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Edited by
Madeleine Hurd

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Introduction

Social Movements: Ritual, Space and Media

By Madeleine Hurd

Social movements studies: Examining and understanding the mobilization, life and effects of sets of loosely organized networks that share a solidaristic identity based on counter-hegemonic narratives and values, launching public protests on behalf of “alternative imaginaries”.
(Paraphrase Leitner et al. 2008:157)

This collection of articles explores seven very different contemporary social movements, ranging from ostracized Waffen-SS veterans through environmentalist activists to Arab Spring protesters. These disparate case-studies are united in their attention to three central social-movement concerns: rituals and emotions; spatialities; and, related to both of these, communication and media. In this introduction, I would like to introduce these themes, drawing – so as not to anticipate the seven authors – on historical instances of social protest to give substance to my discussion.

I should begin by noting that most of our contributions are interested in micro-histories of what might be termed New Social Movement-type phenomena: urban gardening, animal rights, IVF-users', university students' and employees' movements; and that all of the essays use methods inspired by both NSM analysis and symbolic interactionism. These approaches, originally part of the “cultural turn” of the 1970s, moved social-movement analysis away from its early concentration on how shifts in economic-political structures produced marginalized and disadvantaged groups, who then mobilized – according to resources and opportunities – in different types of instrumental-rational protest (Goodwin 2012; classics are Tilly 1978; Skocpol 1979; Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi 1995). After 1970, greater attention to cultural and linguistic factors combined with the challenge posed by “post-modern” NSMs to encourage scholars to look more closely at the actors’ varying world-views. Economic and political structures do not in themselves create collective identities, it was now argued; on the contrary, we must look at how class, gender and ethno-nationalist identities are “made”. People, further, do not only mobilize to their own political and/or economic advantage, even in non-post-modern times. Many powerful collective movements (temperance, neo-Nazis) had seemingly non-instrumental objectives. Scholars turned, accordingly, to micro- and mid-level analyses of, for instance, the discourses, collective frames and “social imaginaries” of counter-hegemonic mobilization. Focus shifted from causa-

tion and efficacy to the study of – among other things – the role of collective emotions and rituals, spatial frames and discourses, representation and communication. Let us take each of these in turn.

Rituals

What causes individuals to join protest collectives? Information and opportunities are important; but equally important (as in all thinking and action) are emotions. Scholars have emphasized the importance of the outrage that spurs involvement, group members' mutual affection, the excitement, pride, joys and sorrows of communal action (cf. Collins 2001; Eyerman 2005; Gould 2009; Doetsch-Kidder 2012). Emotions are strengthened when shared; they underpin collective identities. Group solidarity and emotional engagement are often increased, in turn, by the moving solemnity of collective rituals (e.g., Pàez et al. 1997; Manning 1998; Berstain et al. 2000). Erika Summers-Effler (2002: 54) describes the long, up-hill battle faced by those who combat repressive forces, a struggle demanding both an intense feeling of solidarity and an abundance of emotional energy. They are much benefited by the face-to-face interaction, mutual focus of attention and emotional contagion inherent in group rituals. Some of these can be very every-day. The rituals of coffee-klatches, of doing the movement's work together, for instance, help the group maintain day-to-day solidarity. Some rituals, however, can be deeply central to group identities. James Jasper's classic 1997 study of grass-roots mobilization includes a chapter entitled "Rituals and Emotions /.../ Sustaining Activist Identities". He cites Emile Durkheim's statement that the "collective effervescence" that rituals create is important, in that it transports "participants onto another plane". Rituals

are affirmations of participants' identities and beliefs, as well as of their power. As Durkheim sensed, collective rituals and gatherings suggest that you are participating in something bigger than you: you are part of history, or you are morally sanctioned, or you truly belong to a group. The emotions of rituals reinforce cognitive and moral visions as well. (Jasper 1997: 192, 194).

Such rituals can range from the every-day, through the innovative and playful, to the achingly solemn (often, in the last case, borrowing the forms but subverting the meanings of hegemonic rituals).

Rituals do more than sharpen collective solidarity. They also (as argued by Maurice Halbwachs 1992), provide the movement with narratives. They constitute an "embodied" form of collective remembering which is based on an intensely moral definition of self and collectivity. This moral-social identity implies both a shared past and a hopeful future. This is, Summers-Effler (2002) argues, particularly important to social movements, which depend so highly on the emotional energy of hope. She cites David Snow's and Robert Benford's (1992) term "frame alignment": the ritual helps frame narratives of past experiences so as to confirm

the movement's hope for ultimate success. Feelings of anticipation and hope can then be supported with regular interaction rituals, creating a feedback loop of high emotional energy.

Protest-movement rituals, of course, are not randomly concocted. Many of these happen in public spaces; and these, in particular, tend to reflect important rituals in the dominant society. But reflection can be part of subversion; indeed, reflection might be necessary for subversion. As Fredric Jameson (1981) pointed out, oppositional politics is about the destabilization of shared meanings. There has to be a language overlap, the ability to communicate: two opposing discourses fight it out within the general unity of a shared code. Rituals, as a type of embodied discourse, can do the same.

Historians, indeed, have spent a good deal of time looking at rituals in terms of maintaining and challenging power. It is a truism to note how well power-holders – ranging from medieval kings to fascist leaders – have understood the value of ritual in conferring political legitimacy. What Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989) termed “representational” public culture – the Ancien Régime’s public display of symbols, bodies, rituals – has remained an important part of the public political sphere. Ritual, ceremony, festival and monuments, performed in public places or, more recently, on television, remain useful to governmental authority. They help collectives transcend internal differences, give emotional and aesthetic power to solidarities, mark collective pasts and futures, and denote sacred space for national liturgies. The most powerful can easily survive political upheaval. As Cheles & Sponza (2001: 101) note, the “durability of ritual amidst political change means that ritual itself becomes a political prize, a kind of holy grail. Political competitors, then, not only fight through ritual, they also fight over ritual, that is, over their right to identify with powerful rites.” Oppositional movements can, of course, ridicule, parody or (attempt to) demystify existing rituals. More commonly, however, they seek to hijack (so to speak) elements of already-existing rituals, giving old forms new (but related) meanings as a short-cut to appropriating political or social legitimacy. The latter tactic can be seen in minority flag- and folk-tradition celebrations, in social-democracy’s orderly marches and in fascism’s quasi-religious forms (Warneken 1991; Griffin 1996). The rituals thus become what “floating signifiers” are for texts: powerful symbols, subject to a tug-of-war between two sides, each wishing to appropriate a specific ritual’s potency for their own purposes (for the term, Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

Let me illustrate this with the example of the early Nazis’ “street theatre”. In 1933, Sturmabteilung leader Heinz Lohmann published a memoir on his “Time of Struggle” with the nascent Nazi Storm Troopers. Most of Lohmann’s prose is, predictably enough, given over to descriptions of public meetings, marches and battles: the “political soldiers” used public space to perform rituals that imitated, and thereby contested, those claimed as legitimizing Germany’s democratic regime.

Lohmann, the patriotic hooligan from the small town of Schwelm, first tells how he and his comrades spent Sunday after Sunday training military marching: “as one’s bones learnt to stand upright, so did the soul!”. Lohmann then describes his group’s first proper march. It was performed in front of the Schwelm church, together with visiting Berlin “brown-shirts”. A dozen Schwelm SA members had (he writes)

marched, in closed ranks; the song of good comrades rang out. The small troop assembled before the grave-yard. The square was black with people. SA stand forward! Right turn – March! We twenty Schwelmer Nazis joined the group column. Kommando! Sing!

This, Lohmann continues, “was already too much” for their opponents, the social-democrats and the (Jewish) communists. “A roar of fury! The first stone! The SA went over to the attack”. A lusty account of a battle ensues. A discussion followed the fight. ““This fury against us! /.../ it was because of our brown shirts. They have the effect, it seems, of dynamite.”” (Lohmann 1933: 50-2.)

Why the “fury”, indeed? Lohmann is seeking to show the efficacy of the SA’s challenge to a central establishment symbol: the national army. He and his fellow-demonstrators were exploiting the army’s own ritualistic spatial displays: the closed-ranks, sharply-commanded, uniformed and singing march – in a way that subverted the military march’s dominant meanings. The result was immediate and violent protest, not least from their establishment enemies. It is on events such as this that Lohmann and other SA “comrades” wrote endlessly: it is evident that the experiences and narratives of such public rituals, whose meanings sat, so to speak, in “one’s bones”, was a key emotional and framing resource.

The memory of this counter-hegemonic ritual is, in Lohmann’s book, anchored in both body and space. Paul Connerton (1989: 36-7) notes that social memory always happens in a “socially specific spatial framework”, for images of space “are relatively stable”; references thereto give the illusion of “rediscovering the past in the present”. Space, and descriptions of space, then, may – along with emotions, rituals and bodies - be integral to both collective memory and collective belonging.

Space

The *place* of protest adds to its import. Lohmann was in a symbolically laden place – the square before the town church. Historically, as Vincent Robert (1991) has shown, mass city-street protest – even spontaneous, stone-throwing, lynch-mob protests – were formed within the compass of symbolically-laden nodes of urban geography. As protest became increasingly formalized during the nineteenth-century, “rioters” turned into “demonstrators”; but their routes remained conditioned by urban power structures. It was important to invade, and challenge, symbolically significant places – indeed, contesting shared meanings leant

demonstrations (like rituals) significance. As Alberto Melucci (1994) emphasizes, public spaces are still used, above all, to make questions raised by movements both visible and collective. Jameson's point about rhetoric holds also for the public symbolism of such spaces. They must be invaded, and, if possible, their symbols challenged and changed – only then will the revolution have conquered the sacred centers of the old order.

Religious studies' Paul-Francois Tremlett (2012) has termed this the “production of territorialities”. He cites Occupy London's attempt to “re-enchant” an otherwise strongly Stock Exchange-encoded “place of power”. Their campsite, next to St. Paul Cathedral, linked a symbol of a “securitized nowhere” and “mobile, dis-embedded capital” with a “moral and territorially defined somewhere or relational community”. The camp symbolized an attempt to challenge ruling spatial meanings with what, campers maintained, were practices and discourses that imbued the place with new moral meaning. The result, Tremlett concludes, was a performance which served to “imagine a world without capitalism”. As with rituals, so also – as Leitner et al. (2008) point out – do many social movements seek to strategically manipulate, subvert and resignify places, particularly those that symbolise the priorities and imaginaries they are contesting.

Let us take a more prosaic (but classic) example: November 1918, Berlin. Our newspaper-article source (*DanzigerZeitung*12:11:1918) describes how an enormous demonstration, starting “in the outer suburbs, in the North, in the Brunnenstrasse, then in Moabit”, is convening on Berlin's city center. Demonstrators have been joined by cars and trucks, “people armed with rifles, the red flag swiveling”. The demonstrators have gathered at the Imperial Palace, standing expectantly in front of the cannons which flank its front portals.

On the balustrade of the second-floor balcony a piece of red flag material glows darkly through the twilight. Suddenly there is movement, shoving, calls among the mass; a carriage comes, drawn less by horses than pushed forward by the crowding people. A white head: *Lebedour*. /.../ rousingly greeted /.../ there appears, sharply delineated against the gray sky, the silhouette of a man on the roof of the palace, who tries to attach a red flag to one of the sculptures of the balustrade /.../ shortly thereafter the small *red flag* flew, high, from the palace flag pole. (Italics in the original.)

The palace guards “go over to the people”; the palace is now “national property”. Historians, knowing that the November Revolution will now spread from Berlin through the country – borne by socialists and mutinous soldiers via trains and trucks, but also through twice-daily and special editions of thick-headlined newspapers (our Danzig source is evidence of this) – note the significance of the recodification of the nation's central public-space symbol.

Places can lend those who participate in collective rituals extra passion. This is true, not least, when social imaginaries define *that* particular place as a nodal point in members' own moral order. Pilgrimages to and performances at “sacralized” places – monuments, gravesites – are important to many movements, and

many focus on creating and defending specific places that “stand for” their moral order (usually, places where key rituals are performed).

One's home neighborhood can also be given near-sacral import. Most people, cultural geographers argue, do not mobilize for things in the abstract. It is “passionate attachments to *particular* places, things and non-humans that move people, and motivate people to defend them” (Curry 2006: 79). As Yi-Fu Tuan (2008) observes, emotional life is invested in clothing, home, and neighborhood. One's physical environment has become precious as symbol and carrier for emotionally charged events and practices. Outside this area, the person can feel unclothed, displaced, dislocated.

This sense of belonging derives not only from familiarity with a built and natural environment. It is co-created by bodily movement and interaction. Particular practices make places what they are. It is “the dialectical relationship between the body and a structured organization of space and time that common practice and representations are determined” (Cresswell 1996: 11). Spaces become connected to one's characteristic bodily movements.

The consequent urge to protect the space around one's home helps explain the violent, sometimes murderous tendencies that are spurred by city streets; for power inheres in street-names and post-boxes, flags and statues, squares and public buildings. Demonstrations in these public spaces can become doubly charged, as space is claimed not only for “production of morally defined territorialities”, but as essential to the existence of the community. How does a protest movement lay claim to its preeminent right to be in such significant places – to establish its practices, its bodies, as the most legitimate for those streets?

Let us return to inter-war Germany. The date is December 1918. The Germans of the city of Posen – formerly the dominant minority, now a protesting minority – are attempting to maintain their claim that their home-city as intrinsically “German”. The German-language *Posener Tageblatt* (14:12:1918) tells of the intense passion this inspired. On the day of a planned mass meeting,

from early morning on, soldiers, civilians and burghers, women, girls and youths, held a demonstration over which the free and great German flags fluttered /../ during which the old German fatherland songs rang out /../ developed a momentous impact, to which no German could remain distant and which powerfully expressed that [German essence] which moves the heart of all us Germans, that which lives in us, undeniably and unbreakably.

The report details the squares and streets (giving, of course, only their German names) through which demonstrators moved. The “decoration of the houses with German flags and wimples” had made the German areas of the city “very lovely, and there were, in some streets, scarcely a house, from whose windows and gables the German flag did not wave”. They had stopped in front of Hindenburg's childhood home to cheer with “thunderous” and “exultant” enthusiasm. A meeting was held, whereupon an additional “several-thousand-strong demonstration” marched

to the Bismarck memorial, decorated it with a German flag, and then marched through the town; long into the night, the report happily concludes, one heard *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* sung throughout the city streets.

According to Cresswell (1996, a familiar landscape transmits ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate: spatial structures influence the collective's representation of the world and thereby the group itself. This is done, not least, by spatialized performance – that is, movement through and action in the landscape in question. German Posenites give an excellent example of protesters struggling to claim – with, the newspaper maintains, tremendous emotional impact – a space defined as central to the collective's moral essence. They visit and pay homage to what *they* hold to be the city's nodal points of symbolic meaning, sacralizing an alternative city map, so to speak, while filling (the newspaper claims) the city with their bodies, their emotions, their public symbols, and their collective song. This is an extreme example of what Deborah Martin (2003), discussing neighborhood-based protest movements, terms “place-framing”. For these movements, identities are fostered by the motivating discourse of a “neighborhood” which both promotes passion and obscures residents' social differences. Wilson & Grammenos (2000: 367, cited in Martin 2003), indeed, go further: protests against urban redevelopment use specifically spatial “alternative imaginaries” to frame their resistance. They postulate alternative “terrains of civility” within ideal-type communities, ranging from “gentrified aesthetic, ‘stable’ blue-collar orderliness, the suburban ideal, and the city beautiful ethic”. In Posen, 1918, the supposed incommensurability of two competitive “terrains of civility” – German and Polish – would, a few weeks later, lead to open violence.

Attachment to place, thus, can be incendiary. Today, debate rages over the advantages and dangers of “place framing”, that is, the mobilizational strength of local, neighborhood protest. Those scholars who point to the passions and commitment that arise from collective identification with particular places are met by those who warn sharply against the dangers of selfish, exclusionary boundary-drawing. In debating pro-environmental mobilization, for instance, David Harvey (1996: 303) writes with alarm of “a rather touching and abiding faith” in a revived “sense of place” as promoting what is necessarily an international cause. On the contrary, he warns: deep knowledge of and love for *one* place may actively hinder appreciation of broader, global “socio-ecological processes”. After all, many environmentalist activists see global forces as their enemies, not their allies. Local movements may react to penetration by global powers with increasing insularity, even exclusionary nationalism. The dangers of place-based, exclusionary, even nationalist environmentalism are, indeed, shown not only by environmentalist Not-In-My-Backyard movements, but the ease with which the US and European far-right has adopted ecological planks (Olsen 1999; Hurd & Werther 2013). Or, as Germany's neo-Nazi Nationaldemokratische Partei writes, protection of the environment is protection of the *Heimat*.

An intact nature is the foundation of our future! National politics is environmental politics. The lack of ecologically responsible politics threatens every *Volk* in its substance! Economic interests must come second to protection of nature. The human is part of nature. Nature, therefore, is not simply the ‘*Umwelt*’ of humans, but the *Mitwelt*. (Bavarian NPD Party Program 2013, quoted in Hurd & Werther 2013).

Cultural geographer Doreen Massey (1995) agrees. The assumed right to speak for a territory is often based on a collective memory of inhabitancy, that is, shared experience and usage. But this means that one group defines *its* practices, and those of its forebears, as definitional for a given place. These practices, when enshrined as *the* history of the place, exclude alternative histories and groups, resulting in what Massey calls “space-time envelopes” (1995: 188). Sharma (2012) shows how the greater the elaboration of a specific history of human-nature interaction, the stronger the exclusionary claims made concerning that place’s proper present and future. Collective care for a local place leads, by this argument, not to the international cooperation needed to save the environment but to its opposite – insular, even exclusionary spatial protectionism (Barnett 2001; King 2007).

Media

How, then, to generalize local, spatial and collective attachment – how to lift the social-movement passions engendered by “place framing” beyond the local, face-to-face, and material? This problem can be examined historically. In *A Nation of Provincials*, Celia Applegate (1990) asks how a country as aggressively regional as Germany could ever become a nation. The answer, Jonathan Sperber (1997) postulates, lies in the mid-nineteenth-century interaction between *local* national-liberal movements, these locals’ *neighborhood public-space* performances (ceremonies and rituals), and local and national *media*.

The 1850s saw a burgeoning middle-class civic associational culture, and a corresponding increase in middle-class public-space ritual performance (celebrations to raise statues to national heroes, nationalist parades, public dinners for Garibaldi and the like). These ceremonies were, in turn, both covered and promoted by a growing number of small but interlinked local newspapers. Mid-nineteenth century liberals re-used traditional forms of collective expression, now imbued with liberal-nationalist meaning. These (as Sperber puts it) “discursive formations” were then externalized, distributed, represented, and made accessible to larger audiences by detailed and interested coverage in liberal newspapers, a network of fairly amateurish political journals adept at reading each other for material to cut-and-paste – and so spread the news of national-liberal actions. Collectives active in local public space were fused into a national collective through the new media of newsprint.

Let me show how this might work, by tracing another national-liberal movement: that which underpinned Sweden’s Constitutional Reform of 1865. The older system of rule by the King and Four Estates (aristocracy, clergy, burghers and

farmers) had been declared obsolete by a large set of middle-class liberals. Claiming to represent “public opinion”, they used public meetings, petitions, delegations and festivals to mobilize what they termed “the nation” for a non-corporatist parliamentary system. The motions and resolutions passed at these meetings were conveyed to the capital by delegations, petitions, and – above all – detailed newspaper reports. Opponents, indeed, denounced the entire movement as consisting solely of editor agitators. Proponents did not agree. The newspapers, they pointed out, were publishing endless accounts of “Pro-Reform” meetings, from all parts of Sweden: how could this not represent the nation? Moreover, these lists of nationwide public convocations directly challenged the Four Estates as embodying the nation. The alternative they offered was of a Sweden represented, both geographically and personally, by those notables who held public meetings in all the country’s towns – meetings reported, first, in local newspapers, and then re-told in central Stockholm organs (see Hurd 2010).

Historian David Featherstone (2005), in analyzing eighteenth-century London protest, gives the media a similar central role in providing links between what always began as face-to-face, localized collectives. Political struggles in particular localities do not (he writes) exist merely as “discrete struggles waiting to be brought together by intellectuals or broader political movements”: they bring themselves together, with the help of local and national media (Featherstone 2005: 262). Modern social-movement analysts would refer, here, to “different spatialities”, working together to create new “social movement space” by connecting different-level networks over geographical divides (Nicholls 2009, 2013). As Law & Mol (2001) put it, topological spatiality, which spans rather than covers geographic space, allows ideas and practices to move far afield. Local movements inhere in geographic space. Media allows practices and ideas, narratives and visuals to create a “topology”, connecting one place to another (see summary in Van Aelst & Walgrave 2002).

During Sweden’s Constitutional Reform, the Reform Meetings were covered – “topographically” – by local and national liberal papers. But the papers did more than just list the meetings in question. They gave detailed reports of meetings which were, if the reports are to be believed, very similar, and very formal. All followed the same parliamentary rituals; all were underpinned by strong emotions, alternating between the attentive, the enthusiastic and the solemn. It was obvious that editors strongly sympathized with the meetings’ messages. Norrköping’s liberal editor had, indeed, openly called on locals to join “the great middle-class of Swedish people” in publicizing their “patriotic convictions” in the “great *votum*, to add to the many that have issued from Sweden’s towns”. The meeting, when it took place, was covered in detail. It resembled dozens of others of the same ilk. The audience assembled, was formally welcomed, a chairman elected, an “attentive audience” listened to introductory words, a Question was moved and answered with “joyful acclamation”, an address was read and “enthusiastically” ac-

cepted, cheers rang out and the meeting was closed (*Norrköpingstidningar* 21:11:1865, 23:11:1865, also summarized in the Stockholm newspaper *Post och Inrikes Tidningar* 30:11:1865).

To be sure, the ritual (and, if true, the emotions involved) would help knit together the local collective. Participants, reading about their solemn and orderly meeting the next day, might be impressed; this publicly-sanctioned narrative might standardize group memory. But more important, in this case, was the newspaper report's contribution to "topologies". This was, after all, almost exactly the same meeting as that which appeared in other newspapers' coverage of other meetings. Accordingly, readers could easily link it to those others taking place among the "Swedish people" throughout the nation. Not only did Sweden's middle-class readers participate in an Anderssonian nation-building newspaper-reading ritual; they were reading about how every notable in every town (it seemed) had solemnly performed the same set of public, pro-reform protest rituals. Such accounts linked liberal networks together, and, by giving them a standard form, made them seem both uniform and powerful. Shared ritual, emotion and memory – promoted by formulaic media narratives – combined to make up a new territorial nation.

Many have identified national mass media (along with maps, school-books, and traffic laws) as key in creating national consciousness. Similar hopes have been advanced for global media – that is, social media - in transcending national for global spatialities (Leitner et al. 2008; Castells 2012). The debate on the impact of modern, social media on social movements is extensive; so is that on space. Social movements work on different levels, ranging from local to transregional to national. On the most basic level, media can link protesting networks together, by telling them, for instance, where and when to meet. But the movement's own media (and movement-sympathetic mass media) also join in noticing, solemnifying, interpreting, narrating, providing visuals for and histories of the movement, repeating, reinforcing and standardizing the "frames" upon which the movement depends. Thus, media adds a "topographical" space to geographical mobilization. Media, finally, can be seen as a sort of space in itself. It does impose its own sets of movements, way-stations, aesthetic experiences, public symbols and participatory rituals – including rituals of boundary-drawing and exclusion.

Nicholls (2009: 3) examines the resulting interlinking of local and media networks in national and transnational networks. The linkage, he argues, results in complex topologies of contemporary social movement networks, connected by particular "relational dynamics" that, in turn, create a new sort of "social movement space" – one that encompasses the social movement as a whole. After all, spaces do not exist, so to speak; they are, rather, both defined and interlinked by practices – consisting of "polyvalent inter-connectivities" (Massey 2005: 141) rather than bounded segments of geography. Can each social movement, then,

transcend anchorage in local, material space, in the polyvalent topologies of global, social media?

Let me exemplify (and problematize) this point by a final historical example.. In December 1865, the Swedish Constitutional Reform had just passed; the country (again, according to the newspapers) was rejoicing. Again, reports of local (ritualized) public-space performances were published, first in local newspapers, and then in Stockholm, in, e.g., special columns on “Expressions of Joy”. In Stockholm’s *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* (30:12:65) we find, again, lists of notices on enthusiastic ceremony. “In Hernösand, the reform was celebrated with a banquet.” The King’s toast was followed by toasts to Sweden’s new parliamentary order, the Minister of State, the “brother kingdom of Norway”, a Court Justice, a Bishop, the Mayor, the local M.P., and the town’s Reform Delegation. Further, the town had been illuminated, the streets full of “life and movement”, while

the sharp-shooting association, led by its musicians, marched through the streets and paraded outside the City Hall. The town’s poor were given an extra meal at the expense of an anonymous donor. During the banquet, telegrams were sent off to the Minister of State, Bishop Beckman, the Mayors of Stockholm and Kristiana; an answer was received from the last of these.

We find, again, the combination of new and old rituals, brought together and given new meaning in the topographic space of a newspaper narrative. Like the Reform Meetings, national coverage of these festivals helped cement the new, liberal collective, creating an “imagined community” based on simultaneous ritualistic performance. One notes, further, the summary of the complex, if festive, interplay of different media, working on different scales and within multi-level spatialities: from the local banquet and speeches, parades and illuminated city streets, to the national and even international: Hernösand-Stockholm relations spanned by the bodies of delegations, M.P.s, and the public invocations of Court Justices, Mayors and Ministers, telegrams linking Norwegian and Swedish towns. All these different spatialities were, arguably, brought together in a common “social movement space”, whose dynamics then, in turn, strongly affected the local expressions of collective belonging.

Of all these media, however, I would like to postulate that the press had a leading part. The press was the authoritative, public witness who could confirm that the rituals, both local and topographical, had been simultaneous, significant and shared. I would like, here, to use Nick Couldry’s (2003) concept of “the myth of the mediated center”. This concerns a myth propagated by the media itself. First, the media present some place and aspect of government as the nation’s “natural symbolic center” (usually, the capital city). Second, the media constitutes itself that center’s main watchdog, observer and commentator. This center is (as Kristina Widestedt 2009: 48 paraphrases Couldry) “encircled” by news media, “like the walls of a medieval city”. Editors declare it their high duty to keep this center under surveillance, and claim, in return, a near-monopoly right to control communi-

cation between the “center” and the citizens. It is their voice that defines the important; it is their coverage that establishes the relevant in the public sphere.

Media, thus, disperses narratives. Media links people, topographically, in social space. But media also collects, selects, censors and re-tells. It creates the myth of a common focus, a center of concern. Traditional news media (as media analysts point out) may fail to change people’s values, but it tells them *what* public issues to examine and discuss according to those values. They identify the (mythical) symbolic center. By the 1860s, Sweden’s media had already, arguably, defined Stockholm’s Four Estates’ Parliament and the Court as the symbolic center. The liberal press maintained, indeed, that it was invaluable in giving citizens information and informed commentaries on the political doings of Estates and King.

In December of 1865, however, the nation was to be reconstituted. This did not happen in Stockholm; the Four Estates could only acquiesce in their own abolition. The new nation was, in fact, reconstituted not in Stockholm, but in provincial small towns – by local notables who had declared that they made up the Swedish nation, who would elect the new Parliament, and who were currently celebrating their successes in highly medialized political festivals. The press was there. Arguably, the Reform Meetings and the subsequent “Expressions of Joy”, all so carefully covered in the press, took the place of a Swedish Constituent Assembly. The press briefly dispersed the symbolic center, so to speak, and went a-traveling – to the provinces, where careful adumbration of local public meetings were used to reconstitute the basis of national representation. The press would return to Stockholm, of course, shortly thereafter, to celebrate the new, two-house parliament. But the journey outwards, to the provinces, and the long sets of descriptions of provincial symbols and rituals confirmed both the legitimacy of the protest movement, its right to re-found the nation, and the press’s authoritative right to define the location and nature of the nation’s symbolic center.

This historical example suggests that modern concerns on media as both a danger and a resource to social-movement mobilization have their roots in media traditions established centuries ago. Mass media has traditionally focused attention through a myth of symbolic center. The gate-keeping authority assumed by the news media shut out many voices. But, conversely, what happens to politics when the myth of the symbolic center is gone?

The splintering of such a center seems inherent in the communicative spaces staked out by social media. Unedited, democratically accessible media allows increasingly decentralized and representative politics. But, as BBC Media Action research warns (Schoemaker 2013: 1), the result might be a loss of common focus (including what Habermasian scholars might term the necessary adherence to rituals of rational-critical debate). Instead, one might see further (and increasingly mutually hostile, polarized) social fragmentation. Commentators are worried about the lack of an acknowledged central public forum where people meet to

discuss issues of supposed universal concern. Social media, they argue, fractures these gazes, allowing debate – often extremely polarized – to disperse in endless, mutually unrelated chains of sub-spatialities (a tendency worsened as various platforms impose mutually discriminatory filters in what used to be “open ecosystems”, see *Economist* 2012, Holmes 2013: 1). Social movement space may be much reduced in meaning and impact if there is, no longer, a (mythical, but potent) symbolic centre, able to coordinate stories of local-space, ritualized endeavor.

The reader may judge on this, and other issues, in the seven articles which follow, of which each, in its own way, engages with one or more of the central issues of ritual, place and media. The three often blur, coming together in the practices that, together, define social-movement space. Social-movement space spans that of local face-to-face experiences, members’ performances in public and pilgrimage space. It uses media to create topologies of communication and, finally, imposes additional rituals of communication inherent in each social-movement medium.

Rituals and local spaces, meanwhile, are interrelated; bodies remember both. Face-to-face interaction brings emotional bodies into play, giving strength to collective engagement. Performances and words, rituals and symbolic spaces are, further, re-represented through medialized forums. The media narratives of rituals affect local groups, complementing embodied ritual memory with standardized narrative memories, even liturgies, while confirming the public significance of the group’s experience and purpose.

Further, the events can be presented both locally and in different “mythical-center” spaces; the discourses and rituals of these centers then re-infect local practices and frames. Public narratives and discussion, indeed, allow special types group boundary-drawing. Their genre-specific narratives validate certain rituals and ridicule others. Following these interlinked rituals can intensify and legitimize the group’s message; while flaunting the ritualized frames and norms of media can pose challenges to hegemonic symbolic orders. How this is done, and how we can deepen our understanding of these processes, are the subjects of the following seven studies.

Madeleine Hurd is Associate Professor in Modern History at Södertörn University, Sweden. Her research has focused on emotions and gender in medialized rituals of spatial belonging in inter-war Germany and in German far-right environmentalism. See, e.g., Hurd & Werther, “The Militant Voices of Far-Right Environmentalism”, in *Communicating the Environment*, ed. Heike Graf (fc 2014); “Contested Masculinities in Inter-War Flensburg”, in *Bordering the Baltic*, ed. Hurd, *Nordische Geschichte* 10, Lit Verlag 2010; “Reporting on Civic Rituals:

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Elementary Forms of Religious Life in Animal Rights Activism

By Kerstin Jacobsson

Abstract

Many scholars have noted that secular belief systems, despite lack of a spiritual base, can possess qualities and display features similar to religion. The most well-known and forceful formulation of this is, arguably, Durkheim's claim that elementary forms of religious life pervade collective life in all societies. This article suggests that animal rights activism can fruitfully be analyzed as an instance of "secular religion". Drawing on Durkheim and based on a study of animal rights activists in Sweden, the article identifies a number of elementary forms and experiences of religious life in animal rights activism. These include overwhelming conversion experiences, a division of the world into sacred and profane, concern about protecting the sacred, commitment to spreading the message and living out one's faith, the feeling that suffering and guilt have meaning, and the constitutive role of common symbols and rituals. The article argues that it is in the light of the activist group as a moral community formed around a sacred ideal that these religious elements are best understood. At the same time, the animal rights activists challenge established boundaries between sacred and profane, when dismantling the symbolic boundary between humans and animals.

Keywords: Animal rights, activism, Durkheim, secular religion, sacred, social movement, Yinger

Introduction

It is well known that many social movement activists burn for their cause. The convictions and ideals on which their activism is based are invested with strong moral and affective force, which both fuels their public actions and guides them in their everyday lives (e.g. Jacobsson & Lindblom 2012, Pallotta 2005). Rarely is this more evident than in the case of animal rights activists; conversion to an animal rights universe of meaning has huge implications for the public as well as the private dimensions of a person's life. Moreover, few contemporary movements challenge dominant value and norm systems in such a fundamental way.

Historically, other social movements have pursued radically new ideals, for instance the extension of full human rights to new categories of people, such as women, racial or sexual minorities. However, the animal rights movement challenges us to extend our moral concern and obligation to encompass a new category of beings, namely animals. By conceiving of animals as sentient beings, as individuals with intrinsic value and rights, by viewing meat consumption as murder and modern insemination practices as institutionalized rape, and by drawing parallels between industrial meat production and the Holocaust, they fundamentally challenge dominant social practices and moral codes. Being themselves a product of cultural modernization and reflexivity, where more and more aspects of human life become open to reflection, questioning and choice, the animal rights activists thus contribute to further moral reflexivity.

I conceive of social movement activists as united by a commitment to distinct moral ideals, and can accordingly be conceptualized as pursuers of moral ideals (see also Jacobsson & Lindblom 2012). Activist groups are as much moral as social communities (e.g. Peterson 2001), as the shared moral ideals that translate into behavioral codes of imperative force are basis for their community. Following Durkheim (1912/2001), I argue that these collective ideals are conferred a sacred status by those committed to their defense. This is why I suggest that it is useful to draw parallels to a religious universe of meaning and to religious experience and practice, in order to understand the nature of commitment and activist experience as well as the consequences for the activists' everyday life and social relationships. Thus, the article suggests that animal rights activism can fruitfully be analyzed as an instance of "secular religion" (cf. Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Lowe 2001). The aim of the article is to empirically identify and theoretically understand these religious qualities in animal rights activism as well as to explore their significance for the identities and social relationships of the activists.¹ More generally, the article aims to illustrate the usefulness of a "sociology of religion" perspective for understanding social movement activism even in a secularized society.

It has been noted by many scholars that secular belief systems can possess qualities and display features similar to religion without having a spiritual base or

belief in a transcendent reality. For instance, Simmel stated, “I do not believe that the religious feelings and impulses manifest themselves in religion only” (Simmel quoted in Yinger 1970: 86). Various conceptualizations have been suggested for religious expressions in non-traditional forms of religion, such as secular religion (e.g. Yinger 1970), functional religion (Yinger 1970), quasi-religion (e.g. Edwards 1973; Yinger 1970), implicit religion (e.g. Bailey 1997), invisible religion (Luckman 1967) and civil religion (e.g. Bellah 1967). The most well-known and forceful statement of the persistence of religious elements and forms even in modern, secularized societies is, however, that of Émile Durkheim (2001). Durkheim contended that certain elementary forms of religious life pervade collective life in all societies. He pointed to a basic division of the world into the sacred and the profane, the former being the shared sacrosanct ideals that unite a group, the symbols that represent it, and the collective rites that strengthen group allegiance, and generate the capacity to act in unison.

Empirical illustration of secular religion is provided based on an interview-study of animal rights activists in Sweden. The activists interviewed for this research all identify themselves as animal-*rights* activists in contrast to animal-*welfare* activists. Animal-welfarism is a reformist position, pleading for humane treatment of animals and focusing on improving animal protection. Animal-rights activism more fundamentally challenges humans’ oppression of animals and their claims of superiority. Being an animal-rights activist often entails embracing a vegan lifestyle. Thus, the article captures the mindset of the more radical branch of the broader animal rights movement.

I proceed by introducing the key ideas of Durkheim’s sociology of religion, which are useful for understanding the life worlds, identities and practices of animal rights activists. I also briefly discuss some alternative conceptualizations of non-traditional forms of religion, and argue for my own conceptual understanding and definition in this article, namely that of “secular religion”, for which I am indebted to Durkheim. I then locate my study in relation to previous research. Thereafter, I present my data, methods and finally the findings of an empirical study of animal rights activists in Sweden, their life worlds and experiences.

Animal Rights Activism as Secular Religion: A Theoretical Perspective

According to Durkheim, there are three fundamental elements to every religion: sacred things, a set of beliefs and practices, and the existence of a moral community. He defined religion as

a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church (Durkheim 1917/2001: 46).

Sacred things, in his understanding, “are simply collective ideals that have fixed themselves on material objects” (1914/1973: 159). Thus, the thing symbolizes the ideal. To Durkheim, the division of the world into sacred and profane is universal.² He argued that all societies have moral ideals which are held to be sacred and inviolable, the transgression of which leads to reprisal and sanctions – whether legal or social. For Durkheim, thus, modern society is not a completely desacralized world. However, the taboos and collective imperatives enclosing the sacred are no longer of the same absolute character; with the development of modern science and democracy they become more open to reflection and critique (Durkheim 2002: 52f)

In the modern, secularized world, the sacred is most clearly expressed in the sacrosanct status that is granted to the individual, and Durkheim saw individualism as an expression of a modern faith and cult. I suggest that what the animal rights activists do is expand this individualism to encompass animal individuals as well. Animal rights activists challenge us to take account not only of humans, but to perceive animal-beings as inviolable, entitled to dignity and rights.

Durkheim (2001) defined a moral community, or church, as a group of people with shared views of the sacred world and its relation to the profane, and with shared views of how these representations are to be translated into common practice. I submit that the animal rights activist group can be understood as such a community; its members share a worldview or cosmology where animals are seen as individuals, as having intrinsic value. Animals are seen as fellow-beings capable of suffering and, equally important, as beings with a soul. The notion of soul was for Durkheim an important characteristic of religion, as there is no religion “in which we do not find a whole system of collective representations related to the soul” (2001: 183). As beings in possession of a soul, animals are entitled to dignity and respect, and for this reason, the activists strongly object to the instrumental use of animals for human ends.

This worldview translates into a coherent code of conduct, namely consistent veganism. The inviolability of the human body has become sacred, a symbol of human rights and dignity.

The animal rights activists show a similar concern for the bodily integrity of animals. They see the ingestion of animal flesh as both immoral and disgusting (Hansson & Jacobsson 2014). As will be further elucidated below, recruitment into animal rights activism can be understood as a conversion to such a worldview and mindset.

The role of rituals was also key in Durkheim’s sociology of religion. Rituals are standardized and therefore predictable patterns of behavior with a symbolic and expressive dimension to them. For Durkheim, participation in rituals generates collective feelings among the participants, notably *collective effervescence*, a heightened sense of awareness and aliveness without which activists would not be able to transcend individual self-interest and self-limitations. Collective efferves-

cence is important for collective action because of its transformative potential; for a moment the ritual participants feel that all is possible. This impersonal, extra-individual force transports the individuals into another, ideal realm, lifts them up and outside of themselves, and makes them feel as if they are in contact with an extraordinary energy. However, since collective effervescence is a temporary feeling – often followed by disillusionment and poor self-confidence in the absence of the group rituals must be repeated. Durkheim’s sociology of religion emphasizes the group-related functions of religious practice; that is, the social needs that rituals fill, most importantly by strengthening in-group solidarity and reaffirming commitment to the common ideal.

Drawing on Durkheim, sociologist of religion Milton Yinger (1970) developed the notion of “functional religion”. In contrast to substantive theories of religion, which focus on what religion *is* (its content), functional theories are interested in what religion *does* (Yinger 1970: 4). In the words of Yinger (1970: 11), “If we take the functional approach to the definition of religion, it is not the nature of the *belief*, but the nature of *believing* that requires our study”. This is consistent with my present interest in what a conversion into an animal rights universe of meaning *does* to the individual and her social relationships – the implications of such a faith, as well as its expressions, forms, and ways in which it is practiced.

Yinger defined religion as:

a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with [the] ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human associations. The quality of being religious, seen from the individual point of view, implies two things: first, a belief that evil, pain, bewilderment, and injustice are fundamental facts of existence; and second, a set of practices and related sanctified beliefs that express a conviction that man can ultimately be saved from those facts (1970: 7).

For Yinger, this did not necessarily imply a belief in a transcendent reality, as also inner-worldly matters can be of ultimate concern: “Injustice is bearable only if this world is written off as a temporary and unimportant vale of tears; it becomes an ultimate concern to those who are concerned only with this existence” (Yinger 1970: 533, cf. Tillich 1957).³ Thus, non-theistic belief systems can also be called religions. According to Yinger, even if people reject that which they identify as religion:

It is likely, however, that such individuals, having left some traditional religion, will nevertheless affirm their faith in some “over-beliefs”, will get emotional support from various symbols, acts, and ceremonies (worship), and will join with others in groups that seek to sustain and realize shared beliefs (1970: 11).

In the stress on symbols, ceremonies and emotions, the influence of Durkheim is marked.

Edward Bailey (e.g. 1997) has suggested the term “implicit religion”, which, he claims, can be expressed both in secularism and organized religion. Bailey pre-

fers this concept “because it keeps its options open with regard to its referent’s structural and historical origins, its social and cultural location, its mode of religiosity, and its relationship with other forms of religion” (1997: 41). He identified three defining characteristics of implicit religion: “commitment”, “an integrated focus” of one’s life and “intensive concerns with external effects” (Bailey 1997: 8f). All these characteristics, as we will see, feature prominently in the lives of the animal rights activists.

In synthesis, I use the concept of *secular religion* to denote a set of ideas and accompanying practices displaying the following features/characteristics. First, there is a distinct universe of meaning based on a division of the world into sacred and profane. Second, there is a moral community defined by its adherence to a specific sacred ideal and commitment to its defense. This ideal represents a non-theist system of beliefs and an inner-worldly utopia which nonetheless becomes an ultimate concern for its community of believers.

Finally, the group displays elementary forms of religious life in terms of distinct beliefs, experiences, and practices (such as rituals). According to this concept of secular religion (and in contrast to Bailey and Yinger, for instance), the sacred component of the belief system is still key. It is understood in a Durkheimian sense as a moral ideal, attaching intrinsic value to something, and thus as inviolable and in need of protection from contamination by the profane. Consequently, it is a specific moral ideal that forms the basis for group identification and community. Thus, a secular religion, just like a traditional religion, builds on a clear boundary between believers and non-believers, between those committed to the ideal and others.⁴ Moreover, as in the case of traditional religion, a secular religion is also based on *dedication* to the sacred ideal, which involves not only a cognitive awareness and intellectual motivation but also an equal amount of emotional engagement.

My contention is that animal rights activism contains/displays these elementary forms of religious life and can be seen as an instance of secular religion. It is the sacredness of the ideal (of animals’ intrinsic value) that sets the activists on fire, and it is in the light of this sacred ideal that their fervor, zeal and sometimes uncompromising attitudes should be understood. The moral ideal translates into an imperative code of conduct and manner. Even if the belief system (or faith) is also codified in creeds, such as the universal declaration of animal rights, and in foundational texts, such as texts by moral philosophers Tom Regan, Peter Singer, and Gary Francione, even more important here are the convictions inscribed in the hearts and the souls.

Relation to Previous Research

Research on animal rights activists in the US has found that animal rights activists tend to be less religious in the traditional sense than the average person; the group

numbers a larger than average proportion of agnostics or atheists (e.g. Galvin & Herzog 1992, Jamison & Lunch 1992, Jasper & Poulsen 1995, Richards quoted in Jamison, Wenk, Parker 2000). Nevertheless, as will be illustrated empirically below, the movement displays many of the elementary practices and experiences of religious life.

Two previous studies have explicitly studied animal rights activism in religious terms (Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Lowe 2001), while a number of other studies have drawn parallels to religion without developing this further (e.g. Herzog 1993; McDonald 2000; Jacobsson & Lindblom 2012), or have pointed to experiences which can be interpreted in such terms. Jamison, Wenk and Parker (2000) drew on Yinger (without mentioning Durkheim), arguing that all the critical components of functional religion are to be found in the case of animal rights activism, including intense conversion experiences, newfound communities of meaning, normative creeds, distinct codes of behavior and cult formation. The authors suggested that understanding animal rights activism as functional religion helps us understand the intensity of activist commitment.

