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## Counter-Tribes, Global Protest and Carnivals of Reclamation

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When Reclaim the Streets (RTS) activists passionately recount the first London events, as they have recently in *We Are Everywhere*, by the Notes from Nowhere collective, they effectively recollect what became a template for popular resistance in the emergent “movement of movements.” The appearance in the mid 1990s of a global justice movement consisting of multitudes with a common grievance against neoliberalism suggests the presence of a “single issue” protest movement. The “issue,” condensed as “One No, Many Yeses”, encompasses the entire planet, but is fought on multiple fronts, in variant guises, with diverse influences. And while commentators report that this anti-corporate globalisation movement has been stirred by such seemingly disparate events as the Zapatista uprising and Reclaim the Streets, it also appears that the anti-disciplinary counter-culturalism of an earlier period was getting a second wind.

Indeed, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, slogans like “We Are Everywhere” and “The Whole World Is Watching” were being enthusiastically recycled. Something was happening here, again. And with the maturation of networked cultural politics, this time around it appeared truly global. While extensive comparisons with earlier movements cannot be undertaken here, this essay contributes to discussions of methods through which global anxieties are addressed and redressed in local acts of resistance. In particular it makes exploratory forays into the cultural politics of reclaiming (of land, culture, the internet, the commons, the streets), which appears to have obtained a zeitgeist-like grip upon those compelled to resist corporate globalization.

The proliferation of anti-corporate struggle necessitates the search for useful models through which to comprehend cultures of resistance and youth activism. The tradition of youth cultural studies provides us with little assistance in this regard. Attending to “rituals of resistance” and discrete “subcultures,” the theoretical developments emanating from Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) provide inappropriate heuristics for the comprehension of formations networked in opposition to corporate rule. The semiotic and physical tactics of contemporary activism are not synonymous with “symbolic” or stylistic disruption, nor are they efforts at “winning space” from the parent culture for leisure and recreational pursuits. In his *Profane Culture*, Paul Willis identified how, for post-war working class youth, struggle was waged exclusively through “lifestyle,” and since stylistic transgression provided no real solution to their subordinate structural position, style was the “tragic limit” of working class cultural politics. While style—a desire for cutting-edge or “hardcore” transgres-

sions of received rules of conduct, dress codes, language and consumption patterns—is integral to contemporary activism, reclamation not recreation appears to be the desired end. It is in the “uses of style” that contemporary cultural politics is differentiated from the forms of “resistance” contemplated by CCCS researchers among working class youth, and even from the “authenticity” and cool-oriented youth media practices attended to by later researchers. In such uses, theories of “subculture” or indeed “clubculture” are rendered inappropriate to a movement whose message and goal is an alternative to neoliberalism. And while an understanding of contemporary resistance would recognize, with Alberto Melucci, that the form (the symbols, the internal relations, the culture) of the movement is indeed its “message,” it would not forget that the formation constitutes a mounting response to capital.

What appears immediately striking about reclamation is that it involves behaviors simultaneously tactical (instrumental, pragmatic) and festal (playful, spontaneous), a contiguity most apparent in the carnival of protest or, to use the term coined by Sydney activist and “idea jockey” John Jacobs, the “protestival.” The protestival is a site of creative resistance rooted in aesthetic protest and insurrectionary pleasure running from the 1960s back to the Paris Commune of 1871 (the “festival of the oppressed”). It finds nourishment in avant-garde art movements that have challenged the distinction between art and protest, seeking “situations” through which to penetrate, reveal and out-marvel “the spectacle” of the present. It has strong roots in an anarchist tradition evolving through the International Workers of the World, the Italian autonomes and the anarcho-punk movement emerging in the UK in the 1980s. It is enabled by alternative and independent media and the adoption and repurposing of internet communication technologies.

These threads would culminate in a global do-it-yourself (DIY) culture, an international milieu attracting those opposed to market fundamentalism and committed to ecological sustainability, social justice, human rights and radical expression. Decentralized collectives and affinity groups with roots in the peace, green and women’s movements of the 1960s and before would experience rapid proliferation as the internet and digital media technologies enabled communication, organization and networking capabilities in the 1990s—developments that would enable significant alliances between activists in the global North and South.

