

Conclusion: the economy of unromantic solidarity

In 2010, a law that criminalized squatting,¹ went into effect. Having been classified as an “expert” in squatting, I found that I was repeatedly asked the same question by journalists and in housing forums: will squatting continue after it is officially deemed illegal?²

I typically responded by challenging the definition of squatting. Specifically, squatting as a practice in which people reside in spaces where they lack legal entitlement, hidden from the public eye, which I’m sure has continued especially as it receives little attention in the Netherlands. As for squatting as a movement, which is defined by public overtaking of properties, squatting has continued but in a different form. I never expected it to “die” because as long as the squatters movement has been visible and prominent in Amsterdam, the pronouncement that the movement is dead is as much a part of discourse about and within the movement as evictions and riots.

Rather than focusing on whether the squatters movement will persevere, it’s more relevant to ask, who squats publicly and have they continued squatting? Without legal permission, has this “autonomous” selfextolled in the movement subculture persisted? To answer this question, it’s helpful to consider the general profiles of who comprises this movement, as I have already contended in this book.

The contemporary squatters movement consists of people who can be broadly classified as the culturally marginal and the culturally central. The culturally central, or as Melucci characterizes, “the new elites” (1989), have the benefits of their backgrounds, education, and skills to help them navigate the labyrinthine housing market in Amsterdam. I imagine that such people have continued squatting either for their own housing needs or by setting up radical left anarchist social centers. The practice of squatting social centers in European countries (e.g. Italy and Spain, where squatting is illegal) is known as the Social Centers movement. Thus, illegality provides the opportunity for culturally central activists to articulate themselves against the state.³



Figure 5.1 A utility bicycle built by squatters and used collectively, 2008

When considering the consequences of the squatting ban, I am concerned about the culturally marginal. Living the autonomous life has become increasingly demanding. Being able to reside for a significant amount of time in a squat requires more skills, energy, investment, and capacities. The squatting ban has only heightened the pressure and level of skills necessary to negotiate this terrain of existence. Such demands may prove impossible for people who lack the capacity to handle them. Further, I do not know how many culturally marginal people will function without the extensive support of the backstage of the squatters community. Melucci describes this abstractly as “subterranean networks” (1989) a term which describes informal institutions but fails to elucidate the affective bonds of solidarity and quotidian practices that form the backbone of this movement culture. It is this backstage where people invest in unromantic bonds of solidarity that is at risk of disappearing with the squatting ban.

I think of how culturally marginal squatters profiled in this book generate income outside of the movement. Peter receives state benefits of approximately 700 euros a month. Adam earns an equivalent salary from a position funded by a state program for the long-term unemployed. Hans sells drugs. Shirin works odd jobs and receives financial support from ex-boyfriends and her parents. Ludwic has occasional handyman jobs. Their relatively low incomes combined with residing in squats and eating communally leads to a fairly decent standard of living. They all live in a manner in which they feel

independent, while highly dependent on the mutual aid and free housing offered through the squatters movement. For culturally marginal people, the community provides an informal safety net without the disciplinary apparatus of the welfare state.

In describing these two general social profiles, the question arises, what kinds of selves does this movement attract, produce, and reproduce? The ideal autonomous self who becomes socialized in the movement and then, ultimately, leaves it, is easily visible in the professional sector of Dutch life and provides crucial human resources to the production economy. They are members of parliament, representing the Socialist party, the Social Democrats, and the Green Left, from the national to the neighborhood level. They are architects, attorneys, designers, artists, poets, writers, contractors, urban planners, university professors, teachers, civil servants, social workers, researchers, computer programmers, system administrators, ship builders, carpenters, nurses, small business owners, management consultants, engineers, and policymakers. The squatter movement's function as a space of training for this class is simultaneously accepted as banal and tacitly displayed as an achievement of the left activist self. But what about the culturally marginal, who exist as the inverse of the autonomous ideal?

Morris, a culturally marginal person, illustrates this form of personhood, complicating the myopic narrative of the autonomous self in the squatters movement. The first time I saw Morris was in a documentary; one of hundreds that I viewed at the International Institute for Social History. This documentary profiled a squatted social center in the Staatsliedebuurt in the early 1980s and featured interviews with squatters. The background of Amsterdam looked like a post-war, apocalyptic nightmare. Dilapidated buildings and trash dominated the scenery and starkly contrasted the neat streets, shiny renovated architecture, and cute cafes that abound in Amsterdam of the 2000s. The filmmakers interviewed Morris at age eighteen, wearing a punk leather jacket, handsome, earnest, and articulately explaining his political motivations to squat with enthusiasm and sincerity. The next time I viewed the same documentary was in 2007, with a group of squatter friends. When Morris appeared on the screen, the squatters who recognized him reacted with shock, "That's Morris." "Wow, look at Morris." His youth, beauty, and lucidity flabbergasted them.