Lowe (2001) analyzed animal rights activism as a “quasi-religious phenomena”, in view of the activists’ moral orientation and outrage, their concern with purity and their common micro-interactions and rituals. Lowe also argues that texts produced by philosophers, such as Singer and Regan, have achieved a quasi-sacred status in the movement. The respondents in my study, however, are far more ambivalent about the importance of the philosophers. I find it more appropriate to conceive, not of texts or the movement as sacred objects (cf. Lowe 2001), but of animals as symbols of a sacred ideal. Nevertheless, Lowe acknowledges the fundamentally moral nature of the animal rights movement (drawing, here, on Weber and the notion of value-rational motives, rather than on Durkheim).

I differ from previous authors in emphasizing that it is in the light of the activist group as a moral community formed around a sacred ideal that the religious elements can be best understood. When Jamison, Wenk and Parker (2000: 306) ask, “What are the sources of this intensity and commitment?”, my reply is “the sacred”. Without a theoretical understanding of the sacred, the religious features remain incomprehensible and exotic. The division between sacred and profane is key here, but also the fact that the activists’ representation of the sacred clashes with that of mainstream society. This is why many people react so strongly against the views of animal rights activists or depict them as extreme or even bizarre (which is not uncommon in the mass media). By dismantling the symbolic boundary between humans and animals (Cherry 2010), the activists challenge established boundaries between sacred and profane.

Data and Method

Durkheim's preferred method was observation. However, as will be illustrated in this article, interviews can also capture the forms and experiences of religious life. Another of the classics, William James's seminal work *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/2002), has served as a methodological source of inspiration for this study. In order to capture the religious mind, James chose to study the most religious persons – not because these alone express a religious worldview, but because they do it most explicitly. Likewise, I chose to study persons who are passionate about their cause – not the half-hearted individuals who might be paying but passive members of an animal-welfare organization – because secular sacralism is more visible there. Rather than trying to achieve a sample that would be representative of all branches of the broader movement, including both animal rights and animal welfare activists, the study focuses on the most committed, zealous activists, those who explicitly define themselves as animal rights activists. My selection criteria were (1) that study participants were vegans and (2) that they were self-defined animal rights activists. Consequently, my findings cannot be generalized to the broader movement; what I have captured is the mindset of committed animal rights activist groups. The interviews have been aimed at capturing the life worlds and experiences of the activists as well as the implications activism has for their everyday lives. The fact that many previous studies, mainly from the US (Herzog 1993; McDonald 2000, Pallotta 2005 to name but a few), point in a similar direction (even if they have not necessarily conceptualized them in religious terms), shows that these experiences and outlooks are not extreme but rather typical for this category of activists.

This is an intensive study, based on 18 open-ended, in-depth interviews with Swedish animal rights activists, each lasting from one and a half to five hours. The activists belonged to different groups. Ten interviews were conducted in 2004 with activists engaged in Animal Rights Sweden, which is the largest and oldest animal welfare organization in Sweden. Today it seeks to combine animal rights and animal welfare activism. The remaining eight interviews were conducted in 2010 with activists belonging to the Animal Rights Alliance and a local network of animal rights activists in Gothenburg. The Animal Rights Alliance was started in 2005 as a more activist and radical alternative to Animal Rights Sweden. The local Gothenburg group has an approach similar to the Alliance, giving their moral support even to illegal actions. The activists interviewed, however, tended to be members of several different organizations, not limiting their commitment to one group only, and some were more radical than the organization to which they belonged. At least one had carried out Animal Liberation Front actions. In this article, the analysis focuses on the mindset and experiences of the activists. These tend to be shared by all the interviewed activists. I have therefore chosen to treat the informants as one group. The sample includes activists who held key positions

in the respective organization or network at the time of the study. They either held formal leadership positions or functioned as informal leaders. The remainder of the participants was recruited through snowball sampling. Care was taken to secure diversity in terms of age and gender. Eleven women and seven men were interviewed, aged between twenty and sixty, the average age being around thirty. Most of them worked professionally, although some of the younger ones were students and a few were unemployed or on sick-leave. For all of them, the animal rights issue was a priority concern in their lives, while paid work was more a necessity.

Elements of Secular Religion: Empirical Findings

In the following, I will offer an empirical illustration of some key elementary forms of religious life in animal rights activism. Consistent with an approach which is more interested in what religion *does* than what it *is*, focus will be less on beliefs and more on experiences, practices and relationships.

Experiences of Awakening and Conversion

Return to me with all your heart (Joel 2:12)⁵

A marked element of religious life in animal rights activism is indeed the strong experiences of awakening and conversion that activists give witness to, after which they see the world in a new light and feel compelled to act. It is a conversion to a distinct worldview which entails a transformation of the epistemological horizon of the individual (Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000). But even more importantly, it is a *conversion to a moral ideal* and command. Thus, it entails not just beliefs but moral commitments and obligations. It is in this light that we can understand the dramatic and all-encompassing changes in conduct of life that accompany the changes in thinking (see also Herzog 1993, Pallotta 2005), and the imperative to give up one's old life style and live according to new values and norms, such as unwavering adherence to veganism.

Durkheim (1914/1973) pointed to the fundamental dualism of human nature, which Shilling and Mellor (2010) conceptualize as *homo duplex*. As human beings we are internally divided between egoistic dispositions and moral dispositions, the latter following from our attachment to a social group. The conversion to the animal rights ideal entails a 'push' towards the moral side of one's character, and giving up one's old life thus entails trying to suppress the egoistic dispositions for the sake of the cause.

The fact that the conversion narratives are recurrent in the interview material as well as documented in previous research indicates that conversion is also social – an individual experience in a shared form. The activists interviewed testify to

have experienced a form of revelation – akin to that of a traditional religious revival – whereby their eyes were opened and they saw the world as it truly is:

I was unenlightened before. Our society is incredibly good at hiding and euphemizing the situation and what is going on. We normalize that we murder and use animals. I was socialized into that [...] I think that I just needed to see, someone needed to show me what reality is like, and when I saw that and opened my eyes to something else and to what reality is like, I felt that “this I cannot support”. It felt self-evident.⁶

Another said, “It was as if all pieces fell into their place and I understood that here I have been going around for 10 years without seeing or understanding anything”. The conversion experience entails moving from an unenlightened state to a new consciousness about the world and one’s place in it, namely as a savior of suffering souls (see also Gaarder 2008).

The informants express something close to amazement at not having seen the connection between animals and food before, though perceiving themselves as being animal-friendly. Suddenly it all appears self-evident. In their conversion narratives there is thus a clear “before and after” (who I was and who I became) (see also McDonald 2000). There is also a sense of surrender – life cannot be the same again. (See also Joas 2000 and James 2002 on self-surrender as fundamental to religious experience). To the activist, the moment of conversion appears to be a point of no return. As one informant put it, “Once you have opened yourself there is no way back”.

To “open oneself” means opening up to the suffering that is constantly around us. The experience of eye-opening is accompanied by a willingness to live with open eyes, with “no blockers on” (McDonald 2000: 11), a commitment to face and confront the suffering that exists. Shapiro (1994) has even characterized animal rights activists as “caring sleuths”, who deliberately seek suffering victims with which to empathize. Empathy and compassion with those who suffer feature frequently in the interview narrations (this is consistent with findings in other studies; e.g. Shapiro 1994; Lowe 2001; Pallotta 2005). Instead of turning off or looking away, the activists deliberately let themselves be affected by the suffering of others.

The awakening thus entails a sensitization (Shapiro 1994) and an awakening of sensibilities (Hansson & Jacobsson 2014), whereby the activists can almost feel the pain of others. “It was a disgusting picture of a monkey with a syringe in its neck. I reacted really strongly and could almost feel the physical pain”. As another one puts it, “once you have opened your eyes it is so bloody painful to see everything around you”.

In the experience of eye-opening and “seeing”, meeting animals’ eyes is key, as is also documented in previous research (see Herzog 1993; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Gaarder 2008). One interviewed activist relates the following experience of watching films picturing animals suffering:

I felt so incredibly bad and it was emotional. There are things that just stay and I can never go back. It was like it was so amazingly profound and I was really sad. And when you see it there with their eyes, these pigs' eyes are totally different from other pigs' eyes. Like pigs going to slaughter. Or living in large [industrial] buildings. I still have those pictures. It is the eyes of some animal.

The eyes are the proverbial window of the soul and thus bring to mind that animals are beings with a soul and therefore entitled to moral consideration and concern. It is in this light we can understand Jamison, Wenk & Parker's (2000: 315) finding that the informants drew a distinction between animals who possess eyes and those who don't. Only the former were seen as subjects of moral concern.

As pointed out by Joas (2000: 5), conversions are basically non-intentional, while resulting in a paradoxical feeling of voluntary commitment and ineluctable force. The typical conversion pattern among the informants of this study is not that of seekers looking for a meaningful cause to dedicate their lives to, but rather of people attesting to a sense of being "hit" by the insight/revelation, like St Paul on his way to Damascus (cf. Regan quoted in Vaughan 2012). The activists can point to specific turning-points when their eyes were opened and their lives transformed. In previous research, these moments have been termed "catalytic experiences" (McDonald 2000) "epiphanic events" (Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000) or "trigger events" (Pallotta 2008). The catalytic events typically entail both an overwhelming emotional experience and a new cognitive understanding, whereby "pieces fall into place". Jasper and Poulsen (1995) talk of "moral shocks" and see moral shocking as one of the main mechanisms of recruitment into animal rights activism, often caused by exposure to horrifying and upsetting pictures of animal suffering. For some of my informants, the confrontation with pictures had been preceded by a sensitization by animal rights arguments or by having developed a pre-disposition to empathy towards animals – for example acquired through childhood experiences of having beloved pets – which might have facilitated receptiveness to moral shock (see also Pallotta 2005).

There are also a few (all male) informants who stress that their conversion was due to philosophical reasoning and that their feelings of compassion were developed later. Nevertheless, in the sample, an awakening caused by seeing films, pictures and other sights is the recurrent pattern of conversion and it was typically an emotionally upsetting experience: It was pictures that made me react emotionally. I was sad, angry, in despair. It tore up a lot within me.

It is well known that converts often become "hardcore", as compared to people who have grown into a belief-system gradually, for instance through their upbringing. It is therefore not surprising, in a sample of subjects who define themselves as animal rights activists and who are all vegans, to find many who have had these conversion experiences.⁷

It is, moreover, worth noting that several of the activists also keep exposing themselves to re-shocking experiences. This can be interpreted as a way of recre-

ating the conversion experiences later in their activist careers (see also Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013, Hansson & Jacobsson 2014). This is a deliberate attempt to unsettle one's "zone of comfort" in order to remain open to the suffering of animal-others:

One has to look at animal rights films [...] sometimes there are new animal rights films and so on. New undercover [films] in fur farms, et cetera and that's what I look at to remind myself of why I'm standing outside for example AstraZeneca in Mölndal and screaming. This is why I do this. Not to forget.

Another says, "When I see those pictures, then the fire is lit and there is no other way to go". Reminding oneself through re-shocking experiences is a way of affirming one's commitment to the sacred ideal.

Dedication and Commitment

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.
(James 2:17)

Conversion to animal rights activism is transformative; it pervades all aspects of the activists' lives and it entails a totalizing experience, which is why Pallotta speaks of it as "total recruitment" (2005: 12). It is not possible to compartmentalize the animal rights issue from the daily, non-activist life (cf. McDonald 2000). For the interviewees, activism tends to be the first priority of their lives (see also Herzog 1993): "Activism for animals is very much what my life is about", one activist says. He adds that this is what he would like people to remember him for when he is dead. Thus, the conversion means that the activist gets a new and integrated focus in life, which overcomes divisions of experience (cf. Bailey 1997: 8), something that is characteristic of religious experience (Joas 2000: 52; James 2002). Bailey's three defining characteristics of implicit religion: commitment, an integrated focus in one's life and intensive concerns with external effects, are thus very much present here.

Having had their eyes opened, the activists are typically overwhelmed by the suffering around them and being driven by empathy they feel compelled to reduce this suffering (see also Shapiro 1994; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000). They also feel called upon to go out into the world, give testimony and spread the message, and so save animal-souls. As has also been pointed out by Herzog (1993), there is an evangelical component in their involvement, and activists assume ignorance rather than indifference from the public. Thus, they strongly believe in information-spreading, through leaflet distribution or bookstalls and by talking to and setting examples for others, for instance by demonstrating that there is nothing strange about a vegan diet. Despite the fact that their own experience typically is that of having seen the truth – revelatory knowledge – they are concerned to back up their claims with scientific knowledge claims, such as findings in neuroscience that animals, including fish, are sentient beings capable of feeling pain. Striking in

the animal rights religion is indeed its *combination* of faith and science, a rationalist worldview *and* a secular faith.

The converted activist is typically convinced of the correctness of her beliefs and the justifiability of her cause, showing a combination of idealism and ideological certainty (Galvin & Herzog 1992). As stated by one interviewee, “We know that we are right. One day people will look back and think that we were right”. Another said, “Of course it is very tough to go against all that society is fighting desperately to retain. But it is also so comforting to know that the struggle I pursue is the right one”. The moral certitude leaves little room for compromise and pragmatism (see also Herzog 1993; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Taylor 2004), which has led Jasper & Nelkins (1992) to speak of animal rights activists as being on a moral crusade. As one informant expressed it, “I am uncompromising - no bloody mawkishness here”.

The intensity of commitment, the passion and the zeal of animal rights activists are well documented in previous research (e.g. Jasper & Nelkin 1992; Herzog 1993; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Taylor 2004). I suggest that it is in relation to the burning passion for the sacred that the force of the moral ideal can be understood – a force that occasionally compels the activists to break “earthly” laws. For the activists, the animal rights cause has the status of ultimate concern – it is a religious universe and mindset as much as the ideology they hold. In this light we can understand the dedication to the cause and the willingness to make the sacrifices it exacts. To live the life of an animal rights activist means embarking on “the narrow road”. Small decisions in daily life, which most people don’t even think about, such as whether to take medicines tested on animals or whether to kill vermin or not, become a matter of inner moral deliberations and a cause for remorse (Herzog 1993: 109). Moreover, the activist feels compelled to live out her faith – by taking action. It is through action that commitment is manifested (see also Peterson 2001).

A Meaning in Suffering and Guilt

But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life,
and only a few find it (Matthew 7:4)

Being committed to reduce the suffering of animal-others means that one may have to accept a certain amount suffering oneself. As Yinger has pointed out, for a religious person, surrender and sacrifice can be perceived as beneficial and religious people typically find some meaning in suffering and in “givings up” (Yinger 1970: 7-9). For the interviewed activists, sacrifices for the sake of the cause are perceived as necessary. These may include career opportunities, one’s own comfort, or a traditional family life. “Previously I had some plans for getting children but I am not particularly interested in that any more. If I eventually would want to have children it would certainly be with a vegan.” Another states:

People should not think so much about having a family or devoting their time to possessions. I think it is clear that we who are engaged in Animal Rights Sweden don't care much about such things. We are not as materialistic as society at large [...] I myself have no family and those who are most active are those who don't have children. Of those who usually come to our membership meetings I don't think there is even one who has a child.

Renunciation and sacrifice can be perceived as beneficial because they are signs of commitment to the moral ideal. By contrast, failure to "give up" may be a sign of the fire having died, the loss of the battle against egoistic dispositions.

A distinctive feature of the animal rights movement is the degree to which its members experience feelings of guilt and remorse (see also Groves, 1997; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Shapiro 2004; Pallotta 2005; Gaarder 2008; Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013). Having had their eyes opened, they see suffering all around them and there is no apparent end to this – billions of animals are killed each year and the world's meat consumption is on the rise. The activists experience collective guilt on behalf of humankind, which treats its fellow-beings in such a way, but also personal guilt for not doing enough and for failing to live up to the ideals. The sacred ideal compels; it is imperative to act and failure to do so causes guilt and shame; and vice versa, pride and self-respect require that one acts. Indeed, to act is the only way to get relief from guilt; in contrast to theist belief systems, there is no external source of atonement, no forgiveness or absolution. In such a situation, increased activism becomes a secular penance (Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000: 318f). As one informant put it, "I do this in order to quiet my bad conscience. [...] I feel that I just have to do something, when I know what it [the world] is like". Another said, "Even if it is very hard to see all this, it would be even harder to know that you don't do anything".

To burn for a cause always bears the risk of getting burnt out, something of which several of my informants are acutely aware (see also Pallotta 2005). As one of them related:

I know many who get burnt out and just work out of guilt – guilt, and pressure and force and who can't feel that it is fun [...] Most people can't handle it [the feeling of inadequacy] and I am not saying that I can, but I am working hard at it [...] That is something I am working on right now in a very deliberate way – to not become burnt out.

Nevertheless, while the interviewed activists bear witness to the difficulties entailed in living with guilt and feelings of inadequacy, self-reproach can also gain a positive aura, as it is a sign of commitment to the sacred ideal.

The Moral Community and the Surrounding World

They are not of the world,
just as I am not of the world. (John 17:16)

The capacity to "see" distinguishes the activists from others, and this easily leads to feelings of dissonance and estrangement in relation to the surrounding world

(cf. Pallotta 2005). How can people look upon the world with such different eyes? Where others might just see a bottle of milk, the activist sees a product of institutionalized rape and imagines a calf-child which has been separated from a grieving mother, and where others may enjoy a delicious meal, the activist sees a murder committed. Some informants almost feel like they are living in a parallel universe and, like the Christian pilgrim, they feel like foreigners in this world. The seeming indifference of others to the suffering of animals is incomprehensible to them. “I can’t understand that people can’t see. People are so egoistic”. Another related:

I feel in relation to those who are not vegans that they are fine people, but I cannot disregard that they do not live the way I do. I ask myself, “How come this clever person does not realize such an obvious thing?” It is sad that we cannot fully understand each other.

Moreover, as the animal rights paradigm challenges the worldview of mainstream-society in such a fundamental way, many people are provoked by animal rights activists. Most of the informants report encountering hostility from an unsympathetic environment:

I can be surprised of how mean people can be or how little they care when I meet them in town. When I approach them with a petition they don’t say anything or they make remarks such as “Meat is delicious” or “I want to wear fur”.

There was a meat norm and when I breached it, problems arose. Both my parents and my friends could say “Oh you bloody vegan” and then I felt that I didn’t want to meet people who are not vegans [...] I am not surprised any more when people are unpleasant, sarcastic or make personal attacks. It has been like that ever since I began to be involved in animal rights.

The activists report having to put up with taunts from their social environment daily, and having to defend their eating habits in a way that meat-eaters do not. As it would be useless to be in constant disputes with people around them – “it would be untenable both for me and for others” as one informant put it – the activists feel that they often have to hold back: “You have to compromise all the time and pretend that you don’t care”.

A transformation in thinking and conduct of life as dramatic as that of conversion into animal rights activism inevitably affects personal relationships, and the informants experience alienation in relation to, and sometimes even ostracism from, their previous social networks and families (see also Herzog 1993; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Pallotta 2005). While for some conversion leads to the break-up of old connections, others retain their old friends. Common to all those interviewed, however, is the importance attached to the “new-founded” community, the vegan community, where they can return to regain their spirits and where they feel they can relax and not have to defend their conduct of life but just “be” (see also Pallotta 2005; Gaarder 2008). It is precisely because they are forced to segregate their “different selves”, to some extent “holding back” and “pretending

they don't care" when at, for instance, their workplace, that they urgently need places where they can be their true selves. Thus, the interviewees say that they keep meeting with other vegans "all the time". The activist community is also important for emotional support and reaffirmation of commitment. One interviewee talks of other group-members "sharing the grief", and helping "carry you when you don't have the strength yourself".

The sense of community comes from sharing a commitment to the same moral ideal, and by implication, sharing the same way of life. Adherence to the sacred ideal – and non-adherence – provides a clear-cut boundary between in- and out-group. There is no in-between. This means that for the activists, formal organizational belonging is less important than the group-boundaries arising from commitment to the same ideal. Adherence to the ideal constructs a community of Us in contrast to Them:

Those who are uninformed of the animal rights question and who are not even vegetarians I can regard as "Them." I may feel that those who do not understand a thing are hopeless and thick-headed, but I never say such things even if I feel like that.

Another says that, "Of course there is an Us and Them feeling ... but I try to see them as 'until now blocked'", that is, as persons with the potential to be awakened by the message.

Even so, the commitments and practices separating believers from non-believers create a boundary of purity (see also Lowe 2001), and in-group members are concerned with preserving that purity against contaminations.

Protection of the Sacred

For where your treasure is,
there your heart will be also. (Luke 12:34)

The sacred is worthy of devotion and respect; it bears with it a sense of intrinsic obligation, demanding devotion and enforcing emotional commitment (see also Lowe 2001). This means that the sacred needs to be protected from pollution by the profane; that is, from being taken over by all the mundane matters of everyday life. Sacred ideals, as ultimate concerns, stand in stark contrast to individuals' immediate and utilitarian concerns (Tillich 1957: 1f ; Yinger 1970: 14; cf. Durkheim 1912/2001). It is in this light we should understand the activists' preoccupation with not letting professional life, leisure interests or even a traditional family life outrival the defense of the collective ideal, namely animal rights.

Again, protection of the sacred from contamination by the profane entails a form of boundary-drawing, and all boundary-drawing serves as a symbolic (re)construction of community (cf. Cherry 2010). For instance, meat-eaters within the movements are looked upon with suspicion and even contempt, and animal-welfare activists are criticized for not going far enough in their demands. Thus, collective protection of the sacred ideal readily translates into social control. As Durkheim (2002) reminds us, not only moral ideals but also norms backed up by

sanctions are the building-blocks of the moral order. The interviews reveal that there are social sanctions exerted against apostates, such as petty gossip behind the backs of people who seem to have lost the fire and show up at meetings less frequently, or who have even reverted to meat-consumption. Members of the movement must repeatedly prove their commitment to the ideal through action. They will otherwise be labeled ex-activist and thus apostate (on the policing of dissension, see also Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000, Jacobsson & Lindblom 2012). There is little space for “cooling” down commitment, and anyone who does will lose community bonds.

Moreover, the interviews reveal that, within the activist-group, internal hierarchies tend to arise and actions are assessed according to the sacred ideal and its defense. Sacrifices confer social status. Thus, activists are assigned positions closer to or further from the sphere of the sacred according to their actions (Jacobsson & Lindblom 2012, cf. Lowe 2001 on “moral virtuosos”). “If someone doesn’t do something for a while, that person declines in an informal hierarchy [...] you have to be active to retain your position”, one of them explained. The activists also compare their actions to those of the others:

I compare myself to others, [to see] whether I do more or less than they do. Maybe this preoccupies me more than other people because right now I’m busy trying to get more involved. If I haven’t done anything for a while, I then have more to live up to.

Another purity concern is the internal debate within the movement about whether certain arguments are valid or not. Arguments referring to environment or health benefits from giving up meat-consumption tend to have less validity among animal rights activists – although they would probably find wide resonance in society. Rather, arguments about the intrinsic rights of animals are preferred. Again, the “sacred” with its intrinsic value is to be protected from the instrumental values, which belong to the sphere of “the profane”.

Mary Douglas (1991/1966) has forcefully argued that what is “pure” and what is “dangerous” depends on symbolic classification and boundary-drawing. The animal rights activists feel the same repulsion at the thought of ingesting pork or chicken as most Europeans may feel at the idea of eating cats or rats. The animal rights activists violate and challenge established symbolic boundaries in their attempts to extend moral concern and empathy to animals; they even try consciously to dismantle the symbolic boundary between humans and animals (Cherry 2010). To many people, this questioning of the exceptional position of human beings feels threatening. It is in this light that we should understand the strong reactions against animal rights activists and the aggressions that activists testify to. The reactions indicate that something sacred is at stake – for both sides. I submit that the animal rights issue is an exceedingly illustrative example of secular sacralism. As already pointed out by Durkheim, and developed by among others Joas (2000), the individual person has become sacralised in the modern world. Many people fear that human dignity will be compromised if the same rights and

obligations were extended to animals. This is why many people react so strongly against, for instance, drawing parallels between industrial meat production and the Holocaust. Here, two secular sacralisms collide – even if both are versions of the sacralised individual.

Rituals

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance (Ecclesiastes 3:4)

Collective ideals are celebrated first and foremost in rituals. Vegan meals are a case in point. They are an enactment of faith and the ideal is affirmed each time a life is spared. Thus, meals carry symbolic meaning for the activists and become acts of cleansing and purification, which is why Jamison, Wenk & Parker (2000: 319) speak of eating as a redemptive act. All religions have dietary rules and food taboos (e.g. Douglas 1991). As eating is something we do several times a day, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of meals for the vegan community. Common practices separate the activists from others and create a boundary of purity (Lowe 2001), and rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience (Douglas 1991: 2). As ritual is key to symbolic boundary-drawing (who belongs and who does not), qualifying the action of a group and making it autonomous in relation to other actors, it serves not just as moral but also symbolic reintegration (Sassoon 1984: 867ff; cf. Cherry 2010). Each meal is also a reminder of the normative clash with mainstream society. The informants for this study testify to how painful it is to eat together with meat-eaters, to experience the smell of meat etc., and to end up having to defend their eating habits against people who question their veganism. For the activists, meat-eating is profanation, while for the meat-eaters, comparisons between industrial farming and concentration camps are equally offensive. Again, two secular sacralisms collide.

According to Durkheim (2001: 317), a society “must assemble and concentrate” in order to periodically recreate itself, and in the process it also forms its ideals. Following Durkheim, then, rituals are essential for building collective identity, for sustaining moral commitment and also for invigorating the activists emotionally, as *collective effervescence* is generated in rituals. This invigorates the individual and gives her a momentary feeling of everything being possible, and thus a feeling of being able to transcend her own self-limitations. “You gain self-confidence and dare more”, as one informant said. The individual feels that she is part of something above and beyond herself. The collective effervescence and enthusiasm also help the individual transcend her own egoistic desires and tie her more closely to the collective and its ideal (Shilling & Mellor 2011). Thus rituals serve to increase the internal cohesion of the group as well as to give the emotional refill necessary for the continued struggle (Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013).

Participation in protest actions, such as public demonstrations, is a key type of ritual, by which a synchronization of bodies and fusion of minds is achieved (Peterson 2001). As one interviewed activist related:

[It] feels like a wonderful way for us in the movement to gather and march together. But also that it is public, that it is visible and noisy and that there are streamers and slogans.... You can't just sit at home and write letters to the editor and things like that. It feels good to have this emotional outlet, that you can yell out slogans and chant together with those who you know believe in the same thing. It is important to be many, and it's about showing others that we are many who are moving together.

As ritual-participants, the activists can feel joy and pride in their cause. According to some informants, it can also give emotional energy to share negative feelings, "it is great that someone is there to share pain and sorrow and then one gets energy out of that". In both cases, convictions are affirmed by collective practice.

Drawing on Durkheim, Collins (2001) has argued that rituals focus attention on common symbols important to the group. Symbols representing the faith – pictures of animals – are frequently used in demonstrations and public manifestations, for instance pictures of monkeys used in experiments (see also Jasper & Nelkin 1992; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000). As pointed out above, among activists, a ritual exposure to pictures, such as movies revealing cruelty to animals, is also a means of reminding oneself of the cause, and of reaffirming one's commitment.

Rituals are important in mobilizing collective action capacity and in community-building. However, it has been pointed out that rituals may be even more important for groups who see little tangible success of their struggle (Nepstad 2004: 54). Animal rights activists are of course a case in point – with the seemingly endless killing of animals for human ends. As was also pointed out above, group practice is of utmost importance for them. The rituals serve to "infuse" in the participants the sense of being on the right track and that "time will tell", as one informant puts it.

Conclusion

This article has sought to illustrate the usefulness of analyzing animal rights activism as an instance of secular religion. Although most of the activists interviewed are not religious in the traditional sense, we have seen that there are many parallels to a religious universe of meaning. For these activists, the issue of animal rights obtains the status of ultimate concern.

The article identified a number of elementary forms and experiences of religious life in animal rights activism, including an overwhelming conversion experiences, a division of the world into sacred and profane, concern about protecting the sacred, commitment to living out one's faith, the feeling that suffering and guilt have meaning, and the constitutive role of common symbols and rituals. It

has been suggested that these religious elements can best be understood in the light of the activist group as a moral community formed around a sacred ideal. A moral ideal held to be sacred drives the activists and creates a community of believers, based on a clear in- and out-group distinction; it is the blaze of the sacred that fuels the activists' passion and compels them to dedicate a considerable part of their time and energy to activism, even occasionally go against the laws of "this world". This is, in fact, true of other social movements; this analytical framework could be fruitfully applied to the radical and activist branches of other movements, as well. Nevertheless, the animal rights case is particularly interesting as it represents a very distinctive and controversial boundary-drawing between sacred and the profane. The sacralisation of the human person has here been extended to the sacralisation of the animal-individual.

There are also differences, however, between a secular religion and a theist system of beliefs. A secular faith, such as that of animal rights activism, is not necessarily a lifetime commitment. While some Christians, for instance, may cool off and apostate, belief in an Almighty God may prevent others from turning their backs on the deity. In contrast, the most intensive years of commitment and dedication to animal rights activism are for many a phase of life, after which a more pragmatic stance may prevail. It is very demanding to burn for such a cause and to be in conflict with mainstream society. The informants for this study were aware of this and expressed fear that they would lose their fervency later in life, that egoistic dispositions would come to dominate their lives. Such a loss would inevitably mean also a loss of community bonds.

Finally, I have suggested that the animal rights activists challenge established boundaries between sacred and profane by questioning our practices of eating the dead bodies of animals and the unique position granted to human beings. In doing so, they also contribute to moral reflexivity and moral development.

Kerstin Jacobsson is Professor of Sociology at University of Gothenburg. She is also affiliated to Södertörn University. She publishes widely in the field of political sociology, including studies of social movements. Her most recent books are *Beyond NGO-ization: The Development of Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (edited with Steven Saxonberg, Ashgate, 2013) and *Social Movements in Postcommunist Europe and Russia* (edited with Steven Saxonberg, Routledge, forthcoming 2014). E-mail: kerstin.jacobsson@gu.se

Notes

- ¹ I gratefully acknowledge the generous comments on this article by many colleagues, the research collaboration with Niklas Hansson & Jonas Lindblom and the research funding from the Swedish Research Council.
- ² Durkheim has longly been criticized by religious science scholars for his universalist claims and essentialist view of religion (see e.g. Masuzawa 2005). Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to see his perspective as still very productive (e.g. Joas 2000; Shilling & Mellor 2011). This article indeed is intended to demonstrate the usefulness of his approach.
- ³ Theologian Tillich (1957: 1f) defined faith as ultimate concern. Bellah defined religion similarly as “a set of symbolic forms and acts which men relate to the ultimate condition of their existence” (quoted in Yinger 1970: 6).
- ⁴ Their tight social bonds and intensity of commitment has led some researchers to conceptualize (radical) activist groups as sects (e.g. Peterson 2001; cf. Jamison, Wenk, Parker 2000). They then draw on Weber’s (1963) distinction between church and sect, which has meanwhile been further developed by Troeltsch (1950/1931).
- ⁵ The quotes from the Bible are intended to draw a parallel between the activists’ universe of meaning and that of a traditional religion. The quotes express, for instance, the same type of commitment and imperative to act.
- ⁶ All interview quotes are translated from Swedish into English by the author.
- ⁷ In Lowe’s and Ginsberg’s questionnaire, based on US data, only 25% of the respondents had experienced sudden conversion while (58%) responded that their engagement had grown gradually. However, their sample covered the broader movement, including also animal welfare activists.

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Go East, Old Man: The Ritual Spaces of SS Veterans' Memory Work

By Steffen Werther & Madeleine Hurd

Abstract

This article uses social-movement analysis to understand the rituals, memory-work and spatialities of Waffen-SS veterans and their sympathizers. Most social-movement analysis focuses on left-wing protesters; our concern is with the marginalized counter-narratives, rituals and -spaces produced by the self-proclaimed misunderstood “heroes” of World War Two. This counter-hegemonic self-definition is essential to these former world-war soldiers who, despite an internal mythology of idealistic self-sacrifice, are vilified in West-European master narratives. We discuss how, during the 1990s, veterans and their sympathizers sought to re-place rituals of memory-work in the newly-opened East. We look at how the Waffen-SS's ritual memory-work is “replaced” in alternative settings, including – perhaps surprisingly – Russia itself. Here, Waffen-SS veterans use new, official, semi-sacred places to anchor both an alternative identity and an alternative definition of the central meanings of modern European history.

Keywords: Waffen-SS, veterans, memory work, ritual, place, commemoration, European master narratives, World War Two, Estonia, Ukraine, Russia.

Introduction

This article uses insights furnished by social-movement analysis to understand how a group of ostracized World War Two veterans uses ritual places to challenge hegemonic understandings of European identity. Our subject is the memory work done by European Waffen-SS (W-SS) veterans, with particular focus on ritual and place.¹ Memory work is, of course, particularly important to a group of former world-war soldiers who, despite an internal mythology of idealistic self-sacrifice, are vilified in West-European master narratives. The legitimacy of their own community is tied to the search for public acknowledgement of their role as heroic fighters.² European W-SS veterans' organizations have done much, since the war, to gain this – lobbying politicians, publishing self-justifying memoirs, sponsoring commemorative services, and organizing battle-ground pilgrimages. They have, scholars agree, also re-written W-SS history, so as to fit the W-SS neatly into the European master story of the heroic battle against Bolshevism. If this revision of W-SS history is accepted, the veterans may be allowed to join the ranks of selfless, suffering heroes who, according to the EU's own myth, made possible the triumph of the West. They may even find a place to be – a public space to call their own.

For W-SS veterans suffer a side-effect of their exclusion from Europe's hero/victim World War Two master narrative: they are unwelcome in significant public spaces. Such places, we argue, are important. All other veterans have public-space ceremonies, memorials, battlefields and graveyards where they can legitimately appear. There, they can publicly acclaim the eternal meaningfulness of their battle. They can establish continuity with those who made the "ultimate" sacrifice, dying so that a people and an ideal might live. Not so the Waffen SS. The ability of the W-SS veterans to find and sanctify a public place, and hold, there, some sort of public communal ritual, is narrowly circumscribed. It is also closely linked to their ability to emerge into the sunshine of hegemonic World War Two discourses.

The W-SS veterans do attempt to emplace their narrative memory. This article examines, in some detail, how they go about this – that is, how they redefine both external and external discourses of World War Two and the Cold War, and how they seek to "place" this re-making through the performance of rituals at specially designated public sites.

Space and Ritual

Space matters to communal identity, especially if the community is defined as volunteers, idealistic heroes who fought Europe's most dangerous and terrible enemy. Veterans' rituals are an important part of celebrating the meaningfulness of their self-sacrifice. Commemorative rituals have performative power because

(as Durkheimian scholars of ritual argue) they give a direct emotional, embodied and spatial experience of shared moral ideals. Songs, slogans, flags, marches and speeches sacralise both place and participants; they heighten the bodily sensation and thus the “reality” of both ceremony and community.

Bodies are, moreover, sanctified by moving through significant *places*; to see what their predecessors have seen, to tread the same ground, to perform proper rituals at the traditional places. And these places are, preferably, public. Veterans (more than many others, one might argue) value public affirmation of the truths presented in their ceremonies. After all, soldiers kill and die in order to protect others. If those others do not acknowledge this, veterans might find themselves reduced to communal criminals. Therefore, to hold their ceremonies in significant public spaces, at a memorial dedicated to themselves, and to be acclaimed by national or local dignitaries and by audiences, means a good deal. It is one way of affirming the group’s participation in the pre-eminent moral legitimacy enjoyed by soldiers honored for fighting for the survival of their people, ready to die for its ideals.

But such places are usually denied W-SS veterans. Their attempts to convene and celebrate at public graves or monuments is often forbidden, severely circumscribed, and/or noisily contested. This has caused W-SS veterans and veteran sympathizers to identify space as a special challenge. Their organizations and publications continue to present their counter-narratives, to urge veterans to convene in ritual forms, and to seek out and claim public spaces. This article explores the means by which they do so.

Our sources are veterans’ and W-SS sympathizers’ own publications (and, to some extent, websites). How do these present and discuss spatial ceremonies? We have concentrated on German and Norwegian veterans. These are both vilified – that is, have great difficulty in commanding public sympathy, and thus, concomitantly, in finding a public space where they can perform their legitimizing ceremonies. In order to provide a contrast, we also discuss the Estonian W-SS veterans, for this is a group whose reception is significantly different. We concentrate on the 1990s, when new commemorative places opened up for the (now aged) veterans. Before going into our sources, however, let us briefly sketch the W-SS veterans’ organizational and ideological history.

The Waffen-SS During and After the War

During the Second World War, a total of around 900,000 men came to serve in the Waffen-SS. They were recruited from all of Nazi-occupied Europe. Most were, supposedly, volunteers (something much-celebrated in today’s veterans’ publications); in reality, many were drafted, particularly towards the end of the war and from less “Germanic” areas. The bulk of W-SS members remained German (including *Volksdeutsche*, that is, Germans not resident in Germany proper),

as did the leadership. “Nordic types” such as Scandinavians (e.g., the circa 6000 Norwegians who joined up) were, despite being relatively few, given high status in the association. Baltic states supplied more members, particularly in relation to their populations – 20,000 from Estonia, for instance. Estonians and similar “racial” groups were not, however, as welcome as Germans or Norwegians, even if the SS leadership did, as is well-known, continuously expand its definition of “Germanics” to be able to accept increasingly diverse “racial groups” (Heiber 1968: 134, 233; Wildt 2003: 580f; Emberland & Kott 2012).

After the war, Waffen-SS veterans found themselves increasingly ostracized – much more so, indeed, than other types of World War Two veterans. The acceptance of the W-SS as just another sort of soldier declined most dramatically during and after the 1970s, when television and politicians became increasingly focused on the horrors of the Holocaust.

But public attitudes varied according to national histories. In Germany, an initially fairly sympathetic attitude – after all, the country was full of people who had fought for the Nazis – gave way, as SS war crimes became publicized during the 1970s and 1980s, to public protest and near-total ostracization. (Karsten Wilke, among others, gives a good description of this shift.) The Norwegian W-SS men were, by contrast, branded as national traitors from the start. Not even in the 1950s was it possible for any political party to flirt with them. After the Fall of the Wall, however, Waffen-SS veterans and their sympathizers could look to new publics. In Estonia, for instance, as in other Baltic countries, and to the open disgust of West European (and Russian) commentators, the W-SS veterans were often viewed – and, sometimes, publicly and officially celebrated – as heroes who had fought for their countries’ independence, for Europe against Bolshevism.

The W-SS veterans maintained a communal identity throughout. In Germany, local veterans’ associations came together only a few years after the end of World War Two, founding, in 1959, a federal organization called the Mutual Help Association of Former Waffen-SS Members (the HIAG).³ Local and federal HIAG organizations were complemented by groups of W-SS veterans who had served in the same units, so-called *Truppenkameradschaften*. During the 1950s and 1960s, as Karsten Wilke (2011) has shown, the federal HIAG attracted quite a bit of high-level political attention as a significant pressure group and source of votes (politicians tended to overestimate its influence and membership). The organization had, at most, around 20,000 members; it had many contacts with W-SS veterans in other countries (e.g., Belgium, Holland, France and Scandinavia, a network kept up, not least, by the HIAG in-house publication *Der Freiwillige*). The HIAG’s influence depended, not least, on veterans’ ability to separate out and define the W-SS as a separate and relatively innocent fighting group: this image was advanced in efforts to attain veterans’ benefits and a role in the reconstituted Bundeswehr. During these early years, moreover, its mass meetings could be legitimized as part of a drive to locate and free missing comrades; they were graced by

local politicians and the German Red Cross. (For this history and that below, see Wilke 2011).

A reversal set in, however, during the 1960s, with increasingly public distancing from the Nazis' ideology and war crimes. Divided into various factions, increasingly dismissed by politicians as irrelevant and irredeemable, and hurt by the publicity given SS atrocities, the federal HIAG dissolved in 1992/3. Local chapters often survived, however, as did associations based on veterans of the same units (the *Truppenkameradschaften* mentioned above), but W-SS veteran groups were becoming increasingly taboo during the decades that followed. The increased attention paid to the neo-Nazi right during the 1990s, finally, adversely affected the veterans' attempts to achieve legitimacy. Even those W-SS members who distanced themselves from Nazi ideology found themselves publicly jeered, as part and parcel of a repugnant Nazi resurgence. Today, no West European country tolerates public W-SS demonstrations, nor are W-SS veterans invited to participate in official World War Two memorial ceremonies.

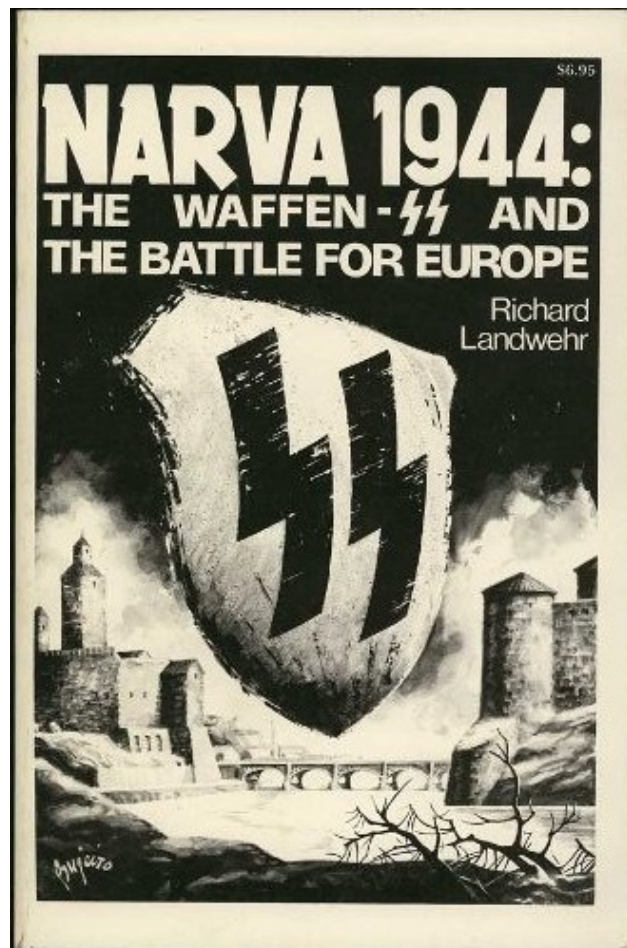
The W-SS veterans are, of course, increasingly aged. But their organizations can depend on next-generation members. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was pressure from the *Truppenkameradschaften* to recruit new members from among younger far-right movements. Many of the W-SS *Truppenkameradschaften* now have younger members, often in leadership positions. While some of these next-generation sympathizers are more interested in heroic WWII battle memories than in politics, and others are relatives of veterans, many are also neo-Nazis (Wilke 2011: 365f). Such members, while welcomed as bringing young blood to the *Truppenkameradschaften*, have also led to the movement's further ostracization. Still, the HIAG's old publication *Der Freiwillige* is kept on its feet, despite the dissolution of the HIAG itself, by younger members, working together with a neo-Nazi publishing house. *Der Freiwillige's* acclaimed aim, today, is to link older and younger generations in a common cause. The same ambition animates *Ein Fähnlein*, a lavishly illustrated newsmonthly that celebrates German WWII-veterans, and particularly the W-SS. Its sub-title is "dedication to duty and tradition" among "young *and* old volunteers!" (their italics).



A sample front cover of *Der Freiwillige* (February 1993).

These periodicals, together with newsletters, websites, etc., keep various veterans' organizations up-to-date on publications, events, and political sympathizers; they publish pictures, celebrate heroes, re-write history, and generally work to infuse life in national and pan-European W-SS veterans' movements. There was and remains much memory-work to be done: re-telling (to the outsider, it seems, endlessly) the history and experiences of SS battalions and veterans, reporting on and contesting negative reports on SS activities in the main-stream press. Then there are angry notices of attacks on SS and Nazi graves, a sign of continued ostracization. The tone is equally polemical when reprinting (the few instances of) pro-SS political speeches or describing marches undertaken by various right-wing groups who, like themselves, are seeking to redefine dominant World War Two narratives. Finally (and in this, they are similar to most social-movement publications), the SS veterans' newsletters give significant textual and pictorial space to their own community events. They note members' birthday notices and deaths; and they write substantially on festivals of commemoration.