In the UK, where RTS would emerge, this milieu of a global DIY culture floated immediately downstream from the acid house rave explosion, elements of which were reclaiming their own heritage and empowering themselves through dance—a not altogether trivial circumstance, as I will explain. Since the 1970s, dissidents were actively reviving, recreating and reinventing semi-nomadic traditions through free festival cultures. “Being together” in their difference, New Age travellers made exodus from modern Britain in events like the Stonehenge summer solstice festival; in the U.S., the Rainbow Family would hold major annual (eventually international) gatherings. Achieving their fullest, and often only, expression in the festal, in the “temporary autonomous zone,” in art, these

counter-tribes seemed to exemplify those micro-cultures Michel Maffesoli held as symptomatic of a post-war society characterized by a voluntary, passional, networked and unstable neo-tribalism.

Yet, motivated by a desire to forge an alternative society, DIY tribalism would be contextualised by its opposition to the reach of capital into everyday life, and to the unchecked power of the state. And rather than disappearing into transgressive carnivals on the margins, these counter-tribes would take their grievances—and their carnivals—to global cosmopolitan centers. Pursuing initiatives consistent with global and historical reflexivity, they are far from Maffesoli's disinterested, narcissistic or even nihilistic "neo-tribes." Not merely seeking difference, DIY tribes have mobilized to make a difference; not exclusively reinventing the past, they are motivated to reclaim the future.

As a product of this reflexive and festive milieu, the protestival gains a life of its own. Such performances aren't "protests" in the mould of the conventional demonstration, the political ritual governed by uniform gestures and predictable outcomes, but are generally non-violent rites of direct action within which individuals are licensed freedoms of expression. Radically creative and imaginative, the direct action "tactic" is informed by the ludic, the living theatre of the festal. It is thus a reappropriation of those perennial liberations from the prevailing order, those periodic interludes of transgressive corporeality, visionary freedom and liminal community universal to the human experience. It is a reclaiming of the carnival, which in a familiar modern pattern has become a predictably controlled context for symbolic inversion endorsed by authorities as an institutional safety valve, permitted momentary and legitimate appearances in the calendar.

The insurrectionary protestival seeks lasting difference—it ruptures the present with figurative vision. As protestivals may be less like vehicles through which historical relations or conditions are recaptured or reclaimed, and more like media through which unheralded conditions are claimed and even constituted, is "reclamation" something of a misnomer? Perhaps it is in many cases, but the popular recognition of actions and events as "reclamational" is undeniable and overwhelming, and the commonality of this perception appears to convey the power and appeal of carnival—a reappropriated human performance framework enabling the pursuit of the future in the present.

**M**ay 1995, London's Camden Town. Two cars collide in the middle of High Street, and one of the heated drivers produces a hammer with which to smash the other vehicle. Around 500 people surge out of the busy shopping crowd, jump on the cars, splash paint across the road and erect the banner "Reclaim the Streets. Free the City/Kill the Car." With this choreographed collision, traffic was intentionally disrupted. And with the assistance of the bicycle-powered Rinky Dink Sound System, children's climbing frames and free food, a street carnival was in full swing. A vehicle of popular resistance, Reclaim the Streets had come into being. At the outset, the objective was to transform the heartless and forbidding "road" into an open and convivial "street." With the catch-cry "streets for people," these direct action festivals were inspired by a

desire to reclaim the roads from automotive traffic—reclaiming a “public commons” that had been hijacked by the motorcar (and, more to the point, by capital).

This was post-Rio, and the massive road programs of Britain’s Department of Transport (DoT) were devastatingly inconsistent with the need to reduce carbon emissions. Spectacular opposition to the DoT had already transpired at Brighton’s “Carmageddon” campaign in 1991, and spectacular mass road occupations at Hampshire’s Twyford Down in 1991–1992 (opposing the M3 highway extension) and the East End’s Claremont Road in 1994 (M11). The latter would become an extraordinary moment of proactive detournment, an inspired fortress, a site of living resistance. In taking on the private automobile, RTS protestors confronted a “cultural icon” representing loneliness and isolation within the contemporary city—a phenomenon closely linked to urban atomization and dehumanization.

And, since cars are a tangible manifestation of the loss of communal space, liveable streets and sites of free expression, these were more than simply “anti-car” or “anti-road” protests. RTS protests were efforts to counter the otherwise inexorable tide of privatization clear-felling remnant public commons—a tide in which young people in particular have been regarded as a menace to patterns of uninterrupted buying. Temporarily obstructing the advance of the motorcar down the high streets would become a significant act—a sign of one’s desire to obstruct the advance of corporate capitalism and its immiserating impact on contemporary life. RTS protests would be spectacular opportunities to demonstrate how the commons can be rehumanized, made liveable, reclaimed. They were moments when the party and the protest collided. And as tactics, imagery and designs were transmitted and replicated with the assistance of virtual and video networks, things wouldn’t be the same again.