I heard random tidbits about Morris before eventually meeting him. Larissa, a squatter neighbor, mentioned that Morris had been banned for stealing from a squat where she lived. I noticed that Morris was a regular of the Motorflex bar (see Chapter 2) and a constant fixture in the living room of the punks. Thirty years after the film, Morris was bald, had gained 20 kg, wore the same leather jacket from the film, eyes bright and sincere, but unable to speak more than few words at a time which he enunciated slowly and carefully. He often ran errands for my squatter neighbors, picking up beer and tobacco. Having heard that he was a thief, I worried about

finding him in my environment. Others reassured me that Morris would never steal from a squat out of principle. I had a hard time distinguishing the line between stealing professionally to stealing from a squat, so I kept my eye on him when he was in my presence.

My subsequent encounter with Morris was fairly dramatic. It was during the middle of the night eviction where I had been arrested (see methodology section of introduction). Hundreds of police had surrounded our block of houses. There were water cannons in front of the squat, violently spraying water against the windows. I was sitting in a bedroom with Solomon, another squatter neighbor, strategizing on what to do next. We wanted to leave the section of the house we were in because the partygoers on the floor below, after hours of alcohol, speed, and cocaine, were untrustworthy and we wondered whether they would start a fire in their resistance of the police. I knew that I was going to get arrested soon and felt afraid. I explained to Solomon, "I wish I didn't have these feelings." Unexpectedly, I heard, in the room, a male voice saying, "It's good to have feelings." Solomon and I turned to find Morris sitting in the corner of the room with us, waiting quietly for the police to arrest him. He repeated himself, "Don't feel bad. It's good to have feelings. Feelings are healthy."

In the last squat I resided, Morris was a frequent visitor. Despite our moment of connection during the drama of the night raid, I felt concerned about having Morris spend time in my house where my possessions lay unlocked in my room. I asked my housemate, Marie, who had been in the scene for over ten years, about Morris. She explained that Morris's adult life encompassed cycles of heroin addiction and recovery. Once, during a period in prison, he weaned himself off of his addiction on his own. In prison, he was given pills to assuage his withdrawal symptoms; since he kicked his addiction without the pills, he saved them and sold them to other prisoners. Another squatter, Darrel, described how once, squatters had found Morris half dead after several days of lying in his own vomit and filth. They took him to a hospital where he was revived.

Morris was incredibly kind to me during the period in which he regularly spent time in my last squatted house, but I was always a little wary about what would happen if he stopped taking his prescription medication. At this time, I had a number of priorities, such as my dissertation, my job at the university, and finding a non-squatted housing solution. However, in the corner of my mind's eye, I wondered what Morris's presence meant for the housemate with whom he spent time. Were they shooting heroin during those hours that they locked themselves in my housemate's room? Was my housemate also an addict?

Within a couple of months after deciding to find a rental at any cost, I found myself in a beautiful rental apartment. Morris, to show his support, and Marie, were the first squatters to visit me. I served them tea. I joked that I finally had white neighbors after residing for years in squats in multicultural

areas with “bad” reputations. Morris responded, “Nazima, you know, I don’t like white people either.” I then said, “Well, Morris, that must be very inconvenient for you since you are a white person.” He answered, “I’m not white. I’m black. My father is from Suriname.” I was completely dumbstruck as Morris to all appearances was the personification of the white, punk squatter. He elaborated, “That is why I like you so much. Because you are brown and dark.”

After this exchange, the three of us continued chatting. At one point, Morris asked if he could inhale speed in our presence. I felt uncomfortable with his use of hard drugs but it seemed rude to deny him since he had visited me to show solidarity. I nodded yes. As I watched him prepare the powder, I gently asked, “Why do you need to do it?” As far as I could tell, the three of us were drinking tea and talking. It didn’t seem like an anxiety provoking situation that required the consumption of speed. He answered, “I do it because it quiets the voices in my head.”

After this, I no longer saw my former squatter housemates as I had made a concerted effort to distance myself from the movement. I did, however, run into Morris, occasionally. I noted how much weight he had lost and the desperate intensity in his eyes. During this period, I had a conversation with a squatter who mentioned that, “Morris is not doing well,” which obliquely meant that Morris had returned to using heroin. She also noted that she saw him furtively walking around the city center. We knew that Morris stole bikes expertly as a means of income. We joked that we wanted to approach Morris, show him our bikes, and say, “Please don’t steal my bike and sell it to buy a hit. Go steal someone else’s bike. Remember, Morris, I’m a comrade. I’m in the community.”

Morris is a person whose life was and is embedded with this movement, an example of this alternative self that is the polar opposite of the community’s autonomous ideal. Having lived his entire adult life in the squatters’ scene, the movement provides him with structure and meaning. Horst, who has known Morris for nearly twenty years, joked, “Morris is what you call a Monday to Sunday user.” This community has literally saved his life when he has overdosed, finding and hospitalizing him. When his plumbing breaks, a builder from the movement fixes it. Another activist has arranged to receive Morris’s public assistance benefits to pay his rent, health insurance, and utilities, before handing Morris weekly allotments of cash. From the perspective of welfare state efficiency, the collective care of Morris and individuals like him by the squatters’ community provides an affordable and manageable solution. The state does not have to employ social workers for the services that the squatters provide out of an unromantic and sober sense of solidarity.