Much of their work is, understandably, concentrated on revising the historical image of the W-SS. This is particularly evident in the HIAG's informal successor, the internationally-active "War Grave Memorial Foundation 'When All Brothers Are Silent'" (the *Kriegsgräberstiftung 'Wenn alle Brüder schweigen'*). The veterans themselves have remained organized, often internationally, in both this Foundation, in local remnants of the HIAG, and in the – often international – *Truppenkameradschaften*. More and more, as the veterans themselves began to die off, the iconized survivors function as the center of admiration of (some) family members and of younger W-SS supporters. It is very difficult to say how many people are involved, however: membership numbers are unreliable and/or unavailable. Dur-



Book-cover of revisionist book published glorifying the role of the W-SS at Narva and advertised in organs sympathetic to the W-SS.

ing the 1990s, there were, perhaps, around 10,000 active veterans and veteran sympathizers. *Der Freiwillige* claimed 8000 subscribers; W-SS festival arrangers in Estonia would speak of thousands of participants. None of these numbers can do more than give a feeling of the general order of magnitude of European W-SS sympathizers. (See “The next generation” 2001; *Freiwillige* 2000/46/2; Raabe & Speit 2005; “Hintergrund” 2011; Wilke 2011: 365; “Ein Zeitzeuge” 2001).

All W-SS survivor organizations build on trans-European networks. Being “European” is important to the veterans’ self-image. It allows them to regale in the W-SS’s supposed trans-European history as a bridge between e.g., Danish, Norwegian, Estonian, Latvian, Finnish, Belgian and Dutch “freedom fighters”. This is, as we shall see, an important part of their revisionist historical self-image. The “Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner” and the “Truppenkameradschaft Division Wiking”, for instance, are important veteran organizations for all Scandinavian W-SS men, as most Norwegians, Danes and Swedes served in one of these units during the war. These complement national W-SS organizations such as the Norwegian “Frontkjemperforening” (Front Fighter Association). The Frontkjemperforening, currently led by a next-generation right-wing extremist activist, long drew sustenance from an in-house journal: *Folk og Land*, founded in 1948 by functionaries in the Quisling party *Nasjonal Samling* and with a circulation, when shut down in 2003, of 3000 (*Folk og Land* 1983/8; Hårseth 2010; *Telemarkavisen* 2012).

The Estonian W-SS veterans’ organization, finally, also relevant to our analysis, has a history that is both more discontinuous and more happy than either its German or Norwegian counterparts. Initially organized abroad, Estonian W-SS veterans’ associations were welcomed home, after 1989, by prominent politicians and by parts of the populations. They remain numerically strong, when considered in relation to the national population. The “Union of Estonian Freedom Fighters”, founded in 1992, claims around 2000 members (here, they are able to draw on the anti-Soviet partisans “Forest Brothers”). After the turn-of-the-century, the Union was complemented by a veterans’ organization based on the W-SS unit “20. Waffen-Grenadier-Division of the SS” (which had been a primarily Estonian division), and, for younger right-wing extremists, the 2007 “Club for the Friends of the Estonian Legion” (see *Kultuur ja Elu* 2009: 2, 68 as well as websites “eesti-leegion” 2013; “metapedia” 2014).⁴

Our study uses concentrates on these W-SS groups, using W-SS veterans’ and sympathizers’ publications and websites during the 1990s, drawing primarily on reports given in *Der Freiwillige* and (what could be termed) the “next generation” magazine *Ein Fähnlein*. We will also use sundry German and Norwegian in-house publications (e.g., newsletters from Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner and the War Memorial Foundation, the *Neues vom Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner e.V* and the *Mitteilungsblatt der Kriegsgräberstiftung “Wenn alle Brüder schweigen”*, hereafter *Neues Korps Steiner* and *Wenn alle Brüder*). We mine these for reports on

rituals of memory and place. First, what is this memory to contain; second, what ceremonies are involved; and, third, how are they emplaced?

Recasting Narratives: Europe's Victimized Heroes

Waffen-SS veterans and their sympathizers do not stoically accept ostracization. As Wilke points out, their main rhetorical point is, indeed, victimization. They have been demonized (they complain) by the victors in World War Two, who re-wrote history to suit themselves. The "correction" of this dominant version of history is, hence, one of the veterans' most important tasks. Their publications seem, accordingly, obsessed with historical facts.

First, and importantly, the veterans' associations claim to represent only the Waffen-SS, not the SS as a whole. The W-SS had, they continue, little or nothing to do with war crimes – which are, moreover, vastly exaggerated. (Both premises are demonstrably false.) Second, the W-SS is worthy of the honor accorded by other World War Two veterans – and more. Not only were they all idealistic volunteers; they were also the first true pan-European warrior group to be mobilized against Bolshevism. And their battle has proven not only just, but, with the Fall of the Wall, victorious (Wilke 2011: 17; for veterans' own works, Straßner 1958; Mabire 1980; Krabbe 1976/ 1998). As an author in the German veteran publication *Der Freiwillige* put it,

Perhaps NATO – perhaps the unification of Europe is only a continuation of our will, our determination to ensure the freedom of Fatherlands in the European Fatherland [...] It was, say what you might, we who did the preparatory work, while the others still were blind. (1995/7)

SS-veteran Henri Fenet, formerly of the French 33rd Waffen-Grenadier-Division "Charlemagne", agreed (his speech was printed in the 1998 *Freiwillige*). The SS had fought "for Europe, for a European Community and against Bolshevism":

After a half-century, history has justified our mission [...] We have paved the way to independence and self-sufficiency, and now the Europeans are walking down the road, that we, then, paved. (1998/44/1: 22).

The story of being both the misunderstood victims and heroes of history is thus important to W-SS veterans' associations. Their publications and speakers repeatedly propose the alternative, a heroic history of "Europe against Bolshevism". This has consequences, as we shall see, for the memory-work practices of the W-SS veterans themselves. For SS veterans not only speak and write; they also commemorate, assemble and remember.

In-house publications always cover commemorative rituals well; those of W-SS veterans and their sympathizers are no exception. Reports on W-SS veteran ceremonies follow a standard form, one recognizable, indeed, from accounts given by veterans' associations throughout the West. Speakers and participants – bearing flags, inscriptions, sometimes uniforms – assemble, preferably at a signif-

icant public and/or hallowed site. They are, again preferably, flanked by attentive on-lookers. The text often opens with the description of the group's solemn assembly (sometimes marching up, sometimes staying in formation), music, words of welcome, a speech – often, from both a military and civil authority; additional performances, songs or poems, from younger members; the communal singing of significant songs (the titles carefully enumerated) and, according to the report, an attendant “solemn mood” (including, sometimes, not unmanly tears). The descriptions often end with praise of the good military order maintained, the summing-up of the event as significant and moving, and, sometimes, a transition to subsequent hearty camaraderie over food and drink.

The W-SS veterans' versions of these ceremonies follow the same pattern. To be sure, there is a frequent absence of civic and military authorities and outside audience. They may have to hold their meeting in a secret, hired locale; they may be interrupted by police and hecklers. There is careful avoidance of their most well-known symbols (compensated, in part, by obligatory inclusion of the old SS *Treuelied*, whose words provide a thinly veiled stand-in for the once-celebrated SS motto *Unser Ehre heisst Treue*, that is, roughly, “Our honor is our faith”).⁵ But the basic form is the same. The reports on W-SS veterans' meetings do not seek to diverge from reports from main-stream veterans' associations.

The tone in is different, though. Those writing about, arranging and participating in the SS veterans' ceremonies tend to assume the reproachful and strident voice of the misunderstood righteous. They are, further, often isolated. They have little or no access to public space or monuments. They are forced either to visit important sites as private tourist groups, to commemorate their heroic community in tucked-away, private places, or to face down loud expressions of state and public opprobrium. It is much less fun to celebrate heroic sacrifices in private spaces, or in circumscribed and contested public space, or as a sometimes appendage to other vilified groups (e.g., neo-Nazis). But the W-SS's veterans' counter-narrative has been treated with contempt by main-stream politicians and media. The W-SS has, today, no public presence in West European commemorations of the victims-and-heroes of World War Two. What does this do to communal feeling; how do the veterans' organizations react?

No Place To Go

Access to significant place is important to community memory-work. Place anchors memory; group pasts are (often) spatially imprinted. Doreen Massey (1994, 1995) describes, indeed, how this anchorage can lead to bitter battles over places. Different groups can have competing “space-time envelopes”, trying to establish *their* usages, *their* symbols and histories, in an exclusionary claim to a particular place. Such rivalry becomes particularly intense when the places in question are already hallowed in public memory and/or tend to host communal ceremonies –

squares in front of palaces and parliaments, churches, grave-yards, monuments. Here, the place itself evokes respect. Even casual visitors might acknowledge this by solemn and attentive looking and speaking. One scholar speaks of group memory's "spatial practices", the perceptual engagement "with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past" (Ingold 1993: 53; see also Hodder 1985: 14). This is where War Memorials are; this is where one finds the Grave of the Unknown Soldier. As Michael Elliott (2011) has pointed out, today's public-space soldiers' monuments are no longer erected in order to inspire the young to emulation. Rather, they are meant to invoke memory and respect for dead soldiers. This memory is solemn and moving. At its most effective (e.g., the Vietnam Soldier Memorial in Washington, or the battle-field graveyards of British World War One soldiers), those at the site are effectively called to invoke the dead as their martyr-like forebears: the monument promotes an acknowledgement that their sacrifice was both meaningful, and done for us.

Finally, the place is further invested with meaning if it is "officially" designated – by an acknowledged authority, a church, state or institution – as a traditional site of community-affirming rituals. Like the dominant public sphere, "legitimate" public space contains utterances and actions which, when done according to specified forms, can claim full public notice and import. Public rituals performed at such places – full of group memory, semi-sacralised, acknowledged as publicly significant – are much easier to think of as deeply meaningful, as transcendental.

Unsurprisingly, then, veterans seek to conduct their ceremonies in such spaces. On Canada's "Remembrance Day", various newspapers detail acts of public commemoration: "At City Hall, hundreds gathered as wreaths were laid at the cenotaph" – "let us all pledge to never forget our past to pay tribute to those who gave their lives for freedom", newspapers quote the Edmonton Mayor (Maimann 2013). Korean war veterans long protested their public invisibility in both the US and Canada. They were propitiated, most recently, by an official Canadian invitation to a celebration at the National Capital Region. Note both the place, and the ritual, as detailed on the invitation: They were to launch a memorial photo exhibit, view a Book of Remembrance, and participate in a ceremony at the National War Memorial (website "Anniversary" 2013). Veterans' Remembrance Day in Union Grove, Wisconsin, takes place at a cemetery (with memorial plaques, "They will never be forgotten"), and involves uniforms, flags, marches, martial songs and music, wreathes and prominent speakers (both politicians and army). It is, according to a veteran interviewed in the Union Grove's own video, effective: "The cohesiveness and camaraderie is strong, the spiritual transcendence is unique" (website Union Grove 2013). Official sanction in public space, for communal memory-work, embodied in spatialized ritual: who could ask for more?

From all such things W-SS veterans, families and sympathizers were, as the 1990s progressed, excluded. But they had by no means given up. Each year, veterans (albeit increasingly few and aged) and their younger supporters meet on

significant dates to re-affirm their community and remember the fallen. Each year, they organize pilgrimages to significant graveyards and battle-fields. They have had to do much of this in private or incognito. The Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner's in-house 1996 invitation to an "Anniversary celebration" (published in *Neues Korps Steiner*, 1996/8/16) gives painful acknowledgement to the dangers of publicity. "For well-known reasons, we do not wish to have our meeting at the usual place. We have found a place, which is equally beautifully located, also in the North German area." Those wishing to find out *where* this was would be told after they had sent in a participants' card; the information could (evidently) not be posted in the advertisement, nor (the arrangers warned) be communicated orally.

Despite hostile public opposition, lack of official confirmation by army, state, or church, contested or denied access to significant places, however, W-SS veterans continue doggedly to seek public places in which to commemorate war dead. But they run into problems – hecklers, for instance – with, it seems, deleterious effects on ritual ceremonies. Let us look at how such commemorations, the memory-work of oppositional history, may be described in in-house websites, newsletters, *Der Freiwillige* and *Ein Fähnlein*; and how public opprobrium disrupts.

We will set the stage by describing a neo-Nazi attempt, orchestrated in 2012, to claim German war dead on behalf of a version of war history supported by the W-SS. Covered in the W-SS-friendly publication *Fähnlein* (2012/3), the story illustrates the difficulties inherent in the far right's attempts to find uncontested commemorative space.

On the 8th of May, neo-Nazis in Pomeranian Demmin were to march to the harbor and throw a wreath into the river – in memory of (among other things) war-time dead, here defined as victims of "Anglo-American" war crimes. The writer opens with an account of the Anglo-American atrocities (that is, presents the history that frames this march and the counter-narrative is to propose), and then ushers in the hero – the "peaceful and solemn sorrow-march of the *Volks-treuen* movement in Demmin". There were, supposedly, 230 men and women present, marching "to commemorate the war dead as well as the victims of deportation, murder and imprisonment".

The text follows standard ceremonial order, describing marchers moving in well-disciplined columns. They were accompanied by "ethnic Demminer" well-wishers; "and also from the windows and balconies many families and citizens looked on". As yet, the only disruption came from a small, timid group of "anti-fascist shindiggers". But this did not last. At the Town Harbor was a "somewhat more whipped-up rabble, loudmouth left-wing extremists and do-gooders who bellowed their stale old 'Out with the Nazis!'" Unimpressed (the article continues), the marchers silently continued to the agreed-upon harbor site, where they listened to a neo-Nazi leader give a speech, a young woman read a poem, and then bequeathed a wreath to the river waters – where, the text concludes, "anti-fascists"

swimming to steal it were heroically defeated by a fellow-marcher, who threw himself full-clad into the water in the wreath's defense (*Fähnlein* 2012/3).

The fact that the *Fähnlein* reprinted this story of neo-Nazi memory work shows the interest of W-SS veterans, and of those who espouse their cause, in public demonstrations on behalf of historical revisionism. They, like the marchers, wish to use ritualized movement through a public space to claim the memory of war-dead for their own. It also shows the disruption that occurs, even in the heavily-edited narrative, when that procession through public space is challenged. As long as locals are (openly) sympathetic to the cause, the solemn commemoration can continue. But when the loud-mouths begin to shout, the text on the marchers is no longer solemn, but angry and defensive; while the wet wreath-rescuer is certainly out of ritual sync. The march loses its footing, so to speak, and becomes a tale of battle rather than of transcendental moral meaning.

The dangers of disruption are witnessed in other texts concerning commemorative events, including those orchestrated by W-SS veterans themselves. W-SS veterans have an easier time finding public places in Baltic States. But even there, disruption is a problem. Take, as evidence, the English-language website narrative of past and planned W-SS-veterans' demonstrations posted under the title "Latvian SS Legion" (2010). The website shows two pictures: "Veterans of the Legion remembering the Battle of More" (around and on top of a defunct tank) and "Veterans of the Latvian Legion remembers [sic] their fallen comrades" (black- and formally-clad elderly men kneeling, amidst flags and in front of on-lookers, to put down wreaths at a monument). The narrator continues:

Tomorrow at March 16 the Latvian Waffen SS Legion remembrance day will be celebrated [...] Occasionally at this day Legion war veterans and their nationalist supporters with flags takes a route from the Dome square to the Monument of Freedom. They put flowers at the monument to remember fallen comrades and remember the hard days of war.

But, the writer continues, the day is also "regretted by others" – "loud and angry", the "Russian nationals, Socialists and others", who in recent years have harassed those partaking in the ceremony – so much so that "this date is no longer a remembrance of war victims but rather a fight". This is, the author concludes, because "history is always written by the victorious side" (website Latvian SS Legion 2010). Here, again, is an emplaced fight about history. The rituals of place and communication with the dead, in defense of one communal memory, are openly and unpleasantly disrupted by hostile on-lookers. The marchers' right to define the memory, for the sake of the nation, is contested. The ceremony is weakened.

Opposition, obviously, matters. We can return to theorists of communal ritual. Durkheimian scholars define such rituals as invoking and involving sacred forces – in the Durkheimian phrase, the locus of a people's "ultimate concern." According to Terence Turner (1977: 144), the efficacy of ritual within a group depends

on the ritual's ability to make the actors feel that they are in unmediated contact with a "generative principle" or "transcendental ground". Or, as John MacAloon (1984: 251) puts it, rituals cause internal group conflicts to melt away; they are transcended into an immediately experienced higher, unifying ideal.

This, MacAloon argues, also applies to civic rituals (his example is the Olympic Games). But here, the community can claim wider significance for its "transcendental ground". A ritual pure and simple, he postulates, states that "all contents represent the most serious matters and are completely true". But then there is the "ritual festival". This makes similar claims, but on behalf of the audience, as well; the local community is included as part of the community. Finally, MacAloon postulates, we have a "ritual spectacle". Here, the audience independently and demonstratively shows agreement with the "truth" of the ritual performance; it creates supportive rituals of its own. Cheers, flowers, flag-waving, throwing hats and streamers, singing along and applauding, all contribute to the consecration of the ritual as ritual spectacle. As MacAloon puts it, this allows the statement that "all contents represent the most serious matters and are *universally* true" (MacAloon 1984: 242-256, italics in the original).

Those who tell the stories of ceremonies afterwards seem aware of the significance of audience mood and recognition. On-lookers are often described (or, today, interviewed) as giving evidence of being moved; they are affected by and share the performers' solemn and elevated mood. For if, conversely, such audience support is clearly lacking, the spectators missing, silent, apathetic, amused or hostile, the ability of ritual performers to claim general or even local, communal validity for their spatially-based narrative is severely circumscribed. This is situation faced by W-SS veterans.

The ritual-performers are, moreover, particularly vulnerable to audience disdain when the marchers need to create a mood that is solemn, proud and valorous – as is common with the dual "hero-victim" narratives sponsored by veterans of lost wars. Indifferent, amused and hostile audiences reduce the ceremony's claim to validity. Even if such audiences are explained away as consisting of an alien minority (as in the Latvian case), their behavior seriously disrupts spatial memory work. The marchers are open to marginalization, even ridicule: it is they who are out of place, making unjustifiable and particularistic memory claims.

What can W-SS veterans do? One option is to eschew public space: to be content with (what MacAloon would call) a ritual pure and simple. Many such rituals are, in fact, described in *Freiwillige* and *Fähnlein*. Take, for instance, a quite recent meeting of one of the last surviving local HIAG groups (*Fähnlein* 2012/3). They had hired and filled a hall (the writer tells us). The mood (he continues) was festive and enthusiastic, as confirmed both by representatives of other W-SS divisions and notables from related organizations. Eight W-SS divisions were represented by actual veterans; the bulk of the meeting was made up of younger sympathizers. The meeting was opened, the ladies and gentleman welcomed, partici-

pants sang the Deutschlandlied (“Deutschland, Deutschland über alles”), Guten Kameraden and the old SS Treuelied – the narrator states, “with all their hearts, whereby a few comrades could not mask one or two tears.” This mood was proper for what followed: remembering “all the fallen comrades from the Wehrmacht, Luftwaffe, Kriegsmarine and Waffen SS”. These fighters were linked, in turn, to “all the German women, children and men, victims of the inhuman bomb war, the victims of sexual outrage and violence”. Finally, homage was paid to “all the comrades of foreign nations who gave their life for the freedom of Germany and Europe, as well as all the fallen comrades of our *Gemeinschaft*.” A wreath was presented by “the younger comrades”; veterans’ names announced and applauded; and the ceremony closed (ibid.). No audience, no disruption: as re-told, the ritual was successful. But oh, that it could have been a ritual spectacle!

But the W-SS veterans have no public place. Political spaces, war memorials, city streets, even graveyards, are off-bounds. In Norway, a bronze placard-graced memorial stone does exist. It was erected by the Frontkjemperforening during the 1970s, in a clearing in the woods in Bamble, and was long the site of yearly commemorations (supposedly gathering 100-200 veterans). The stone remained undisturbed (probably because no-one knew it was there) until media publicity led to its vandalism, in 1993, by left-wing activists. A member of the Frontkjemperforening (as well as the Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner) had attempted, two years earlier, to get the Bamble church to incorporate the stone in its graveyard – an attempt, one might say, to gain the added protection and legitimacy, one supposes, of being on holy ground. But in vain; instead, and to his disgust, he was “outed” by local main-stream media as a right-wing extremist (see, e.g., *Folk og Land* 1983/8, 1993/10; *Telemark Arbeiderblad* 1993, *Telemarkavisen* 2012).

Or take the situation in France. A 2012 issue of *Ein Fähnlein* account of the commemoration of the French W-SS’s dead shows similar placelessness. The “SS-Division ‘Charlemagne’ – Gedenken in Bad Reichenhall” documents the torturous process necessary to commemorate (what the publication termed) the “murder” of twelve French SS-members. The dead were buried in a Bad Reichenhall churchyard; but in 2007, their memorials, to which W-SS veterans (the writer claims) had long travelled, were removed by city authorities in a “night-and-fog action”. The W-SS veterans were not to be deterred. In 2012, eighty of them travelled to the village and, ignoring the “provocations” of a massive police presence, held a remembrance ceremony – not in public, to be sure, but in a rented room in an inn. The author details the usual rituals: the trumpet playing the W-SS song *Ich hatte einen Kameraden*, the poem read out by a “young comrade”, the speech detailing the cruel outrages of the victors, and the singing of *Treuelied* (*Fähnlein* 2012/1).

What about the grave – the place where the dead could be directly invoked as evidence of transcendent communal truths? “In answer” to the authorities’ removal of the SS gravestone, the narrative goes on, “certain comrades from the area”

had created a “mobile” memorial (pictures are included). This portable birch-log memorial is borne into the graveyard by two SS veterans (only two SS veterans were allowed in the graveyard at a time, the local authorities had decided). Other veterans enter, pair by pair, lay wreaths and take photographs, and then leave. Finally, two veterans take the wooden monument away again. The article ends with the slogan “Ewig lebt der Toten Tatenruhm” – in temporary and portable memorials of birch-logs (ibid).

No place, no official confirmation, no sympathetic audience. What might be done? As one peruses the W-SS publications, one finds that much of the solution lay in seeking out significant places outside of West Europe. But how could this work?

Effective commemorations can, in fact, be held on foreign ground, if the patch of earth is held to be significant at home. Indeed, the bodily experience of far-off sites venerated as “holy” can be strongly moving. Maurice Halbwachs (1952/1992) has described a type of spatial exaltation – the combined pilgrimage and tourist-goal – which has its roots in Holy Land travel. When pilgrims move through a (communally) sacred site, treading hallowed ground, following the footsteps of the sanctified dead, they experience significant *privilege*: the individual is briefly lifted up out of the masses. The euphoria of direct contact with the sacred is intensified by taking place in an unfamiliar context, framing the feeling of “awe and reverence” with a sense of (what anthropologists might term liminal) disorientation (see discussion in Olick & Robbins 1998; Scutts & West 2008).

This type of sentiment can, it seems, be transferred to non-religious sites. The emotional pull of the West’s battlefield pilgrimages (a form of tourism that took off after World War One) is evidence of this. Brad West (2009) has interviewed Australians visiting the World War One battlefield Gallipoli, a sacred place whose story allows an “enchantment of national [Australian] history”. The Gallipoli visitors, indeed, described the experience as unique, intense and emotional; several claimed, further, to now realize that “they died for us” (West 2009: 262).

For veterans, the feeling of being in contact with those who died before is, arguably, an important part of the construction of meaningful community. This is one reason for the high popularity of pilgrimages to war memorials; it holds also for visit to gravesites and battlefields. The latter places are physically imbued with ancestral memory: we stand where they stood, we see what they saw. Indeed, the bodies of those “who died for us” may be part of the earth upon which we walk.

W-SS veterans seek, like other veterans, to claim such sentiments as their own. It is difficult to do this in the Western Europe for which they supposedly fought. During the 1990s, indeed, public hostility to neo-Nazi manifestations (in which the W-SS veterans were, willy-nilly, included) drove them increasingly to foreign parts. Luckily, World War Two had covered a lot of ground. Where, then, to go?

Estonian Brothers-In-Arms

“The Waffen-SS Marches Again”, “The Waffen-SS As Freedom Fighters”, “Distorted History” – headlines were spurred by East and West European W-SS veterans joining in public World War Two commemorations in the Baltic states (see *The Allgemeiner* 2012; *Junge Welt* 2012; Huffingtonpost 2012; *taz* 2012; *Aftonbladet* 2013). Ritual celebrations at the “historic SS battlefield” close to Narva especially outraged them. What was happening here?

The actual history of the Estonians’ involvement in the W-SS, as sketched above, is, perhaps, relatively irrelevant in this context. What matters is W-SS veterans’ ability to argue that they had volunteered not to fight *with* Germans, but to fight *against* Soviet annexation. In the Baltic States, this has resonance. Bitter memories of poor treatment by the occupying Nazi power have been overlaid by bitter memories of occupation by the Soviet Union. The result is an alternative moral interpretation of World War Two, where Russia is the evil villain – a divergence from the West which Stefan Troebst pithily summarizes as Gulag *versus* Holocaust (Troebst 2005; also Wulf 2007; Bottici 2010).

It was during the 1990s, when the Baltic State toleration and encouragement of W-SS veterans’ celebrations reached its height (in what commentators termed “the war of monuments”, see Brüggermann & Kasekamp 2008; Smith 2008; Wulf 2007), that Scandinavian and German W-SS veterans first contacted their Baltic comrades. Within a few years, West European W-SS veterans would learn to use this unexpected commemorative space, situated among and honored by a people whom the W-SS had once held to be an expendable, non-Germanic people, in W-SS memory work.

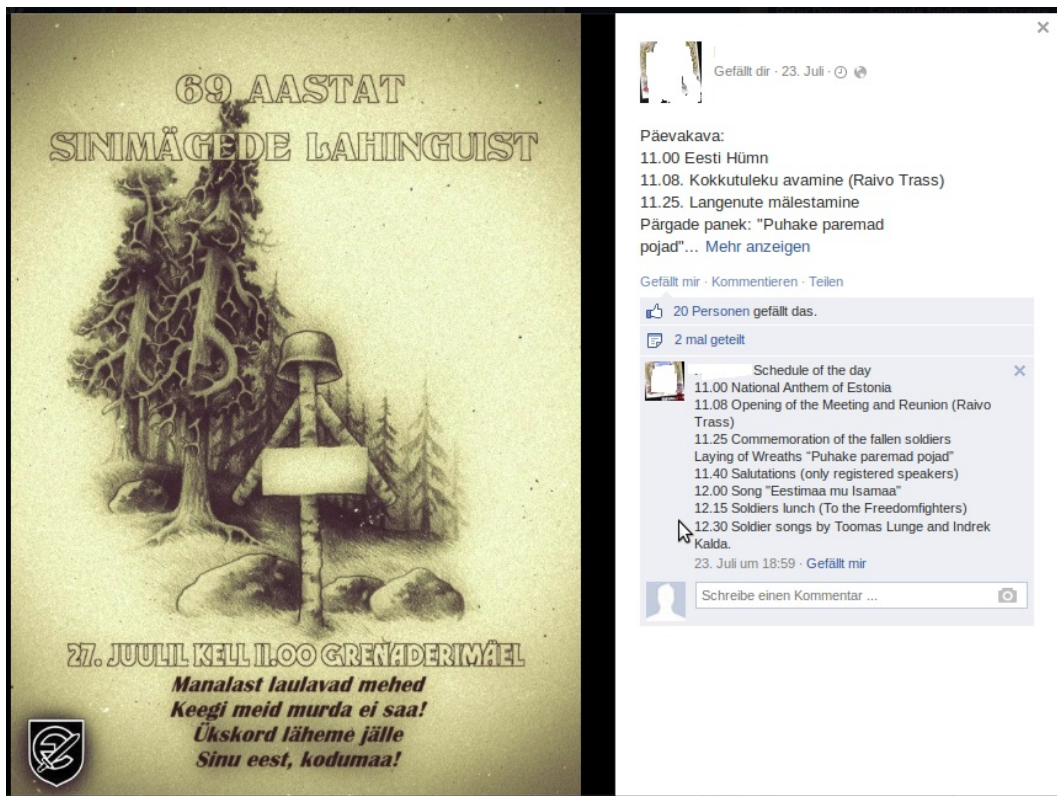
They were aided by the fact that Estonia houses significant SS battlefields. One of these has, indeed, had long been the object of W-SS veterans’ veneration: the site of the Battle of Narva. Fought in 1944 while retreating from the Russians, and manned, on the German side, by (mostly) W-SS units, this was, in W-SS veteran parlance, Europe’s “only real SS battle”. The Third (Germanic) Armored Corps, which played a major role, was, moreover, unusually “European”. Formed to be the flagship of the international volunteers’ movement, it included German, Scandinavian, Dutch, Belgian and Estonian soldiers. Its commander, General Felix Steiner, remains an idol for many W-SS veterans (including, of course, our old friends, the Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner). It was easy, therefore, for W-SS veterans to incorporate the battle into stories of their heroic defense of Europe against predatory Bolshevism (info14.com 2006; for example, Landwehr’s revisionist 1981 book).

During the 1990s, the battle site was adopted by nationalist Estonians. In 1993, the Estonian veterans of the W-SS Battalion “Narwa” invited German veterans to visit. *Der Freiwillige* (1993/39/11) proudly reported that representatives of the Norwegian Frontkjemperforening had joined Erhard Heder, the German chairman

of the Truppenkameradschaft Wiking and a delegate from the Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner, in an Estonian expedition. The Germans (in a pattern which mirrored continuing power hierarchies and which would, it transpired, be typical for West European W-SS veterans and sympathizers visiting the East) had arrived with a trailer of relief supplies. Speeches were made and further donations promised to “our brothers in arms” (no empty words: as German main-stream media later noticed, Western W-SS veterans donated on a fairly major scale; see *daserste.ndr.de* 1998).

In 1994, W-SS veterans and sympathizers from Germany, Scandinavia and Estonia met again, this time celebrating a pompous veterans’ ceremony in Narva itself. The chairman of the Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner took advantage of the opportunity to contrast the Estonians’ public and official ceremonies in honor of W-SS veterans to the “contempt” expressed in the Germany: “You, in your young democracy, can stand by your past; we in our 50-year old [democracy] cannot do it” (*Freiwillige* 1994/40/10). The contrast was, indeed, telling. The W-SS veterans’ press had been able to report on the presence Estonian military of the commanders-in-chief at the 1993 meetings; again, in 1995, 1996 and 1997, it noted the presence of high-ranking politicians, priests and military personnel at Estonian SS veteran ceremonies (*Freiwillige* 1993/39/11, 1995/41/7; *Neues Korps Steiner* 1996/8/16, 1997/9/18).

This was emplaced, ritual recognition at its best. No wonder West-European W-SS veterans and their sympathizers continued to flock to the site. The commemorations were, of course, progressively redefined so as to focus less on the Estonian W-SS and more on the supposedly pan-European nature of both historical and present SS ideals. As early as 1994, at the Narva commemoration, the German chairman of the Truppenkameradschaft of the Wiking Division ended his speech with the words “Long live Estonia. Long live Germany. Long live Europe.” The *Freiwillige* reporter, who had reproduced the speech in full, endorsed this: the Estonian meetings would, he hoped, “someday” develop into “European soldiers’ meetings” (1994/40/10). His hopes seem realistic: after all, the Korps Steiner had established an Estonian Aid, which contributed goods and money to Estonian veterans’ associations, and also, eventually, paid for an on-site stone memorial, commemorating the entire Korps Steiner (*Wenn alle Brüder* 2006/3; *Freiwillige* 1993/39/4, 1993/39/5).

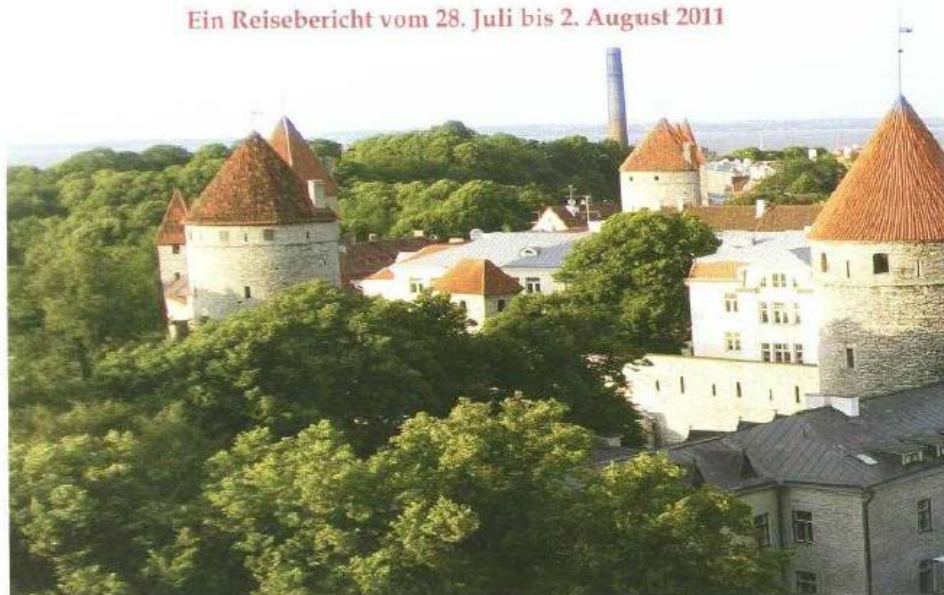


Screenshot of an Estonian far-right band's Facebook website, which reproduces an Estonian invitation to the annual W-SS commemorative meeting at Sinamae/Narva.

The West-East relation did involve some friction. The Estonians' first concerns, however much they welcomed outside West European input, were nationalist. The European W-SS, by contrast, was uninterested in the heroic story of Estonia's national survival. *Their* story concerned Europe. Narva was referred to as Europe's "Thermopylae", the W-SS troops' retreat becoming, of course, an indirect victory. The self-sacrificing and idealistic W-SS men had, in the end, saved Europe. As the Korps Steiner leader put it in 1997, "Just as, today, stories are still told of the Spartan warriors of King Leonidas, great in historical renown, so shall, in after-years" – in different places, on the Narva river and "before Leningrad" – history celebrate the W-SS men, the "earliest Europeans", who had fallen in the battle of Narva (*Neues Korps Steiner* 1997/9/18). Or, as another speaker put it, "it was we [Waffen-SS Germans] and our European volunteers who alone stopped Stalin's armies' advance to the Atlantic" (*Neues Korps Steiner* 1997/9/18). The myth was not of Estonian survival, but of the salvation of Europe: the only reason that all of Europe (and, implicitly, the rest of the West) were not taken over by Communists had been the self-sacrificing endurance of these "first Europeans" (*Fähnlein* 2012/1).⁶

Veteranentreffen der Europäischen Freiwilligen in Estland

Ein Reisebericht vom 28. Juli bis 2. August 2011



Wenn wir heute erleben, daß eine große Zahl junger Männer aus Skandinavien, aus den Niederlanden, aus Flandern, aus Wallonien, aus der Schweiz, zusammen mit Volksdeutschen und Reichsdeutschen, in die Waffen-SS gekommen ist mit dem Ziel, gegen einen gemeinsamen Feind zu kämpfen, so ist es wichtig, daß wir nicht nur an der Waffe ausgebildet und mit ihr vertraut werden, sondern auch wissen, worum es in diesem Kampf geht...

Nur der Mut, der im entscheidenden Augenblick die Verantwortung zu tragen bereit ist, kann das Volk retten und den neuen Menschen schaffen. Dieser neue Mensch mit dem Mut zur Verantwortung für sein Volk beginnt sich heute schon allenthalben zu formen. Insbesondere in der germanischen Jugend, die mit der Waffe in der Hand die Zukunft ihrer Völker im härtesten Kampf im Osten verteidigt und neu begründet und dafür in vielen Fällen aus dem engsten

Familienkreis heraus und bei weiten Bevölkerungskreisen kein Verständnis findet, im Gegenteil sich zurücksetzen, verdächtigen, schädigen und beleidigen lassen muß."

Aus „Die germanische Revolution“, eine Schrift, die vom Generalkommando des III. (germanischen) SS-Panzerkorps verbreitet wurde.

Die Aufstellung dieses Großverbandes wurde am 30. März 1943 vom Oberbefehlshaber der Wehrmacht befohlen. General Felix Steiner wurde sein erster Befehlshaber und war es auch Ende Juli 1944. Zu dieser Zeit fand in dem Gebiet Waiwara, heute Vaivara, das sich am Finnischen Meerbusen, ca. 20 km westlich von Narva befindet, eine Abwehrschlacht statt, die nicht nur von den Einheimischen als eine Art estnische Thermopylen dargestellt wird, weil es mit geringen Kräften möglich gewesen ist, den mächtigen Feind am Vorstoß zu hindern. Die Landenge, die Schauplatz schwerster Kämpfe

6

Ein Fähnlein - Premierenausgabe 2011

Coverage of a “Veterans’ Meeting of the European Volunteers in Estonia”,
Ein Fähnlein.

This narrative was presented in conjunction with the dedication of an additional on-site stone, that of the W-SS Regiment Norge in 1996 (the regiment Norge had been a part of the Korps Steiner). This ceremony had had been prepared for the previous year. In 1996, the *Neues vom Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner* (1996/8/16) tells us, in a rather chatty manner, how “we” – German, Norwegian and Swedish veterans – proceeded to a W-SS ceremony, holding reunion meetings and visiting

memory sites on the way. The usual singing of the Treuelied and other “soldiers’ songs” was followed, this time, by less typical activities. This time, the veterans had public acknowledgement.

First, an Estonian “dignitary” reminded those present of “the proud freedom battle of the Estonian people, who together with the German Wehrmacht fought against Bolshevism”. The account continued by noting the “self-evident” presence of local priests and Mayor. Further, two Korps Steiner members who had earned the Ritterkreuz medal (awarded, in its time, by Adolf Hitler himself) had been personally welcomed by State President Lennart Meri, who, in turn, “gratefully accepted” an honorary membership in the Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner (see coverage in *Neues Korps Steiner* 1996/8).



A picture of the W-SS veterans’ memorial plate dedicated to Lennart Meri, presented to him in 1997, “with the wish for enduring freedom for Estonia in a unified Europe”. Reproduced in *Neues vom Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner* (1997), “Estlandfahrt des Kameradenwerks Korps Steiner”.

The Norwegian veterans' *Folk og Land* (1996/7, 1996/8) described the stone in detail. It stood proudly on church grounds in near-by Vaivara – that is, on hallowed ground – and was formally dedicated to the members of the Regiment Norge. The stone, *Folk og Land* continues, carries inscriptions in Norwegian, German and Estonian – “In Memory of the Fallen”. Its inscription would also seem to link East Europe to Germany, in that it tells of how the regiment travelled through Croatia, Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Pomerania to Berlin. (A photo of the memorial re-appears on the title-page of *Der Freiwillige* 1997/43/5, flanked, here, by the Norwegian flag.) The Norwegian national anthem was played and the stone blessed by a priest. There followed a re-print of the celebratory speech by the Mayor of Vaivara:

We only know, that many soldiers from the European peoples became heroes on this site [...] The monument stands in honor of the Norwegian soldiers, their hardihood and self-sacrifice. It is in memory of their undefeatable determination to be free, with which they also helped us Estonians. (Ibid; also *Folk og Land* 1996/8.)

Thus did Estonian statesmen get on with local and visiting W-SS veterans.



*Europäische Freiwillige am Gedenkstein des „Korps Steiner“
Ein Fähnlein - Premierenausgabe 2011*

9

Veterans at Narva, 2011: “European Volunteers at the Memorial Stone of ‘Korps Steiner’”,
Ein Fähnlein 2011

The Vaivara site, today, includes stones and plaques commemorating the participation of Norwegian, Danish and Flemish SS troops. A visit to these stones is often included in what has become annual W-SS veterans’ and veterans’ sympathizers’ battle-field pilgrimages to and ceremonies at Narva. The annual meeting

is, nowadays, one of the high points on the calendar of European veterans and their sympathizers. Virtually all pertinent forums carry admiring reports on the festivities. In August 2011, for instance, *Ein Fähnlein* describes the meeting as “the European volunteers’ veterans” meeting *tout court*.

Nationalists in countries within the former Soviet Union could, thus, provide European W-SS veterans with both significant places and public acknowledgment – both becoming increasingly scarce elsewhere. Indeed, in 1994, Norwegian W-SS veteran Arnfinn Vik was able to report at a (private) W-SS veterans’ meeting that work was proceeding on additional monuments and places – not only “a commemorative stone monument in Narva”, but also one at “Krasnoye Selo” – for “we are certainly be most sympathetically met in the East” (*Folk og Land* 1994/9). One could put it, somewhat provocatively, that the Scandinavian and German veterans functioned as European volunteers in the Baltic war of memory of Gulag *versus* Holocaust.

What additional places had been found?

Go East, Old Man: Ukraine, 1992-2010

It must have been an unusual sight: in June 1993, about three dozen elderly men and women standing in an East-Ukrainian potato-field, singing enthusiastically and to accompaniment of a trumpet. The song was the SS Treuelied; and they faced a recently-erected wooden cross (3.6 meters high; of oak, of course), bearing a placard with the legend: “1941-1945 / To Honor of the Fallen / The First European Armored Division” (*Freiwillige* 1993/39/2).

The singers were W-SS veterans and their families; and the inscription is, as usual, somewhat misleading. The “First European Armored Division” refers, in fact, to the W-SS Division Wiking. In 1993, the veterans were, in their own words, staking out an SS graveyard, established in 1942 and subsequently abandoned. Seventeen years later, in 2010, the Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior would sign a fifty-year contract leasing the field to the innocuous-sounding German Association of War Graves (Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge; see www.volksbund.de and *Wenn alle Brüder* 2010: 2) through which, in fact, the W-SS were working. W-SS veterans had found still another place to be.

The story began in 1992. The collapse of the Soviet Union – as W-SS veteran and Wiking leader Eberhard Heder explained in *Der Freiwillige* (1993/39/2) – had increased veterans’ interest in seeking out “the far-scattered traces of a fateful past”. Two veterans, accompanied by a guide and a translator sympathetic to the cause, had taken off, caravan in tow, toward the East. Their goal was Uspenka (formerly Uspenskaja) in East Ukraine. Here, the W-SS Division Wiking had once had its supply base, and here – as the expedition knew – was a Division Wiking grave-yard. The expedition intended to contact the Mayor of Uspenka, as well as those townspeople upon whom the SS had been billeted. Heder hoped that

the expedition would “use the opportunities and conditions of such a visit to proclaim good will” (*Freiwillige* 1993/39/2).

Good will was expressed by the substantial load of relief goods, including clothing and medicine, stowed in the veterans’ caravan. This was (one would supposed) to ensure a welcome in Uspenka; Heder maintained that another purpose was to obtain an official designation as relief transport and thus facilitate the border crossing (ibid).

In Uspenka, Heder’s second, same-issue *Freiwillige* article tells readers, all went very well. The veterans were “greeted with friendliness” by the director of the local “Kolkhoz”, who shook their hands and took them into the village. There, Heder continues, they met villagers, while the director held a short speech. “Dear German veterans! We have been waiting for you. We have prepared ourselves for your visit. It is good, that you are back in Uspenskaja after fifty years”. The audience applauded. Heder answered (truly from the heart, he writes) that “We were in your village earlier. Then we were eighteen-nineteen years old. And we had fought with all the passion and power of youth. But your soldiers, too, your current grandfathers, were also fighting for their fatherland” (ibid).

The veterans then distributed the goods they had brought and were, finally, “lavishly entertained”. The writer repeatedly expresses gratified astonishment at the sympathetic, “friendly and approving” attitude shown by the local population. They had been toasted in vodka; given a feast; they had sung a song for the villagers, and had joined in the latter in their own renditions of the songs Kalinka and Katjuscha. “Filled with contentment”, Heder concludes that such a welcome would be impossible were it true that the W-SS had used “arson, terror and rape” – as the Soviet divisions had (ibid). For once, it seems – albeit in far-off Ukraine – witnesses and audiences, the local population, were held to confirm the truth of the SS’s revisionist view of its own historical role and character.

