien walks into the room, he receives attention. Even when silent, people stare at him. He talks to his few friends but otherwise, seems uninterested in forming relationships or socializing. He only speaks to people for instrumental reasons: to neighbors about the campaign to defend his squat from eviction, the housing shortage in Amsterdam, and the squatters movement. He talks to other squatters about political actions and their houses. He preaches to non-squatters about their housing situations. If a non-squatter lives in a precarious housing situation, he shames this person unless he can successfully convince them to squat. He appears to have no interest in forming emotional bonds with anyone and seems immune from loneliness. Yet, the paradox of his life is that he lives in a tight-knit community and spouts a rhetoric of socialism, community values versus individualist ones, and rants vehemently against the “the private life.”

In comparison to the other kraakbonzen, who are renowned womanizers, such as Dominic, Damien lacks the string of girlfriends and casual affairs. Despite his heterosexuality and the adoration he receives from a number of women, he seems disinterested in intimate relationships. His rejection of a number of young and beautiful women who have attempted to seduce him, and thus, of sex in general, is a plentiful source for gossip. The few women who have had affairs with him talk about their experiences with him in a trophy-like manner.

Frida, who was a good squatter friend of mine, was a non-punk Canadian activist from the alternative globalization movement who had an affair with Damien. When the affair developed into a serious relationship, like the earlier story about Janneke and Dominic, I watched as she became the target of a phenomenal amount of aggression and curiosity, reflecting squatters’ intense and multi-layered emotions provoked by the figure of Damien. In the past, Frida had affairs with other squatters without ensuing gossip or aggression, so she knew that Damian was the trigger point.

The following is a compilation of various statements to Frida from squatters, mostly women. I witnessed most of these statements while others...
I heard from Frida secondhand. She knew most of these individuals only superficially, having had at most one or two interactions with them:

**Germaine:** Is he good in bed? Is he rough? Is he eager? I heard from Alexandra that he is a good fuck but that he doesn’t want to do it too often. Once every eight days, she said. Is that how it is with you? I heard he’s really into periods. Does he only fuck when you have your period?

**Dirk:** So I heard that Damien spent last night with you. How was it? Was he good? Tell us about what he was like in bed. He told us all about you.

**Lucy:** I had an affair with him. It was wonderfully romantic. He was very happy. He gives great head. The best time with him involved blood and shit.

**Ludwic:** Alexandra said that he was terrible in bed. They only did it a few times. He abuses everyone. He must also abuse you.

**Jennifer (who is obese):** You’re sleeping with Damien! I heard from Michiel that he sleeps with women and literally throws them out of his bed. He was hitting on me relentlessly all of last year. I felt so unsafe with him. You just got out of a relationship. You have to be careful because you don’t know what you are doing.

**Lianne:** You know, I was convinced for a while that he was in love with you. But now, I see that he isn’t. I’ve known him for a long time and I can see that he doesn’t love you.

**Clara:** You must be a masochist to be dating a guy like that.

**Marlous:** You’re dating Damien? Does he know that?

**Anna:** They say that Damien has changed and is nicer because he’s sleeping with you. People talk about you, you know. Well, I guess I shouldn’t be saying that.

**Else:** So, you’re the one who Damien is in love with. What does he see in you? Maybe it’s your looks? I guess you are his type – physically.

**Jenny (visiting Frida in Damien’s room):** So, this is the King’s room? This is where the King sleeps?

**Henk (to Frida):** What is your name again?

**Rick (friend of Henk):** You just need to know that she’s Damien’s girlfriend.

**Horst:** They are being mean to you because they are jealous. When the revolution comes, and El Presidente (referring to Damien) is on the balcony before the masses, it’s going to be you standing next to him waving the little handkerchief, not them.

Once, at a squatters’ party with Frida, Willem the breaker, approached Frida drunk, and said, “Hey, you, where’s your man? Where’s El Presidente? What is he doing letting you come to this party all by yourself. If he’s not
around, does it mean I have a chance with you? Why isn’t he here? Where is he?” To this, Frida responded (in Dutch):

Look at my forehead. Is there a sign that says that I’m Damien’s secretary? Now, if you want to talk to Damien, you can call him, email him, stop by and visit him, find him in the squatters chat room, or see him at the kraakspreekuur. These are the ways that you can talk to him. If you really want to, you can fuck him too. I’m sure that he would let you.