It’s this unromantic and sober sense of solidarity that is one of the ties that binds the backstage of social movement communities. The people who assist Morris do not necessarily like him or feel that by helping him, they

earn “scene points” or increased squatter capital. They support Morris simply because he is a member of their community to whom they feel responsible.

As I have argued in this book, by ignoring both the backstage and culturally marginal figures like Morris, social movement studies has failed to understand a whole set of dynamics within social movement communities as well as this particular manifestation of solidarity. In classical social movement studies, solidarity as a motivating factor is absent entirely. While in the case of more recent studies of the alterglobalization movement, scholars represent solidarity romantically and abstractly rather than analyzing it as an unspoken ideal with a functional set of quotidian practices. Furthermore, the scholarly neglect is unsurprising since social movements themselves do not acknowledge both the importance of the backstage and the practice of quotidian solidarity.

Returning to this book, I have interrogated the ideal of the autonomous life from a sober and perhaps, cynical academic perspective. I have explored how this community simultaneously disavows and maintains hierarchy and authority and how the contradiction structures the social world of this movement subculture.

In Chapter 1, I argued that through examining squatter skills and negative classifications, one can see how unspoken status hierarchies function in this community. In Chapter 2, I contended that authority figures should display a certain performance of “autonomous” squatter selfhood, comprising assertiveness, the capacity for highly prestigious squatter skills, such as public speaking, campaigning, and presswork, and a habitus of emotional sovereignty. Moreover, I demonstrated how their authority is reified through negative gossip around the sexuality of these figures. In Chapter 3, I explored how hierarchy and authority manifest within internal dynamics of living groups within squatted houses. In this case, movement capital transfers into one’s status within a group. However, for the sake of cohesion and a peaceful “home” atmosphere, it is necessary to suspend the argumentative, assertive self held up as part of the autonomous ideal. Finally, in Chapter 4, I examined the notion of activist careers in the movement, the movement subculture as a space of training and liminal adolescence, and how the autonomous self is based on a myopic construction of privileges held by entitled citizens of liberal democratic welfare states. To conclude, however, I would like to suspend this interrogative cynicism and celebrate the unspoken and sober practice of solidarity of this social movement community as illustrated by the Morris story.

I personally have benefited from countless acts of unromantic and sober solidarity. When I was unexpectedly evicted and had my belongings impounded by the police, a group of squatters who I did not know personally, transported my boxes from one end of the city to the other. One of these squatters was one of the perpetrators who was jailed for injuring Yoghurt (see introduction). When I had left my ex-partner and months later,

he was being difficult about returning my personal items, a few squatter women presented themselves with me at his house, barged in, grabbed some suitcases, and filled them with my possessions, while I watched in a state of paralysis. I even benefited from this solidarity after I moved out of the community. Hans, my former housemate who never spoke and, I suspected, feared women, once fixed a broken stove burner in my house and then left as quickly as possible to avoid having to either speak or be alone with me. Despite his discomfort, he worked on my stove as a gesture of solidarity.

I laud these moments of unromantic solidarity because they are altruistic without the condescension of charity and reveal the best of this community's values of mutual responsibility, cooperation, and the pooling of resources. In this book, I have argued that the autonomous life is a fiction, a narrative on the movement's front and back stages that masks a deeper collective yearning for belonging and love through the performance of a non-conformist, anti-capitalist, individualist self. This fraught ideal is impossible to achieve and requires a constant disavowal and double-speak.

I believe that the economy of non-romantic solidarity that tacitly operates in this movement community presents a more accessible model through which to find love and belonging, especially in a highly alienating urban environment. It's a pity that in the squatters movement, this economy of unsentimental solidarity is taken for granted, that it's absent from the movement's rhetoric and its value system from which it confers status and, finally, that it operates at its best when no one else is watching.

The last time I saw Morris was at a massive demonstration protesting the squatting ban – an event which eventually turned into a bloody and violent riot. The black bloc had organized themselves at the head of the demonstration. I recognized some of my friends beneath the masks. In the midst of a tensely formed square of black blockers, there was Morris: bald, unmasked, and relaxed. Upon catching his eye, I waved to him. He looked back at me, eyes bright with enthusiasm, and smiled.

Notes

- 1 The squatting ban features the following changes in the law: the penalty for being a squatter and for violently resisting is one year and eight months in prison. The penalty for trespassing had changed from five months to one year. Furthermore, the police can evict squatters without a court order and the owner's consent.
- 2 This phrase in English is the same as the motto in Dutch: *kraken gaat door*, squatting goes on. But in Dutch, this connotes "resistance continues."
- 3 This activity contrasts sharply with the UK, where up until 2012, squatting residential properties was legal and an estimated 25,000 people live in squats in

London alone. The majority squatted for free housing and only a tiny minority did so to enact an anarchist counter cultural existence. Furthermore, compared to Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands, social centers in the UK are few and far in between and almost immediately evicted by the police. Hence, legal permission, in the UK case, led to squatting for purely “material” reasons. In my experience, visiting squats in London and listening to the personal accounts of friends who have squatted in London, it seems that the majority of squatters do so for material gain. For example, a number of squatters have social housing, but live in squats while they rent out their social housing flats for income. Squats as spaces to use drugs are rampant in the UK, including in “political” squats.