The next step was to establish a commemorative pilgrimage site. Heder writes that “official Uspenka” approved of the idea. In summer of 1993, thirty-two W-SS veterans and sympathizers arrived at the village; it is they who erected the wooden cross. A “proud Wiking” elaborated on the cross’s inscription in *Der Freiwillige*, as follows:

Thenadays, 1941-1945, Finns, Norwegians, Danes, Flemish, Walloons, Dutch and Swedes fought shoulder-to-shoulder with us [Germans] against Bolshevism, hence [the name] “First European Armored Division”! (1993/39/9)

During the following weeks, four additional veteran groups visited the cross in the field. Two more crosses were soon erected. *Der Freiwillige* (1995/41/8, 1995/41/11) announced and coordinated annual excursions thither, and published celebratory accounts of the visits, all emphasizing that the veterans were always greeted as “friends”.

The final aim, however, was to get official sanction for the site. By 2007, the veterans, now operating through a “German-Ukrainian Association” and, later, the

fairly respectable German association *Der Volksbund*, were working hard to establish the field as what the W-SS-veterans' *Wenn alle Brüder* (2007/3) now called the "Soldiers' Graveyard of the Three Crosses". And they were doing well. There was a dedication ceremony, visited by enough visiting dignitaries and approving audience to, indeed, qualify the ceremony (at least on paper) as a ritual festival. A Ukrainian Orthodox minister and an evangelical preacher alternated in leading devotions and prayers, while veterans and sympathizers were joined by members of the village population. The entire was, the *Wenn alle Brüder* author maintained, a great success.

The German-Ukrainian Association ended by calling for additional contributions to further develop the site (*Wenn alle Brüder* 2007/3). In 2010, the climax came. The W-SS veterans' German War Grave Memorial Association published a special issue of *Wenn alle Brüder*: "Uspenka – only a few mile-stones for an extraordinary project" (2010/2). At this point, the Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior signed over the field, now with a wall enclosing 300 square meters, newly-planted acacias and a new commemorative stone on behalf of Wallonian veterans, to the *Volksbund* (to whom, in a complicated maneuver, the *Kriegsgräberstiftung* donated money ear-marked for developing the Uspenka site). The W-SS Wiking and its comrades had, in short, found a second pilgrimage site: a W-SS graveyard with commemorative stones and crosses dedicated to themselves, acknowledged by both local public and state. A good place, in short, for much-publicized and successful ritual festivals; a good sop to communal self-identity.

And Deep in Enemy Territory: Norwegians in Russia, 1998

Were there more worlds – or, rather, public sites – to conquer? The Norwegian veteran Arnfinn Vik, as noted above, had already mentioned "Krasnoye Selo" (*Folk og Land* 1994/9). As we have seen, Estonian anti-Soviet sentiments afforded veterans of the W-SS, now redefined as Europeans fighting Bolshevism, with memory sites within the former Soviet Union. Why not, then, Krasnoye Selo, where, in 1942/42, for instance, the SS Legion Norge had been stationed – that is, just outside the city once known as Leningrad?

To commemorate the W-SS there would, one would think, necessitate some creative thinking. By no stretch of the imagination could the W-SS veterans present themselves as ancient "allies against alien occupation", as the Vaivara Mayor had put it. But history could be re-interpreted in other ways. Had not the W-SS tried to liberate the Russians from the Russians themselves? Or, as *Folk og Land* put it in 1998 (7), the only reason that the W-SS volunteers had had to fight Russian soldiers was because they, the Russians, had been "the first victims of Bolshevism". But Russian soldiers (the author hastens to add) had been valorous, too – all fighting for their fatherland, here as in Ukraine – and it was time, it seems, to let by-gones by by-gones.

It did take some time to put this myth – and site – in place. Years of veterans' travel to Russia and Krasnoye Selo, in order to meet with (and hand over money to) various officials and local politicians, were followed by direct negotiations with Krasnoye Selo's Orthodox ministry (see *Monitor* 1999/1). This, together with continued donations all round, turned the tide. In 1998, a memorial stone to the Norwegian "volunteers" was erected and dedicated on church property just outside the city of St. Petersburg.



FOLK og LAND

UAVHENGIG AVIS Nr. 7 - 1998 46. årgang

Forsoning - Samhold - Kjærlighet

Legionens minnestøtte over falne nordmenn avduket i Krasnoje Selo - støtten står på den russiske kirkes grunn - under dens beskyttelse



«Folk og Land» var med da minnesteinen over falne legionærer ble avduket i Krasnoje Selo den 23. august.

Det ble en gripende høytidsstund som gjorde et sterkt inntrykk på de mange norske og russiske krigsveteraner som var tilstede.

En legionær betegner avdukingen som det største som har skjedd i Legionens historie.

I dette nummer bringer vi en større reportasje fra begivenheten, ledsaget av vår fotografs «billedlige» inntrykk.

Norske frontkjemper i Regiment NORGE har også vandret på gjengrodde stier. I juli var de i Estland, der de deltok i de estiske frontkameraters minnehøgtideligheter, og hvor de også la ned krans på minnesteinen for nordmenn som falt under kampene.

Du finner reportasjen inne i bladet

The Krasnoye Selo stone, as pictured in *Folk og Land* 1998/7. “Reconciliation – Cohesion- Affection. The Legion’s memorial over the fallen Norwegians /.../ One legionnaire describes the dedication as the greatest that has happened in the history of the Legion.”

Folk og Land (1998/7) gave first-page coverage to the dedication of the stone, which stands “on the grounds of the Russian church – and is under its protection.” Per Storlid, the moderately reliable eye-witness who does the reporting, continually emphasizes that the (W-SS) dead are being, finally, honored and protected. The ceremony itself was “moving”, making “a strong impression on the many Norwegian and Russian [!] war veterans who were there.” The notice is full of hackneyed Slavic romanticism. “Mother Russia, through her church, has taken these

fallen foreigners, once enemies, to herself as her own, forever”. The priest who does the blessing is described almost ecstatically – his eyes shine with “mildness and wisdom”, as evidenced in his words “All dead have the right to a place where they can be remembered”. The visitors feel “a friendliness as from an old acquaintance”. The stone awaits, under a Norwegian flag, a be-ribboned wreath in honor of the dead, and an anonymously bequeathed bouquet. After a very lengthy religious ceremony, performed in full regalia and with the help of three additional officiants, the priest asks if he may put a Russian orthodox cross on the stone. Storlid records the response: “*no*, no-one has anything against that”, for “in this way Russia’s church takes this memorial explicitly and visibly in its care and protection for all time.” The stone is unveiled, the flag and ribbons donated to the priest, and the Norwegian national anthem (but not the Treuelied) is sung. Jørgen Høve holds a brief speech on the subject of reconciliation. The newsletter’s picture of the stone shows inscriptions (in Norwegian, with a Russian translation, and under two clasped hands: “For Freedom and Reconciliation – To the Fallen Norwegians” (ibid, italics in the original).

This article is flanked by another, a brief, anonymous addition to the piece’s memory politics (*Folk og Land* 1998/7). Here, a W-SS veteran reminisces about his time at Krasnoye Selo. His had been the task, every day, of standing before “the legion” and calling out the names of the dead. The dead men (he writes) had been friends – he had remembered the good times, “common happiness, common sorrows, common fight and common battle. The strong bands of brotherhood in arms shall again be knotted between those who stand in formation in gray rows, and those who lie under the earth.” In this edition of *Folk og Land*, the Norwegian SS veterans have found a way of commemorating their dead, and thus themselves – solemn, meaningful, and very much emplaced.

The W-SS itself, it seems, was not mentioned. Neither the SS insignia nor the words Waffen-SS appeared on the Russian stone; they were not mentioned in speeches. This meant that Norwegian and Russian antifascists could accuse the veterans, in a 1999 demonstration against the memorial, of having deceived the community: they had been silent on their membership in the W-SS, and had also kept quiet about the fallen soldiers’ volunteer status. They also brought up the fact that money had changed hands between veterans and priests, not least at the ceremony itself (see www.vespen.no). These protests were ineffectual. On the contrary: shortly after the protest, an additional stone was erected and blessed, this time on behalf of the Flemish SS veterans (*Wenn alle Brüder* 2006/4). A major propaganda point had been won. If SS veterans could find public, officially blessed places for ceremonies just outside St. Petersburg, that is, amidst what had once been deepest enemy territory, how could they be denied legitimacy and place in Europe itself?

Concluding Remarks

A military unit, argue Ender, Bartone and Kolditz (2003), is based on a particularly intense form of comradeship. There is “the feeling of freedom and power instilled in us by communal effort in combat”. But there is also the true comradeship that appears “only when each is ready to give up his life for the other, without reflection and without thought of personal loss” (quoting Gray 1970: 46). This particularly strong, often idealized comradeship, is an important part of any legion’s experience. Army leaders must (Ender et al continue) respect this; for them,

there is no event more important to the preservation of unit morale than a soldier’s memorial service. /.../ It is an officer’s solemn duty to preserve the memory of a fallen comrade and in doing so communicate respect and concern for the living soldiers in the unit. Far from being mere impression management, the common expectation is that the commander is personally involved and deeply emotionally moved. The shedding of tears is accepted and not viewed as a form of weakness. (Ender et al 2003:n.p.)

These intense feelings of comradeship and sorrow, and the equally intense need to publicly display such feelings, may be part of what drives the W-SS veterans’ and, by extension, veterans’ sympathizers, to their unrelenting commitment to commemorative ceremonies. It is at least as important, it seems, to the W-SS sympathizers who never experienced the war itself: the ceremonies are intense and valued because (one might conclude) this is the closest that those born after 1945 can get to what they see as the pre-eminent experience, the most meaningful battle. To find a counter-hegemonic heroic myth and a place to be are, arguably, appendices to this emotional commitment. But the sentiment is indeed swaddled in new apparel; and the Emperor’s new clothing has implications for proposed revisions of the history of World War Two and of Europe.

Each of the ceremonies detailed above cement the myth of heroic Europeans volunteering against Bolshevism. The anti-Bolshevist / European profile of the fighters is thus all that matters; the fact of fighting an expansionist, racist, genocidal war under German leadership is constantly erased. On none of the monuments do the two letters SS appear. There is, of course, a set of codes that allow those with even a little knowledge to read the messages correctly: inscriptions (on stones in Hungary and Austria) which read “Their Honor is Faith”, citations from the Treuelied, or even the self-designation “Europe’s soldiers”.⁷ Still, this self-designation leads thoughts far from the real W-SS. Images of benign internationalism are reinforced by the consistent addition, at each site, of memorial stones to various nationalities, each designated by neutral terms such as the “Fallen Norwegians” or “European Armored Division”. And in this guise, particularly in the areas once part of the Soviet Union, the W-SS’s new self-identification seems viable.

The determination to refashion themselves, publicly, as the fascinating forbears of modern Europe, has further implications. The organizations covered here call for recognition of the W-SS as soldiers (if not soldiers pure and simple: they are very proud of their European-wide and volunteer status). As such, they claim a place in the ranks of loyal, true soldiers everywhere. It is notable, indeed, the degree to which W-SS veterans' organizations constantly mention *reconciliation*. The Estonian ritual festivals are, exceptionally, about brothers-in-arms: the Russians are still the enemy. But in the Ukraine and in Russia itself, as in, for instance, France, Germany, and Scandinavia, the message is very different. All soldiers are honored. Only the Bolsheviks, as insubstantial, here, as the Jews whom Hitler accused of causing world war, were evil. All those who actually fought tend to be exonerated.

This is not unique to organizations sympathetic to the W-SS. Australian visitors to Gallipoli – ushered around, it should be added, by Turkish guides – find both Australian and Turkish soldiers innocent, patriotic victims of German manipulation and malice (West 2003). Of course, that battle was not strictly comparable to the slaughter, often of civilians, brought about by parts of the W-SS. But even that can be forgotten and forgiven between soldiers. It was regrettable, writes Storlid (*Folk og Land* 1998/7) that “the fight that these volunteers who fought against Bolshevism was simultaneously a war that brought the Russian people unending suffering and losses”. But this was only because the Russian people were “the first victim of Bolshevism”. For the rest, each man was fighting for his fatherland; and so each must be remembered and honored. True to their “European” status, the W-SS veterans' publications claim that the veterans have advanced far further than any modern politicians in terms of reconciliation. After all (it seems), they were reconciled with the men whom they once tried to kill. And this is possible *because* they had once tried to kill the others – *because* they were soldiers.

True, honorable soldiers, according to veterans' publications, never hate the enemy. This was particularly true of the W-SS soldiers (as opposed, various W-SS veteran publications maintain, to English, American, or – here they slip – Russian soldiers). Politicians are among “the post-war born ingrates” who still bear malice for battles fought in the War. The “old soldiers, who were once forced to fight each other /.../ have long ago made peace with each other” (*Wenn alle Brüder* 2005/1). Or, as *Wenn alle Brüder* put it in 2004:

Of course, at that time, there arose hate as a result of propaganda and experiences, but there were also instances of high respect and deep understanding for the situation of oppositional soldiers, which could be tied to the idea of a reconciliation between peoples after the end of the war (2004/4).

Indeed, illustrative examples of “honorable” or “soldierly” actions join positive statements about former enemies in filling the pages of veterans' magazines (see e.g., “Slik treffes tidligere fiender”, *Folk og Land*, 2002/3). When an article on the

Uspenka monument-erecting expedition is entitled “Trip of Good Will”, it says something about the self-understanding of such men. The Ukrainians and Russians, themselves excellent soldiers, can bear no ill-will; all were honorable, all were true, and all were fighting evil. Let the W-SS come.

Steffen Werther is Senior Lecturer and researcher at Södertörn University, Stockholm. His doctoral thesis examines the implementation of the SS’s Greater Germanic idea in the Danish-German border region. He is currently involved as researcher in “The Moral Economy of Global Civil Society: A History of Private Transnational Food Aid” (Swedish Research Council). His latest publications include “Volksgemeinschaft vs. Rassegemeinschaft”, David Reinicke et al. (eds), *Gemeinschaft als Erfahrung: Kulturelle Inszenierungen und soziale Praxis 1930-1960*, 2014; (with Madeleine Hurd) “Nature, the Volk, and the Heimat: The Narratives and Practices of the Far Right Ecologist”, *Baltic Worlds*, 2013 6:2; “Nordic-Germanic Dreams and National Realities”, in Anton Weiss-Wendt and Rory Yeomans (eds.), *Racial Science in Hitler’s New Europe*, Univ. of Nebraska Press 2013. E-mail: steffen.werther@sh.se.

Madeleine Hurd is Associate Professor in Modern History at Södertörn University, Sweden. Her research has focused on emotions and gender in medialized rituals of spatial belonging in inter-war Germany and in German far-right environmentalism. See, e.g., Hurd & Werther, “The Militant Voices of Far-Right Environmentalism”, in *Communicating the Environment*, ed. Heike Graf (fc 2014); “Contested Masculinities in Inter-War Flensburg”, in *Bordering the Baltic*, ed. Hurd, *Nordische Geschichte* 10, Lit Verlag 2010; “Reporting on Civic Rituals: Texts, Performers and Audience”, in *Ritual and Media: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Brosius & Polit, Harrassowitz 2010. E-mail madeleine.hurd@sh.se.

Notes

- ¹ We owe thanks to the Expo Archiv in Stockholm for the material we use for this article. We owe special thanks to Jan Raabe, of “Argumente & Kultur gegen Rechts” in Bielefeld, for his help to Steffen Werther in making material available.
- ² The Waffen-SS (W-SS, known until 1940 as the SS Verfügungstruppe) is to be distinguished, nominally, from the “Allgemeine” (General) SS. The W-SS was a relatively small proportion of the SS as a whole, created in order to partake in battles together with (but not as a part of) the German Army. However, arguments that there was no overlap between the two SS organizations do not hold; there was, historians have shown, a fairly regularized exchange of personnel.
- ³ Hilfspolizei auf Gegenseitigkeit der Angehörigen der ehemaligen W-SS.
- ⁴ Estonian names: Eesti Vabadusvõitlejate Liit; Eesti Relvavägede Diviisi Veteraanide Ühendus and Eesti Leegioni Sõprade Klubi.

- ⁵ Also known under its title, “Wenn alle untreu werden”. In the SS’s WWII song-book, the “Treuelied” is listed just after the “Deutschlandlied” and just before the notorious “Horst-Wessel-Song”. See Wilke 2011: 192f.
- ⁶ The exploitation of the Sparta/Thermopylae topic has a long German tradition, with a peak during WWII. See: Roche (2013).
- ⁷ See, also, inscriptions on the highly controversial Hungarian memorial stones. For the checkered history of the SS-veterans’ Budapest monument (dedicated to SS divisions “Totenkopf” und “Wiking”), *Wenn alle Brüder schweigen, Mitteilungsblatt* Nr. 1, February 2005.

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Lovable Anarchism: Campus Protest in Japan From the 1990s to Today

By Carl Cassegård

Abstract

This is a paper on the transformation of campus activism in Japan since the 1990's. Japan's so-called freeter movements (movements of young men and women lacking regular employment) are often said to have emerged as young people shifted their base of activism from campuses to the "street". However, campuses have continued to play a role in activism. Although the radical student organisations of the New Left have waned, new movements are forming among students and precarious university employees in response to neoliberalization trends in society and the precarization of their conditions. This transformation has gone hand in hand with a shift of action repertoire towards forms of direct action such as squatting, sit-ins, hunger strikes, and opening "cafés". In this paper I focus on the development of campus protest in Kyoto from the mid-1990s until today to shed light on the following questions: How have campus-based activists responded to the neoliberalization of Japanese universities? What motivates them to use art or art-like forms of direct action and how are these activities related to space? I investigate the notions of space towards which activists have been oriented since the 1990's, focusing on three notions: official public space, counter-space and no-man's-land. These conceptions of space, I argue, are needed to account for the various forms campus protest has taken since the 1990s.

Keywords: Campus protest, Japan, precarity, direct action, space, counter-space.

Introduction

An unusual performance took place at Kyoto University in February 2009, on the day of the annual entrance examinations. In front of the big camphor tree before the main clock tower one of the university's part-time librarians, Ogawa Kyōhei (1969-), started singing in a seemingly improvised way while dancing and making movements vaguely reminiscent of a strip-tease performance.

So it's five years and then out, right?
But I've worked here on and off for altogether seven years.
Yes, seven years, here at Kyoto University.
So it's about time for this, right?
[he shows how his head will be cut off]
Is it really!?
No, no, no, no!

Next to him an oil drum was standing, painted in big white brush strokes with the word "Kubi" – a common word for being fired which also means neck or getting decapitated. The oil drum was filled with water that had been heated by his comrades in Union Extasy and was in fact a bath tub, in which Ogawa was soon bathing stark naked, all the time singing or shouting at the top of his voice to the high-school students who were walking by on their way back from their entrance examinations: "Let everybody pass!! Let everybody pass!! Kyoto University, let everyone enter!! And stop cutting off our heads!!"(Ogawa 2010b).¹

Union Extasy is a union for the university's part-time employees which was founded in 2007 by Ogawa and another librarian, Inoue Masaya (1971-). At the time of the oil drum bath, it had just initiated a strike to protest against the part-timers' employment conditions. In particular they turned against the university's so-called "five year rule", according to which part-timers would at most be able to hold on to their jobs for five years. Setting up a tent-like struc-



Members of Union Extasy in the "Dispersal and disobedience" (*Chōsan to fufukujū*) May Day demonstration in Kyoto, 29 April 2010. Photo: author

ture next to the camphor tree, a well-known symbol of Kyoto University, they quickly gained attention and much laughter through their drastic methods, which struck some observers as charmingly clownish and others as outrageous and provocative. A big tuna head was placed in front of the tent to get the message through. In April they turned their shack into Kubikubi Café, a place for pleasant talk and cheap coffee which was in existence for over two years, serving as a gathering place, as a center for disseminating information and, for a time, as the temporary residence of one of the union members.

The union's activities illustrate the rise of protests against "precarity" and "neo-liberalism" on Japanese campuses in recent years. They also illustrate the tendency among campus activists today to resort to spectacular acts of direct action that often involve the occupation of space – e.g. sit-ins, hunger strikes or opening cafés in shacks or tents. That campus based anti-precarity protest and direct action go hand in hand is a trend that can also be seen in many other countries today – e.g. the wave of student and faculty protests against "austerity" or "corporatization" in California, Québec, Chile, the UK, Italy and elsewhere, which have involved flash mobs, kiss-ins, blockades, traffic disruptions, house occupations, street theatre, the painting of government buildings, nightly "snake-march" demonstrations with no pre-determined route, and casseroles (banging pots and cans from balconies and windows), apart from ordinary street demonstrations and dance parties (see Connery 2011; Ayotte-Thompson & Freeman 2012; Lagalisie 2012; Caruso 2013).

In this article I will attempt to shed light on the interconnection between anti-precarity protest and direct action by focusing on the role played by space in activism and on how this role has changed over time.² Tracing the development of campus protest from the 1990s until today in Kyoto, I will attempt to answer the following questions. Firstly, how have campus-based activists responded to the ongoing transformation of Japanese universities into profit-driven corporations that increasingly subject students and staff to perceived market demands? Secondly, what motivates activists to use direct action in general and space occupations in particular? I will show that a sensitive instrument for tracing the process of shifting forms of action can be gained by relating them to theories of public space. A third question will therefore be: What use have campus activists made of space and how have they conceptualized space?

Let me briefly flesh out the theoretical background behind my choice of focusing on space. The publicness of a space is not a static given and can be an object of contestation. In the course of struggle, space can be used in various ways, and I will distinguish between three ways of conceptualizing space: as officially recognized public space, counter-space and no-man's-land. Officially recognized public space is largely attuned to the rhythms of mainstream life. Such space can be important to political challengers since it helps them project messages to a wider public and to authorities – to participate in what Habermas (1989) calls a public

sphere where citizens deliberate on their common affairs. Patricia Steinhoff points out that this use of space has been prominent in student activism in Japan, which has always gone “beyond campus issues to engage the major political issues of the day”, often in close collaboration with oppositional political parties, labor unions and other civil society groups who were engaged in the same protest movements (Steinhoff 2012: 73). At the same time, there are limits to how radical the demands and the conduct permitted in such space can be, since they need to be considered legitimate or in tune with the normative expectations of the surrounding society.

However, campus-based movements cannot be understood solely by focusing on their contribution to the mainstream public sphere. Spaces for direct action often assume the character of what Lefebvre (1991: 381ff) calls counter-spaces. These are spaces for the provocative visibilization of behavior that is subject to sanctions or stigmatization in mainstream public areas and therefore normally hidden or bracketed. Typically the very right of activists to use the counter-space is contested. While part of the aim of Kubikubi Café was certainly to promote the union’s voice in the public sphere – the café serving as a place for interaction with passers-by, for gaining the attention of local newspapers, and for exerting pressure on the university – it was also a counter-space that intentionally and gleefully “desecrated” a symbolic spot on the main campus and whose very existence was a gauntlet thrown to the university. The popularity of direct action in today’s campus activism has gone hand in hand with an increasing prevalence of counter-spaces.

Direct action on campuses cannot be understood in isolation from a third kind of space which I will call no-man’s-lands (see Cassegård 2013). These too are places permitting behavior considered contrary to mainstream norms, but unlike counter-spaces they are not created in order to challenge these norms publicly. Instead they thrive on official neglect. Waste and garbage, things that are free to pick up for anyone who feels like it, belong to this world.

Although seemingly unrelated to politics, no-man’s-lands have political import since they are places where activists and other people can spend time relatively sheltered from mainstream norms in times when not engaging in publicly visible acts of confrontation. During their drawn out struggle with the university, it was important for the participants in Kubikubi Café to be able to use the campus as a no-man’s-land, taking electricity and water from nearby buildings and gathering firewood from construction sites to heat their oven in the winter. Unlike many other public spaces, such as streets and squares, campuses are places where such resources are relatively abundant and accessible to activists.

Paying attention to how activists use space helps us to see that activism is not always oriented to participation in the public sphere or towards instrumentally working for social change. In particular, access to alternative arenas such as counter-spaces or no-man’s-lands has been important in processes of empowerment –

the strengthening of people's self-confidence as political actors. Empowerment can be furthered through activities that at first sight do not appear political: it can be about escaping isolation by discovering and associating with likeminded people, having access to spaces relatively free from outside sanctions, or engaging in protest activities as a form of practice when political stakes are seemingly insignificant. The way activists navigate between or combine various forms of space is often conditioned by the degree to which they see empowerment as an urgent task (see Cassegård 2013).

Background: New Cultural Movements and Precarization

For a long time, campus protest in Japan was virtually synonymous with the student movement, usually bringing forth associations to the radical so-called New Left groups that had used the campuses as bases for rallies and street demonstrations in their heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. This student activism weakened and lost popular appeal in the late 1970s, being discredited by political failure, violent sectarian infighting and dogmatism. Severely damaging the reputation of New Left activists was their tendency to get embroiled in violent sectarian infighting. Even more devastating to their image was the development of terrorist groups like the United Red Army, a militant grouping who murdered 14 of their own for their alleged lack of revolutionary zeal in their hideout at Mt Asama in 1972. Among many radical activists in Japan, this so-called Asama Sansō incident achieved iconic status as a powerful symbol of the New Left's failure (Suga 2003, 2006; Igarashi 2007; Oguma 2009; Steinhoff 2012).

Since then, radical youth activism has made a comeback, especially after the turn to the new millennium, as can be seen in today's precarity movement or the movements against war or nuclear power (see Cassegård 2013). This activism, however, has usually not been campus-based. Participants have often been so-called freeters, young people without regular employment, a group which has increased rapidly in Japan since the early 1990s, rather than students. With its use of performances, art, music and dancing, this activism is typical of what Mōri (2005) calls "new cultural movements". In contrast to the widespread image of the New Left these movements are said to be characterized by an open and loose network-structure, ideological diversity, more egalitarian and individualist forms of organization, and a predilection for art, performances and fun (Mōri 2005, 2009a; Hayashi & McKnight 2006).

This cultural activism became known to the wider public through the rise of protests against precarity among freeters. However, it is important to point out that it was not simply a reaction to the deterioration of economic conditions during the so-called lost decade which followed the so-called economic "bubble" of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Its roots can be found in bubble-years themselves, which was a fertile period of experimentation in which new forms of protest and

organization were tried out among young people outside the established Leftist groups (Kohso 2006; Toyama 2008). A decisive contribution was that it offered forms of action, organization, style and “thought” that were no longer felt to be tainted by the negative legacy of the New Left and which matched the needs and desires of the quickly growing freeter stratum.

Although freeter activism has generally taken the “street” as its preferred scene of action rather than university campuses, the rise of freeter activism has not meant that universities have lost their role as platforms of activism. New Left groups dating back to the 60s continue to exist on several campuses. Even more significantly, the processes that have produced freeter activism in society at large have also fuelled the rise of new forms of activism on campuses. In line with the international trend towards “managerialism” or “New Public Management” (Goldfinch 2004, Dunleavy et al. 2006), universities in Japan have increasingly adjusted to the role of service-providers on a capitalist market. This shift is part of a wider neoliberal trend in Japanese society, if neoliberalism is seen broadly as social and economic transformations under the sign of the free market, including the institutional arrangements to implement this project (Connell 2013: 100). In Japanese higher education, this shift was accelerated by a 2003 law turning national universities into national university corporations. The incorporation took place 2004 and forced national universities to rely more heavily on private funding, making them more similar to private universities, at the same time as they became more tightly supervised by the Ministry of Education (Tabata 2005, Yonezawa 2013: 128f, 133-136).

A question that has received scant attention is how activism on the campuses has changed under the influence of this shift. While the mass-media has reported on the repressive measures directed towards some of the remaining New Left groups, far less attention has been paid to new forms of activism that have emerged in recent years in response to the neoliberal transformation of universities. These newer movements cannot be viewed exclusively as student movements. Largely they have emerged among university employees who protest against their precarious labor conditions. Spanning student and labor issues, they take aim at the transformation of universities into corporations that increasingly need to secure their budgets through attracting private funding and investment, raising student fees where possible, and curtailing the costs of the labor force by increasingly relying on short-term contract employees.

From Students and Employees to Freters

Campus activism today is not just a student movement and also not just a movement among employees. Behind its emergence lie social processes that are increasingly transforming both of these groups into a condition of “freeter”-likeness. The precarious situation of students today has often been pointed out.

“The majority of universities are no longer institutions for producing middle-class, white-collar workers, to say nothing of Japan’s future elites, but temporary camps for chronically jobless youth”, Sabu Kohso states (2006: 416). Asato Ken, founder of the General Freeter Union, emphasizes that since students are now part of the precarious worker stratum, the time has come for them to fight, not *for* the workers, but *as* workers (PAFF 2003). The lack of openings for stable employment after graduation has its factual background in the overall increase in university graduates in addition to processes of deregulation and economic slowdown (Hommerich 2012: 212f).

That many students face an uncertain future after graduation is not all. Already as students, they enter a milieu on the campus that has been transformed in a neoliberal direction. Four interrelated areas can be discerned that have aroused student protest in recent years. One is the burden of student fees, with a movement arising both in Tokyo and in Kyoto against the “blacklisting” of students who fail to pay back their student loans (Ribault 2010). A second has been the time-consuming job hunting, which many students feel that they need to engage in already in their second or third year, reflecting the increasing competition for regular employment (see e.g. Nagata 2010). A third area is the suppression of political student activism, with Hōsei University (see Saitō 2009; McNeil 2009; Yabu 2009) and Waseda University (see Suga 2006; Suga & Hanasaki 2006) in Tokyo being particularly notorious examples. A fourth, related area has been the gentrification of university campuses – a process which Bose (2012: 816) refers to as the “material transformation of campuses into ‘commercial spaces’ with an increasingly visible corporate presence”. Typically, this has involved the reorganization of campus life to allow a greater role to privately run cafés, restaurants and convenience stores along with a concomitant rebuilding and prettification of its physical infrastructure and attempts to ban, remove or tear down manifestations of the culture of student activism, such as standing signboards, shacks or rooms for students’ circle activities or dormitories strongly associated with student self-rule (such as Tokyo University’s Komaba Dormitory). A group that pioneered the protests against campus gentrification was the “Society for preserving the squalor of Hōsei” (Hōsei no binbōkusasa o mamoru kai). This group was formed by Matsumoto Hajime – later a leading activist associated with the Amateur Riot (Shirōto no ran) – when he was a student at Hōsei University in 1997. Aghast at the transformation of the university into what he saw as a preparatory school for work, he started inviting students to *nabe* (hot pot) parties on the campus, creating “liberated zones” where they would also camp. These gatherings were not political demonstrations so much as playful acts of sabotage against the prettification of the campus, but they were popular and easy to imitate and soon spread to other universities in Japan (Amamiya 2007: 226-238; Matsumoto 2008a:95-102, 2008b: 38-66, 70-75; Takemura 2008).

While these changes were happening, there was also a conspicuous flexibilization of employment for university staff (e.g. Shiraishi & Ono 2005). As will be discussed below, university employees have played a leading role in protesting against this flexibilization. However, their protests should not be seen as separate from the protests of the students. The activism of students and employees has developed in interaction with each other and today new forms of solidarity appear to be taking form between these two groups. Below, I will illustrate this development by discussing campus activism from the 1990s onwards in Kyoto, focusing to those episodes of activism in which Union Extasy's two founding members, Ogawa and Inoue Masaya, have been involved.

Kinji House, or “Cleaning is love”

In the 1990s Kyoto became the place for a strong student activist ferment, which saw students at Dōshisha University develop Japan's first so-called sound-demos (street parties), as well as much activism related to feminism, queer and AIDS. In the early 1990s many students still felt it was easy to find employment and found it easy to take breaks in their studies in order to pursue interests such as theatre or engaging in activism while making their living on irregular work (Noiz 2009: 17ff; interviews with A and B, 2011-07-23 and 2009-08-20; with D 2010-06-27 and 2010-07-29).

In contrast to Tokyo, where many activists who pioneered the new cultural forms of activism were students who had chosen to migrate out of the still New Left-dominated campuses, in Kyoto the new cultural movements were largely campus-based. One reason for this was the relatively strong tradition of non-sect student activism at universities like Kyoto University or Dōshisha, which meant that activists critical of the New Left factions had less need to find a base of activities outside the campus (Ogawa 2010a: 80; interviews with activists C and D, 2010-03-19 resp. 2010-06-27). A second reason for the continued importance of university campuses in Kyoto may have been their relatively liberal management, which made them more tolerant of New Left groups as well as newer non-sect groups to a higher degree than in Tokyo (C, activist in Kyoto, interviews 2009-09-24 and 2010-03-18).

One offspring of the activist ferment in Kyoto was the creation of Kinji House at Kyoto University in 1995, one of Japan's few examples of large-scale squatting. The prime mover in this enterprise was Ogawa, who had entered Kyoto University in 1989. As he looks back on Kinji House, he emphasizes the importance of the year 1995 for activism in Kyoto.

There was a feeling that things were being born and people got connected. Gays, sex workers and others got movements started and this was bound up with expression, performances, dance and poetry... One felt that if this feeling would spread the whole world would be happy... I too existed in the margins of all that, participating

here and there, and breathing the same air. Kinji House too existed in the same air.
(Ogawa 2009c)

Together with a few friends he opened Kinji House in an empty building on Kyoto University's North Campus for a few months in 1995. This was a building scheduled for demolition that had been left empty after the death of the ecologist and anthropologist Iwanishi Kinji (1902-1992). At the start, the participants were mainly non-sect students at Kyoto University and a nearby art college. They kept the house going from early June to late August – a period when the university was relatively deserted by students – sun-bathing on the roof and sprinkling water on each other with hoses. In the house, they opened a café and a bar, a dance studio, a radio station and a gallery for exhibitions.

The exhilaration participants felt in the beginning was expressed in the cleaning up they started as soon as they had moved in: “A place belongs to the ones who clean it”, Ogawa writes, adding that “cleaning is love” (Ogawa 1997: 227f). In these early days, an exciting uncertainty appears to have existed about what would become of the project: “Rather than ‘what should we do?’, Kinji was ‘what will become of it?’”, Ogawa writes (ibid. 231). His choice of words indicates that the participants felt enveloped in something that they could not fully control, but which they nevertheless experienced as thrilling and pleasurable.

Was there an idea behind Kinji House? During the occupation, there was no explicit political message which activists used to justify the occupation. A letter which Ogawa sent to the dean of student affairs at the time states that he had been guided by three ideas. The first was “direct action”, a concept which he gives his own twist by explaining that it means to try an action and see what it leads to rather than to execute an already finished plan. Hence it is an action that “does not oppose the system with a system, but directly expresses one’s feelings”. The second was the idea of action based on rhizomatous networks, i.e. on autonomous individuals rather than a group will. The third was the idea of constructing a “place for traffic, a factory, a place welcoming everything and constantly changing” (ibid. 228f). Later Ogawa also referred to the attraction of an empty space with free electricity and heating where people were free to do what they wanted. In addition, he explains, there was something “extra” which everyone treasured, and that “extra was probably our dream” (ibid. 229).

At the time, there had been a vogue of interest in the idea of squatting among activists in Kyoto, fanned by publications introducing European anarchist or autonomist movements such as *Actual Action* and *BURST CITY*. Ogawa himself had previously lived for short periods in empty rooms or in self-made huts on the campus, learning how to gain access to water and electricity and how to make fires. Often this was done stealthily, but sometimes the squat was conducted in public, as during a three-day squat when he opened a “love hotel” called “Je t’aime” after having gotten his hands on a twin bed. Ogawa was also interested in exploring lifestyles that dispensed with the idea of a fixed home. He became well-

known for the *isōrō* (a word meaning to live in other people's houses) lifestyle he embarked on in the latter half of the 1990s, systematically moving from one acquaintance to another (Ogawa & Ogawa 1999).

One of his friends described him as an *isōrō* artist, pointing out the similarities between *isōrō* and children's play (Yamamura 1997b). Ogawa appears to have thought of *isōrō* and squatting as existing on a continuum, since both problematize the relationship between ownership and use of space. In both squatting and *isōrō* space tends to be conceived of not only or primarily as a stage for participating in the general public sphere, but rather as a space which is free to use for creating and living beyond the norms and regulations of mainstream institutions, as no-man's-land.

In the end, Kinji House self-destructed because of inner conflicts – many triggered by the arrival of young *yankī* (“hoodlums” or members of the *yankī* subculture) who moved in during the summer vacations. Some were violent, used thinner, and refused to attend meetings. In August the electricity was cut off and people started to dwindle. When the police entered and arrested some of the *yankī*, the university used the occasion to close the building. The few remaining squatters offered no resistance. “Rather than resisting, we helped cleaning up”, Ogawa writes, describing “the great sense of powerlessness” he felt when the house was emptied of their belongings. Soon after, the building was demolished by the university (Ogawa 2006: 235).

The violence and fatigue Kinji House engendered shows how easy the sense of possibility and freedom of a space with no institutionalized, shared rules can disintegrate. “Kinji aimed at becoming a square but failed and ended up as a vacant lot”, one of the participants writes (Yamamura 1997a). The reason for this assessment was the diversity of participants which meant that communication broke down and that there was an uncertainty about what rules were valid. Other participants described Kinji House as a “wonderland of hoodlums” or as “fatiguing” because of the need to maintain diplomatic relations with people who did not share your premises. Ogawa himself points out that the failure was not that there was any closed sectarianism, but rather that the ambiguity and unwillingness of anyone to take responsibility hurt participants (Ogawa 1997: 233, 230ff).

Some thought that I, who triggered it all, was irresponsible. They would probably not listen if I suggested to them that we should do something together again. As for me, I have lost the self-confidence to suggest such things, or rather I've lost all desire to do it [...]. But “what will become of it?” ought to be something good. I don't understand. The only thing I can say is that “what will become of it” and “whatever” are different. The difference lies in curiosity. As Kinji gradually slipped out of control, as it finally overwhelmed me and when it was actually destroyed, I was unable to utter a single word. But in reality it never slipped out of control. What really happened was that it gradually transformed into a “whatever”. Curiosity is love. As love waned, cleaning too became scarce and the house became dirty. (ibid. 231)

Ogawa's ideal of an *isōrō*-life as well as the Kinji House experiment can be seen as manifestations of a wish to create an open, unregulated no-man's-land beyond the sway of institutions, money and status. He describes himself as close to anarchism. Being unconnected to confrontation or militancy and driven primarily by the dream of a world where everyone can have fun together without hierarchies or money, this might be described as what Oda Masanori calls a "lovable anarchism", more interested in creation and expression than in ideology (quoted in Aida et al. 2008:93). Rather than seeking confrontation, it hopes to remain undetected or that the world will be won over and tolerate its projects.

Fun as Resistance – the Case of Ishigaki Café

For a few months in 2005, a café existed on top of the stone wall surrounding Kyoto University's main campus on a conspicuous spot near the Hyakumanben crossing. Because the café rests on a small platform five meters above the ground and lacks walls, customers got a good view of the crossing below. The structure was especially striking at night, when it seemed to hover like a phantom over the crossing. Some customers described it as a "house above the trees", others as a "secret base". The platform could be reached through a ladder from the pavement. Shoes had to be taken off before entering the café platform, where coffee was sold for 50 yen per cup, allegedly the "cheapest in Kyoto".

One of the activists who helped create the café was Inoue. At the time he was a master's student in Italian. His favorite hobby was *kabuki*. He had a history of unconventional living. He had rebuilt his dormitory room into a field for cultivating rice and later squatted for three years in a small hut which he built just outside the dormitory (interview, 2007-07-19; Inoue & Ogawa 2009). When the university in the autumn of 2004 announced its plan to tear down part of the wall in order to create a barrier-free entrance, he and a few others – the group, which started at four, eventually included more than ten persons– reacted by camping on the site to physically prevent the demolition. To protect themselves against the cold, they brought a *kotatsu* (a low blanket-covered table with a heat source beneath). Soon they had constructed a tower-like structure topped by a roofed platform. At the suggestion of a visiting waitress, they turned the tower into a café, the Ishigaki Café (literally "stonewall café") (Inoue & Kasagi 2005; Kasagi 2006).

They managed to keep the café running for seven months, from January to August. Activities included live music, *bon* dancing, lectures, film showings and parties. Bigger events were a symposium with well-known radical intellectuals in May, and the Ishigaki dormitory festival in July with live music and noodle-selling on the pavement below. Meanwhile outdrawn negotiations were held with university representatives, ending with the university agreeing to leave part of the wall intact. After the settlement, the activists celebrated by arranging a festival

that went on for three days with live music, speeches on the street, and *bon-dancing*, before finally closing the café (Inoue & Kasagi 2005; Shinohara 2005).

During the period of its existence the café claimed to have served many customers, a majority of whom were non-students such as school kids, tourists, and families with children. It appears to have made a relatively successful appeal to people who would otherwise lack interest in student activities. By using the form of a café the activists created a space that was considerably more open and easy to enter than protest groups or organizations with a more traditional form. Compared to Kinji House, the café was a much more organized space. Rules such as the banning of alcohol were imposed on the space to create an environment that was welcoming and friendly to visitors.

A certain tongue-in-cheek traditionalism was characteristic of the activists in the café. As Inoue explained, the choice of a tower (*yagura*) was a respectful nod to previous struggles. Wooden towers were built during the Sanrizuka struggles in the 1970s by farmers who sought to prevent the construction of present-day Tokyo Airport. The idea of building towers was also a tradition among rebellious students at Kyoto University, who, he says, in all their actions would “start by building a tower”. Inoue and the other activists also liked to speak about Kyoto University’s tradition of “trouble-making” and expressed an elegiac love for the university’s tolerant “shabbiness”. Today, they lament, the squalor of Kyoto University is disappearing, with new stylish buildings like restaurants, cafés and convenience stores being built all over the campus. “If you take away the underground smell it will cease to be Kyoto University” (Inoue & Kasagi 2005).

The students claimed to be driven primarily by a desire for fun rather than by any serious political commitment. “Ishigaki Café was truly a ‘space for mischief’”, Inoue and another participant, Kasagi Jō, exclaimed triumphantly afterwards (ibid.). “More than anything else, Ishigaki Café was born from the desire for fun and enjoyment”, another participant says (Shinohara 2005: 202).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, preserving a stone wall struck many of the more serious political activists on the campus as nonsensical and lacking a political aim (e.g. C, interview 2010-03-19). To the participants, however, fun was not unrelated to resistance. To Inoue and other activists, the act of causing mischief and trouble was clearly itself a source of fun. Conversely, Kasagi explains that it was as fun that it constituted good resistance. To perform simple café activities like selling cheap coffee and interacting with customers was in itself an act of resistance against the campus homogenization. One participant points out that Ishigaki Café was a “counter-space” protesting against the trend in society to homogenize space, visible in the creation of new monumental spaces and chic restaurants on the campus (Shinohara 2005: 194-200). They expressly distinguished their activities from those of more traditional student movements.

Ishigaki Café wasn’t a place for appealing ardently to visitors to get them to support our opposition to the removal of the stone wall. [...] There was no need for us to en-

gage in any particular political activity. Everyday talk and pouring coffee would in themselves constitute a performative resistance to the campus reorganization [...] (Kasagi 2006: 65f)

Like Kinji House, the café involved the occupation of a space, which was torn from its officially designated use. Much more than Kinji House, however, it was established as a visible challenge to university authorities. The activists set up a tower on one of the most conspicuous spots imaginable, where everything going on in the café would take place in full visibility, and this visibility was itself something they thoroughly enjoyed. If the squatters in Kinji House thought of their project as a foray into no-man's-land, Ishigaki Café is better understood as a playfully and self-consciously established counter-space.

Hunger Strikes at Ritsumeikan and Kyoto Seika University

The year 2007 was an important year for campus activism in Kyoto. Several events occurred that led activists to protest against measures taken by university managements that appeared to increase the precarious situation of employees and students. At their height, these protests included two sit-ins during which activists engaged in hunger strikes. In both episodes, counter-spaces were briefly established in which elements of fun were prominent, but unlike in the case of Ishigaki Café, these elements were now wedded to “serious” causes and to an attempt to reachout to the public with a message.