Willem was dumbstruck while his friends nodded drunkenly with approval. After this incident, Frida confided to me that it was time for her to find a normal rental apartment to take distance from the squatters movement.

Returning to the concept of the homosocial, these individuals were more interested in relating to Damien. They treated Frida as a third-party substitute against which to funnel their aggressions which masked their feelings of love and dependency in response to his status as an authority figure. As discussed earlier, Dominic was a well-known womanizer whose sexual voracity conformed to expectations of kraakbonzen and movement ideals regarding sexuality. His sexual practices exhibited that by indiscriminately loving everyone, he actually loved no one in particular. Damien’s sexuality in the movement provided a contrasting model. His refusal to engage in the sexual economy of the subculture also conformed to Alberoni’s framework. By Damien literally not loving anyone in particular, he committed himself wholly to the movement for political reasons which increased an elusive sphere of emotional sovereignty that he maintained around himself towards other squatters.

The many comments that Frida received as a result of the affair reflect similar emotional negotiations to those levied against Janneke. They revealed jealousy towards Frida for being a single individual who, exceptionally, receives individual love from the charismatic leader, where previously, he exhibited love only to the total group collectivity. The comments relentlessly attempt to dismiss this love by disparaging the affair as “physical,” and hence, a form of loveless exploitation, as well as label Damien as a dangerous abuser of women (none of which Frida had experienced). Again, in terms of the homosocial, these individuals were more invested in connecting to Damien through Frida, as the woman with less status, but still too in awe of him to express such feelings to him directly.

**Emotional dependence and the absence of authority**

To further examine how the squatters’ subculture constructs authority, it’s helpful to consider the foil of Ludwic, a squatter who calls himself a
kraakbonz but is not recognized by others as an authority figure. Ludwic’s inability to achieve recognition as an authority figure stems partially from his position straddling the line between insider and outsider since his outsider status originates from his working-class taste and habitus. Ludwic conveys a habitus of emotional dependency rather than emotional sovereignty. Despite Ludwic’s having excelled in a number of squatter skills, his habitus betrays an emotional dependency by misrepresenting himself as a kraakbonz, through his incessant gossiping, and his state of cultural marginality.

Ludwic is in his forties, with chin-length, dyed dark hair, big glasses, and missing front teeth. Ludwic is kind, though not charismatic and easily fades into a room. He never has a girlfriend and announces to his fellow squatters if he obtains a woman’s telephone number, proudly displaying the piece of paper. Although born and raised in Holland, his dark hair and relative smallness lend him a vaguely “ethnic” appearance. Once, at a squatting action, Ludwic dropped a lighter in front of police officers. While bending to retrieve it, a police officer looked at Ludwic with disgust and asked him (in Dutch), “Do you even speak Dutch?” His fellow Dutchmen consider him a foreigner in his own country.

Ludwic spent most of his youth in detention centers for petty crimes. As an adult, he worked in a factory as a skilled laborer, was married, and raised a family. According to Ludwic, after his marriage ended, he decided to embrace an alternative, communal lifestyle, by squatting in the east of Holland. He claimed that he left the squat because it was overtaken by drug users (a process that commonly occurs in big squats, see Chapter 4). After this experience, Ludwic moved to Amsterdam and became involved in the squatters movement without having any connections. When Ludwic told me his story, he emphasized that he slept in a hotel during his first night in Amsterdam.

Ludwic has a number of squatter skills that earn him capital in the community. He adeptly researches houses to squat by disguising himself as a building inspector. Once he squats a house, he installs electricity, gas, and water, and constructs floors and walls. He was a member of a group that squatted an enormous house with an owner who had violently evicted squatters with hired thugs in the past and took responsibility for protecting the house from its owner. Ludwic also enjoys confrontational situations and rioting. He demonstrates commitment and sincerity in the movement by attending all squatting actions and potentially violent actions, such as alarms and resquattings.

Despite his dedication to the movement and his extensive squatter capital, Ludwic has an ambiguous status, straddling between insider and outsider. His working-class taste and habitus mark him as not quite belonging. Markos, a fellow squatter, described Ludwic as “just a working-class guy with working-class taste.” “The guy drinks Heineken and loves chicken. What else is there to say,” laughed Markos. Rather than engage in conversations...
about microbreweries, beer culture, and the minute differences among beers, Ludwic instead prefers Heineken (a symbol of low quality, flavorless, corporate mass consumption) and complains that the beer in the social center is too expensive rather than appreciating its high quality for its relatively low price. He sneers at “the hypocritical vegetarianism of the squatters movement,” and at the, “vegan fascists.”