Unlike state-sanctioned events like annual May Day celebrations, Mardi Gras and Berlin’s Love Parade, where controlled inversions transpire in city centers, the RTS carnival of resistance is largely illicit—an act of civil disobedience. But its aestheticising of politics is not new. While the RTS actions emerging from Prague to Sydney, Helsinki to Cape Town, New York to Madrid were direct translations of the London model, those early events were themselves preceded and informed by street reclamations and Situationist-style resistance transpiring thirty years prior and apparent at events like the Yippie Levitation of the Pentagon in Washington, DC, or the Paris Uprising of 1968 and its “propaganda of the possible.” As major London traffic arteries were occupied in the mid 1990s by coalitions of performers, ecstatic crowds and direct actors fuelled by the epic drama of Claremont Road, and the radical commuting of Critical Mass (mass bike rides through city centers which began in San Francisco in 1992), RTS became the contemporary model—a template—through which “artivism” would be performed.

At this juncture, a Situationist *raison d’être* was recollected via Hakim Bey, whose *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* and other writings filtered through the mid 1990s underground. At that time, corporations were subject to subvertising via a multitude of micro-spectacles and acts of creative destruction as corporate logos, slogans and ad jingles were publicly subverted in a noise of graffiti, T-shirts, clothing patches, billboard liberations and plunderphonics. A socially

engaged artistic practice was at large and overcoming, it was thought, Situationism's elitism and detachment. As Naomi Klein reported, participants in the July 1996 RTS at London's M41 acknowledged their activist heritage with an audacious act of creative resistance:

Two people dressed in elaborate carnival costumes sat thirty feet above the roadway, perched on scaffolding contraptions that were covered by huge hoop skirts. The police standing by had no idea that underneath the skirts were guerrilla gardeners with jackhammers, drilling holes in the highway and planting saplings in the asphalt. The RTSers—die-hard Situationist fans—had made their point: "Beneath the tarmac ... a forest," a reference to the Paris '68 slogan, "Beneath the cobblestones ... a beach."

"Avant gardeners" thus planted seeds from tree species formerly growing in the path of the M41. But alongside Situationist roots, such direct action theatre reveals a reclamational culture directly modulated by another more recent UK development: rave culture. At the M41, the police were unaware of the pneumatic drills cracking the asphalt as body jarring electronic music was amplified from a nearby sound system. From industrial noise to trance, dance music would become integral to rehumanizing city space. From the second RTS at Upper Street Islington (July 1995), the subterranean warehouse dance floor opened out into the high street. Reclaim the Streets was harnessing the inclusive sensibility and re-inhabitational mood of the rave—itself an involutory simulation of 1960s radicalism (when, after all, the term "rave" was first used). As rave's *ekstasis* was recruited into the service of the cause, carnival became integral to the tactical assemblage of protest.

Such sites were "realms of pure possibility," as anthropologist Victor Turner might have had it, or perhaps more accurately anarcho-heterotopias—reservoirs of potential within which dissident urban dwellers could experiment with the future now, demonstrate alternative energy and sustainable transport practices, acknowledge indigenous custodians, practise direct democracy and form the "structure of the new world in the shell of the old" (in Jeffrey Shantz's paraphrase of a Wobbly message). Dramatizing ultimate concerns through theatre, and realizing alternatives through action, citizens of the dance TAZ enjoined the counter-spectacle of the present. And while the outcomes were never certain, a demonstrable "future-presence" was made possible as the carnival came to the streets, as the private road was transformed into a ludic street.

Since it had experienced mutation from a transgressive form of recreation (disappearance) into something of a movement (presence) in the preceding years—as politicised ravers joined anti-roads protestors and others threatened by the 1994 Criminal Justice Act—rave's recruitment into the service of the cause was almost seamless (just as seamless as its commercialisation). By the time of the RTS occupation of Trafalgar Square on April 12, 1997 (and later events in, for instance, Sydney in November 1997 and New York in October 1998), the sound system (cobbled-together and impromptu PAs) would be a critical reclamational device, sometimes broadcasting pirate radio, other times amplifying live mixes incorporating audio culture jamming. With a mass of bodies responding to pulsating rhythms, an organic machine consisting of a wild blur of gesticulating appendages has proven to be an effective obstruction device. And pleasurable

besides. The popularity of other dance music and bands at subsequent events, such as Seattle's Infernal Noise Brigade, is testament to this.