The first of these episodes took place at the Kinugasa campus of Ritsumeikan University. Endō Reiko, a part-time lecturer in Italian and vice chair of the General Union, initiated a four-day hunger strike (conducted 17-20 July) to protest against the university's practice of hiring teachers on yearly renewable contracts with a maximum length of employment of four or five years. Already in 2006, the union had conducted a strike among Ritsumeikan teachers to protest against the practice and the university had responded by excluding union members from proceedings and threatening them with non-renewal of their contracts. When the university refused to renew her contract in 2007, Endō responded by initiating the hunger strike. A tent was put up at the campus which she called the Hunger Strike Café. Next to it was a flag with the words “Not just hungry, but angry”. Her demands were for secure employments for irregular staff and a renewal of her contract. Backing her were not only the General Union but also the newly established Union Extasy and several other unions. When I asked her why she chose a hunger strike as her means of protest, she answered that it was the best way to get attention. She only had four days and couldn't do a permanent sit-in. One alternative might have been to make a “performance”, but that would have required too much time and effort (Endō, interviews 2007-07-19 and 2010-04-29).

The university did not rescind its decision, but Endō's action inspired other activists in at least two ways. Firstly, it directed attention to the so-called “3-5 year

rules” which later also became a prime target of Union Extasy. Following the incorporation of national universities in 2004, they and many private universities introduced a system of hiring staff on one-year contracts to cut labor costs. These contracts were renewable, but with a limit at 3-5 years.

This limitation was controversial, since it introduced an extra element of uncertainty in the lives of the staff and since no special legal basis existed for it. The Labor Standard Law only specifies that if contract renewals are repeated several times, a decision not to renew the contract cannot be taken without rational reason. The limitation thus seems to have been introduced by universities mainly in order for them to keep their freedom of action, i.e. their freedom to refuse to renew contracts should the need arise (Endō 2009).

Secondly, the very form of the protest – the hunger strike – inspired several other activists in Kyoto, including student activists. The second spectacular sit-in that year was performed by a student at Kyoto Seika University, Yamada Shirō, who, citing Endō as an inspiration, went on hunger strike for a week (5-13 December) to protest against the high university fees, setting himself up in a hut (which Union Extasy helped him build) with TV and *kotatsu* on a conspicuous spot on the campus. Yamada was also a participant in the movement’s circles at Kyoto University, which inspired him to start raising chicken and pigs on the campus as a source of alternative livelihood. He thus expanded his repertoire of action by making use of campus space as a no-man’s-land. He also succeeded in making himself heard in the wider public sphere by getting *Kyoto Shimbun*, the local newspaper, to cover his hunger strike. Later he was central in setting up the Black list association, a group that carried out sound-demos in Kyoto against the blacklisting of students who failed to pay back their student loans, a movement that soon spread to Tokyo (interview 2009-09-24; also see Shiraishi 2008; Yamada 2008; Yamada et al. 2010).

Yamada provides us with several clues to why direct action is attractive to activists today. These clues have to do with the similarities between direct action and art. To start with, artistic activities as well as direct action are often performed by individuals or small groups, who rely on impact rather than large numbers. Yamada explains:

In a trial of strength, we are sure to lose. Better than that is to use a little imagination, irony or humor, including setting up weird buildings... What matters is not how many handbills you hand out or how many hours you spend in conferences, but rather something I think can be called art. In practice, it means doing what you think is fun where it will attract attention. (Yamada 2008: 171)

Shiraishi Yoshiharu comments that in Japan “there’s no organization of students that can conduct a strike, like in Europe or North America, so what Yamada did was that he used his own body as a stake in the struggle instead” (Shiraishi 2008: 172). In a situation in which many students are reluctant to engage politically and activists lack the backing of existing student organizations, the numbers and re-

sources necessary for demonstrations of a more traditional kind were simply not be available.

A second similarity to art is that these acts are meant to be more than mere means to achieve some purpose. As Yamada stresses, the acts are meant to be enjoyed for their own sake, even when they are physically excruciating. “I wasn’t thinking about dying or anything else as desperate as that”, he states about his hunger strike, “I just wanted to do it in an enjoyable way” (Yamada 2008: 170).

A third similarity is that, just like many art works, many of these acts seem to aim at producing ambiguity. Their power stems from their ability to upset norms rather than from clear-cut political messages. Yamada’s principle of not asking permission from the university authorities for his activities is an example.

When I started raising chicken[s] on the campus, some guys engaged in some non-sensical circle activities came and asked me if I had permission from the university. Of course I hadn’t. Again, when the people of the music circle wanted to do a guerrilla live concert, even they went and tried to get permission. Then they got upset when they were refused. Sure, I understand their anger, but why on earth ask for permission in the first place if you’re doing a guerrilla live? Pretty strange, in my view. In any case, that’s why I go on doing my things without asking permission. I’m ready to discuss with people if they have complaints. Not with authorities, but with other people who use the place. In that vein, by doing things without permission people will finally just think “Oh there they go again”. What’s really important is to create an atmosphere of not asking permission. (Yamada 2008: 171)

The power that statements like these, which by themselves are clear and unambiguous, have to create ambiguity stems from the struggle that is latently or openly taking place over the use of the campus and in which onlookers are invited to choose a side. While some will identify with the authorities, others will feel drawn to the activists. Ambiguity arises because the question “Is this really defensible?” reveals itself as posed to society itself, rather than at the activists.

Taken together, these similarities between Yamada’s actions and art suggest a conception of space that combines an orientation to participation in the mainstream public – as seen in the emphasis on direct action as a means of getting attention or in the attempt to influence onlookers by producing ambiguity – and an orientation towards enjoying the setting up of a counter-space as a goal in its own right – as seen in the emphasis on having fun or not asking permission.

Kubikubi Café and Union Extasy

2007 was also the year when Union Extasy was founded by Inoue and Ogawa, who at the time were both working as part-time librarians at Kyoto University. The union at first made itself known chiefly through its pranks – arranging barbecues on the campus or sailing down the Kamo River on a floating *kotatsu* during the 2008 “freeter May Day” demonstration. The playful attitude was evident from the start in the big signboard near the campus entrance through which it an-

nounced its existence. Next to a smiling, violin-playing grasshopper was the text: “We want ecstasy in our work like the grasshopper. But no death by starvation, thanks!”. They also distributed pamphlets asking if the reader enjoys his or her workplace: “Everybody, do you enjoy your work place? Can you sing ‘la-la-la’ while cleaning up? Do you have tea time when you can sing ‘la-la-la’ while pouring up tea?”. The text goes on to encourage everyone who doesn’t feel like working, not to join their union, but to set up their own unions.

As for the union’s name, Ogawa had insisted on “extasy” since it suggested something usually not associated with unions. By insisting on ecstasy in work, they wanted to formulate something close to a refusal of work: “Ecstasy in work is close to ‘I won’t work’”, leaning more towards something akin to *eros* than to work (Inoue 2008; Inoue & Ogawa 2009: 37). The demand for ecstasy in work is easy to understand as a thinly disguised stab at capitalism. If alienation is part of all wage labor, raising the demand for ecstasy is to demand the impossible of capitalism, namely that it abolish itself.

Despite the playful attitude, this time Inoue and Ogawa took aim at a subject generally regarded as “serious” – the precarious working conditions at the university. Part-timers make up 2,700 of the university’s employees, including teachers, librarians, janitors and guards. Most of them (85 percent) are women and like female irregular workers elsewhere in Japan their salaries are drastically below those of regular (mostly male) employees. At Kyoto University, part-timers earn 900-1200 yen per hour, a typical freeter wage, and they have almost no possibility of entering regular employment. As Ogawa (2009b) points out, this is a matter of exploiting female labor. The fact that wages are lower than for regular employees is justified by the university with the argument that the wages are only meant to be “supplementary” – i.e. that the work is “housewife part-time work”. Today, this justification rings hollow since the universities are shifting from regular to irregular employees on a large scale, the latter including many single people who cannot rely on a family to supplement the income. With the five-year rule, which stated that contracts could at most be renewed for a period of five years, the position of such workers was made even more insecure.

Like many other universities, Kyoto University introduced this rule in 2005 after the university’s incorporation. To protest against it, Ogawa and Inoue went on strike in February 2009 by setting up the shack that later became known as Kubikubi Café. This was a timely juncture, since the first employees scheduled to fall under the rule were some fifty employees whose contracts would end in early 2010. As inspirations for the café, the union quoted Ishigaki Café and Endō Reiko’s hunger strike.

The union’s methods made some laud it as an example of “cultural” activism or “collective art” (Mōri 2009; Amamiya 2010: 194). However, the fact that it was engaged in a drawn-out conflict in which it needed to represent many employees at the university meant that less playful aspects of activism gradually

came to the fore. Inoue and Ogawa both state that they learnt a lot about “responsibility” during their campaign and that they felt that they had grown closer to the struggle of the labor movement (Inoue & Ogawa 2009: 40f; Ogawa 2010a: 80). Another aspect that had not been as evident in the briefer sit-ins performed by Endō or Yamada were the sacrifices involved in out-drawn campaigns, which tended to harm the human relations of ordinary life. Ogawa used the simile of *nukadoko*, the bran used for fermenting vegetables into homemade pickles that needs to be stirred by hand every day.

I used to take good care of my *nukadoko*, which I look on as a living thing that helps me and greets me as I return home every day. It needs to be stirred every day. If you eat it daily, it is a simple matter since you just need to put in new vegetables and mix them into the bran. But if you can no longer return home daily, taking good care of the *nukadoko* becomes hard. (Ogawa 2010c)

In its struggle with the university, the union achieved almost none of its aims: the five year rule is still in force and Inoue and Ogawa both had their contracts terminated. In February 2010 the university director agreed to meet for collective bargaining but restated that it needed to maintain the five year rule to press labor costs. Further rounds of collective bargaining proved unfruitful and court verdicts also went against the union. Meanwhile, the efforts involved in keeping the café running were taking its toll on the private lives of the activists. In June 2011 Ogawa withdrew from the union and in the autumn the café closed down, after more than two years in existence.

The union did succeed, however, in catalyzing a movement of part-time staff in the Kansai region. Following its example, similar unions such as Union Socosoco sprang up at other universities in Kyoto (Yanbe 2010). It also took the initiative to the first “Why temporary employments?” symposium, which it arranged in Osaka in February 2010 together with other university-based unions in the Kansai region with which it formed a network for collaboration. These symposiums have since been held every year – a good example showing that Union Extasy did not merely set up a counter-space but also participated in the public sphere and contributed to the public debate about temporary employment.

Direct Action, Space and Empowerment

Two trends stand out in the development of campus activism sketched here. One is that campus activism has become increasingly focused on precarization and neo-liberalization. The actions of Endō, Yamada, Union Extasy and Union Socosoco all target the transformation of universities from institutions relatively independent of the market into profit-driven corporations in which teachers are turned into flex-workers, students are mass-produced for a precarious labor market, and campuses are increasingly subject to control and surveillance (and prettified by chic restaurants and glass-covered facades).

A second trend has been the tendency for activists to resort to direct action, in particular by using counter-spaces as a way of participating in the public sphere. Let me recapitulate the conceptions of space informing the activities described above. In Kinji House, space was hardly used at all as a way to transmit a message or to protest, but primarily as an arena for exploring the possibility of living differently. Put in a nutshell, Ogawa's ideal was to *live* in no-man's-land rather than to be an activist in mainstream public space. In Ishigaki Café there was a valuing of counter-space as such, but not yet much of a political message beyond a defiant demonstration of the possibility of an alternative life. In more recent activities, such as Endō's and Yamada's hunger strikes or Kubikubi Café, political messages came to the fore, although important elements of counter-space remained. Over time, then, activities appear to have become more oriented more to achieving public visibility and to participation in the public sphere, although recent activism still makes use, albeit in varying degrees, of all three kinds of space.

Why has the rise of a campus-based precarity movement come about in tandem with an increasing reliance on direct action? Interestingly, as the case of Ishigaki Café demonstrates quite clearly, the turn to direct action in the form of setting up counter-spaces appears not to have followed, but rather preceded the adoption of issues such as precarity. It thus cannot have been caused solely by any need for activists to direct public attention to the issue of precarity. How, then, can the turn to direct action be explained? Yamada's remarks on the similarities between art and direct action suggest *one* possible answer, namely the existence of pragmatic concerns behind the choice of artistic methods. In the absence of organizational support, resorting to activities like sit-ins and hunger strikes is one of the few available means activists have to gain attention. Endō too states that the hunger strike was the best way for her to get attention, considering the limited time she had. For Union Extasy as well, setting up a café at a conspicuous spot where it was a constant irritant to the university management may have been a rational choice for a small union that could not threaten to call out many members in a strike. Yamada also points to the fact that there may be practical considerations behind the emphasis on enjoyability. He explains that if you are on your own, you don't manage to continue unless the activity is fun. He frankly admits that there are limitations with the artistic forms of activism inherent in their low number of participants. Actions flare up but do not last, and they are often ignored by the mass media. It goes without saying that a movement gains more weight the more people it is able to mobilize (interview, 2009-09-24).

Still, the sit-ins, hunger strikes and cafés cannot be explained solely as a strategic choice to get attention or to keep spirits up. Getting attention is important, but mainly from the perspective of participation in the public sphere – as a means to spread a message and exert pressure on opponents. Several of the activities described above, such as the antics engaged in by Union Extasy, appear unnecessary or even counter-productive from the point of view of swaying public opinion.

But why would direct action have any intrinsic value beyond strategic concerns? As mentioned, having access to alternative arenas outside mainstream public space can be important since such spaces are crucial as spaces for empowerment. Although spaces like Kinji House or Ishigaki Café were criticized or looked askance at by some activists as being too preoccupied with mere fun or play, the playful activities they engaged in may have been important as a form of practice or training for challenging authorities. They furnished participants with experiences that later helped them to use direct action in other struggles which had more “serious” causes but which to a considerable extent were waged using the same playful style.

Play often involves a play with the categories of the dominant order in society, including spatial ones. Jacques Rancière (1999) points out that the dominant order is not simply discursive, but also a spatial “ordering of the sensible”. When protesters make themselves visible in public they often do so through a rejection of given spatial arrangements. What I would add is that playful redefinitions of space do not merely come about through counter-spaces. No-man’s-lands can be important arenas for exploring new uses of space since they provide activists with spaces relatively sheltered from interference by authorities. Such spaces are hospitable to those who are not yet empowered enough to openly confront the latter, they can be important in providing access to resources needed to sustain counter-spaces, and – as Kinji House illustrates – the attempt to create or expand no-man’s-lands can itself be the goal of activism.

Arguably, the need for spaces for empowerment has been greater in Japan than in many other countries. Although campus-based activism in Japan shares some characteristics with contemporary campus-based protests against austerity or neoliberal university management in other countries, the negative legacy of the Japanese New Left has meant that activists in Japan have had to grapple with a negative view of political activism in the general public. It has also meant that those activists who have attempted to break with the negative legacy by developing new forms of activism have been handicapped by their inability to rely on existing movement organizations and networks. This may explain why campus-based activism in Japan is still relatively small-scale and why broad mass-mobilizations involving older social movement organizations have been hard to achieve. In these years of reorientation, when new styles of action are being invented and new networks formed, there is also a need to “play” with space so as to increase empowerment. The playful forms of direct action in which campus-based activists in Kyoto have engaged from Kinji House onwards have been part of this trend. This playfulness has remained strong even as the precarious situation of university employees and students have become pressing concerns in recent years.

Carl Cassegård is Associate Professor at the Dept. of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg. He is currently researching Japanese social movements with a focus on the precarity movement and the environmental movement. He is the author of *Youth Movements, Trauma and Alternative Space in Contemporary Japan* (2013) and *Shock and Naturalization in Contemporary Japanese Literature* (2007). E-mail: carl.cassegard@socav.gu.se.

Notes

- ¹ The performance is shown in a You Tube video: “Kubikiri shokuinmura Suto 3.4 nichime Part 2 Doramukanburohen 2009/2/26”; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SZaT-4Y7oQ> (accessed 2012-11-20).
- ² The article is based on fieldwork conducted in Japan 2005-2011. The investigation was conducted through interviews, participant observation and analyses of texts. Material about Kinji House consists mainly of essays and reports left by participants, and interviews with Ogawa and two other participants carried out in 2010. Accounts of Ishigaki Café can be found in Inoue & Kasagi (2005), Kasagi (2006), Shinohara (2005), Shishido (2005). My account is based on five visits in 2005 and several conversations with Inoue and other participants. Kubikubi Café’s activities are well documented by abundant material on the union’s homepage and their blog (<http://extasy07.exblog.jp/>). I made altogether 32 visits to the café and events arranged by the union during 2009-2011. I also used various other texts written by Inoue and Ogawa (e.g. Inoue 2008, 2009; Inoue & Ogawa 2009; Ogawa 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b) as well as reports by visitors and journalists (e.g. Amamiya 2009, Matsumoto 2009, Mōri 2009b). In addition to interviews with activists named in the text, I also make use of four additional interviews with former activists (referred to as A, B, C, D) active on campuses in Kyoto in the 1990s.

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Klimax Working for the Climate: Through Humor, Play, and the Redefinition of Space

By Robert Hamrén

Abstract

This article focuses on the strategies of protest employed by the climate-change activist network Klimax (circa 2007-10). My questions are: What, in their view, was the main threat to our environment? How did they protest against it? The study is based on a close examination of twenty – four protest actions, undertaken during the years 2009-11, as described on the movement’s own KLIMAX homepage. I am interested in how the website’s narratives and visuals demonstrate the ways in which individual actions’ specific protest strategies challenge the current social order. The analysis of these texts and visuals is based on concepts and theories derived from Cultural Studies, textual analysis and theories of representation, research on New and social resistance movements, emotion sociology and cultural–social approaches to place.

Keywords: Climate-change activist, Melucci, redefinition of space, emotions, counter-symbols.

Introduction

This article investigates the strategies of protest employed by the climate-change activist network Klimax (circa 2007-10). What, in their view, was the main threat to our environment; how did they protest against it? Klimax activists envisioned a society that no longer depends on fossil fuels, and they took direct action against sources of carbon dioxide emission such as coal-fueled power plants, cars and airplanes. The network had affiliates in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Uppsala and Malmö; it was a city phenomenon; and it was most active between 2007 and 2010. The organization, which kept no membership register, seems to have consisted of loosely knit groups and of individuals recruited for events through social media. Why is the movement interesting?

The study of social movements encompasses several different scholarly paradigms. Interest in and questions concerning what takes place in civil society has ranged from inquiries into movement strategies, influence and resources to questions of how a single movement may manifest itself differently in different countries. In the early 1980s, European research on social movements was marked by increasing interest in identity, as formulated by constructivist sociological theory – that is, the cultural processes by which collective identity is created. Alberto Melucci is a principal representative of this turn towards social groups whose concern lies not only with political power but also in defending personal autonomy and publicizing the risks of the Western life style (Wettergren & Jamison 2006: 12 ff.). KLIMAX activities fit into this paradigm: protests centered on ecologist personal autonomy were coupled to a great ability to gain Swedish media attention.

In his 2010 book on Swedish street festivals and the “right to the city”, Ulf Stahre describes KLIMAX. The movement arose when the Stockholm Reclaim the Streets movement was disappearing. Reclaim the Streets had arranged protest actions meant to reclaim the city from the injustices of capitalism and the pollution of automobiles. KLIMAX picked up on the idea of street festivals, but adapted to new purposes. Their program may well have been inspired by the British organization Plane Stupid, which launches direct protest against air traffic and airports. Stahre sees KLIMAX as unique, however, in its symbolically expressive manner of protesting. As we shall see, organization members were fond of role-playing (e.g., blocking traffic dressed as polar bears). By 2009, Stahre notes, KLIMAX actions were in decline; the KLIMAX homepage notes no protest action later than December 2011. This is not uncommon; many so-called “new” social movements have limited life-spans. As Melucci puts it, new social movements are more “nomads of the present” than embedded in a long-term historical process. (Melucci 1989/1992: 69). So what might such a “symbolic expressive” style of protest mean in this case?

Sources and Methods

This article is based on a close examination of twenty-four protest actions, 2009-2011, as described on the KLIMAX homepage. I do not attempt a complete or anthropological description of the events; rather, I am interested in website narratives and visuals. These show how the website re-told and represented the movement to its own members and to the public. Today, the KLIMAX homepage server is closed; but the author can supply complete screenshots, etc., upon request. My analysis of these texts and visuals is based on concepts and theories derived from Cultural Studies' textual analysis and theories of representation, research on New and social resistance movements, emotion sociology and a cultural-social approach to place.

Let me illustrate my approach by describing a 2010 KLIMAX "action". In March 2010, Gothenburg KLIMAX members blocked access to a supermarket meat counter. According to the website, the activists wanted to focus attention on the adverse impact of meat consumptions on the environment. Visuals were supplied, such as that below, which shows an activist holding up a placard whose "Meat counter cordoned off because of climate changes" is framed by black-and-yellow zebra stripes (a police cordon signal). This announcement warns bystanders of approaching danger. Further, the website report tells readers, the activists offered people alternative, vegetarian food, and distributed vegetarian recipes.



The homepage gives the following narrative:

This year in the month of March Klimax Gothenburg arranged a blockade of the meat counter at a superstore. For no fewer than 45 minutes they managed to remain in the cold temple of consumption frenzy and take up discussion about the climate effects of meat. They saved some of the customers from the desperate robot-like migration between the shelves, the desperation over the choices and the anger that there never is a really good choice (klimax.se, 2012).

This is a battle of symbols. The activists are challenging established power structures through presenting alternative systems and practices. They strengthen their challenge by showing the public that their “alternative” life-style is feasible, in a public performance of personal, embodied, esthetically articulated practices. These practices included (as we see in the quote above) not only food, cooking hints and arguments, but an alternative to the consumers’ patterns of movement, which were interrupted through the use of contra-symbols.

Climate-friendly recipes, traffic-warnings of cordoned-off areas of meat, “vegetarian food” – all show symbol manipulation. Melucci (1989) describes this presentation of counter-symbols as typical of new social movements. Personal, public performances of this counter-symbolic world are (argues Melucci) a new social-movement medium, effective because they illuminate the dominant system’s hidden and arbitrary codes. A social movement’s aim must, by this argument, be to provide the public with an alternative symbolic system from which to re-interpret individual and collective experiences.

Melucci also argues that collective actions have taken on a new guise which makes political effectiveness and success less important. Conflicts now take place at a symbolic level. The organizations are, he maintains, self-reflective. They can be seen as laboratories where actors test their ability to challenge dominant cultural codes.

This seems to apply to KLIMAX’s actions, as re-told and communicated on their homepage: their publicly-communicated actions challenge the social system at a symbolic level. The website is one example of such communication; but more important, if one believes website texts, is on-site communication with the public. Passers-by and observers are actively engaged during KLIMAX actions. According to the homepage, KLIMAX activists routinely contact and involve bystanders, inviting them to read placards and inverse advertising, enjoy free performances, to participate in discussion, singing, dancing, foot-ball, to eat gifts of vegan food, coffee and cakes, to “shop” at free shops. Above all, observers are invited into the humorous counter-use of symbols. Activists are often dressed up as animals, Santa Claus or clowns, a sort of “play” with power relations which introduced their own alternative to the prevailing social order.

Challenging Emotions in Place

The action described above is very much about claiming place. The redefinition of the significance of a given place is a recurring feature in KLIMAX action. The supermarket, above, is first charged with negative emotions. Supermarket food stores, advertised as places of joyful exercise in self-expression, bodily enjoyment and family-care, are here described cold and frenzied temples of consumption, places of “desperate robot-like migration” which produce only anger. KLIMAX activists seek to change the emotions of the place, and thereby the meaning of the place itself: they generously distribute “environmentally friendly” recipes and vegetarian food, and do so even with a touch of humor.

The use of humor in connection with civil disobedience has a long tradition. It not only ridicules repression and hierarchy, while articulating an alternative state of being. Humor also creates feelings of joy (Lundberg 2008). And joy (if one is to believe the text) would deprive the temple of consumption frenzy of its meaning. Place is included in this challenge to the prevailing symbolic order. The website narratives recount contra-symbolic actions which mean to redefine the places where they occur – be they commercial sites, transportation hubs or places of mass production.

Cultural geographers such as Tim Cresswell (1996: 3ff) claim that we apply various meanings to the word place. Sometimes we refer to a building or a geographical place with a certain meaning. At other times the word appears to have no specific geographical spatial reference, for example in “everything is in its place”, “you must know your place”, “she was put in her place” etc. These phrases intimate that something is correct, that something or someone fits in a certain context but not in others. One’s “correct” place is determined by one’s relationship with other people or objects. Expectations and norms are coupled to a person’s place in the social structure and to the activity that takes place in a geographic location. Thus, “place” has a social as well as a spatial reference. Since the social system first and foremost serves those in power, the norms of place serve ideological functions as well.

Social and spatial place join to form the normative landscape, where something may seem perfectly proper in one place but entirely out-of-place in another. According to Cresswell, this normative landscape is constantly being re-created. It is when spatial ideologies come in conflict with each other that the “proper” nature of places becomes visible. This is also the moment when climate activists (for example) can challenge the normative landscape and bring forth an alternative understanding of the spatial and social place.

Above, I mentioned the KLIMAX text’s reading strong negative emotions into a particular place, and the text’s evident attempt to introduce an alternative tone. Emotions are also a weapon. The fact that activists flout expectations and norms associated with particular social and spatial places raise passions. One should,

perhaps, complement the idea of dominant and counter-dominant symbolic and spatial orders with that of emotional structures. Indeed, Ron Eyerman (2005) claims that emotional structures order society. Anger can motivate activism; feelings of shame can stand in the way of social engagement. Emotions set organizations in motion. It is the collective feeling of an emotionally bonded “we”, independent of time and context, that makes a social movement possible. Such emotional ties are strengthened, further, by the collective protesters’ ritual practices and symbols. Sara Ahmed (2004) has looked, further, at how certain objects become emotionally-charged movement symbols. In accounts of KLIMAX actions, the airplane and the car are two such symbolic objects. Both can be related to anger and fear.

Ahmed brings up fear as one emotion that she believes to both regulate and invalidate social norms. The narrative of global warming is a “successful” image of menace, which constantly recurs in the media, and which is used extensively by environmental organizations such as KLIMAX. The threat of a “climate collapse”, presented as spelling the end of mankind, is always present as a KLIMAX under-text: With terrific speed (their website argues) the world is moving towards a total catastrophe. The future of humanity is at stake; we must go in an entirely different direction. (klimax.se, 2012). This apocalyptic vision is always present, often communicated, and is one inducement to action.

I am convinced that emotions not only strengthened KLIMAX organizationally, but were a necessary element in its strategy. KLIMAX actions were meant to generate specific emotions that would then affect both (imagined) audiences and the activists themselves. Humour, whose effect is often joy, is one such emotion. Another (one that pervades KLIMAX texts) is fear. The production of certain emotions not only helped establish sympathetic contact with audiences, but helped motivate the activists themselves. By appealing to emotions like joy and fear KLIMAX engaged its audiences, inviting them to participate in the emotional culture the network shares.

KLIMAX Actions: Sitting in A Round-About

My first example of symbolic and emotional struggle over the meaning of place is an action that took place in Uppsala in 2010. KLIMAX occupied a traffic round-about in order to call attention to environmental problems and to issues of city planning.

On Sunday, April 17th, Uppsala’s Klimax “occupied” a bit of land, the round-about traffic circle at the intersection of Kyrkogårdsgatan and S:t Johannesgata. The website provides the movement’s own version of the events. Activists spent the time planting vegetables and drinking coffee, while ten bicyclists rode around and around them in the traffic circle, including one dressed as a polar bear, carried along on a bicycle trailer. KLIMAX activist Per Tjäder went on record as saying

that the action was in order to observe the Small Farmers' International Battle Day, in memory of nineteen peasants murdered by military police in Brazil. (The placard in the picture reads "The land is occupied by Uppsala's landless peasants".) The occupation thus seems meant to contrast personal, peasant production of food and "social and constructive" activities such as bicycling and coffee-drinking against environmentally disastrous practices such as driving cars and highways, car pollution, and global land-robbing practices:

By delaying traffic we also want to show problems that are in today's city planning in Sweden. Enormous areas are left for drivers who make our environment dirty and destroy our climate, while social and constructive activities must stay in the periphery. The problems with lack of food in the world today is exacerbated by the fact that one uses agricultural products as fuel in our cars, at the same time as the highways occupy more and more of the best agricultural land in the world (klimax.se, 2012).



Note the symbols involved here (again, interestingly, including patterns of movement). A traffic circle is meant to keep traffic flowing. Those entering the circle give precedence to vehicles (cars) that already are in the circle. The activists break the flow by using the "wrong" kind of vehicles in the traffic circle, hindering cars from entering. They also transgress norms about how bit of land inside the roundabout's interior circle should be utilized, and thus show that it is possible to think differently about what and whom the place serves. The traffic circle's small patch of lawn is given direct associations to agriculture and food. Through their action, they call attention to the fact the automobile traffic takes up place and claims otherwise useful land.

Coffee, placards, planting vegetables in impossible places, riding round and round, stopping traffic with bicycle-borne polar-bears: the activists' protest actions bear some resemblance to carnival-like events. According to Strindlund & Vinthagen (2011), such actions do not set out to engage the authorities in political dialogue. Rather, they play pranks on (and thus, arguably, subvert) the authorities. This kind of performance was used effectively, not least, in the non-violent Indian liberation movement. It remains popular: at the G8 meeting in Scotland 2005, a group of activists actually dressed up as clowns (ibid: 280).

Dressing up as an animal, of course, is also – as Timothy Ingalsbee (1996: 270) points out – a way of intensifying an ideological message. In this case, it signifies the activists' ecological identification with nature. For the environmental movement, the polar bear is a recurring symbol. It has great media appeal. The link between the diminishing Arctic icecap and the polar bear's extinction is a prevalent symbol of the vulnerability of the earth. Cars, of course, are another key KLIMAX symbol. The automobile is presented as a global threat, not only because of emissions but because biofuels threaten the food supply of the third world. The reference, here, is to ethanol-powered cars. To plant, drink coffee, and bicycle around in an occupied round-about become a set of anti-car, symbolic acts of resistance: the actions show and offer “alternatives”, not least to the waste of limited resources, especially those of poor countries.

The “Climate Clash”

Actions playing “pranks” against, for instance, car-directed city infrastructure, are a recurring theme in KLIMAX. Cars are already heavily charged symbols in modern society: as wrecks, penis extensions, environment rogues, symbols of city/village, as carriers of high or low social status. In the eyes of KLIMAX, cars and the inner-city motor roads represent a threat to the environment and to people's health. The car is also a socially unjust means of transportation. On its homepage, KLIMAX states that

many people cannot afford to drive a car, but must use public transportation, travel on bicycle or walk. The fact that these latter forms of transportation are far better for the environment, and for people's health, hardly needs reiteration, but we think it is important to stress that there are also egalitarian forms of transportation (klimax.se, 2012).

KLIMAX's means of spot-lighting this problem has been to arrange what it termed “climate clashes” in larger cities such as Stockholm, Malmö, Gothenburg and Uppsala. In this, KLIMAX was inspired by the so-called “culture clashes” arranged twenty years earlier in Stockholm. These #clashes” had started off as traffic blockades but subsequently turned into a sort of cultural festival, hence their name (Stahre 2010: 185).

In their “climate clashes”, KLIMAX brings together a series of emotionally loaded symbols and ideas which challenge the connotations of the place. This can start with posters advertising the event. Below, for instance, we can see how an upcoming action is announced, in a combination of meaning-carrying entities; smoke, a lonely child trying to eat up the car, the black background, the dove smoking a cigarette. (The slogan reads, “For a car-free inner city and a sustainable society”.) Together, the images form a kind of horror vision of a future society. Placing a baby child – the symbol of future generations, innocent and natural, something to safeguard – in a horrible, insecure place, far from nature (save in its perverted, smoking-dove guise) and parents, says something not only about who has right to the city, but just who is in the wrong place: drivers and cars.

To disturb traffic by physically sitting down in the middle of the city street is what Cresswell would describe as transgression (of the normative landscape). This is what KLIMAX activists did; and they got strong reactions. According to the KLIMAX homepage account of a “climate clash” action in Malmö, things became rowdy when some drivers refused to stop: they would detour around or simply drive straight ahead (klimax.se, 2012). The KLIMAX homepage describes how about two



hundred activists gathered and chanted slogans, attacking “motorism” in order to “save the planet from a climate catastrophe”. They blocked a heavily trafficked city street. True to type, the activists had

quickly carried out a table at which they offered coffee and home-baked goods. A polar bear made a little welcome speech on [from on top of] a [city] electrical box and a penguin went around collecting money for KLIMAX. The police were present but made no attempt to break the blockade. Nor were lines formed, as drivers were quick to find short cuts in one of the side streets. Also, many chose to drive straight on over the traffic island between the roadways in order to avoid waiting. Buses were let through and were greeted with hand-waving and cries of joy (klimax.se, 2012).

This description of a “climate clash” may be considered characteristic for this type of action. An underlying threat is often cited, in this case a future climate catastrophe. The message of apocalypse is, moreover, given from within a particular, symbolically-laden place. In this case, it is a heavily trafficked road which the activists transform into a “performance stage”. Theater expert Dirk Gindt (2007: 39-40) defines “theatricity” as songs, slogans, flags, costumes (polar bears and penguins) and the like that differ from the customary and normal. The “theatrical” action takes place in a kind of extended context – a public place – outside the ordinary stage. The public place, as Cresswell points out, has its own ideological association and meaning; and this, in turn, contributes to the theatric event. (For similar analyses of environmental activism, Alaimo 2011: 45.) The heavily trafficked road has a symbolic content which KLIMAX challenged, altered and “extended”, so to speak. A transportation route was transformed into a recreational place, an invitation to get out of the car, meet others, take a coffee-break. The website text also goes into the emotions involved. There is a playful (polar-bear) welcome from a city infrastructure perch; no waiting was involved; busses become positive symbolic objects, a kind of ally, greeted with hand-waving and shouts of joy.

Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer

The free hand-out of food and coffee is typical for KLIMAX actions. Commercialized consumption is ranged with car emissions as an environmental problem. KLIMAX has protested against consumption in actions in shopping arcades. According to Cresswell (1996: 160), shopping arcades are prime examples of places that try to hide their historical origin by appearing as something “natural” that just “is”, rather than the result of series of social relations created by capitalism, each with its unique meaning. A prime, if not public, place for intervention.

The organization’s homepage describes, accordingly, how activists mingled with Christmas shoppers in a city shopping arcade where, according to the website text, they “dumped” masses of cinnamon buns. They were dressed as Santa Claus (the pictures shows one such, holding a package on which “?? Christmas joy??” is written), distributing Christmas cards and carrying a poster with the slogan “Santa Claus hates Christmas ham” (the Swedish Christmas dinner focuses on ham). Instead of using polar bears to show their identification with animals, an activist was dressed as the red-nosed reindeer Rudolf. Activists also made suggestions and demands. They (according to the text) “called for restraint and reflection on what Christmas is all about”, as well as general de-commercialization and a six-hour workday. Again, the norms defining what belongs to and goes on in a given place, this time a shopping arcade at Christmas, are used to frame and strengthen a *challenge* to that content and those actions – in the form of humorous, reinterpreted theater.

The emotions engendered by this action were good: the activists were, according to the homepage, met with “encouragement and warm smiles”. But their joyous invitation to reinvent the place was suddenly stopped. This was not, after all, a public space: it was private and commercial. Security guards set in “violent intervention [...] they were wrestled down, and were mocked for their beliefs” (klimax.se, 2012).

The Swedish Christmas celebration comprises a number of phenomena such as Christmas gifts, food, mulled wine, window displays, advent-calendar TV-shows, year-end sales, etc. Although some go to midnight mass and early service on Christmas Day, Sweden is relatively secular; and



so consumption plays a central role in the celebration. Buying Christmas gifts and food is the natural thing to do. Here KLIMAX succeeded in transgressing the rules for behaving suitably within this (semi-private) place, which led to security-guard action.

At the same time, however, they claimed that they had won approval of those present in the arcade. Klimax urges people to do something different, to slow down and reflect, calling for “restraint and reflection on what Christmas is all about”. The symbolic world is very much like that of a church. It invites people to participate in spirituality in the form of higher, communal values, including communal coffee and cakes.

Like Christmas, moreover, this type of action has its own history and tradition. Demonstrators dressed up as Santa Clauses are not new. In the 1970s, the Danish non-violent theater group Solvognen arranged several anti-consumption demonstrations (Strindlund & Vinthagen 2011: 97). They would, for example, take merchandise off the shelves in department stores and distribute it among the customers as truly “free” gifts. Like the Klimax activists, the Danish activists were seized by the police during what the participants called a “violent” episode – indeed, it led sympathetic shoppers to protest against the police. One is lucky, however, to be so successful in creating a counter-space. Cresswell (1996: 24) writes that those who transgress the norms are often themselves considered abnormal – including, of course, activists who transgress in public.

Bill-Boards as Contested Places

KLIMAX had other places, as well, in which it could use the strategy of appealing to emotions of shame, guilt, pleasure – as well as to people’s sense of irony (humor and joy). These were billboards. KLIMAX’s homepage has up-loaded several pictures from actions, without captions, featuring bill-board advertisements whose messages have been altered – so-called reverse advertising. Scholars link this phenomenon to the concept culture jam, activism where the actor infringes on well-known signs and symbols. (In Sweden, Adbusters are probably among the most well-known logos saboteurs.) Åsa Wettergren (2005: 174) traces culture jam as an ironic resistance technique to the French Situationist Internationale and its *détournement* (inversion, turning upside down). The 1960s Situationists claimed that the spread of consumption culture and mass media transformed society into a seductive spectacle, blunting working-class activism. Their answer, *détournement*, involved exposing the “spectacle” by creating situations or visions of another, possible world. How did KLIMAX use reverse advertising to this end?

Consider the pictures below.

The first picture is a billboard advertising the travel agency *detur* (their non-capitalization and italization) with the slogan “where the sun shines!”. The joyful image of bikini-clad female, sea, sun and beach, headed “Winter 2010-2011”, endorses the slogan. If you buy a vacation through *detur*, you will get the happiness of sunny and warm weather – a scarce commodity in Sweden, where summers are short and winters long. (The female featured is another matter.) But that joy is then openly belied. The woman brandishes and even seems to caress a large, prominent tattoo of a “no flying” sign, a crossed-over airplane. The sight of this, emblazoned prominently on the woman’s arm, brings consumption-culture’s stream of emotionally-laden symbols to a jolting halt. Many people know that flying is bad for the environment. The aim is to remind people with travel plans of the negative environmental consequences of flight. I would call the tattoo an “ironic trope” (Lindgren 2011: 91f). The airplane becomes an object



associated with “doing wrong” by contributing to climate change. The picture’s signification has been reversed; new connotations have changed its original message.

The second website picture features an advertisement for a conservative party’s pet project, “Bypass Stockholm” – that is, the plans for a new, partially under-ground Stockholm expressway. The proposal had not met with approval from all sides. Rather, the plan to construct additional expressways has been criticized for producing more traffic and greater carbon dioxide emissions. The image has been “turned” by using masks as ironic tropes – less seductive and more shocking than the tattoo. The two serious-looking conservative politicians, supposedly radiating



statesmanlike concentration, are now both muzzled, worried-looking, dressed-down as construction workers and seeking protection against emissions – and therefore comical. Moreover, the politicians stand very close together under the conservative party’s logo – the circle enclosing the word TOGETHER. A viewer might think that perhaps without the masks they are together, united for a “better” environment; but with the masks they look more like two oddly-groomed figures huddled together to protect themselves against the emissions caused by their own proposition. If, as Wettergren argues (2005: 179ff), cultural symbols serve the purpose of regulating people’s options by codifying good or bad choices, KLIMAX’s interference with this last image recodes its message and diminishes its political impact.

KLIMAX used ironic humor as a strategy in another protest against the Bypass Stockholm project, this one outside Stockholm’s Royal Palace. They chose this location because they supposedly wanted to appeal to the Swedish King for help, entreating him to “live up” to his Christmas Speech of 2010. As their petition (reproduced on their website) put it, “In his Christmas speech 2010, the King compared earth to an apple, and life here on earth the King called fragile as dew on the skin of the apple.” We agree with the King, the petition continued, and therefore “are confident” that the King, soon to meet with Catharina Elmsäter-Svärd, Swedish minister of infrastructure, would urge her to rethink the Bypass. “Say to her”, the petition continues, “that to build a six-lane expressway on this beautiful apple

is to build us firmly into automobile traffic” – and this in a situation when, rather, one must “build” traffic “away”. Say (the petition continues)

That you are merely King but that you feel uneasy about the situation and are forced to bring this up. Not only will the road run close to Drottningholm [Palace] and an important world universal heritage but it will also ruin the possibilities for life on this fragile, beautiful apple, and that you now want to talk about this over lunch. That if we are to survive, Bypass Stockholm must be stopped (klimax.se, 2012).

This message is, like many KLIMAX texts, both well formulated and has clear ironical undertones (“merely King”, “not only” run close to the Palace but destroy life on earth, “talk about this over lunch”). KLIMAX often makes ironic use of material from other texts: in this case, they also take out an intertextual loan from the King’s Christmas speech. The humorous result exposes power relations. The King’s Christmas speech metaphor may very well have presented His Majesty’s emotional standpoint on nature’s needs, but when quoted in the KLIMAX text it seems threadbare and ineffectual. The petition, indeed, invokes the King as an ally, but this invocation is ironic; and it is in this irony that gives the text its explosive political effect. The text confirms Melucci’s claims about this kind of network: the form is in itself both result and expression of resistance against the established institutions.

The petition is presented at a location which is chosen with care: next to a heavily trafficked road outside the royal palace. This is, of course, more or less expected of petitioners to the Court. However, in this case the activists do not transgress the expected spatial behavior and the presence of KLIMAX does not lead to a redefinition of the place – unless using this place to present such a heavily ironic petition, obviously not meant to be taken seriously (“merely King”, “you now want to talk about this over lunch”) is itself a challenge to emplaced traditions of King-subject, government-citizen authority.

Altogether New Places: Giving Things Away

A recurring KLIMAX feature is the so-called “free-store” event. The point is to create a place from which commercial consumption can be excluded, thus encouraging “right” feelings such as sharing and generosity. At a free-store, people take what they want free of charge, and leave off things they wish to give away. The KLIMAX website characterizes the free-store a way of “practicing alternatives to the capitalist system” (klimax.se, 2012) – or, as the placard on the picture shows, “FREE-STORE – SHOP FOR REAL – CONSUME SUSTAINABLY HERE WITH US”. An activist describes the phenomenon on-line:

A for-free-store is a concrete, above all fun way to decrease carbon dioxide emissions and environmental effects that come from newly produced goods. Put up a couple of tables and clothes racks in the city, get together friends and strangers and let clothes, gadgets and toys find new homes. [...] a for-free-store is a concrete alternative to capitalism’s unsustainable market and eternal growth. In future Klimax

for-free-stores we think there should be room for free services such as bicycle repairs, haircuts, and *dumpstrad* food [food recovered from supermarket dumpsters] (klimax.se, 2012).



The activists goes on to write that the ties between people are strengthened by the exchange of gifts, and that it teaches people to be more generous. “By sharing you can achieve security [in] that your neighbors will share with you when this is what you need. In this way, everyone gets richer without having to exploit anyone” (klimax.se, 2012).

According to the activists, if no alternatives to the consumption society are offered ruin will be the consequence.

Capitalism has led to the greatest inequality in wealth, the greatest mass starvation and the poorest distribution system in history. Capitalism’s fixation on growth has caused a climate chaos that may be the death of humanity and the world. (klimax.se, 2012).

In this description, an apocalyptic view of humanity’s future is paired with a view of an alternative humanity which has more fun, is more generous, is more egalitarian, lives more ascetically and is more conscious in its consumption. Altruism is seen a solution to the coming crisis. Some of this may seem nostalgic. To advocate a non-commercial exchange culture connotes a will to struggle for a pre-industrial, more pristine culture. “Evil” is placed in consumerism, as exemplified in the shopping arcade. On the other hand, I believe that when the activists speak of virtues such as thrift and generosity, they refer back to traditional humanistic

values. Thrift, simplicity and self-restraint are, indeed, the values that most often characterize the ecological discourse (Alaimo 2011: 44).