Ludwic’s disdain seems to derive from his status as an outsider rather than the insider perspective of having mastered and understood the aesthetic cultures of the squatters movement and then rejected them. The insider perspective reflects another level of oppositionality, in which someone who has mastered the conventions of the squatters’ scene then rejects them out of critical perspective. However in Ludwic’s case, his non-compliance with the squatters community’s cultural practices did not originate from this convoluted process of mastering and rejecting, but from never mastering at all nor even wanting to do so. In contrast to Coen, however, who articulates his rejection of squatter cultural practices from a position of personal working-class critique, Ludwic frames his refusal defensively and within a practice of gossiping and expressing disdain for a community that he clearly depends on emotionally.

If one only spoke with Ludwic to describe the squatters movement, it would seem that he occupies the status of the main kraakbonzen. According to Ludwic, “People come to me to talk about their squatting problems. They need me to help straighten out complicated issues.” Talking from inside his squatted house – whose owner was notorious and with whom the squatters had many violent interactions, Ludwic said, “Do you want to know why I have this room?” (pointing to a small room in the front of the house). “It’s at the front, and if anything happens, if any of those fuckers try to come by, I’m the first to know. I watch everything.”

At squatting group meetings, in contrast to Shirin, Ludwic can focus on a topic and contribute insights. Instead, he often argues with other people at the meeting and challenges the authority of the kraakbonzen rather than engage in the topic at hand. When Ludwic talks about his work in the movement, he emphasizes his presence at confrontational and potentially violent situations as well as his efforts at strategic manipulation. He never speaks about his considerable building skills. Most of the time, though, Ludwic spends insulting the other kraakbonzen. He obsessively disdains both Dominic and Damien. Dominic is an “arrogant asshole who thinks he knows everything.” He gossips about Dominic’s treatment of women and informs Dominic’s many girlfriends that Dominic cheats on them. He can soliloquize for hours about Damien and how he “abuses everyone and everyone puts up with it.” He wants to “cut off Damien’s head to save the squatters movement.”

It’s difficult to ascertain if Ludwic tells the truth. He claims to reject a paying job to protest the Iraq war, calling squatters like Damien who have a high paying job, “hypocrites.” Yet, it remains unclear if he refuses to have
a job or if he cannot manage to obtain and hold a job. He told me that he
left his first squat in the east of Holland because it deteriorated into a drug
users’ space. His former housemate from this squat scoffed at this asser-
tion, saying instead that the living group asked him to leave because he
pit housemates against each other, causing conflict to splinter the group.
I watched him repeat the same tactics in a squat in Amsterdam, arguing
with his housemates, exasperating them, escalating small conflicts between
people, to the extent that they also eventually asked him to leave. He claims,
in contrast, that he left the group out of frustration because they lacked
political ideals.

All of these behaviors lead others to withhold authority from him because
his actions subvert his intentions and reveal a total lack of sovereignty through
the demonstrations of self-doubt, emotional dependency, and cultural mar-
ginality. By advertising himself as a kraakbonz, he demonstrates the oppo-
tite: that he is not one. In a community that rejects authority, those who hold
it must deny first off, that such hierarchies exist, and second, that they hold
positions of authority. His constant gossiping about others and derision of
the kraakbonzen subverts his intention. He intends to decrease their author-
ity but, instead, by gossiping about them, reifies it. By perpetually insulting
others, he reveals a self-doubt that requires the dismantling of others to bol-
ster his own fragile sense of self. He defines himself continuously in relation
to others and openly seeks recognition for his investment in the movement,
and as a result, does not receive it. Such demonstrations signify an inability to
occupy the types of central positions in the movement that he seeks.

Ludwic constantly derides and insults the community where he is a member,
but in doing so, shows only its substantial importance to him. He once said to
me in a moment of heartbreaking honesty: “What are you still doing here with
us? You are a smart woman. You can do whatever you want. You know, I
have no other choice. This is my only community. I have no other place to go.”

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I wrote that the squatters’ subculture and
its unspoken but omnipresent expectations of authenticity and authority
create a social world full of contradictions. In the face of such silenced para-
doxes that comprise the daily existence of squatters who identify as politi-
cal and active, it seems appropriate to question what squatters gain from
such struggles and negotiations. In the desire to be recognized as a figure of
authority, both failed and successful, there is a quest for a sense of belong-
ing, acceptance, and love that can never be spoken out loud in a sphere that
is dominated by a hostile pose.