One of the more pervasive quotes bombed on roads and painted across banners at events worldwide is: "If I can't dance, it's not my revolution." Its author, Emma Goldman, once stated that anarchism is "the spirit of revolt"—not a "theory of the future" but "a living force in the affairs of our life, constantly creating new conditions." For Goldman, the goal was not to see some forms of authority replaced by others but, as Jeff Ferrell points out, "to create conditions of disorder out of which unforeseen alternatives might emerge." The Gold-*manesque* "spirit of revolt" resounding in the anarcho-liminal streets would prove particularly appealing to a youth population for whom "dancing" had become a cardinal pursuit. There are at least two ways to look at this. On the one hand, without any understanding of or interest in the anarchist ideas driving Goldman and other thinkers, the quote quite possibly legitimated a repetitious nocturnal rebellion where "revolution" might require little more effort than dropping an ecstasy tablet. At the other end of the possibility continuum, it confirmed to young people that dance held significance, that their activities at underground dance venues were implicated in efforts to alter the contemporary state of affairs, permitting the exploration of new social and political territory, that they were performing the new world within the shell of the old and that their dance steps landed firmly on paths to an alternative, lived now, in the street.

After its appearance in 1995, RTS rapidly took on the formula of a protest carnival. Three years after it began, the street party was virulent. As RTS actions proliferated, their inclusive post-rave sensibility cascaded in the reclaiming of street after street. As this vehicle of resistance was globally embraced, RTS became a familiar model for direct action—at once living performance and tactical spectacle. Replicants would accumulate a staggering array of causes: the right to dance, to breathe clean air, fair trade, peace, global justice. And, as demonstrated by the occupation of Trafalgar Square in 1997 when dockers and ravers, environmentalists and trade unionists, anarchists and socialists converged in creative resistance prior to the general election that year, this truly was a carnival of protest. It was a counter-space where multitudinous cells could amplify their messages, hand out literature, raise funds, recruit volunteers, dance in bubble-soaped fountains, ride together upon a wave of spontaneous conviviality. And the *ekstasis* and unpredictability of carnival, of the world turned upside down, would be the context for the generation of alliances between disparate groups—a potent device as the decade wore on.

Anti-corporate globalization trends gathering momentum in the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union, the mid-1990s Zapatista uprising and global events since 9/11 saw the carnival of protest adopted by a global justice movement. Coinciding with a G-8 meeting in Birmingham, the "Global Street Party" of May 16, 1998 (with 30 RTS events mounted around the world) saw RTS take its place in a protean international movement against transnational corporations and institutions of economic globalisation. And by J18 1999 ("J18" is standard shorthand among activists for June 18) the protestival had come of age. Signalling the crisis of legitimacy of neoliberal political agendas, the Carnival Against Capitalism would rehearse its lines for the main performance scheduled

for November 30 that year which shut down the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle.

After this, the carnivalesque formula for globalized resistance gained a global reputation (e.g. Melbourne's Carnival for Global Justice at S11 2000, Prague's S26 2000, Genoa's Global Day of Action on J20 2001, and Reclaim the Commons in San Francisco during the Georgia G-8 Summit on June 3–9, 2004). And the reputation has expanded since the Bush administration's exploitation of the events of 9/11 for its own imperial agendas (and those of its allies).

An adequate understanding of the emergent "movement of movements" would include both the complex conditions necessitating resistance (material inequality, racial and gender discrimination, dispossession, ecological despoliation), and the cultural politics enlivening radicalism. Popular reclamational practices stand at the heart of the present collision of cultural and political radicalism, the greatest legacy of which appears to be the transactivist, transcultural and transnational coalitions made possible by its spontaneity and indeterminacy. Such an esprit de corps is ultimately dependent upon the re-appropriation of the carnival as a tactical medium, a process evolving through Reclaim the Streets and its successful recruitment of the convivial rave. Circumstances now differ markedly from the 1970s, when models of youth subculture emerged and when the exploits of working class youth were romanticized.

With the resurgence of anarchist and local resistance nodes globalizing themselves from below, and with the adoption of new media enabling such networks, the "dangerous" posturing of the punk and other heroic working class youth subcultures have been superseded by real dangers posed by contemporary tactics. The mounting threat to neoliberalism manifesting in a proliferating global network of reclamational cultural formations, technologies and aesthetic resistance forms necessitates new approaches to understanding youth and resistance, approaches that escape the limitations of subculture theory while retaining something of its commitment to document in lived detail resistance to the operations of power. Approaches that may enhance our understanding of the role of cultural politics in the (re)generation of political culture.

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