I quoted Sara Ahmed, above, as saying that emotions are not only things people carry within them. Emotions circulate in interactions between people; objects can be associated with emotions. It is evident that in the actions described above cars and airplanes, for example, are associated with expressions of negative feelings while the for-free-store is associated with positive feelings. The free-store is, “above all, fun”. KLIMAX practices seem often meant to call forth well-being, irony, concern and even sympathetic identification.

This contrasts with studies done of other environmental movements. Take, for instance, animal rights activists. As Jacobsson and Lindblom (2013) show, these activists compare industrial meat production with extermination camps. They are often driven by a sudden awakening to the fact that animals suffer. In order to evoke feelings of disgust in themselves, they may start the day by looking at films or pictures depicting mistreatment of animals. The radical animal rights organization is ideologically anchored and has a clear goal: to stop industrial meat production. Here, we are faced with a fundamentalist worldview

KLIMAX’s use of playfulness and humor, and way in which it “easily” shifts between different symbols, is interesting insofar as its activists are also usually portrayed as fundamentalists. Of course, my comparison is based on website texts and visuals; Jacobsson and Lindblom use interviews. Nonetheless, the contrast is striking. The animal rights organization attempts physically to stop something that is being done. KLIMAX acts out its resistance on a playful, symbolic level. In this, the movement falls outside the prevailing and popular image of environmental activists. Perhaps this is intentional – perhaps the focus on pleasant fun allows KLIMAX to reach its audience more effectively, by side-stepping the view that environmentalism is a matter of dour sacrifice? Or does it devalue and trivialize the message?

Conclusion

As a rule, social movement research focuses on issues such as organization, identity formation, globalization, resource mobilization, political power etc. In this article, I have taken a closer look at individual actions and their meaning in terms of opinion-making, that is, the manner in which the specific protest strategies of individual actions challenge the current social order. I have chosen to focus on a different aspect of one of today’s networks, one that shows greater flexibility than do the mass movements of the industrialized society, not least in its decentralized and symbolically charged resistance. This aspect also appears to be imbued with playfulness and humor, in contrast to, e.g., Swedish animal rights activism. At the same time, these activists do view the “climate threat” in strong emotionally negative terms.

In today's society, which Melucci sees as characterized by the increasing importance of the symbolic, one may take it for granted that communication is essential to the function of many social movements. I have, accordingly, analyzed the communication, the narratives presented on the KLIMAX website. My focus on these climate activists was initially sparked by an interest in how various environmentalist groups view questions of humanity's place in and responsibilities towards nature. There exist several parallel discourses about nature: nature to be discovered and mastered, as a threat, as a source of income, as something to be valued for itself, etc.

Surprisingly, it appeared that "nature" was very much absent in KLIMAX rhetoric. There was general talk of a threat from increased carbon dioxide emission and a subsequent climate collapse, and there were the activists who dressed up as animals. The rest of the references were to city, roads, cars and humans. The focus, evidently, was not on ecology, but challenging the current social system (first and foremost transportation policies and people's consumerist life styles).

In order to challenge the prevalent view of city, transportation and consumption KLIMAX arranged climate crashes, free-shops, protests in shopping arcades, blockades of superstores, different types of culture jam (anti-advertising), and so on. A characteristic feature of the actions was KLIMAX's attempts to create space for alternative ways of thinking and acting in relation to specific socially-determined places. In an almost ritual manner, they used "inappropriate" actions and things to make it possible to use the original places and situations for pause and reflection. They challenged their audiences to think new thoughts, to give up the capitalist and technocratic society, to become physical and participate in the overturn of the symbolic system. They played not only on feelings of shame but of laughter, in efforts to change opinions. They were, thus, typical "new social movements", bent on winning the battle over the creation of meaning, and following Wettergren's (2005: 179) precept: if information is to carry meaning, it must catch the attention of the recipient and affect him or her with its challenge and questioning, through identification with emotive and cultural symbols.

Whether KLIMAX succeeded in affecting its audience cannot be answered within the scope of this article, but they certainly made use of well-known emotive and cultural symbols. Narratives recurred to allies and positive emotional objects, symbols of vulnerability, symbols of respect (and perhaps light ridicule): polar bears, a baby, Santa Clauses, bicycles, busses, the King, vegan snacks, thrown-away food and free clothing and services. Then there were the objects constantly cited in negative emotional contexts, to be resisted and avoided: cars, meat, airplanes, shopping arcades and holidays that encourage consumption. These sets of objects were played out against each other in the narratives presented on the KLIMAX homepage. If, as the researchers cited here have argued, power is situated in symbols, then KLIMAX has shown that a mastery of cultural codes allows one to challenge established thought patterns and ways of life.

Robert Hamrén has a Ph.D. in Gender Studies at Linköping University in 2007. During the past four years, he has worked in research funding at VINNOVA (Swedish Agency for Innovation Systems). He is currently Research Manager at Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (The Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences). Hamréns research has centered on issues related to identity, power, gender, class and emotions in civil society. His publications include (with Agneta Stark) *Frivilligarbetets kön - Kvinnor, män och frivilligt arbete*, Ajour: Svenska kommunförbundet, Stockholm (2000); *Vi är bara några kompisar som träffas ibland. Rotary som en manlig arena*, Normal förlag: Stockholm. (diss., 2007); and *Känslan och platsens betydelse för mäns sociala organisering*, Statens Offentliga Utredningar (2014:6). E-mail: Robert.hamren@rj.se.

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The Revolution *Will* be Uploaded: Vernacular Video and the Arab Spring

By Peter Snowdon

Abstract

The vernacular online videos produced by the Arab revolutions constitute an unprecedented (though not unproblematic) historical resource for understanding the subjective experience of the ordinary people who find themselves on the front line of revolutionary struggle. But they also effect a sea-change in the way in which we view and understand YouTube itself. This article argues that the political significance of these videos lies less in their explicit content, than in their aesthetics - that is, in the new formal and sensory propositions that they constitute, the ways in which they “redistribute the sensible” (Rancière).

The prologue proposes, following Judith Butler, that “the people” who are the subject of history are essentially a performative event, rather than a pre-existing entity, and that to write about revolution therefore requires a performative and allegorical approach. The first section reviews the current academic notion of “vernacular video” in the light of Ivan Illich’s work of the early 1980s on vernacular language and values, and argues that a stronger, more political conception of the vernacular is necessary to do justice to these works. The second section offers a close reading of one particular video from the Libyan uprising, and argues that it offers less an example, than an allegory of the dialogical relationship between the individual and the collective that defines the moral economy of the vernacular. The article concludes by proposing that the right response to such videos is not (just) more theory or criticism, but rather to seek to emulate their radically egalitarian forms of practice.

Keywords: Ivan Illich, Judith Butler, revolution, Arab Spring, YouTube, online video, vernacular, Libya.

Introduction

Not the least extraordinary thing about the Arab revolutions of 2010 onwards is the fact that they have given rise to an exercise in popular self-documentation on an unprecedented scale. In this, they have an obvious precursor in the Iranian Green Movement of 2009, which might be considered an outlier event from the same series, a first tremor announcing the larger earthquake to come. But whether we include Iran in 2009 or not, this ongoing sequence is, I believe, the first time since the invention of the cinema that the people have not largely left it to experts, professionals and/or outsiders to film their attempts to overthrow an oppressive order, but have instead seen it as part and parcel of their revolutionary action, even as part of their revolutionary duty, to film each other as together they made and unmade history, day in and day out.

The result has been, for the viewer, an almost overwhelming proliferation of material, archived and made accessible in quasi-real time via online video-sharing websites. These videos do not simply sit there on YouTube, either, waiting for us to stumble on them: they are always already in circulation, posted and reposted via Twitter and Facebook, as well as being passed on through more private communications channels, such as email. They are not static objects waiting to be discovered and analyzed: they are part and parcel of a much larger dynamic process, in which what matters most is not any specific video itself, so much as the affective energy that they gather and transmit as they travel through the complex online-offline ecosystems these events have carved out across the region, and beyond. These videos are, then, not primarily videos, so much as one vector among many for the ongoing work of mutual self-mobilization that makes revolutionary social change possible, or at least, conceivable (Aouragh & Alexander 2011).

This double character, matching massive volume with high velocity, makes this phenomenon even harder to pin down – if indeed it makes any sense to refer to these videos as a single phenomenon at all. After all, no single viewer, however dedicated, is ever likely to be able to view enough of these videos to establish with reasonable confidence what might constitute any given sample of them as “representative”. At the same time, one does not have to watch so many of them before one comes across one or more which do not simply *record* events that were, or aspired to be, significant, or even exceptional, but which also *produce* an exceptional effect upon the viewer, even when that viewer is remote, unfamiliar with the context, and has little or no prior emotional connection with the content.

This article represents a first step towards trying to elaborate an approach to the videos from the Arab revolutions which can do justice to them, both as a mass phenomenon that is too vast ever to be fully encompassed by analysis, and as a series of singular events whose perceived value is related to, but not entirely dependent upon, their online and offline contexts.

In the first section of this article, I propose a theoretical framework for considering these videos collectively as an emerging “vernacular” practice, based on the sense given to that term by Ivan Illich in his work of the early 1980s.¹ In doing so, I am applying Illich’s *political* conception of the vernacular to a realm (online video) where the term has generally functioned up till now as a purely *descriptive* category. But I am also actively extending it to a domain of practice – the Internet – to which Illich himself never applied it, and I do so in a way which he might not have approved of, though I would argue that this extended usage is indeed consonant both with certain strands in his own thought, and with the views of some of his closest friends and intellectual heirs (Esteva & Prakash 1998).

These online vernacular practices differ from their offline forbears in part because they are *emerging* practices, rather than established ones (Mackey 2010). Their vernacular status is less a given, than a projection: we are watching territory being claimed, contentiously and performatively, rather than merely observing a state of affairs whose status is securely established and largely consensual. As such, these videos represent not so much the continuation or renewal of an earlier practice, as an *aesthetic* (that is, sensory *and* formal) revolution in the way that online video is perceived and used. Following Jacques Rancière, I propose that we should see the aesthetic dimension of these videos as integral to the political proposition that they represent. In this perspective, they function less as the documentation or representation of a political process that is already given in reality, than as a “redistribution of the sensible” that makes new forms of political process possible. In doing so, they prefigure a new order that is at once, and indissolubly, political and sensory (Rancière 2000).

In the second section, I turn to examine what this “aesthetic revolution” consists in when viewed close up, through the detailed discussion of one particular video from Libya. Building on the idea that the aesthetic prefigures the political, I seek to foreground precisely those formal and sensory features that are generally bypassed by both social scientists and political commentators when they discuss such videos as evidence of social and political phenomena. If Rancière is right, it is precisely these aesthetic features that we need to attend to, if we are to understand the kind of politics that videos such as this one may anticipate or invoke.

The first part of my essay, then, constructs this video practice in terms of a “collective” subject – the people, or more precisely, the Arab peoples, who have “occupied” the virtual public space of YouTube in a way that can be seen as analogous to the way in which they have repeatedly occupied physical public spaces over the last three years. The second part, on the other hand, explores the work of an anonymous, but incontrovertibly singular (and almost certainly male) cameraperson, in order to bring out what is unique and irreducibly complex about the specific forms of subjectivity that one particular vernacular video can construct.

Before proceeding with my main arguments, however, it is first necessary to clarify a little further some of the presuppositions I am making about the nature of

revolutionary processes, including their mediation through film and video, on the one hand, and about the limitations and potentials of different ways of analyzing and writing about them, on the other.

Methodological Prologue: The People as Performance

Judith Butler has argued that “the people” referred to in the talismanic anaphora of the Arab revolutions, “The people want...” (*Ash-sha‘b yurīd*), should not be understood as a singular, pre-existing and substantial, essence, however “progressively” defined, but rather as a performative, plural, conflictual, and self-constituting event. The political meaning of the “people” who are invoked in such moments is not given in advance, but exists only as the projected outcome of the process which such a declaration initiates, without any guarantee of being able to see it through (Butler 2013). And her interpretation has been confirmed by close observers of these events themselves:

As revolutionaries have testified [...] it was the collective act of stating that the people wanted something that created the sense there was a social actor by that name. For many Egyptian activists, it was this locutionary event that proved there was an Egyptian people capable of revolutionary action in the first place (Colla 2012).

Indeed, following Hannah Arendt, Butler sees the inaugural moment of this performative event as not even linguistic, but physical. The coming together of bodies, whether in a single time and place, or distributed and yet connected, not only makes this collective self-enunciation possible, but in some sense, *already is* the claim that, simply through their physical presence or attention to one another, “the people” may be said to have come into existence (Butler 2011, 2013).



*Performing the people who perform the revolution: Cairo, 28 January 2011
(Still from video by Hossam El-Hamlawy, subtitles by Peter Snowdon)*

So “the people” of the Arab revolutions, as I use the term in this essay, is a performance. And the videos which they produce and post online are part of that performance – part of that process of constituting themselves as a collective subject, and negotiating exactly what such a form of subjectivity may be and can do. Since the sense of “the people” is therefore always dependent on the specific moments of its production in public space, and not vice versa, the people is never a substance that might be captured in a static definition: it is at most an ongoing process, and at least, a series of irruptive interventions, whose apparent isolation from one another is perhaps one of the things that it is most difficult, and most necessary, for political theory, and political activists, to think through.

If the people is a performance, and a process, then it follows that some of the problems alluded to above in my introduction may be less intractable than they at first seemed. For the performative changes the nature of the relationship, not only between the individual and the collective, but also between each event and the larger political phenomena in which it seeks, and sometimes finds, its meaning. In that case, there is no “Arab revolution(s)”, singular or plural (no “Egyptian revolution”, no Tunisian, no Bahraini...), and no corpus, real or imagined, of “the Arab revolution videos”. There is only ever an accumulation of particular paths through experience, and through the traces of experience performed that are video, some of which may intersect with our own paths, but which can never be totalized arithmetically, statistically, or otherwise, to produce a single, coherent, and objectively knowable world, because the worlds that they invoke, and help to make, can never exactly coincide, even if in places they may touch or even overlap.

In bringing together in this article a theoretical discussion of vernacular video in general, with my attempts at interpreting one particular video, I am *not* therefore proposing that the particular should be read simply as a case study whose specific features, once explicated, may validate the more general claims that precede it. Rather, following Gregson (2011), I am as much interested in how the experience of the specific and the particular exceed and overflow any conceptual limits within which we may try to enclose them, and how the kind of thinking which they provoke cannot be separated out from specific textures of embodied, sensory experience, without being caricatured and betrayed.

It is for this reason that my “reading” of the Libyan video is less a reading than a *writing*. Borrowing deliberately from literary and poetic techniques, I try to do justice to what there is in this video that cannot be separated out for capture in concepts, as well as to what can. Through ekphrasis, and in particular by dramatizing the different subjective positions to be found both within the video (cameraperson, martyr, crowd...) and outside (viewers, both real and hypothetical, singular and plural), I try to give a sense of the complexity of the way it figures and refigures the relationship of the individual to the collective, without implying that

this complex choreography can be reduced to something as blunt and immobile as a “theory” of the revolutionary subject.

As long as the revolution is in progress, there can be no “theory” of the revolution. But as long as the revolution is in progress, there will and indeed must be theorizing going on. This concrete, situated theorizing privileges the possible over the actual, the embodied over the abstract, and the particular over the general. For that reason, the video discussed in the second part of this essay should be viewed neither as a “sample” that is conveniently representative of some larger body of work, nor as so irremediably unique that it can have nothing useful to say about the larger course of these events and their mediation. Rather, I offer both the video, and my textual re-enactment of it, as (in John Law’s sense) an *allegory*: that is, an aesthetic relationship, indissolubly abstract *and* sensory, which condenses in a single complex figure *both* something that is conceptually significant, *and* all those aspects of our experience of it which explicitly and persistently resist conceptualization (Law 2004: 96-113).

My argument, therefore, embraces theory, rather than rejecting it. But it embraces it as just one more kind of practice – as a particular mode of performance, rather than an Archimedean point from which performances and practices can be assembled, compared and judged. Even my discussion of Illich on the vernacular, by extending his concept far beyond its original field of application, seeks not simply to recognize a state of affairs, but to enact an ontological politics (Mol 1999). And behind that ontological politics, there is, of course, a politics *tout court*.

In the final paragraphs of this essay, then, instead of trying to tie my arguments up in neatly conclusive theoretical bundles, I return instead to the question of practice, broadly conceived, and try to make explicit the kind of politics which I see these videos as proposing (in general), and enacting (in the particular cases of their own times and places). More specifically, I argue that, in the wake of these revolutions, video making can only be approached, beyond both personal creative pursuit and collective political strategy, as a radically egalitarian commitment to the poetic possibilities of the present.

Defining the Vernacular: Ivan Illich Looks at YouTube

The term “vernacular video” is commonly used to refer to the proliferation of user-generated content provoked by video-sharing services such as YouTube. In academic circles, this term is generally treated as straightforwardly descriptive, and largely synonymous with “non-professional” or “non-commercial”. This “depoliticized” vocabulary both reflects, and obscures, the atypical nature of the early years of online video, which were dominated by North American and (to a lesser extent) European productions. Thus, by the force of historical circumstance and

ethnocentric happenstance, the idea of “vernacular video” has come in practice to be heavily weighted towards the domestic and the personal.²

In the first part of this article, I want to develop a concept of the vernacular which is explicitly political, rather than descriptive, and which might provide a better basis for exploring the plurality of grassroots media practices emerging on today’s decentered Internet, without eliding the constraints and imbalances of power within which they have to operate. To do this, I turn for guidance to the work of Ivan Illich.

In the early 1980s, Illich published two books in which he developed a theory of “vernacular values”. (A third book to be entitled, precisely, *Vernacular Values* was planned and announced, but never appeared: Illich 1982: xi). In the first of these, *Shadow Work* (Illich 1981), Illich identified vernacular practices as those activities that help make any given community autonomous from both the market and the State – activities which enhance subsistence, and reduce dependency.

This positive definition subsumes the negative definitions cited above (“non-professional”, “non-commercial”), but it also goes well beyond them. The term “subsistence” in particular is intended by Illich in a strong sense, which implies not only an autonomous relation to the means of material survival, but also a complex dialogue between the individual and the collective. As he wrote in *Gender* in 1982, a “subsistence ethics”, which he saw as closely related to E.P. Thompson’s “moral economy”, “affirms the right of every villager, of every member of the crowd, to make survival the supreme rule of common behaviour, not the isolated right of an individual. Both terms bespeak an attitude, an orientation, that protects the weakest from ruin” (Illich 1982: 111; cf. Thompson 1963). The right that is affirmed, it should be noted, is not the right of the group, as if it preexisted any individual action or decision: it is the right of the individual to limit his or her own rights and desires in favor of those of others, and in particular, of those who are most in need of such a gesture. This gesture, then, mirrors that described by Butler, who draws attention to the right of the individual to participate freely in enacting the people, rather than to simply be “enacted” as one of them, with or without her or his consent.

Seen in this way, to say that vernacular practices are subsistence-oriented, is to say that they are inherently ethical and political in ways that are incompatible with an atomistic and possessive vision of social rationality. Indeed, it is the viewpoint which such vernacular values provide which enables Illich to go on and distinguish a type of practice which is patently non-professional and non-commercial, but which is also anti-vernacular, because it aggravates rather than diminishes our dependency on commodities and services. This is the “shadow work” of the title of his 1981 book, which consists of all those unpaid activities that are needed to make commodities bought on the market genuinely useful to and usable by the household (Illich 1981: 99-116; Illich 1982: 45-60). The category of shadow work allows Illich to identify much of what lies apparently outside the bureaucratic and

commercial institutions of the modern State as being in fact deeply conditioned by those institutions. Many of the personal and individualistic Euro-American uses of online video which common academic usage would describe as “vernacular” should plausibly be classified as shadow work, in Illich’s terms, precisely because they make little or no contribution to strengthening those forms of collective reciprocity on which autonomy and subsistence depend. “Broadcasting yourself” is not, or at least not necessarily, a way of acknowledging the needs of others, or of putting the group before the individual.

Illich’s account of the vernacular is complex and far from systematic. For my present purposes I simply wish to point out three other characteristics of vernacular values as he describes them which specifically resonate with the argument I am making here. For Illich, the vernacular is intrinsically *performative*; it is essentially rooted in the primacy of *bodily* gesture and action; and it therefore cannot be understood through abstract conceptual analysis, but can only be approached through *poetry* and *metaphor*.

Where classical Western science posits a space that is universal, homogenous, isotropic, abstract, definite, and inert, the space of the vernacular is always particular, heterogeneous, asymmetrical, embodied, ambiguous, and alive (Illich 1982: 105-118). Indeed, there is for Illich no vernacular space that exists independently of the particular gestures and actions that shape it. Vernacular values are not given in advance, but are constantly and continuously being enacted, and this enactment is itself always a physical gesture. As a result, vernacular space is not some abstract Cartesian desert in which we find ourselves abandoned; it is “engendered by the bodies of its inhabitants”, and exists only as “the environmental trace of their vernacular living” (Illich 1982: 121).

As with Butler’s assembled bodies, so for Illich the performance here is physical before it is verbal. Seeking to explain why, as Robert Hertz had proposed (Hertz 1909), the vernacular realm is inherently ambiguous and asymmetrical, Illich proposes that it is because it remains rooted in what Piaget termed the infra-logical register of human experience. Vernacular life has not suffered those processes of abstraction and reduction that are needed to render it amenable to economic exploitation and bureaucratic management (while making it more or less unlivable for people in the process). Vernacular practices rather emanate from the deepest layer of our embodied, gestural experience, and it is this fact that determines their intrinsically dual character (Illich 1982: 127). That is why their complementarity is a “*fuzzy, partly incongruous* complementarity that can be understood only by means of metaphors” (Illich 1982: 75-76, emphasis in original). Vernacular practices do not try to deny these infra-logical registers of experience, as do Western scientific and sociological thought, by relegating them to the realm of the “private” and the “subjective”: rather, they seek to keep them close, and to reaffirm their centrality in the life of the community, by reenacting them daily. They do this not only through separate specialized activities such as poetry, song

and ritual, but by embedding even the simplest of everyday actions in larger symbolic frameworks, through which origins are recapitulated, and collective decisions reaffirmed.

To approach vernacular experience without betraying it will therefore require forms of research that do not seek to disembed actions and intentions from the infra-logical and the bodily, but that instead embrace their mutual inextricability, even if this means accepting that reality is inherently enigmatic and ambiguous, irreducible to any single universal frame of reference. Travelling by a somewhat different route, Illich thus reaches a conclusion that resonates with those of Moll, Law and Gregson. The kind of research that the human sciences need if they are to do justice to the vernacular domain will of course be “disciplined, critical, well-documented, and public”, but it will also have to eschew scientific reductionism and the pursuit of conceptual clarity at all costs, and instead explicitly embrace “analogy, metaphor and poetry” (Illich 1982: 62; cf. 129). For only poetry can show us ways to hold together the incompatible yet complementary dimensions which just *are* the nature of vernacular experience.

If we take the idea of “subsistence” in a narrowly materialist sense, rather than in terms of the constantly reiterated decision of individuals to put collective survival before their own personal interests, then to speak of online video as a vernacular practice may seem like an abuse of Illich’s categories. After all, this media’s dependency on commercial infrastructure, institutional regulation, and professional expertise is both obvious and potentially overwhelming (O’Dwyer & Doyle 2012). Illich’s own attitude to information technology was complex, and sometimes contradictory, and changed dramatically over time, as the focus of his attention shifted from the practical impact of “disabling institutions” to what, following Marshall McLuhan, he termed their “symbolic fallout”. While in his later work he frankly expressed his hostility to the “dimensionless cybernetic space” (Cayley 1992: 123) created by the computer and its screens, and the threat this transformation posed to the textual cultures of meditative reading and contemplative seeing which he so valued, the pages in *Deschooling Society* on how computer-assisted “learning webs” could help free people of their dependency on educational institutions have often been read as prefiguring the more positive, decentralized aspects of the Internet (Illich 1971: 72-104; Levi 2012: 348-349; Winslow 2013).³

Yet despite the apparent pessimism with which he came to view the age of electronic communication, Illich always remained alive to the ways in which people “creatively misuse” the new tools through which government and industry attempt to enroll citizens and consumers as collaborators in their own exploitation (Cayley 1992: 117). Nowhere is this more true than in his essay on the invention of the concept of “mother tongue” as a tool of bureaucratic power in the late fifteenth century (Illich 1981: 27–51). Looking more closely at Illich’s writing on vernacular *language* can help us see how his concept of the vernacular might

plausibly be extended to include even such highly-capitalized activities as the production and circulation of online video.

While the printing press would eventually come to serve as an instrument for the centralization and homogenization of both language and thought, in the first fifty years following the invention of movable type it was just as often used for the exactly opposite purpose – to propagate a myriad non-standardized vernacular languages, through the dissemination of texts whose content was often politically subversive into the bargain. It was in the face of this tidal wave of creative misuse that the Castilian grammarian Elio Antonio de Nebrija proposed in 1492 that Queen Isabella should sponsor his project to replace this unruly and uncontrollable diversity with a single, artificially standardized Spanish language. This was a language which at the time no one spoke, and which Nebrija set out to invent, single-handed. Like Latin or Greek, it could only be learned from professionals. The decision to call it a “mother tongue” was an indication, not that it might actually be learned at some mother’s knee (which was in fact the last place one was likely to hear it at that time), but rather that it was to play a key role in the State’s attempts to replace the Church as the central “maternal” institution in the lives of the people (Illich 1981: 44-46).

According to Illich, Nebrija’s explicit aim was not to facilitate communication among Isabella’s subjects, but rather to make it easier for the authorities to monitor such communication, and terminate it whenever it showed signs of getting out of hand. His main argument against the vernacular forms of Spanish was that they made it impossible for bureaucrats to eavesdrop on what people in distant parts of the empire – which was just then about to commence its rapid expansion into the Americas – were saying (or rather, writing and reading) to each other, and so root out sedition before it could establish itself. After some persuading, Isabella finally agreed to this plan.

Thanks to Nebrija and others like him, print would thus come to serve the purposes of institutional control and bureaucratic censorship, not only in Spain but throughout the literate world. But Illich shows that it was initially a threateningly anarchic grassroots technology, whose power as a multiplier of vernacular discourses represented a directly political challenge to the authority of the emerging State.⁴

Illich’s analysis of this proliferation of untutored discourses in the second half of the fifteenth century offers a lens through which we can better understand the political significance of the explosion of vernacular video across the Arab world over the last few years. What we are witnessing is, in these terms, another Gutenberg event: the unpredictable collision, under the conditions of a repressive political environment, between a cheap and accessible technology that can be used to amplify and disseminate the people’s self-produced images and sounds without prior institutional censorship or professional formatting, and societies in which older forms of vernacular culture (including non-standardized vernacular lan-

guages – in Arabic, *al-lugha(t) al-âmiyya*) continue to shape many aspects of daily life, and thus play an important role in defining the people's sense of their own identity, and of their difference from those who would govern them.⁵

These videos are vernacular, then, not simply because they are non-professional and non-commercial. They are vernacular because they belong to the multiple series of gestures and actions through which individuals gather, both online and offline, to enact the people as the possible subject of *another* history. In doing so, they reaffirm the “subsistence ethic” as Illich describes it, and reinvent it for the age of online video. For those who make these videos, their own individuality is not denied, but rather is most fully realized by the act of self-limitation through which they give way to the collective. This ethic may be easily overlooked, because far from being dramatized, it is most often simply taken for granted. But it is woven through everything else which these videos do, and it is evident in two of the most obvious features that tie them to older forms of vernacular art in other media: that they are almost always *anonymous*, and that they are offered not as personal contributions, but as *common property*.⁶

It is in this explicitly political sense, then, that I want to propose that the videos from the Arab revolutions should be called vernacular. They are the first attempt by a critical mass of non-professional filmmakers to extend an informal, home-made, and largely improvised practice out beyond the realms of private or domestic life, and to use it to give an account of the public and political realms – an account which one senses is intended not only to be competent by its own, vernacular standards, but also more pertinent, and more comprehensive, than any of the accounts attempted by the professional audiovisual cultures that preceded it. And in doing so, they do not simply supplant this institutional discourse, they also undermine the very division between “public” and “private” space upon which the current distribution of power in our societies depends (Butler 2011; cf. Illich 1983).

These videos, then, are not just amateur, spontaneous and “home-made”. They speak from outside the enclosed domain of the dominant media institutions. They enact dissent in their idiosyncratic grammars, as well as in their subject matters. They speak a language that is learned from one's peers, on the street, or in the home, not one that requires paid instruction or seeks institutional validation. And their basic gesture is not “linguistic”, but physical: not the image as representation, but the unauthorized and transgressive presence of the body that films in a public place, recording and participating in a collective event, against the will of the state. In their insistent iteration of this act of co-presence through which the people enunciates itself, and of which each single video is the trace, they constitute perhaps the first step towards the invention of Internet video *per se* as a genuinely vernacular practice.

In doing so, these videos do not just make use of the existing repertoire of YouTube's functions to broadcast the Arab revolutions. They are also a revolution

in the way YouTube itself is conceived and used. By unsettling the opposition between public and private, objective and subjective, collective and individual, they bring about an irrevocable change in the potential of the online database, because that database is not just an infrastructure or an algorithm, but is inextricably enmeshed with practices, experiences and desires without which it cannot make sense, and which exist only offline – not only in our heads and hearts, but in the simplest, least explicable of our bodily gestures, too.

These videos, then, are *not* home videos. Indeed, one of the striking things to me is how little domestic and interior spaces figure in them, and how rigorously they exclude anything that we might consider private, intimate or personal. In particular, they are notable for the near total absence of the archetypal online video form of the Euro-American internet, the vlog or video blog, in which a single person speaks directly to the camera in a domestic setting, such as a bedroom or home office, and where the sense of intimacy is generally enhanced by the implication that they are alone as they record their message. One Euro-American survey suggests that vlogs were, at least until recently, the single most widely watched genre of user-generated online video content, accounting for some 40% of the “most popular” online videos as measured by multiple criteria (Burgess & Green 2009: 43). The existence of a small number of high-profile vlogs from these revolutions, and most notably those made by Asmaa Mahfouz during the early days of the Egyptian revolution,⁷ should not be allowed to obscure the fact that this format accounts for only a vanishingly tiny fraction of the material posted.



The exception that proves the rule. Vlog by Asmaa Mahfouz, Cairo, 18 January 2011. (Still from video uploaded by Iyad El-Baghdadi, subtitles by Peter Snowdon.)

These videos are not documentary films either, because most of them contain no narrative (Le Grice 2001: 166-67). They cannot be defined as citizen journalism, as they have no rhetoric of description or explanation; nor are they merely or mainly forensic video, of the kind which has become an increasingly important part of human rights activism worldwide. While they sometimes adopt some of the forms of journalism (such as the vox pop interview), and while they sometimes purport to prove that something terrible happened (though the element of proof rarely goes beyond mere verbal assertion, whether by voiceover or by written text), these videos are essentially uncategorisable. They are a new genre, or genres, replete with new forms, or old forms adapted to entirely new purposes.

The *political* revolution in the function of YouTube is thus accompanied by an *aesthetic* revolution in the kinds of experience people might look for when watching videos online. As such, these videos constitute, in the terms of Jacques Rancière, a redistribution of the sensible: they prefigure the political revolution that is to come,⁸ by challenging the aesthetic limitations which popular culture, the mass media, and intellectual condescension, have sought to place on the forms of experience the people are supposed to be able to imagine, enact and enjoy (Rancière 1983/2007: vi).

What we have here then is a body of work that is accumulating from the bottom up, generating its own norms, habits and customs as it goes, and which makes a claim – individually and collectively – to speak, beyond any distinction between the private and the public, for society once again imagined as a vernacular domain, where every action is intrinsically political, because it is involved in the shaping of shared meanings. Through these videos, individuals explore, negotiate and express their relationship to the collective, and in doing so, they remake that collectivity, and reaffirm or redefine its values, its practices, and its symbols.

Of course, however numerically overwhelming these videos may seem as they unfurl day-by-day on to our screens, they in fact contain only a tiny, and quite possibly non-representative subset of all the experiences, relations and practices that these revolutions have put into play. Not everybody filmed. Those who did film were not evenly distributed in space or time, by gender, age cohort, or social class. When they filmed, they did so selectively. And of what was filmed, only a very small percentage was uploaded. The rest is still on the memory cards in people's camera phones, or on their hard drives. What we can see of these revolutions on YouTube is only the tip of the iceberg, and it may not be a very good guide to the shape of the main mass of these events, which remains stubbornly outside the lines of our digital sight.⁹

But it is possible, also, that precisely *because* the revolutions as they are figured on YouTube are not “representative” of the mainstream revolutionary experience, they may also include, and in some cases even provoke or create, experiences, relations and practices which are more radical, more subversive, and more productive of alternative futures, than those which the historical record may later

be inclined to define as the “core” of these events. If Kropotkin was right to claim that revolutions themselves are always made by a minority of society, so some of the most significant meanings of these revolutions may also be found in experiences and figures which, from the point of view of the majority of those who took part in them, were marginal, atypical, or directly incompatible with what they, or we, may want the sense of those revolutions to have been (Kropotkine 1909/2011: 249).

Souk Al-Jumaa, 25 February 2011: Towards a Political Aesthetics of the Libyan Uprising

So I find myself, some three years after these events began, still looking at these videos with more questions in my mind than answers. What kinds of revolution do these videos imagine or invoke? And what kinds of revolution do they refuse? What sorts of action do they call for, and to what types of outcome do they seek to bar the path? What do they understand of the experiences that befall those who film, and what in those experiences remains opaque, obscure, recalcitrant to interpretation and appropriation? Above all, how do they succeed (or fail) in mediating between the recalcitrant singularity of their own point of view, and the performance of new forms of vernacular collectivity that is sometimes their explicit subject, and always their unspoken horizon?

To begin to sketch an answer to some of these questions, I’d like to look closely at one particular film, shot by an anonymous cameraman in Souk Al-Jumaa, a working-class neighborhood of Tripoli, and uploaded to YouTube on 27 February 2011.¹⁰

The Libyan uprising broke out in Benghazi on 15 February 2011, and the Day of Rage on 17 February saw protests spread to many other cities, including the capital, Tripoli. On Friday 25 February – the day on which this video would appear to have been made – several thousand protesters gathered after Friday prayers in the district of Tajura to the east of the capital, from where they set off to march towards the town center. As they passed through the Souk Al-Jumaa neighborhood later that afternoon, they were ambushed by state security forces, including snipers posted on the roofs of surrounding buildings. The result was a massacre. Different estimates put the death toll for the afternoon at between 10 and 25, with many more seriously wounded.

The march from Tajura followed a week of constant clashes during which the security forces had tried and failed to establish control over the neighborhood, and its brutal repression marked, perhaps, the end of residents’ initial hopes that they might see Gadhafi depart as quickly as Ben Ali and Mubarak before him. By 1 March, most of the people of Tripoli had abandoned overt public protest, and were looking for other ways to continue the struggle. (The city was not finally

liberated until six months later, in a major military operation organized by the National Transitional Council, that ran from 19 to 28 August.)¹¹

One of those who died during the march on 25 February was a fifty-year old man, named Ali Mohammed Talha. His name does not figure in any of the journalistic accounts of this day that appeared in the international or local media at the time, and I have not been able to find out any more about him.¹² This video records the moments immediately before and after his martyrdom.



Looking for Ali Talha

(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution.)

To view the video with English subtitles, go to <http://vimeo.com/49182496>

The “information content” of this video is, in many ways, very low. It adds little to the little we already know from written reports, either about Ali Talha’s death, or about what the other protesters around him, including the cameraman, were doing, saying, or thinking on that afternoon. But it offers us something inestimable, which few written accounts could rival, and none could replace. In the most simple terms, we might say that it gives us a sense of “what it was like to be there” in that particular place, at that particular time, and in this particular position. But what lies behind this apparently transparent (and, in some ways, problematic) claim? How exactly do these images and sounds shape the experience of the viewer in order to produce this effect? And how do the forms they take affect us,¹³ not just intellectually, but also physically and emotionally?



The sea is only a suspicion
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution)

A man is advancing through space. He is among other men, though the space between them is not clearly defined, and the crowd seems too strung out, too fragmented to really count as “a crowd”. On the soundtrack, there is a lot of noise, of a kind we may recognize (or not) as the sound of wind buffeting the camera’s microphone. We may get the sense that we are near the sea¹⁴. There is a large space that seems to open up on the horizon, far ahead of us and to the left, which seems to hold the future towards which we are heading – promise or disaster. Yet while the bodies move that way, the camera almost ignores this space, and seems intent instead on pointing off towards the right, and down towards the ground, when it’s not tilting off wildly up into the sky, dodging and jerking across the multiple layers of off-white cloud.

The sea is only a suspicion. Yet the men who have gathered here continue to advance and fall back in waves, and these human waves form a larger rhythm, which surrounds and absorbs the faster rhythm of the camera’s tilting up and down. It is as if the group is testing some invisible boundary, trying to push it forward, incrementally, or at least to hold the line. At the same time, the way the camera is held creates a long diagonal that emphasizes the inherently unstable geometry of the space, which is further pulled apart by the asymmetries of the faulty stereo sound.



As if drugged, or stunned
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution)

The crowd surges forward twice, and twice they fall back.¹⁵ During the second, more chaotic retreat, there is a strange hiatus: the camera, as if drugged or stunned, in any case in need of relief, suddenly tilts up and then stops moving for several seconds, and the sky, plus a shard of ochre building, finds itself caught within the frame. Just at that moment the sound of gunshots intensifies, and then suddenly, with a single cry, the crowd rushes forwards again. And a few seconds later we realize that although we are moving, we are not going anywhere – the barrier that stands between us and the sea, between us and the future, has not been demolished, will not be overrun.

True, we keep surging forwards, even stronger than before, but others are already trying to work their way back. We are going to meet someone who is returning to us. Returning to us dead. As a martyr. When the camera almost collides with his bloodied head, we run alongside him for a while, then let him go on, and instead the camera reverses course one last time to follow the trail of blood that he has left behind him, as if retracing the steps he could no longer take. We follow this trace as if it could lead us somewhere, as if it might prove something. As if. And as we advance, the shadow of the filmmaker falls across that trail, as if to cross it out. Or to imprint himself upon it. Or it on him.

It's very hard to do justice to this video, and the above re-description barely scratches the surface of what I find so extraordinary about it. So let me try and say something a little more analytical.



We follow this trace as if it could lead us somewhere
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution)

This video figures a moment from the heart of this revolution, and any revolution, and one which is central to the vernacular moral economy of the people: the moment when the decision that it is better to die fighting for what you believe in than to continue to live without honor has to be cashed in. And it shows us that moment from a point of view that is, for me, revelatory, and which is also hard to define, but which I think can best be described as being, simply, the point of view of the camera.

It's a fact about cameraphones – and one which is easily verified, for instance by watching how the many people who can be seen filming in so many of these videos, go about filming, physically – that whereas with most earlier cameras, the “natural” way to handle the machine was to hold the viewfinder to your eye, the natural way to use a cameraphone, and indeed most cameras with small digital screens, is to hold them at arm's length.

The camera is not an extension of your eye, it's an extension of your arm. It's not a lens through which to see, it's a tool with which to act upon the world (Figurt 2009; Campanelli 2013). Of course, sometimes you look through it, or more strictly speaking, at it. But much of the time, you don't. You hold it overhead to see over the crowd around you. You put it up to a hole in the wall while you remain crouched down, for fear of getting shot. Or you clasp it in your hand, while you grip a stone in the other, as you run for your life. This video falls mainly, but not entirely, into the latter category.



Nothing like what a human eye would have seen
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution.)

So the video doesn't show us anything like what a human being would have seen if they were in that crowd. No human eye moves up and down in this crazy delirious way relative to your center of gravity while you run. And few human brains lack the neural processing ability to iron out the constant jitter and judder from which they do suffer when moving around quickly, even when their eyes remain more or less in a single horizontal plane.

Nothing remarkable about that, you might say. Anyone could make a film like this. Maybe. Maybe that's the point. And then again...

There are two things which I find striking about this video. First, that anyone should have made it in the first place. By which I mean, that they should have thought it important enough to film in a situation where they are risking their life, where acute attention to what is going on around them is crucial to their personal survival, and where the existence of the film they might make is unlikely to have any direct material influence on the outcome of the day's action. But also, I mean, that they should have decided to start filming at this precise moment which, as we experience it in the film – but who knows how it was in reality? – is not the moment when something happens, but the moment when one begins to think that something *might* be about to happen. And it turns out, they were right.

The second thing which I find amazing is that, having filmed it, they decide to put the video on the Internet in its entirety. Unedited. You have to watch it for more than four minutes, you have to sit through what might seem (if this was a Hollywood action movie) an eternity of bad camera work, barely audible dialogue, and disjointed slivers of unintelligible action, before this apparent chaos coalesces into an event. And yet, by June 2013, the original upload of this video had been viewed just under 8000 times, and there are also several clones of it

around which I have not been monitoring. So I'm obviously not the only person who seems to find it compelling. But why is it so compelling?

I would suggest that this video owes its force precisely to those formal and sensory extremes which it essays, and which constitute a large part of its unlikelihood, its strangeness. The gestural camera style creates an intense sense of the bodily inscription of the filmer in this space, even as it dissolves both space and time into a kind of distended plasticity, far removed from our sense of the everyday norms of experience. The soundtrack, with its alternation of intense wind noise, holes of near silence, distant voices, and gunshots that register like whiplash, further adds to this sense of being at the same time intensely present, and somehow absent, elsewhere, not directly concerned by what may be going on. And while the sound connects us directly to what is happening off screen, the image denies us access to it until what seems like the last possible moment. We never see the soldiers who fire on Ali Talha, though we hear the shots, and possibly – probably – we hear the shot that kills him.



We never see the soldiers who kill Ali Talha
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution)

The result of the whole is dream-like. We spend five minutes on the verge of an irrevocable, tragic event, and yet we experience those five minutes as a space of paradoxical, unstable freedom, in which the tension and threat of the situation is not denied, but is somehow abstracted to the point where it becomes almost unrecognizable. And it is this abstraction, and our collaboration in it – the pleasure we take in the figures which the camera produces, or in the epiphanic moment when the sky appears above this street in Souk Al-Jumaa, on one particular afternoon in February 2011, rather as it appeared to Prince Andrei in *War and Peace* after he was shot at the Battle of Austerlitz, in the moments just before he loses

consciousness¹⁶ – it is this complete dissociation from the ultimate reality of what conventional narratives would tell us was “the event”, and the sense of access to *another* reality which that inexorably produces, which makes the abrupt return of reality in the form of death that much more shocking. A reality which is no sooner exposed, than it too is recycled into an abstract form, namely, the line of blood that Ali Talha’s dead body has left behind it on the ground, leading to his crumpled, useless jacket.



The abrupt return of reality
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution)

Not many of the videos from the Arab revolutions achieve this level of dialogical interplay between form and content, sound and image, abstraction and brute fact. Not many of them go beyond the external recording of trance-like states, to embody them so directly in this way. But many of them do achieve a remarkable convergence between unexpected formal procedures and the complexity of shared collective truth. And many of them go well beyond the simple recording or replication of revolutionary figures already existing in the environment, and invent their own figures, which are not reducible to slogans, demands, or recognizable, goal-directed actions, but which are perhaps more closely comparable to the songs, poetry and paintings which overflow every time a space is liberated, and people are able to occupy it for what people were made for: celebration.

This video from Tripoli disables and defeats many of the things we might know, or think we know, not only about the “potential” and the “limitations” of “amateur” video, but also about the place of subjectivity in the revolution, and about the relationship of the individual to the collective in such moments. It develops its own concrete sensory discourse on these subjects, in terms which are irreducible to any merely discursive language. It uses the camera to mediate be-

tween the individual, the group, and the elements (sky, sea, wind, and sun), and in doing so, it produces a form of subjectivity which is irreducible to either the individual, the collectivity, the impersonality of the natural world, or the somewhat different impersonality of the digital camera, but which is also unimaginable without the co-presence of all four of them.