Putting aside the issue of skills necessary to enable the machinations of
the movement, the figures of failed authority, Shirin and Ludwic, could never
occupy the positions of authority that they sought because their actions revealed a persistent emotional dependency and vulnerability that rendered it impossible for others to recognize them as authority figures. Serving as mediating priests, authority figures should exude emotional sovereignty. Shirin and Ludwic’s transparent striving for love led them to never receive it, at least in the form for which they aimed.

In contrast, the successful authority figures, Jenny, Fleur, Coen, Dominic, and Damien, all possessed a habitus of emotional sovereignty and, as Bourdieu names it, “a sense of one’s place,” (1984: 471) which enables them to project an elusive emotional independence, using their class backgrounds strategically when necessary to enact this sovereignty. Regardless of their performance of aloofness, they are as emotionally invested as the rest of the squatters but have the skills and habitus to portray themselves otherwise. They also are able to find love and belonging in more abstract ways such as by receiving a round of applause at a neighborhood council meeting after a speech or by the non-reciprocal and asymmetrical relations of love that they maintain with the members of the group, as Alberoni contends.

In this dialectical quest for love, the culturally marginal and the culturally central need each other and the squatting subculture. For the culturally marginal, the squatting community and its subcultural capital offers them the possibility to achieve love, belonging, and acceptance in a way that is impossible in the discursive mainstream. For the culturally central, the squatters’ subculture offers a community consisting of a number of marginalized people who will more readily project a sense of magic and authority onto them for possessing a number of basic middle-class capacities.

Notes

1 Action squats are spaces specifically squatted to make political statements in addition to providing housing. These differ from spaces that are squatted only to provide housing.

2 I write “according to Shirin” because it’s unclear if she truthfully represented herself. I believe that as a designer, she was well trained and had impressive skills, but that she most likely was unable to succeed socially as a member of a team and interacting with clients.

3 Even this honor of being invited to be a member of the kraakspreekuur was dubious since during this time, this kraakspreekuur was dominated by Lianne, who was well-known for being hostile to capable women. This meant that Lianne actively recruited women to join the kraakspreekuur, but only women of whom she did not feel threatened. Thus, the choice of Shirin, who felt honored by the invitation but whose capabilities were questionable, and as a result occupied a low status in the informal hierarchy of this kraakspreekuur.
In fact, after Shirin was evicted from the Motorflex, she lived as a guest in different squats for nearly a year since she was unable to squat a house on her own or find a group to squat with her. Eventually, she returned to Germany because she was unable to find a job and an affordable housing situation in Amsterdam.

Again, I doubt the veracity of this claim. I do not think that Shirin actively searched for a job, despite perpetually talking about needing a job and lacking money.

At the time of my fieldwork, it was considered unacceptable for privileged people to take advantage of a white, elderly, working-class woman, who was considered to be in a more vulnerable position.

In fact, Jenny eventually became a kraakbonz.

While I was a squatter, there were various epidemics that rolled through the scene: tuberculosis, Chlamydia (several times), and scabies. I witnessed a disturbingly high number of young women, who identified as feminists and complained about machismo in the squatters movement, put their health at risk through unprotected sex with men who had reputations as promiscuous womanizers. In conversations with these women, I always said that if the man in particular was not using condoms with them, then he wasn’t using condoms with anyone. This information did not impact their behavior. Some women shrugged their shoulders and conceded sheepishly, “I know, I know.” Others teased me for being excessively concerned with hygiene. These women interpreted my concern as undue attention to hygiene rather than highlighting male dominant behavior.

The fact that the names are in Spanish is another ironic word play, referring to Latin American dictatorships.

I note Jennifer’s obesity because despite the subculture’s disavowal of mainstream beauty ideals, obesity is not widely considered attractive. Obesity in Amsterdam is relatively rare, and particularly so in the squatters’ subculture. Kraakbonzen in particular tend to date women who are considered attractive both in the Mainstream and in the subculture. To be clear, there is a difference between being considered overweight, for which there is more acceptance in the subculture, and being obese.

Many of Ludwic’s claims are questionable. As stated later in the text, Ludwic’s claim that he left the squat because drug users had taken it over was denied by one of his former housemates, who stated that they had asked him to leave because he caused excessive conflict in the group.