It places the individual within a group which is never represented as a group, which is always either too dispersed, or too compact, too close or too far away. The group exists for the filmer not as a structured aggregation of individuals, but as a quasi-natural phenomenon, dictating his own wavelike movements back and forward, as it responds intuitively to that other unseen figure, the enemy.

And likewise, the camera oscillates back and forward between the ultra-mobile ultra-subjectivity of the human body, and the moments of static or deliberate framing – the sky above, the line of blood on the ground which can be followed methodically to its beginning or its end. Although I know, or suspect, that one of these shots was intentional, and the other not at all, I cannot help seeing them as somehow equivalent, as balanced against one another, the two moments of relative stability in a radically unstable world.

What both these moments share is, of course, a certain dissolution of the self. By filming his shadow as it falls across the trail of blood he follows, the filmmaker projects himself inside the frame, but he projects himself not as a character in some 19th-century novel – a person with a unique physiognomy, a particular temperament, a distinctive wardrobe, and a mailing address – but as an anonymous silhouette, the space where a person *could* be. This shadow doubles the ecstatic openness to life suggested by the shot of the clouds against the blue sky, embodying an act of acknowledgement, even consent, to the fact of death as unavoidable. The shadow *signs* the video, but it signs it not on behalf of the individual *qua* individual, but on behalf of the community. To belong to that community, to gather with it physically in the street, to proclaim its existence, is to accept the possibility of one's own death, and to assert the value of that possibility. In this moment, the unique and the common reveal their interdependence. It is in order to protect the possibility of a unique life for all, even the weakest, that "the people" are called to exist.

The originality of this video, then, is located in its very refusal of individual authorship, and of all the forms of authority that would traditionally go along with that. In the vernacular realm, it is the shading out of the possessive self, the placing in common of what is most unique and fragile in each of us, that makes the invention of new forms and new experiences possible.

In its representation of the revolution as a state that couples political clarity with perceptual chaos, living machines with dead bodies, invisible enemies with indifferent clouds, this brief anonymous video, for me, goes further than 99 per cent of what the cinema and television have produced in the last 100-odd years in expressing the lived complexities of the revolutionary present. And in doing so, it

effects a redistribution of the sensible whose significance and impact reach far beyond the confines of Libya, or even of the Arab world. It participates not only in the invention of a new, collective audio-visual language, a vernacular which exists to embody and project the desires and values of the people on their own terms, but also in the reassertion of the vernacular itself as a realm whose aesthetic and intellectual complexity is both independent of, and equal if not superior to, that of any institutionally-recognized artistic practice, however radical or “experimental”.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Revolution and the Poetic Imperative

In this essay I have argued that the online videos produced by the Arab revolutions testify, if not to the revolutionary nature of these events, then at least to the kinds of capacity for radical change that are implicit in them. I see this capacity for real-world, offline change as inherent in the formal and sensory “originality” of an online video such as that of Ali Talha’s death in Souk El-Jomaa – in the ways in which it proposes non-standardized, extra-conceptual ways of “thinking” the relationship of individual to collective, of future to present, and of process to event. And I have proposed that we can therefore see such videos as examples of the “redistribution of the sensible” that Jacques Rancière has defined as one of the central ways in which political change can be initiated, beyond the categories of existing discourse, not from the top down, but from the bottom up.

I have argued that this capacity for change already changes the way in which we should see YouTube, decentering the Euro-American bias of both usage and critique during the first five years of the site’s existence. Dissolving the dichotomy between “public” and “private” space which has structured most previous discussions of online video, these videos occupy YouTube in order to reinvent it as a genuinely vernacular space – one which is above all subject to and answerable to the people and their ways of knowing and acting. If we want to treat these videos from the Arab revolutions as “vernacular video”, then we need a stronger sense of the word “vernacular” than that which has been prevalent heretofore. I suggest that we can find just such a sense in the work of Ivan Illich, despite Illich’s well-known aversion to many aspects of electronic culture. And I propose that placing Illich in dialogue with Judith Butler can bring out a performative dimension in Illich’s own work that is too easily overlooked, and which can help ensure its continued political and theoretical relevance.

I have also proposed that in moving between one particular case and one particular concept, the challenge is not to define and justify the “representative” nature of the video discussed, but to find ways of writing which can precisely *avoid* any such reduction of the specific to the general, and instead reinstate something of the textural density and figural recalcitrance of the particular which the social and human sciences eliminate at their peril. In responding to this need for the per-

sistence of the irreducibly concrete at the heart of all our thinking and doing, I suggest, following Law and Gregson, that such singular cases as this video might best be written and read as allegory, rather than as example. For allegory not only enables a consciously performative approach to critical method; it also respects the non-inductive logic of events such as revolutions, which are themselves inherently performative, and thus not answerable to any pre-defined conceptual framework.

I believe that this approach not only makes theoretical sense, but is also coherent with the politics implicit in the kind of radical grassroots movements and processes we have seen emerging in recent years. Indeed, it is hard to see how any analysis which treats particular events, including audiovisual events, as valuable because they are “representative”, could be useful for elaborating a theory of *non-representational* politics of the kind such uprisings and occupations (including, but not limited to, the Arab revolutions) may be seen to call for (Tormey 2005, 2012).

Of course, in the absence of such a theory, many people have questioned whether we should call the Arab revolutions, “revolutions” at all. The Syrian poet Adonis has suggested that they cannot be revolutions since they have not led to a complete change of the political, economic and social system (Adonis 2011). The sociologist Mohammed Bamyeh describes them as anarchist in their methods, and liberal in their intentions, which may seem like a contradiction in terms (Bamyeh 2011). Back in the 1960s, Jacques Ellul proposed nominalism as the best way out of such a dilemma: if people call it a revolution, then that’s how they experience it, and who are we to differ? (Ellul 1969/2008)

But maybe we don’t have to make any such concessions. Maybe embracing these revolutions *as* revolutions is *in itself* a performative and prefigurative act – one that could help bring about not just a certain kind of theory, but also a certain kind of society, and a certain kind of artistic participation in that society’s making. If the best criterion we have for recognizing a revolution is that moment in which everyday life can no longer be distinguished from poetry, then I’d like to think that this video from Libya, and others like it, show us the revolution in its essential action – that of inventing new ways of being and experiencing by which whatever comes after will be judged in the memory of those who were then alive.

As Louise Michel put it, speaking of the Paris Commune: “Just as drama was no longer to be found in the theatre, because it was unfolding in the street as the crowd wrote its own legends, so poetry now belonged to everyone” (Michel 1886: 347, my translation).

Since the Arab revolutions, the moving image too belongs to everyone. It’s up to us – not to filmmakers, but to all of us – to make the films that will keep that true.¹⁷

Peter Snowdon (*1964) is a British filmmaker and writer. He holds a Master in Transmedia from Sint Lukas Hogeschool, Brussels, and is currently an LSM research fellow at MAD Faculty (Media, Art and Design), PXL/University of Hasselt, Belgium, where he is preparing a practice-based PhD on vernacular video and documentary film practice after the Arab Spring. His feature-length montage film, *The Uprising* (Rien à voir/Third Films, 2013), based entirely on YouTube videos from the Arab revolutions, had its début at the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in October 2013, where it won the Opus Bonum Award for best international documentary. Website: theuprising.be. E-mail: peter@redrice.net.

Notes

- ¹ In its simplest empirical sense, “these videos” refers to all videos made and uploaded by non-institutional/non-professional actors from the six Arab countries that have experienced revolutionary processes since late 2010 (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain), and which either directly or indirectly reference some aspect of struggle against the regime in place. However, it would be more in keeping with the argument made below (“Methodological Prologue”) to see “these” videos as a repertoire that is being *enacted* as much as analyzed by this essay. As hinted by the deictic, in so far as this repertoire does not simply vanish into the oceanic database that is YouTube by trying to identify with it as a totality, it must itself be a performance of that database - and only one among many that are possible.
- ² For an analysis of YouTube as an almost exclusively personal (and Euro-American) domain, see Strangelove (2010). In her PhD thesis on vernacular creativity and new media, Jean Burgess relates the vernacular to the public sphere, but confines the term to a descriptive role, in line with her post-Habermasian conception of “participation” and “inclusion” as the maximalist goal of a reformist-progressive politics (Burgess 2007; cf. Burgess & Green 2009: 25–26). Tom Sherman has written perceptively about the coming vernacular age of video and the deprofessionalization required of the artist who wants to find an adequate response to it (Sherman 2008). But while he avoids the trap of automatically ranking the vernacular on the side of the private and the personal, his claim that vernacular video is essentially part of a larger culture of “messaging”, and thus fated to ever more abbreviated forms, “excessive” use of digital effects, and an “anaesthetic” aesthetic, is seriously challenged, if not definitively refuted, by the kind of videos discussed in this article. For an example of how the term is used descriptively to refer to online videos produced by recent social movements, including the Arab uprisings, see Gregory and Losh (2012).
- ³ Illich was not a systematic thinker, and he was certainly not systematic in his approach to living. Just as the critic of modern transportation systems was a frequent flyer, and even chose to buy a (cheap) car when teaching at Penn State in the 1980s, he also came to use a computer to finalise his texts – but only after having first written them out by hand (using a felt tip pen – “a much newer invention [...] so soft that you can even write on a moving Mexican bus with it”: Cayley 1992: 249). Practical familiarity with the concrete object was, for Illich, potentially an antidote to some of the worst aspects of its symbolic fallout. A comprehensive assessment of Illich’s contribution to a critical media ecology, in all its contradictions and complexities, remains to be written. One starting point would be Kahn and Kellner (2007).
- ⁴ “It is estimated that before 1500, more than seventeen hundred presses in almost three hundred European towns had produced one or more books. Almost forty thousand editions were published during the fifteenth century, comprising something between fifteen and twenty million copies. About one third of these were published in the various vernacular languages of

- Europe. This portion of printed books is the source of Nebrija's concern. To appreciate more fully his worry about the freedom to read, one must remember that reading in his time was not silent. [...] Habitual reading in a loud voice produces social effects. [...] Reading aloud was common in Europe before Nebrija's time. Print multiplied and spread opportunities for this infectious reading in an epidemic manner." (Illich 1981: 41–42).
- 5 On the role of vernacular forms of knowledge and expression, including *âmiyya*, in the Egyptian revolution, see El-Desouky (2011).
- 6 The point that these videos are uploaded *as* common property, in a moral if not a legal sense, was made by Rabih Mroué during his 24 January 2014 performance of *The Pixellated Revolution* at the Frascati Theater, Amsterdam (but does not figure in the earlier published version of the text). While Mroué's exploration of the Syrian videos which record (or seem to record) the death of the cameraperson often leads him to formulations which are quite close to mine, the conclusions he draws from them serve a quite different purpose (Mroué 2013)
- 7 See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjIgMdsEuk> for the first, and most widely circulated of these videos. On the Asmaa Mahfouz phenomenon, see Wall and El-Zahed (2011).
- 8 On prefiguration as, itself, a principal mode of revolutionary action, with specific reference to Tahrir Square, see Van de Sande (2013). On the relation between politics as prefiguration and politics as performance, see Klimke & Scharloth (2009).
- 9 The Italian filmmaker Stefano Savona has speculated that maybe 90 per cent of the camera-phone videos made during the 18 days of the Egyptian revolution were never uploaded to YouTube, but remain on people's flash cards or hard drives. The figure is an anecdotal estimate, but probably points us in the right direction (Savona et al 2012).
- 10 "Protest in Souq Al Jumma - Tripoli" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdlBRgi0BFc>, uploaded 27.02.11 by 17thFebRevolution, accessed 15.04.13, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdlBRgi0BFc>.
- 11 The best English-language source for the Tripoli protests of February 2011 is the diary of Sandra James, a British woman who had lived in Libya for over 20 years, and whose Libyan husband and two eldest sons took part in (and survived) the 25 February march (James 2012). I have also consulted the information and videos assembled by the *New York Times's* blog, "The Lede" in the immediate aftermath of the event (Mather and Mackey 2011), and by John Liebhardt at Global Voices Online (Liebhardt 2011).
- 12 The date and place of the death of Ali Mohamed Talha, along with his full name and age, are confirmed by <http://www.ayamnal7lwa.net/forum/index.php?topic=4487.385:wap2>. I am grateful to Amira El-Noshokaty for cross-checking the Arabic-language sources for me.
- 13 In what follows, I frequently adopt the first person plural, "we", as a rhetorical strategy. Sometimes I use it to refer to the audience of the video, sometimes to refer to the group of men we see assembled in it. In both cases, I am not prejudging the reactions of others, which I can never know, nor am I trying to impose (or disavow) my own. Rather, my intention is to make explicit the way in which the political takes place *between* people (Butler 2011). The political implies a transition from the singular to the plural, from an "I" to a "we", that is always a risk, a gamble, and whose results are never given in advance. So, when I saw "we" as the audience, I am inviting my readers to experiment with identifying with my reactions, rather than to dismiss them as simply "my" individual subjective response. And when I say "we" as if I/we had actually been present on that day in February 2011, I am inviting the reader to join with me in experimenting with identifying with what might or might not be the reactions and emotions of the people figured in the video. I do so, not with the intention of producing a consensus, but in order to open a debate about the possibility of responding to such a flux of images and sounds, not just as an individual, but *also* as a collective.
- 14 All the accounts I have consulted place the massacre of 25 February on Aradah Road, near to the Al-Hany crossroads -- that is, several kilometers from the sea front. If it really is the sea we can see in this video, then it must have been filmed on one of the arteries running through

the neighbourhood perpendicular to the general east-west direction of the march, connecting Aradah Road with the coast.

- ¹⁵ Overall, the video can be divided into seven distinct movements (four ‘forwards’ and three ‘backwards’): 0.00-2.19: first advance; 2.19–2.41: first retreat and regroup; 2.41-3.08: second advance; 3.08-3.35: second retreat and regroup; 3.35-4.12: third advance (to recover Ali Talha’s body); 4.12-4.37: third retreat (with Ali Talha’s body); 4.37-5.15: the cameraman alone moves forward against the flow of the people immediately around him, retracing the trail of blood the martyr’s passage has left on the ground.
- ¹⁶ “Above him there was now only the sky – the lofty sky, not clear yet still immeasurably lofty, with grey clouds creeping softly across it. ‘How quiet, peaceful, and solemn! Quite different from when I was running,’ thought Prince Andrei. ‘Quite different from us running and shouting and fighting. Not at all like the gunner and the Frenchman dragging the mop from one another with frightened, frantic faces. How differently do these clouds float across that lofty, limitless sky! How was it I did not see that sky before?’” (Tolstoy 1896/1982: 326).
- ¹⁷ A first, much shorter version of this paper was presented at the Anarchist Studies Network Conference 2.0 – “Making Connections”, Loughborough University, 3-5 September 2012. I am grateful to the conference participants for their feedback, and to Ulrike Riboni, Samah Selim, Amal Egeiq, Hallveig Agudsdottir, Remco Roes, Mathijs van de Sande, Dustin Zemel, Laura Waddington, Wendy Morris, Saraa Saleh and Karolina Majewska for their comments and encouragement at various points in the writing process. Special thanks to Madeleine Hurd and Mohammed Bamyeh for prompting me to clarify and articulate much that would otherwise have remained obscure, and to Chris Miller and Monica Woodhall for invaluable bibliographical assistance.

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Terms of Engagement: Re-Defining Identity and Infertility On-line

By Elżbieta Korolczuk

Abstract

This article focuses on the identity work that takes place on the biggest Polish Internet forum for infertile people (www.nasz-bocian.pl). It is an example of a wider trend of “digital groupings created by and for those who struggle with the physical and emotional burden of a disease or disability, and through blogs, chats and forums contact others who have similar experiences, while staying anonymous. Participating in on-line discussions often leads to various forms of social engagement, both on-line and off-line. The sick, their family members, partners and friends cooperate in order to change the public discourse, as well as the regulation and financing of research and the treatment of certain diseases. Emergence and proliferation of such digital groupings raise questions such as: what ails these communities? How the collective identity is constructed on-line? This article examines “boundary work, which is a specific element of collective identity construction processes. The analysis concerns how the borders are established between the different sub-groups within the digital community, and how this process involves producing novel forms of identity based on a fragmented “socially legitimized childlessness. It focuses on a sub-forum “Conscious Childlessness and is based on qualitative analysis of the posts placed there. This sub-forum was established by users who do not necessarily share the dominant collective identity around which the social mobilization on infertility in Poland coalesces. They refuse to see themselves as sick people, or as patients, attempting to construct a new collective identity based on the idea of choice and the pursuit of happiness.

Keywords: infertility, identity, boundary work, on-line activism, assisted reproductive technologies

Introduction

“You will become a mother, you will cuddle your own children. We have dreamed of your children” – that is how, according to one Internet forum user, other infertile people reacted when she stated that she wants to end an unsuccessful infertility treatment. This happened on “Our Stork”, the biggest Polish Internet forum for people with infertility (www.nasz-bocian.pl). The user whose nickname is “bloo” is not only a member, but a moderator. She stresses that she posted the above quote to show that the boundary between support and pressure is sometimes trespassed by the members of the virtual community; that the encouragement of others to keep up the fight when in vitro fertilization (IVF) fails may easily turn into coercion.

“bloo” concludes her post by saying that receiving such reactions did not change her own decision, but that such responses may deepen the sense of guilt and shame felt by others. Because of this, she initiated the Our Stork sub-forum “Conscious Childlessness”, where the negative aspects of being a member of virtual community of the infertile can be discussed.

This sub-forum has become a space for women who identify themselves as infertile, but who do not share the dominant collective identity around which the social mobilization on infertility coalesces. They do not necessarily see themselves as sick people, or as patients. Rather, they define themselves as women who happen to be infertile but who are able to make conscious decisions concerning their engagement with reproductive technologies. Thus, they challenge the official types of identity promulgated by the Our Stork group, attempting to construct a new one based on the idea of choice and the pursuit of happiness. This article focuses on the identity work that takes place on Our Stork’s “Conscious Childlessness” Internet forum, and examines the strategies used for establishing boundaries between different groups of infertile people when their life trajectories, emotional responses and needs differ.

Activism Around Infertility and Access to IVF

The Polish Our Stork forum is an example of a wider trend of “digital groupings” created by and for those who struggle with the physical and emotional burden of a disease or disability (Rose & Novas 2005). Through blogs, chats and forums, the sick and their partners or friends can contact others who have similar experiences. New communication technologies allow people from all over the world to discuss what they live through, to express their hopes and fears, and to share information, while staying anonymous. Furthermore, participating in on-line discussions often leads to additional forms of social engagement, both on-line and off-line. People cooperate in order to change the public discourse, as well as the regulation and

financing of research and the treatment of certain diseases (Rose & Novas 2005; Brown & Zavestoski 2008; Callon & Rebeharisoa 2008).

This trend also applies to people suffering from infertility, even though it is not always possible to discern whether the problems with conceiving a child are health-related or stem from other environmental or social factors. Today, there are many organizations focusing on infertility and assisted reproductive technologies (ART), most of which originated on the Internet.¹ Examples include the Çider Association in Turkey, which has been studied by Polat (2012), and the Association for Medical Treatment of Infertility and Supporting Adoptions Our Stork (*Nasz Bocian*), whose members have created and managed the forum discussed here. The situation of the infertile is special because people, especially women, who do not have children are often subject to social stigmatization, no matter what their state of health is. This stems from the fact that motherhood is seen as a key to women's "normal" social identity, and so being childless is regarded with disdain and/or pity. The Internet is often the only place where childless and infertile women can discuss their feelings and experiences freely (Allison 2011).

This may be still more the case in the Polish context due to the hegemonic discourses on femininity as based on motherhood (Hryciuk & Korolczuk 2013). Moreover, while in Poland the childless are often stigmatized and considered egoistic, the people who use assisted reproduction are regarded with still greater suspicion. They are condemned by representatives of the Catholic Church and by conservative politicians, both of whom accuse such persons of defying God's laws and thus of immorality and indecency (Radkowska-Walkowicz 2012; Korolczuk 2013). In fact, the Church's opposition to IVF influences both discourses and practices. Consequently, assisted reproductive technologies, such as IVF, are not regulated by the state, and Poland did not ratify the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine of 1997, despite the fact that ART have been offered in Polish hospitals and private clinics since the late 1980s and today there are over 40 clinics where such procedures are performed. The situation has improved while this text was written: on the 1st of June 2013, the Ministry of Health introduced a three-year plan for state-funded IVF treatments, which will partially cover the costs of procedures, if not hormonal treatment and diagnostics, for a total of 15,000 heterosexual couples. However biotechnologies in general remain unregulated.²

The example of "bloo", cited above, shows that while there are advantages attached to being a member of a virtual community of people grappling with infertility, there are also challenges. These concern issues such as the construction of a shared identity and the definition of a common goal. Infertile people in Poland have to cope not only with the social consequences of infertility, such as exclusion, feelings of inadequacy and reproductive failure, but also with negative opinions on ART disseminated in the media and public sphere (Korolczuk 2013). This requires constructing a new type of embodied identity based on a desire to be-

come a biological parent, which gives the infertile the status of a patient and a citizen. The problem is that some members of the community may experience the identity of a parent *in spe* or a patient as oppressive. This happens, for example, when, as in the case of “bloo”, IVF fails.

British sociologist Karen Throsby (2006), who examined the experiences of IVF failure, points out the fact that infertile people whom ART did not help

find themselves ambiguously located between often contradictory norms of gender, technology and the reproductive body: they have a strong desire to be biological parents, but are no longer actively pursuing that desire, and they have technologised the “natural” reproductive process but without a subsequent baby to counterbalance anxieties about technological corruption of the natural order. (83)

Throsby stresses that the failure to achieve the desired result – the baby – does not mean that people’s bodies and identities remain unaltered. My study examines the ways in which this ambiguous location is expressed on the Internet forum which is dedicated to people who are using or have used ART. I am interested in how website users who have undergone ART but decided to stop the treatments, define their position vis-à-vis those who refuse to “give up”. The latter, openly or implicitly, brand the former as losers if not traitors; yet they all remain a part of a larger Internet community of the infertile. Moreover, there are people like “bloo”, who stay active on the forum, although they no longer pursue the goal of becoming a parent. How is the boundary between these two groups drawn? How is the boundary-drawing process facilitated by the medium?

In this article I examine “boundary work” (Hunt & Bedford 2004: 442), which is a specific element of collective identity construction processes. My analysis concerns how the borders are established between the different sub-groups within the digital community, and how this process involves producing novel forms of identity based on a fragmented “socially legitimized childlessness” (Throsby 2006).

Methodology and Ethics

The analysis presented here is based on the outcomes of a research project, which examined the institutional, legal and discursive framework concerning infertility and assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) in contemporary Poland.³ It involved qualitative analysis of the posts which are placed on the internet forum www.nasz-bocian.pl, which is the biggest Polish virtual community concerned with infertility and ART. As of March 2013 there were 6,548,993 entries, organized around almost 50,000 threads, and 76,838 registered users. The main themes include: “Ask the expert” (with threads such as: Infertility, Men’s infertility, Miscarriages, Infertility for beginners), “Infertility, let’s share information” (e.g. How to get treatment, Where to get treatment, The sperm etc.), “Adoption, let’s share information” (e.g. Places and procedures, Dilemmas, My road to adop-

tion), “Foster families”, “I need to talk about it” (Space for some psychotherapy, Good and bad news, Our dearest) and “Technical and organizational stuff”, and finally, the focus of the present study, the “Conscious childlessness” sub-forum. I have analyzed the posts on the “Conscious childlessness” sub-forum, looking for specific key-words on the whole forum. Critical discourse analysis has been an important inspiration for the present study, as I attempt to re-constructing the ways “infertility” and “childlessness” are framed in these on-line discussions, and how internal hierarchies are (re)produced through discourse (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 1997). Data gathered in the semi-structured interviews conducted in 2013 with key activists of Our Stork Association living in Warsaw has been used as an additional source of information.

The analysis of Internet forums raises some important ethical questions, especially concerning privacy and informed consent. The forum of Our Stork is open to the general public, which means that all posts are available to all Internet users, without registering. Those who register providing a nick name and an e-mail address get access to more functionalities, e.g. they can publish posts, establish new threads etc. There is no verification process during registration.

Also, the number of people using the community is large – there are thousands of users and posts. Thus, I regard the forum as public and decided that informed consent for my passive analysis of the postings was not needed. However, the researcher is obliged to make sure not to put the informants in a situation where they might be at risk of psychological harm, which is especially important concerning issues related to health and sexuality. Thus, I informed the activists from Our Stork of my project, its goals and of how the outcomes will be used, and invited them to an open seminar where I presented the preliminary outcomes of my analysis. I am very grateful for their comments and generosity, and hope that my work will be helpful in their struggle towards social change.

Boundary Work and Social Activism in Virtual Space

The Internet forum, which is the focus of my analysis, is linked to the Association Our Stork (*Nasz Bocian*), the most vocal social actor fighting on behalf of the infertile in Poland.⁴ This is a politically engaged lobbyist group, which supports people, collaborates with doctors, educates the public, engages in cooperation on the international and local level and fights for regulations that would mandate safe, state co-financed treatment.⁵ The Internet forum to which the Association is linked, on the other hand, offers a space for interaction and emotional support. At times, the Internet forum users also engage in social activism, mostly in reaction to potential threats, such as aggressive and demeaning utterances concerning infertile people publicized in the media, or in order to support new laws regulating ARTs. On such occasions they alert the media, write open letters to newspapers, sign petitions to politicians and representatives of the Church, or express their

opinions on the social media. In a few instances small groups also took to the streets.

In some respects the Association functions as a typical Social Movement Organization (SMO), while the users of the Internet forum mobilize only occasionally, and some – perhaps even most – do not engage in social activism. Nevertheless, they influence public discourse and the political sphere not only via direct actions, but also through the production of knowledge and promulgation of novel interpretations of infertility, ART and human reproduction. Thus, I interpret the engagement of the active members of Our Stork forum as a case of on-line social activism, and take my theoretical starting point in collective identity theory (Polletta & Jasper 2001) as well as and the body of work done on social activism related to health (Brown & Zavestowski 2005; Rose & Novas 2005; Polat 2012).

I focus specifically on boundary work, which is usually interpreted as the marking of social territory by stressing differences between those who belong to a specific group or a movement and those who do not (Hunt & Benford 2004: 442). The goal of such work is to strengthen a sense of togetherness, solidarity and commitment, by producing both a collective “us” and a collective “them” through a variety of practices and activities. Hunt and Benford point to the fact that boundary work occurs also within a movement, for example when the most engaged members of a specific SMO attempt to mark boundaries between themselves, and more casual activists. Analyses of animal rights activism demonstrate how this dynamic works in a specific context. Here, the demarcation lines can be drawn between activists who are vegan and those who are vegetarians (Jagger 1992 in: Hunt & Benford 2004: 444, Jacobsson 2013). Following less strict rules concerning one’s diet is interpreted as a sign that a person lacks commitment, that she is not truly engaged. According to Jacobsson (2013), the division between those who promote veganism and those who stick with vegetarianism forms a major source of division within the animal rights movement in Poland, and causes its “bifurcation into the two strands of animal welfare and animal rights proper” (30).

The analysis of the Our Stork forum suggests that establishing borders between the groups within a larger community may also serve other goals. It may, for example, enable people to challenge the official identity of the group from within and to manage the problem of divergent goals, without the necessity to leave the group altogether. In sub-groups people can voice desires, emotions and interests which are not shared by the majority, while remaining connected to a bigger community.

In this specific case, the social terrain where boundary work takes place is the Internet. The Internet has proved to be “a congenial host territory” for people who want to share knowledge and information, exchange their feelings, and campaign for their rights (Rose & Novas 2005: 449). Thus, it is often perceived as an instrument which not only facilitates communication and reduces the costs of coop-

eration, but also promotes collective identity and creates new communities (Norris 2004; Garret 2006: 204). Such a vision has significant social currency. Other scholars, however, point to the fact that the loose networks created on the web are often temporary, and easy to opt out of. Thus, they cannot generate the commitment, persistence, and solidarity that characterizes successful social movements (Garret 2006). Technologies such as the Internet enable communication or recruitment but do not necessarily lead to mobilization, or as Wall (2007) argues, they may facilitate specific organizational activities, but have less impact on the symbolic aspects of action.

Recent works on the relation between new communication technologies and contentious activities demonstrate that the influence of new technologies depends on a variety of interrelated factors, for example the nature of the existing social movement organization (Diani 2000; Garrett 2006). Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 756) distinguish between formal political organizations and groups, which follow the logic of collective action, and which are based on high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities; and digital media networks that follow a different logic – the logic of connective action – based on personalized social networking among followers. Bennett and Segerberg define three modes of technologically enhanced activism: self-organizing networks and organizationally enabled networks that follow the logic of connective action, and organizationally brokered networks that follow the rules of collective action.

What makes this distinction interesting for the present analysis is that it addresses the problem of collective identity. Bennett and Segerberg agree that new types of Internet-based mobilizations do not require the strong, fixed types of identification, which according to many scholars, including Snow were traditionally employed to “activate adherents, transform bystanders into supporters, exact concessions from targets, and demobilize antagonists” (2008: 385). Today, the activists prefer “using resources to deploy social technologies enabling loose public networks to form around personalized action themes” (Bennett & Segerberg 2012: 757). These new networks embrace a rather eclectic sense of identity, which enables cooperation between different groups and organizations and makes digitally mediated collective action formations more flexible “in tracking moving political targets and bridging different issues” (ibid: 742).

This article focuses on this type of “connective” and “eclectic” approach of social movement identity. The case of Our Stork differs from those analyzed by Bennett and Segerberg, but the perspective they propose, which links the use of ICTs to the specific type of identity work employed by a group, may be helpful in understanding the dynamic of the identity construction process within a heterogeneous on-line community of the people travelling down the road called “infertility”.⁶

Together, Yet Apart – The Case of the “Conscious Childlessness” Sub-Forum

In this article, I focus on Our Stork’s “Conscious childlessness” sub-forum, which is one of the newest on the portal, established in 2011. Today, it has close to 600 entries in three different active threads, which had, in turn, over 6500 views. The users consist of people (mostly women) who have not managed to have a biological child through ART, and have considered stopping or did end the treatments, but nonetheless remain active members of the portal. How do they relate to the rest of the community; how do they re-negotiate their identity?

Scholars of social movements observe that the identity that a group projects publicly is sometimes not the same as that which its members experience, and that some members challenge the collective identity imposed on them (Polletta & Jasper 2001: 285). This is the case of “Conscious childlessness” sub-forum members. They challenge the collective identity promulgated by the activists from Our Stork. As I have argued elsewhere, the official collective identity – as formulated in official statements, press interviews, open letters and on the Internet site itself – is that of patients-citizens protesting the state’s violation of their right to medical treatment (Korolczuk forthcoming). They accuse the state of insufficient support and lack of regulations, and very actively encourage each other’s quest for effective treatment. In the process, infertility is constructed discursively as a disease, a biological fact, and/or a difficult emotional experience, embedded in a specific social context. Analogously to other patient organizations (Polat 2012), people active in the association Our Stork and connecting through the Internet bond by sharing the emotional, intellectual and physical experience of grappling with infertility. It is a negative experience, but also something to fight, to overcome.

Hence, the underlying assumption is that all members share a common goal, an overriding desire: to have a biological child (Franklin 1997; Allison 2011). This is exactly the assumption that the users who established “Conscious Childlessness” sub-forum challenge.

Analysis of the posts on this sub-forum demonstrates that while support from other members is often badly needed, other members’ strong emphasis put on perseverance and commitment can be perceived as oppressive. Hence, some women who decided to end unsuccessful infertility treatments established a space for members of Our Stork community, who seek escape from the portal’s culture of “fighting for a child”. They carved out space for their own experiences and needs, at the same time attempting to challenge the dominant collective identity of the infertile as patients-citizens, driven by the desire to have a biological child.

As explained by the moderators who created the sub-forum, it was launched in reaction to constant pressure to reproduce exerted not only by the “outside world”, e.g. family members or friends, but also by other Our Stork members. One of the moderators – the same “bloo” cited above – claims that at one point she realized

that the emphasis on having biological children at all costs was becoming simply unbearable:

It scares me that so much energy goes into constant stressing SUPPORT, which we have to show each other constantly, in the name of patients' solidarity. We have no right to say "no, we will go no further" and "yes, this is the end of the fight for a child". If someone stops fighting it is interpreted as "stopping others". If someone doesn't have the strength anymore, it is interpreted as "going astray". If someone says "I don't have energy for more", "it's over" [...] others claim that you just need some time before another attempt. [...] The boundary between support and pressure is very often trespassed. (bloo, capitalization in the original)⁷

Most of the women who posted their opinions on the new sub-forum shared the perception that the users of Our Stork portal tend to pressure others to continue the fight for conception, regardless of the personal situation, health condition and emotional needs of the addressee. Assistance and encouragement thus easily turn into coercion, and those who want to stop treatments for reasons other than financial difficulties can feel bullied and/or marginalized. Their decisions are interpreted as undermining the struggle and commitment of others. They are sometimes accused of being lazy, of being neither truly committed nor serious (see also Korolczuk forthcoming). Such views are confirmed by the posts on other threads, such as "Infertility, let's share information" or "I need to talk about it". Moreover, the language used on the main forum is full of militaristic comparisons and phrases. The expression "to fight for a child" is often used on the forum, as many infertile persons perceive their experiences as a battle or a war against the limitations of their bodies and/or modern technology (see Radkowska-Walkowicz 2013).

The question of when to stop trying to become a parent through reproductive technologies is problematic, as there are no clear, objectively identifiable boundaries. Throsby (2006) points out that one of the most fundamental problems for those undergoing treatment is "that while a given amount of treatment may, in retrospect, become constituted as definitive, what actually constitutes the end of treatment is never clear" (85). Moreover, the engagement in assisted reproduction generates a post-IVF body. In the case of failure, it requires further the construction of a new (or yet another) form of socially legitimized infertility. The process of making sense of IVF failure, and constructing such novel forms of identification is often long and inconclusive (Throsby 2004, 2006).

These factors strengthen the pressure to continue fertilization treatments until the desired goal – pregnancy and the birth of a child – is reached. This is exemplified by the post of one of the moderators who had decided to stop seeking medical help, and adopted a child. Her initial happiness and confidence were overlaid with doubts after visiting Our Stork forum and reading posts by people, who encouraged others to fight against all odds:

I came back on the forum in February, after years of absence. And I started to have doubts [...] I have read all those posts encouraging others to fight and I began think-

ing that I was LAZY, and that's why I let it go so easily! I started to think of IVF [...] I started to pester my husband, fight with him, tell him how egoistic he was, at times I was full of hatred. (Bobetka, capitalization in original)

As several scholars have pointed out, constant encouragement from others during IVF treatment can make it even more difficult to fight the social stigma attached to being infertile. Such support is based, after all, on the idea that everyone can have a child; that it is just a matter of commitment and will. The pressure is especially effective in the case of women, for the effort and commitment put into trying is interpreted as the litmus test of their engagement in (potential) motherhood (e.g. Inhorn & van Balen 2002; Throsby 2006). But when technology turns out to be ineffective, the process undermines the women's struggle for emotional stability and happiness. Thus, it is not a coincidence that most users on "Conscious Childlessness" sub-forum are women, and that they are interested in redefining the meaning of infertility.

The posts of people who support the seemingly endless "fight for a child" reinforce the sense of those who quit as being "losers"; only this time not only in the eyes of society, but in the eyes of other infertile people, the very people who are supposed to provide them with a sense of acceptance and understanding. This makes this group "homeless", in more ways than one, as they find understanding neither among their family, neighbors and co-workers, nor among other infertile people. The post by "mija77" expresses the feelings of guilt and remorse that such a situation evokes:

On one of my favorite threads I saw a title once "You are a winner, if you fight." That reeeely made me feel as a loser 😞, because I stopped "fighting". (mija 77, "misspelling" and emotive in original)

Several women active in the "Conscious childlessness" sub-forum openly argue that the continual emphasis on not giving up "the fight" and on trying more advanced medical procedures, in fact serves the people who write the posts rather than their addressees. As a person with the nickname "Agaaaa" puts it, "all this 'you should fight this battle' serves the person who writes this, as she wants to feel that what she does is right".

The case of "Conscious Childlessness" demonstrates that when sharing the desire and the intention to have biological children becomes normalized within the community, it becomes a very powerful tool for disciplining those who want to renegotiate their engagement with technology. The resulting sense of being under constant pressure puts in question the sense of solidarity and cohesion within the group. In the case of Our Stork, this conflict has been resolved by a resource perhaps unique to the Internet: the creation of a semi-separate space where users can be free from peer pressure, where they can challenge the dominant collective identity, and yet can remain a part of the collective, active, so to speak, on shared virtual domain.

The sub-forum examined in the article became a safe space where people who choose not to pursue medical treatment and/or adoption can experience comfort and safety within the community of the infertile, and yet be free from the judgmental remarks of fellow Our Stork members.⁸ Sub-forum moderator “yasuko” makes it clear, indeed, that “this is the place where [infertile] people who decide to be childless should be protected from being persuaded to try adoption or another IVF cycle.” Importantly, some of the people who opt out from treatment apparently do not want to opt out of the community. Rather, they want to re-negotiate the terms of belonging. As one woman (“lenox”, who initiated one of the threads on “Conscious childlessness”) puts it, “I want others to respect my decision, my arguments and I want others to admit that my way may also be good, that I can be happy with what I have.” “lenox” wants to be recognized as a legitimate member of the community. Her desire is shared by others who emphasize that they also identify themselves as the infertile, but still want their individual decisions to stop pursuing treatment to be recognized as valid and legitimate. They argue for this not only on an individual but also on a collective level.

According to “yasuko”, such a strategy would ensure wider membership, as well as strengthen in-group solidarity and engagement. “This is why we have this sub-forum, so that the girls [sic!] would not escape, nor disappear from Our Stork, so that they have their own space.”

Notably, while this on-line space is presented as safely free from intervention, it is also under strict supervision. The interactions are controlled by the moderators, some of whom were once engaged in the association but are no longer able or willing to undertake any responsibilities off-line. They have established rather strict rules for the forum users, removing posts which they consider repetitive and/or irrelevant to the thread’s main theme.

General organizational rules are rather strict on what can and cannot be said in specific threads, and it is stressed several times in the Regulations that the users need to be very specific and stick to one issue or theme, posting their opinions in threads devoted to particular issues (e.g. infertility treatments, adoption, men’s infertility or pregnancy after infertility treatments).⁹ Already in the second point of the Regulations, the administrator warns the users to “Think of what theme you are going to develop and find the thread that fits best. Any threads that do not fit the main theme will be closed and removed by the moderators.” (sylvia30)

The activists whom I interviewed claim that the moderators of “Conscious childlessness” are correspondingly strict, actively counteracting any attempts at introducing topics which they consider either oppressive or irrelevant. This is confirmed by the warnings posted on the forum. Users are often warned that their freedom to discuss specific topics is limited: “Any posts that include suggestions concerning adoption will be removed” (yasuko). The boundaries of the alternative space are thus patrolled by moderators who act as the gate keepers. These interactions take place in a controlled environment, where power and decision-making

processes are not fully transparent. The gate keepers manage the flow of information by deciding on what is important and what is not, and thus play a key role in the process of negotiating collective identity within the digital community. One of the activists whom I interviewed claimed that such sub-forums become “voluntary ghettos”, where people isolate themselves from the world, seeking instead the company of a selected group of those who have the most comparable experiences and most similar views (see also Allison 2011). Thus, participation in the sub-forum may also be interpreted as a process which undermines solidarity within the larger group, and leads to fragmentation of the movement.

Boundary Work – From Infertility to Conscious Childlessness

The sub-forum, thus defined and policed, establishes its own discursive field. The question of what it is exactly that “ails” the infertile is *the* common topic of discussions here. Most posts concern the definition of infertility and childlessness, the questions of who can belong to the newly created group and what differentiates this group from the rest of the Our Stork community. Instead of stressing infertility as a bodily condition or painful experience (Inhorn & van Balen 2002), the women who initiated the sub-forum propose the counter-notion of “conscious childlessness”.¹⁰ This concept encompasses not only their experience of not being able to have biological offspring, but also their agency in making conscious decisions about infertility treatment and ultimately, their own life. By introducing this notion they implicitly renounce the language of desperation and the hope for a miracle which are often described as characteristic for women undergoing infertility treatment (Franklin 1997: 202; Inhorn & van Balen 2002). They no longer concentrate on their desire for a technological miracle, rather, they stress their agency even when technology fails.

This re-definition of the collective identity of the infertile poses significant challenges. Some Our Stork users doubt whether they can belong to the “Conscious Childlessness” group at all, for they perceive their situation as something beyond their own control, and/or are not able to come to terms with IVF failure:

Is conscious childlessness the situation when life made that decision, not me? I wanted and still want to have children, but can't have them, and I don't want another IVF attempt. I just don't believe it would work. And adoption? Maybe, I think yes, but my husband doesn't want that. [...] Is this “conscious childlessness”?? (mija77)

Another example of the challenges involved in the re-negotiation of the meaning of infertility / childlessness is the discussion initiated by user “EWA1794”. This user states “I’ve been living with the awareness that I am childless 😞 Now I have an adopted son.” (EWA1794). Such posts are, in fact, emphatically not welcomed on the sub-forum, and the moderator reacted immediately:

We are focusing on childlessness, which was consciously chosen as a way to escape the viscous circle of infertility. This is childlessness, which is based on coming to

terms with our fate, childlessness which does not hurt and does not cause this sad face, which you placed in your post 😊 (yasuko)

In her post, “yasuko” objects to the idea that being infertile involves a failure of agency. She counters with the vision of conscious childlessness as a decision, an identity which offers “a way out” of the vicious circle of guilt and anger.

The affirmation of certain emotional attitudes towards one’s condition – most particularly, acknowledgment of the members’ inability to be happy as infertile persons – constitutes an important part of the larger Our Stork community’s identity work. This identity work confirms “infertility” as a core, and sorrowful, element of one’s perception of the self. Such an assumption is challenged by “Conscious Childlessness” initiators, who stress the difference between being “happy despite of one’s childlessness” and being “happy as a person who is – among other characteristics – also infertile and childless”. Users, such as “yasuko”, stress people’s agency, the desire to have children need not be a determining, essential, or even enduring aspect of one’s identity:

Me and my husband made the decision to end treatment and stop trying to have a child 12 years ago. We are happy not “despite of,” we are just normally happy. I didn’t have a child before, I didn’t try to have one and I was happy, why should I stop being happy when my attempts failed? (yasuko)

She and other users insist on interpreting infertility as one of life’s many experiences, not necessarily the constitutive one. This opens up a different temporal perspective. Most importantly, it challenges the collective identity endorsed by Our Stork, that of people who are allies because of their status as patients, bonded by their common hope for successful treatment.

This analysis of the discussion on “Conscious Childlessness” provokes a question: why do some people stay active on the Our Stork portal when they no longer identify themselves as patients and reject the culture of “fighting for a child”? “yasuko”, for instance, has stopped treatments long ago, yet she remains involved, and helps manage the forum. Others, such as “bloo”, left the forum after adopting a child, but came back after several years and have remained active members ever since. We return here, in fact, to Throsby’s conceptualization of the post-IVF experiences as an ambiguous location between “often contradictory norms of gender, technology and the reproductive body” (Throsby 2006: 83). Those who, however unsuccessfully, attempted pregnancy through IVF treatment have “technologized” the reproductive process, and thus placed themselves outside the “biological” mainstream; in Poland, indeed, this has involved withstanding a public polemic about being egoistic and godless. And yet, as Throsby puts it, these people have no baby with which to “counterbalance anxieties about the technological corruption of the natural order” (Throsby 2006: 83). The failure of IVF requires a fundamental reinterpretation of one’s goals and desires – yet again.

It is a process based on experiences and emotions related to “grappling with” or “fighting” infertility, but in which the meaning and emotional significance of

these experiences are redefined. As a result, although the inability to have biological children is no longer the center of one's self-identification, one is different nonetheless. He or she becomes someone who has undergone unsuccessful IVF treatment.

This process of choosing to end attempts to get a child also requires a shift in collective identity. Many Our Stork members who decided to stop treatments understand and have shared the experience and desires of other infertile persons, and can, to some extent, still identify with them. This produces a deep emotional commitment, a sense of solidarity – the affective bonds which motivate long-term participation (Polletta & Jasper 2001). At the same time, ending the treatment endangers the collective sense of solidarity, challenging the conviction that infertile share the same goals and fight for common interests. Such decisions symbolically undermine the efforts of others who keep investing their emotions, health and money in “the fight for a child”. Thus, the terms of belonging have to be renegotiated. Arguably, the engagement of people such as “yasuko” and others attests to the power of collective identity. Even when challenged and re-defined, it remains an important basis for personal engagement.

Conclusions

The case of the “Conscious Childlessness” sub-forum confirms the view that the identity a group projects publicly is not necessarily the same one its members experience (Polletta & Jasper 2001). Some members of Our Stork resisted the idea that what bonds people experiencing infertility is, first and foremost, their status as patients and the desire to become a biological parent. They started to contest the organizationally generated action frames and proposed a different way of framing infertility, coining the notion of “conscious childlessness”. The article has discussed how borders are established between different sub-groups within the digital community, and how this process involves producing novel form of identity, based on what Throsby (2006) interprets as “socially legitimized childlessness”. Throsby points out that the amount of energy, time and effort invested in the fight for a child is supposed to legitimize technological interventions, as in the context of IVF

reproductive belonging is rewritten [...] as defined not by actual reproduction, but by the desire and the intention to reproduce; it is having tried [...] that produces the socially-legitimized post-IVF body (85)

“Having tried” and having invested a lot in the process of becoming a parent is something that unites the group. The analysis of the Our Stork sub-forum suggests, however, that in the context of social activism people may want to distance themselves from “the desire and the intention to reproduce” imposed upon them by others, and seek a new form of socially legitimized childlessness. “Conscious Childlessness” becomes an identity which is related to the experience of strug-

gling with infertility, but which involves a re-definition of the emotional, cognitive and temporal aspects of this process – from the past to the present, from desperation to hope, from being focused on infertility to concentrating on other aspects of one’s life.

This analysis demonstrates that boundary work serves different goals than what is often assumed in social movement literature. It not only allows for separating “us” from “them”, and for strengthening the engagement of a core group of most committed activists, but also helps to bridge the differences in emotions and self-identification, and to keep people involved when interests and needs diverge. I found this was accomplished through a process that involved (1) identifying the elements of the dominant identity that did not fit the experiences and needs of some members of the group, (2) strategic deployment of emotions aroused by being oppressed and excluded by the group, (3) constructing an alternative collective identity, and (4) establishing a semi-separate space with well-guarded borders while remaining connected to the larger community via other threads and sub-forums. Thus, boundary work enables people to challenge the official identity that the group promulgates from within, without having to abjure the group altogether. In carefully gated sub-groups people can voice desires, emotions and interests which are not shared by the majority. This helps them to feel safe and accepted, among “others who are like me”. At the same time, the fact that this takes place in a relatively isolated space within, and not outside the community, allows them to remain a part of a larger group – the infertile. This provides room for communication and negotiation, and, moreover, enhances their ability to influence the public discourse on infertility.

The technology used, the Internet, arguably has been key to this process. The “Conscious Childlessness” sub-forum is a relatively isolated, autonomous space, yet at the same time connected to other sub-forums and the on-line community of the infertile as a whole. The technology which allows the creation of such “safe havens” enables group members to cope with differences in goals and interests by offering different levels of proximity and communication. The medium provides people the opportunity to act on the fragmented nature of human identity.

These findings dovetail with Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) suggestion that the ways in which social movements construct and promulgate collective identity changes with technological development. In some respects the Our Stork forum fits the second model, which they termed “organizationally enabled networks”, because the organization provides a social technology outlay and a loose coordination of actions. At the same time, the communication content on-line centers on personal expressions rather than organizationally generated action frames, and most members of the collectivity shun involvement in Our Stork’s parallel formal organization, which is characteristic of self-organizing networks. The sub-forum’s heavy-handed moderation, in turn, is characteristic of organizationally brokered networks, as opposed to networks based on a logic of connective action. This

shows that tools and modes of action which we associate with specific organizational types, e.g. the high level of control associated with hierarchical organizations, may also be used by groups which are structured differently, or by individuals who are not necessarily recognized as leaders. This hybridity suggests that certain conceptual tools, e.g. the differentiation between social movement lay members and social-movement organization (SMO), may not be as useful in the case of on-line activism.

This insight raises further questions, in turn, concerning the mechanisms of control which influence the process of establishing the personal action frames, and consequently, an eclectic type of collective identity. The fact that these frames are produced by lay members, not the representatives of an organization, does not mean that all have access to creating the content. In the case of Our Stork, which in many respects functions similar to the self-organizing networks that follow the logic of connective action, the communication content centers on personal action frames which are primarily ramified by the moderators. This confirms the fact that if we wish to understand the interplay between technology and collective action, we should move from a generalized discussion of how the Internet influences social movements to the specificities of different processes and types of interaction on Internet sites.

The question as to the probable success of a minority's attempts to challenge the dominant collective identity of a larger community is an open one. But even if such attempts fail, boundary work within the movement has positive outcomes. Our Stork forum users can be interpreted as using a strategy which enables those who feel that their self-identification and interests cannot be accommodated within the dominant group identity to remain engaged. The notion of "conscious childlessness" facilitates alliances between different groups, for it encompasses various categories of people, e.g. those who are infertile and are undergoing treatment (or not); those who had to stop treatment but did not give up hope; and those who refuse to engage in assisted technology even though they did not manage to become parents. Also it highlights people's agency and ability to make sense of difficult experiences, which may be an incentive to mobilize. Nevertheless, the challenge of mobilizing in the Polish cultural and political context, where women's reproductive choices are severely limited and reproductive rights are marginalized in public discourse, remains enormous.

Elżbieta Korolczuk is a sociologist and a researcher at the Department of Sociology and Work Science at University of Gothenburg, and at Södertörn University. She is currently working on two projects *Institutional constraints and creative solutions: Civil society in Poland in comparative perspective* funded by Swedish Research Council and 'We are no second-rate quality citizens'. *Negotiating biological citizenship in social mobilizations around infertility issues and access to in*

vitro in Poland founded by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies. She is a co-editor (together with Renata E. Hryciuk) of an edited volume "Farewell to the Polish Mother? Discourses, practices and representations of motherhood in contemporary Poland" (Warsaw University Press, 2012). Her main fields of interests include: social movements, civil society and gender studies, motherhood/parenthood, reproductive technologies and infertility. E-mail: elzbieta.korolczuk@sh.se.

Notes

- ¹ A comprehensive list of such groups and networks can be found at the Internet site of Infertility Network UK: <http://www.infertilitynetworkuk.com/?id=502>
- ² The main criteria concern age and medical records stating that IVF is recommended by doctors. See also <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/22/us-poland-fertility-idUSBRE89L1BJ20121022>
- ³ The project entitled 'We are not second-rate quality citizens'. Negotiating biological citizenship in social mobilizations around infertility issues and access to in vitro in Poland has been funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies 1555/42/2011. This article has been read and commented upon by people I would like to thank for their comments and suggestions. This includes Kerstin Jacobsson, anonymous reviewers, the members of the social movements seminar at University of Gothenburg (especially Abby Peterson), and last but not least, Madeleine Hurd who has been a dedicated editor of this special issue.
- ⁴ This text and my chapter "'Those who are almost full would never understand the hungry'. Negotiating collective identity in social activism around infertility in Poland" in *The Identity Dilemma* (eds A. McGarry and J. Jasper), should if possible be read in relation to each other. They cover some common ground concerning the construction of collective identity based on infertility but develop different aspects of this process. While in the latter I analyze social activism concerning infertility and assisted reproductive technologies in relation to social, cultural and political context of contemporary Poland, in the present article I focus specifically on boundary work employed by the people who did not manage to become biological parents via ART, but who are still engaged in the on-line community of the infertile.
- ⁵ The association has been established in 2002. Today it has around 60 members, but only a few are active on a daily basis.
- ⁶ Our Stork is a small-scale national mobilization, which does not address highly contentious political issues such as globalization or environmental effects of economic development. Another difference concerns the fact that Bennett and Segerberg (2012) analyze the cases, where activists used many different ICTs, e.g. Twitter, Facebook or mailing lists, while in the present text I focus mostly on just one communication platform – the Internet forum, which places specific limitations on the types of actions that can be undertaken via technology. However, the association has also a Facebook profile and this digital technology works differently than the forum - it is more interactive, engages people more and thus is a much better platform for promulgating political views and potentially contentious opinions.
- ⁷ All the quotes from Internet forum has been translated by the author.
- ⁸ The issue of adoption is also controversial, as many opponents of IVF claim that people who are infertile should adopt "poor, abandoned children" rather than attempt at having a biological offspring themselves, at the expense of fellow citizens. Sometimes, this is also a source of conflict for the users of Our Stork forum, as for some people who happen to have problems with fertility it is one of acceptable options, while others do not want to adopt a child, even if IVF fails. The representatives of the Association often stress that they represent also people

who adopted or want to adopt a child, and that ART are not the only way out from involuntary childlessness, but most their activities center around access to ART.

⁹ <http://www.nasz-bocian.pl/phpbbforum/viewtopic.php?f=75&t=76960>

¹⁰ While in English there is a difference between being “childless” and “childfree”, no such distinction exists in Polish.

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From Wasteland to Flower Bed: Ritual in the Website Communication of Urban Activist Gardeners

By Heike Graf

Abstract

The goal of this article is to explore the website communication of urban activist gardeners by focusing on the concept of ritual as a heuristic category. In contrast to the majority of those doing research on ritual, I use a systems-theoretical approach in applying the concept of ritual to communication processes. I explore the role played by ritual in communication in order to answer questions such as, “What is specifically unique about the ritual mode of communicating?” and, following from this, “What function do these rituals serve in communication?” My subject, urban garden activism, is thus addressed from the perspective of media- and communication research.

First, I briefly describe urban activist gardening and how communication is usually structured on their websites. Second, I present an outline of some theories and concepts of communication and ritual within media studies, and give a brief account of the systems-theoretical approach that I use. Third, I define some areas of ritual – that is, ritualized patterns of communication found in the urban activist gardeners’ empirical material – so as to provide answers regarding the means and function of ritual in communication

Keywords: Ritual, communication, systems theory, urban activist gardening

Urban Garden Activism

Oooh, that was so beautiiiiiiifuul. We sowed peppers, cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage, kohlrabi, corn and celery. [...] Therefore 50 people came with planting bowls, soil donations & bottled water and became godparents for our seeds. Thanks to all for this!!!! (March, 6th 2012 www.opflanztis.wordpress.com/).

This quote is one of several entries on blogs and homepages which emphasize the great pleasure of doing collective gardening in urban areas. Urban activist gardening is practiced in almost all cities in the world, and can take many forms. In general, it involves the temporary transformation of vacant construction sites – such as wasteland, abandoned car parks and vacant rooftops – into urban farmland and green meeting places. In recent years, the guerilla garden movement has appeared as a kind of an ad hoc transformation of wasteland or neglected areas (McKay 2011: 157), which can involve cultivation of tree pits, or moss graffiti on rocks, logs, pots or statuary. It is a special form of activist gardening, namely “the illicit cultivation of someone else’s land” (Richard Reynolds, cit. in McKay 2011: 183). In contrast to community gardens, guerilla gardening takes the form of “the overnight transformation of a neglected patch, or the sprinkling of seeds on waste ground for a subsequent seasonal surprise, without permission” (McKay 2011: 184). Here, doing gardening without permission has its own attraction. It is the attraction of constantly available cracks, spaces and even wasteland that can be transformed into green oases.

This apparently singular movement of urban gardening has a long history. Its roots can be found in the allotment movement for the urban working class. It expresses a general “critique of private property interwoven with a statement of communal interest, mutual aid and cooperation” (McKay 2011: 155). The community garden movement began in the early 1970s in the USA, in cities such as New York. Gardening was done in vacant lots, or on land that was considered to be neglected or abandoned by its legal owners. In Germany, the engagement in urban alternative forms of farming is associated with the rise of the environmental movement in the eighties (Rosol 2006), when the first urban community gardens appeared. In Sweden, community gardening is relatively new, having its beginning in the early 21st century, when the discussion of climate change gained momentum (Larsson 2009: 13). Some of these gardening movements belong to the European network “Reclaim the Fields”, which was founded by young people in 2007 in connection with the anti- G8 mobilization in Rostock (Germany) in an effort to introduce new ways of farming (www.reclaimthefields.org).

The gardening movements are often driven by a group of activists and visionaries who share a passion for turning neglected spaces into vibrant gardens or green spaces, and who take direct action in order to transform land. These movements express the rise of eco-consciousness in urban areas, and express a desire for sociality in the neighborhood, as well as pleasure in doing physical work. Concurrently, the green space of the garden and the common act of gardening are

symbolic, and address “a multitude of contemporary questions such as access to, and ownership of, land, food production and consumption, biotechnology, the environment, sustainability, slowness and modernity, grassroots politics and empowerment” (McKay 2011: 192). They stand for an anti-capitalist orientation aimed at mobilizing alternatives and questioning consumer lifestyles in the industrial cities.

If the actions of transforming land were not communicated, we would know nothing about these movements. We might have noticed some transformed tree pits or vegetables planted in flower pots, but without therefore associating them with a global movement or placing them in a wider context. The theoretical approach of Niklas Luhmann effectively shows the importance of communication:

Fish may die or human beings; it may cause illness to swim in lakes and rivers; no more oil may come from the pumps; and average temperatures may rise or fall, but as long as this is not communicated it does not have any effect on society (Luhmann 2008: 41).

These remarks express the late-modern tenet that “communication became the basic concept for describing the most elementary units of social life” (Thomas 2006: 322), and that therefore human behavior and attitudes towards the natural world are mediated by communication (and not by action).

To reduce communication to action, as many scholars do (e.g. Habermas 1987), does not suffice to adequately describe a social phenomenon. Action, which is connected to an agent, can also take place when nobody is watching, or when there is nobody there to react to this action. Luhmann gives the example of brushing ones teeth, which one does for oneself, knowing that it ought to be done. He concludes: “However, in principle, action can be conceived of as a solitary, individual operation that has no social resonance” (Luhmann 2013: 54). The concept of communication, however, is specifically tailored for sociality: At least one person has to react if we speak of communication as a *social* phenomenon (otherwise we are faced merely with information transmission). In this sense, I want to apply the concept of ritual to communication processes, rather than reduce it to action, since actions must be communicated if they are to become visible to society. In this sense, I also want to incorporate the concept of ritual in communication, and not reduce it to action. This may seem a bit unusual, as ritual traditionally is associated with action, but the approach has a tradition; it was developed already during the seventies by Roy Rappaport (e.g. 1971, see Thomas 2006: 327). In the following section I want to give a brief overview of how communication and ritual is discussed within media and communication research.

The Concept of Communication and Ritual

Within media and communication studies, the concept of ritual has widely been used to examine various forms of media production, texts and audiences. We may

begin with Carey's model of communication as ritual from 1975 (Carey 1975; see Thomas 1998: 146ff). In his article "A cultural approach to communication", he contrasts his view of communication as ritual with the common view of communication as transmission. Carey claims that the deeply rooted view of communication as transmission originated in religion, since the moral motives behind the age of exploration and discovery were actually religious – that is, to establish and extend the "Kingdom of God". The same applies to communication technologies such as the telegraph, which was seen as an ideal device for spreading Christian messages (Carey 1975: 3). Consequently, he goes back to the roots of commonness and community, and offers a ritual definition of communication which "is linked to terms such as sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of a common faith" (Carey 1975: 6). Thereby, he indicates the social role of communication, in that messages can only fulfill their function when they communicate shared beliefs. This means that society becomes possible because of the reproduction of common symbolic forms of reality. According to Carey, communication serves the purpose of constructing and maintaining "an ordered meaningful cultural world which can serve as a control and container for human action" (Carey 1975: 6). He understands communication as a process of commonness, that is, of common beliefs, agreement and like-mindedness. However, he ignores processes of plurality, unfamiliarity, strangeness, otherness, etc. His harmonizing, normative view of communication becomes problematic when he claims that communication strengthens social bonds. There are many examples, in the past and present, of the opposite being the fact.

The Durkheimian view of rituals – that is, as holding together society – is still paradigmatic in media and communication research. A great deal of research is therefore focused on the impact of media rituals. Scholars such as Schudson (1986) are convinced that media serves a religious function in a secular society, since mass media has become the only social institution that strengthens the feeling of togetherness. However, Alexander (1981) notes that the impact of media rituals is less certain and determined than were religious rituals, and he therefore does not follow a naive Durkheimian application. However, Alexander notes that in contrast to the religious rites of pre-modern societies, the impact of media rituals is uncertain and undetermined. Alexander thus rejects a naive Durkheimian approach. According to Alexander, media rituals are a sort of horizon of understanding, to which the audience can relate (Thomas 1998: 169). Couldry (2003) also tries to avoid a Durkheimian reading, by focusing on transcendent values produced through media rituals. He defines media rituals as "formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance frames, or suggests a connection with, wider media-related values" (Couldry 2003: 29). These rituals are formalized actions. They include the changed behavior shown by people who are being e.g. filmed or photographed, a change determined by the "ritual nature of the studio situation" (Couldry 2003: 126) – that

is, when media or media celebrities are present. Hence, his approach also deals with media's impact on humans and society, but with special focus on media power. In his own words, he tries to shift "the emphasis in ritual analysis away from questions of meaning to questions of power", that is, the media's power to "influence the representation of social 'reality'" (Couldry 2003: 12, 19). He assumes that there is a special media logic which changes action into ritualized behavior, and which is determined by the media. However, he mentions various forms of media behavior only casually. These find no place within his model, which is a weakness of his approach.

However, my approach is not to address the manner in which ritual interacts with the recipients, or how media, including the internet, interacts with the users according to ritualized forms of communication. Rather, I wish to examine *how rituals are used* in communication, specifically in websites, as a means of handling the complexity of communication.

The Systems-Theoretical Approach to Ritual in Communication

In order to make my point of departure clear, I must explain the systems-theoretical approach to communication. Luhmann's conception of communication departs from the phenomenological tradition that emphasizes selectivity. Communication is the union of three selections: *information, utterance and understanding* (Luhmann 2013: 212ff). *Information* is – in line with its standard definition of Shannon & Weaver (1949) – a selection from a repertoire of possibilities. It is a selection meant to communicate this and not other information, in short: what the message is about. *Utterance* is the selection of a form of communication, or in other words: how the information is to be communicated. In face-to face communication, you can whisper or shout information, in website communication you can choose the form of language, you can make your information visible with the aid of images, and you can add films etc. *Understanding* is simply about reaction, and the meaning that is generated: is the/a meaning selected, if yes which one?

Here, understanding is not a psychological concept. It is not concerned with understanding rightly or wrongly. It is not concerned with what a message, or the author behind the message, really means. Here, Luhmann also abandons the concept of doubling meaning intended by the sender. One is tempted to imagine that the information transferred is the same for both sender and receiver. However, it sometimes looks as if this identity is determined, rather, by the quality of the information. The systems-theoretical perspective states that meaning is only constituted in the communication process, not by the message as such. The identity of the information must also be thought of as something that can mean very different things to the sender and the receiver (Luhmann 1987: 193-4). It is only in the connecting communication that it becomes clear how the difference between information and utterance has been understood.

This communicative approach differs from the framing theories that have become popular within media research, especially in the fields of news media (McQuail 2005: 378) and social movement research (e.g. Johnston & Noakes 2000). Here, as well, the issue is information selection and forms of information expressions, as well as information effects. However, highlighting components can be added by considering the “bias” and “angle” of a message, especially when it aims at studying the effect of a communicative strategy (such as that of activist groups). According to the frequently quoted scholar Robert Entman,

[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman 1993: 52).

Frames as schemas for interpretation add a special story line to information such as to “define problems”, to “diagnose causes”, “make moral judgments” and to “suggest remedies”. As such, they serve as guidelines for “*receiver’s* thinking” (Entman 1993: 52). According to Entman, it is about the power of a text: It is assumed that a certain frame, a highlighted piece of information, would cause a certain meaning according to the intention of a text.

Here, we can see the problem entailed in this approach: it overemphasizes the quality of a message, and does not consider the contingency and, hence, complexity of communication. From a phenomenological point of view, a highlighted piece of information has no power as such. The power and influence of a text is constructed in a dynamic communication process and therefore uncertain. In line with systems theories, frames such as rituals can only be understood as a horizon of understanding, and they serve the purpose of reducing uncertainty in communication processes, as explained below. In this sense, frames have a relational value: they serve to support meaning production (or not) on both sides (sender and receiver). They help make sense of events and to communicate them as a story line by highlighting something and darkening something else. In times of surplus of communication, e.g., offered via Internet, there is a risk of not reaching recipients. In order to gain attention, frames support organizing events and, hence, a schema for understanding.

However, frames do not guarantee success, success of communication here meaning that recipients take the communicated information as a premise for their own actions and meaning production (Luhmann 1987: 218). Given the separateness and individuality of human consciousness, that is, given the mutual opacity of human minds – it is by no means self-evident that one person understands what another person says – as mentioned above. Meaning can only be understood in a context, and context is what one’s consciousness and perception contributes to the meaning produced (Luhmann 1987: 217).

As mentioned above, the success of communication is uncertain and the process of understanding, in particular, becomes highly indeterminate when a larger

group is addressed. Here, rituals, as frames, can fulfill an important function: According to Thomas (2006), risks are improbabilities of communication which can be changed into probabilities through the cultural form of “ritual, even though ritual is not the sole form” (Thomas 2006: 331).

According to Luhmann, rituals function as an internal communication schema (Luhmann 1987) within communication systems, and deploy the strategy of supporting coordinated understanding. They are structured in such a way that they appear to provide no major alternative when it comes to information, utterance and understanding; that is, they reduce the selection possibilities and therefore facilitate the process of recognition. It is scholarly common sense that rituals represent a code for a limited communication without an alternative (Luhmann 1987: 613). It means that a special kind of information and utterance are transmitted in order to enhance the recognizability of the posted information/image, and finally to gain attention from a desired group of people. In Thomas’ words, “Preformed and more-less fixed sequences of utterances eliminate the contingency of the selection in understanding [...] No misunderstanding can disturb the proceedings” (Thomas 2006: 333). In order to reach the intended recipients, rituals are also used for attracting people by “drawing the people *to* the message” (Thomas 2006: 335) instead of merely offering messages.

Rituals, here, have the capacity of marking out a difference in communication by *attraction*. Reference to this notion can be found in Douglas’s early discussion of rituals that focus attention and hence direct perception (Douglas 1966). In line with this approach, rituals can be described as special, presupposed frames for managing attention, and also perception. This is different to the above-mentioned framing theories, as the uttered information says more about how the activist group wants to be recognized (and what they think will attract their audience) and less about how the messages are understood and how they influence others.

What is *not* ritualized communication in this sense? From the observational point of view, we cannot draw a distinction between ritual and everyday life as many scholars do (e.g. Couldry 2003). We must approach the question from the perspective of the complex process of communication. Communication is connected to expectations (e.g., what is and is not expected of a website communication) as well as selections made from a reservoir of information and utterance possibilities. These selections are made with the help of what can be described as a “synthesis of a plurality of possibilities” (Luhmann 1987: 405). They regulate communication or, in other words, to create a kind of expected order. Rituals, thus, greatly support “coordinated understandings” by bypassing reflexive communication (Thomas 2006: 333). Hence, ritual and non-ritual communication can be distinguished by their relative degrees of indeterminacy.

To summarize, how can we describe these forms of ritual in website communication? These forms of ritual are characterized by a *prefigured stream of website entries*, which are “more or less fixed” (Thomas 2006: 333), and are characterized

by their *repetitive character*. The website entries communicate *transcendent values and metaphors*. Rituals in communication can be applied to verbal entries as well as to images, as I will illustrate with examples below.

Communicating Urban Gardening Concepts

Communication can take many forms. It may take place as face-to-face communication, as a direct way of addressing people, but it can also be mediated, that is, disseminated through brochures, policy papers, posters, flyers etc., particularly through mass media (the topic of urban gardening has received some media attention), and on Internet homepages etc., which is my field of study. Websites can be characterized as self-descriptions which relate to multiple environments: meta-communicative utterances directed both toward their own group and toward the public. Through their various pages, websites structure communication, and hence offer a social dimension (links to other sides, discussion possibility), as well as a topical (treated themes) and time dimension (time line). In this article, the focus lies on the topical dimension, which shows the group's constructions of reality.

The activist gardeners' communications studied here include fifteen German and five Swedish activist gardening websites/blogs as well as five individual English-language guerilla gardening blogs. All are open to the public and updated fairly regularly. The entries analyzed were mainly posted between 2011 and 2012. We should distinguish between blogs and websites. Some websites have their own blogs, where in a diary form, with the latest entry being on top, gardening activities and connected events are communicated, and possibilities for comments are provided. All websites studied here have an "About us" page, some have an archive, a page with planting and harvest information, a calendar, and a special page for images, as well as links to other activist groups and information about gardening etc. Some websites offer debate forum, where connecting communication takes place. Access to these is often limited to subscribers.

Using the systems-theoretical approach to communication, I explore how activist gardeners communicate their messages on their websites. Which information (topics) and forms of utterances (entries) are selected? By looking at entries or comments that refer to earlier entries, I can see how the difference between information and utterance has been understood. The almost complete lack of comments on various entries has kept me from exploring the process of understanding. Instead, I focus on entries' topics and forms – that is, how they are posted from the angle of ritual.

In order to understand the topical context, I briefly describe the groups' points of departure as expressed in their "About us" pages. A comparison of a number of "About us" pages shows that the activist gardeners, to a large degree, have followed a communicative frame that we recognize from social movement research. There are certain recurring "master frames". One begins with the *postulation of a*

problem, the “diagnostic framing” (Benford & Snow 2000: 615). For example, we are informed that urbanites face a wide range of ecological problems which challenge modern life. More concretely, the German non-profit organization “Nomadisch Grün” [Nomadic Green], which organizes the inner-city community garden “Prinzessinnengärten” [Princess garden] in Berlin, explains that these problems stem from modern society’s emphasis on consumption at the expense of nature (www.prinzessinnengarten.net). The Swedish network Mykorrhiza [Mycorrhiza] also highlights the ecological problems caused by the modern lifestyle and “unsustainable methods in farming” (www.mykorrhiza.se). Another group, the Stockholm based network “Tillväxt” [Growth] blames the politicians who do not react to these problems, and therefore, are a part of the problem:

The politicians have not understood that the cities of the future must produce more or less most of their own food, and not be dependent on oil, transport, meat from and land in other countries (www.tillvaext.org).

Some homepages highlight the *social relevance of the problem* in order to place the movement in a larger context and thus appeal to everyone: It is not only an issue for gardeners but also for the entire city. For example, we can read on the homepage of Prinzessinnengärten in Berlin: “The city of the future should be a climate-friendly, pleasant place to live, where every care is taken to conserve our natural resources” (www.prinzessinnengarten.net). The Swedish network Mykorrhiza goes further in its argumentation, by including the living conditions of all people in the world: “This contributes in turn to the destruction of the environment and suffering of people around the world” (www.mykorrhiza.se).

Finally, a *solution* is offered through an “action mobilization” frame (see Bender & Snow 2000: 615) which explains what can be done and why it is worthwhile to participate or to support the activists: It is about sustainable gardening and living in urban areas. For example, The German group Nomadisch Grün offers a site with the motto: “Eine andere Welt ist pflanzbar” [Another world is plantable]:

Prinzessinnengärten is a new urban place of learning. It is where locals can come together to experiment and discover more about organic food production, biodiversity and climate protection. The space will help them adapt to climate change and learn about healthy eating, sustainable living and a future-oriented urban lifestyle. With this project Nomadisch Grün intends to increase biological, social and cultural diversity in the neighborhood and pioneer a new way of living together in the city (www.prinzessinnengarten.net).

The motivational frame of the Swedish network Mykorrhiza is more hands-on, offering the following solution: “What is needed is more small-scale farmers, and our aim is to inspire and help those who want to run small-scale organic farms, live in a more self-sufficient way or grow crops in the city” (www.mykorrhiza.se). The same goes for the Stockholm-based group Tillväxt, according to which “There is only one [type of] sustainable growth, and it is organic, biological

growth.” In concrete terms, we can read: “We are planting edible plants in Stockholm” (www.tillvaext.org). In other words, we can take direct action to change our life style by cultivating our own food.

Looking at individual blogs, and exploring the reasons for activist gardening, we can find more personal motivations. Take the example of one guerilla gardener: He has neither garden nor allotment, but he loves gardening, so he does it on “neglected traffic islands and tree pits near me” (www.pimpyourpavement.wordpress.com). For him, these neglected places offer important possibilities for recreational gardening, and simultaneously they fulfill a political function. He concludes that “we can make a very tangible and welcoming contribution to improving our local environment, both ecologically and socially” (www.pimpyourpavement.wordpress.com).

The communication of these above-mentioned concepts, aided by a clearly defined frame of argumentation and often illustrated by photos, serves to define the identity of the group or the individual and thus attract the “right” people. That means that the text turns, primarily, to those who already share these ideas and are open these arguments. The self-descriptions on the “About us” pages are not, thus, meant to convince people hostile to gardening in urban areas. Nevertheless, they function as a kind of relation management in the communication process. For instance, they simplify the complex realities of food production, thus inviting communication and, eventually, guiding towards joint action.

These “About us” pages should, thus, probably be characterized as frames rather than ritual communication. They are strategic, insofar as they are meant to help one understand the websites’ topics of communication. They are not meant to draw people to the message. They are a customary way of presenting the group and its goals. In short, they are not ritual as such. However, within them, we can find patterns of communication which I want to mark as ritual.

The Form of Ritual

In the next section, I take a closer look at examples which I define as ritual in communication. These include *performed and fixed repeated pattern of entries* on websites as well as the *transcendent values* communicated on websites.

Performed and Fixed Patterns of Utterances

A repeatedly used pattern of urban garden activist communication is the past-and-present narrative. Where an action takes place, that is, a neglected area of a city is being transformed, images of “then and now” or “before and after” are often used in the communication. Utterances such as: “Previously, it was a dog toilet. Now it is a flourishing tree pit with sun flowers”, or, “previously it was wasteland and now a green oasis” are following a script that conforms to what Bird (1995: 27) describes as ritual action of successfully transforming and ordering nature. Those

statements are clear, and coordinated understanding can be expected. Often, the post has images illustrating and confirming this transformation, the functioning as physical evidence of the claims. It is almost impossible to misinterpret the message. Whether you like the transformation or not is another question. Retelling this over and over again is done more often on guerilla garden web sites than on websites involving community gardens, since guerilla gardeners deal with an over-night transformation of neglected areas, and retelling tends to reinforce a belief in the absolute necessity of change.

As an example, I want to further explore the website of the community garden in Berlin, Die Prinzessinnengärten. This garden, located in the city center of Berlin, is a mobile growing space, and the plants are in containers that can easily be wheeled around within and beyond the garden. The garden is also host to a series of activities. On their “About us” page, the activists narrate a transformation story in a condensed manner with the help of two photos:

Where there was, before, a wasteland or wilderness, we now see a well-arranged, civilized green oasis. It is a garden in the inner city, where a multitude of vegetables and fruits grow.

The application of semiotics, that is, the arrangement of signs, uses a “then and now” ritual. It follows its own logic in the activist gardeners’ communications. First, there is the logic of sequentiality. The signs follow the temporal order of ‘before it was this, after it is that’. Second, this sequentiality recurs regularly. It is a normal practice, a more or less stable sequence of utterances on various activist gardeners’ websites. Because this ritual uses the fixed arrangement of ‘then and now’, it is related to what Merchant (2004: 205)



terms the Recovery Narrative – that is, the account of efforts to create order out of a chaotic wild nature. It, therefore, unfolds its own dynamic, and, probably, efficacy.

This recurring website pattern shows, further, that activist gardeners' actions are causally related to the specificity of the place: the place conditions (but does not determine) their actions in some manner. The “then and now” narrative follows a pattern of successful transformation of a given place in the face of harsh conditions. Nature is the main character in this ritual script. It vitalizes memory by linking the present to the past. It facilitates recognition and understanding in the communication processes, and therefore minimizes contingency – that is, uncertainty about how the message is or will be perceived. In the process, it may shape the public's perception to some degree. It may also limit the public's interpretative choices to either judging the transformation favorably or questioning whether it is worthwhile or desirable (for example from an ecological point of view). Rituals reduce the reservoir of interpretive alternatives. However, they cannot altogether eliminate the contingent character of communication.

In order to qualify as rituals, our descriptions of beautiful gardens must entail the expression of “something more”. Ritual reveals the group's own visions and convictions: it expresses the group's norms and facilitates further communication. The normative distinction between “what is” and “what could be” the case is activated. In other words, this narrative emphasizes how things ought to be: Tree pits ought to be used for flowers and not for dogs. Wasteland should be used for cultivation. Many features of environmental communication address the gap between the “indicative” and the “subjunctive” (cit. Turner in Szerszynski 2002: 56).

Values: The Garden of Eden Trope

In the following examples, I will focus on the figurative side of ritual in communication. In this context I will refer to a slideshow that appears every year on the homepage of Prinzessinnengärten in Berlin and which serves the purpose of documenting and summarizing garden life for the public. This slideshow functions as a means of visually taking part in the annual actions of the activist group. It serves to promote the cohesion of its own group, and to gain attention from the recipients, and eventually to recruit new participants.

What kind of reality is constructed in these images and which symbolic rituals are used to support understanding? This reality is based on some common principles that allow communication to connect with tropes that will be recognized by the recipients.

The slideshow “garden season 2011” (www.flickr.com) consists of 22 photos. Only four of these show garden produce and beautiful flowers; the majority portrays people working or socializing in the garden. The gardeners are the main characters, and the garden is a kind of *mise en scène*. The atmospheric fashioning of the scene is constructed through beautiful flowers, healthy edible plants, tomato

plants supported by a string construction, a bunch of fresh carrots. The gardeners are favorably portrayed, and make statements about how they interact with nature. The images of these gardeners show a new category of people, who invent new forms of gardening in the inner-city. They have access to nature and wildlife. Here, nature is not an exclusive property, opportunities for intimate experiences are around the corner. This experience contrasts with that of most citizens, who experience “nature as a great distance, if at all, from places next to the road marked with a sign showing the image of a camera” (Bergman 1996: 295-296).

The security of recognition is generated by the tropes “garden” and “garden-*ing*”. In Western Christian culture, the garden is rich in symbols and values, and has both a spiritual and a physical dimension. It refers to a discourse in which the garden is a vital symbol “of a moral society living in ‘natural’ social and environmental harmony” (Olwig 1995: 384). According to Merchant, the “Garden of Eden” trope is among the most powerful of Western narratives. “The recovery story begins with the fall from the garden into the desert”. The desert, here, is the city or the wasteland. This entailed the “loss of an original partnership with the land”. But the city garden moves us “upward to the re-creation of Eden” (Merchant 2004: 18). Nadel-Klein concludes that all modern gardeners are “engaged in recapturing Eden, if only in a limited way, and some more explicitly than others” (Nadel-Klein 2010: 167). Recovering nature and creating a kitchen garden are “experienced as antidotes to civilization”. In the case of the urban community garden, nature “becomes a retreat from capitalist production” (Merchant 2004: 119). Cultivation takes place in small containers; all is handmade. It represents a resistance to the industrial production of food. Images of crops and tasty dishes talk of a successful garden season. This implies a normative framework: garden-*ing* is predicated as “good” and rewarding.

The “Garden of Eden” trope tells us that we can regain Eden if we work for it (Merchant 2004: 39). This involves bodies. Gardeners’ bodies become a medium of communication. In ritual theory, the body is an indexical sign of performers’ relationship with the order they refer to, and, in this case with the order of seasonal performance. In other words, rituals of knowing, arising from gardening, give the security of expectations concerning what gardening is about. The bodies are in motion and repeat the act of creation: they are digging the soil, alone or together, they are holding a water hose in order to water seedlings, lending a helping hand to support tomato plants, and sitting down for dinner at a long table with peers. The slideshow constructs the bodily engagement of the participants as ritual events: the body is shown doing hard work, performing simple tasks, and finally relaxing and socializing. As is often the case, the most important function of this ritual is to express a corporate group feeling: The active individual is part of the community in body and spirit.

The garden and the gardening activity are also seen as reservoirs of ecological knowledge and social practice: the garden is a place of learning. Here knowledge

passes from one generation to another, from expert to a layman. Children and adults watch a bee colony, and learn about the social behavior of honey bees. Showing a seed-pod, an adult presumably explains germination to a group of children, who are listening and watching attentively. Such images exemplify the metaphor of “nature as mother and teacher” (Merchant 2004: 118). They show that meaning production processes are controlled by connecting to powerful narratives where nature is becoming more important as a knowledge base and also as a moral entity.

The garden is also associated the idea of personal expression (arranging plants, cooking meals) as well as practical experimentation, recreation and social life. The body can be an intimate companion of nature and of peers. The images of the body shown narrate a story of environmental and social harmony. There are alternatives: the story told could have been of exhausting work, bad weather, lack of crops, plant illnesses, vandalism etc. But it is not. A selection has taken place among information available for publication, and the visual “Recovering-of-the-Garden-of-Eden” trope has been chosen. This trope seems to work best for winning the approval and sympathy of both group members and public, and ultimate for getting support for future activities.

The slideshow from the previous year includes almost the same images. It displays a repetition of ritual performances, or, in other words, images of communicated ritualized action: digging, hacking, planting, watering, learning, harvesting, cooking, eating and socializing. Here, attraction and replicability are elementary mechanisms for the management of public attention: the performance of seasonal garden activities becomes a ritual that can be endlessly replicated, and therefore visualized during different seasons and in different places. Also the above-mentioned mobile cultivation makes it possible to replicate the social action in other places. In one case, all the containers were wheeled out to a theatre and placed there for some days, which received some attention, not least from the mass media.

Finally, the communication of the annual slideshows on the home page of the community garden *Prinzessinnengärten* makes use of ritual symbols that speak of “a perfect world” as a kind of emotional inspiration for a joyful future: people are not only in harmony with each other, but also with nature. The communication of harmony is not only visible in the slideshow but also at other entries such as the following: “Raus aus der Stube, rein in den Garten!” [Getting out into the garden!]



“Creating [flower-]beds, containing beds, pre-cultivating rhubarb, planting rhubarb, honey bees are flying, the smell of coffee, in short: Again, a perfect world at Moritzplatz in 2011”.

Telling Emotions of Pleasure

As mentioned above, rituals in communication are meant to attract people to the message and reduce the uncertainties of communication. Apart from, notification of the different group activities, we find information about farming, various expressions of feelings about gardening. The communication of feelings experienced in the garden, and while gardening, enforces the authenticity of the utterances. These messages offer an emotional insight into someone’s thought processes, and a deeper involvement in communication. Simultaneously, the expression of positive feelings experienced while engaging in communal gardening promotes bonding, as does the fact that peers’ activities are presented as being worthy of esteem. It enforces emotional ties within the group and strengthens the feeling of common goal. Within social movement studies it is common knowledge that strong emotions play a decisive role in attracting and mobilizing people. Negative emotions, in particular, play a prominent role in protest movements and are conceived as “powerful” (Jasper 1998: 414). Protest movements often express feelings of outrage or fear.

However, the feelings that the urban gardeners express on the web sites are almost uniformly positive. It is striking that emotions of pleasure and delight are selected: gardening is described as an object of keen interest, or in other words, of passion. Harsh weather conditions, unfavorable soil and unsuccessful sowing do not stand in the way of expressions of emotions of pleasure and enthusiasm. A few entries describe disappointments, but the final outcome of the activity would be satisfying. For example: A blog entry relates that most of the expensively purchased seed bombs had not sprouted, which “was very annoying”, but neverthe-

less, the deserted tree pits “could be brought to life” and “thanks” everyone. (28 March 2011, www.gartenmiliz.wordpress.com).

Almost all the stories told are success stories, and even if there are problems such as vandalism in a community garden, the entry ends on an optimistic note: “It is the way it is, and so you have to make the best of it” (12 April 2012, www.rosarose.twoday.net/). Nature teaches you to be patient – and a later entry claims that vandalism has decreased. The writer hopes for a change in behavior of those who cause destruction. Thus, the writer relies on the positive energy a community garden can spread in the neighborhood. Accordingly, vandalism, even though it is a negative event, is neutralized or even masked by the pleasure of describing other positive experiences. Negative feelings, such as anger or displeasure, that may dominate an entry, are generally sorted out within the examined website communication.

The entries on blogs and websites exhibit a joyful feeling of togetherness with peers and with nature, and also of satisfaction with one own efforts. Entries emotionally describe the difficulties and efforts entailed in turning wasteland into green areas, and waste into garden tools. One author praises the “permanently required creativity” and the “constant confidence in achieving the ultimate raised flower bed, this time”, though all the involved gardeners are laymen and have no experience with working in wood (30 May 2012, www.opflanztis.wordpress.com). But confidence in the possibility of reaching the goal is great, and the enthusiasm is palpable.

Most entries express a sense of being drawn together by a shared concern. By emphasizing people-to-people rather than people-to-nature relationships, they express an intense feeling of fellowship among those involved in the gardening, as some examples show:

It is always exciting, unbelievable, and encouraging how many wonderful people give their best to make our garden possible. (6 March 2012 <http://opflanztis.wordpress.com/>)

[...] On the same day I started to revive the completely overgrown old flower bed. When I had to leave after three hours of strenuous grubbing and digging, out of nowhere appeared an unknown female garden enthusiast and offered to expand the bed. Meanwhile, someone has planted the bed, too. I have no idea who that, again, was. But it’s fun that enthusiasts appear from somewhere and take care of the garden. (26 May 2012, www.rosarose.twoday.net/)

The joy and work enthusiasm that spread in the group make our farming project feel fantastically meaningful and important. (23 Sept. 2012 www.matparken.wordpress.com/)

Gardening is celebrated as a unifying and uplifting force. The gardeners are a part of a collectivity of enthusiasts who share an identity created by a common interest. These quoted emotions express a strong feeling of belonging to the group of garden enthusiasts, and intensify the cohesion of the group. This collectivity of

enthusiast comprises not only the group of activists but also those who appreciate guerilla gardening, as another entry relates:

During the 15 minutes we were actually in place, passers-by were constantly approaching us with kind words. It was a great action, thanks Wolfsburg! (4 April 2012, www.gartenstadt2punkt0.wordpress.com/2012/04/)

These entries communicate feelings of joyful togetherness and pleasure, of a positive attitude towards planting activities within the group and among outsiders. The aesthetic of a “we-ness” is present in all the websites and blogs examined here. However, feelings of well-being are not limited to relations within a group and to other people but are expressed at a purely individual level as well. Gardening makes you happy, and helps to fulfill yourself. A gardener expresses his excitement at beginning the garden season after a long winter, in capital letters:

“I AM SO EXCITED. I HAVE ‘EARTH WORMS’ IN THE BELLY. My first planting in the garden” (3 March 2012, www.opflanztis.wordpress.com/)

Gardening is seen as an activity that leads to self-fulfillment. It allows people to communicate their feeling, to be proud of themselves and of their efforts, and to show and communicate the results of these efforts to a public, as a guerilla gardener expresses:

For me, this day was certainly very fulfilling, because I finally realized how much the garden means to me, and that it simply is a part of me. Guerilla Gardening brings great fun and joy! I had almost forgotten it in the last year, since I barely did any guerilla gardening.

(29 Sept 2012 www.gartenstadt2punkt0.wordpress.com/2012/09/)

Feelings of being in a relationship with nature are expressed in descriptions of hard work (often in the form of pulling weeds) and simultaneously enjoying the results of one’s own efforts when looking at these transformed areas. Nice weather conditions are mentioned as something that makes work easier and turn hard work into pleasure, as another entry relates:

We have built a new compost – shady in the North under bushes. This was very necessary because even the old compost has to be sorted and turned. But on such a beautiful sunny day like yesterday, it was a pure pleasure

(3 Sept. 2012 www.keimzelle.blogspot.eu/).

Entries describing the opposite – harsh weather conditions that make gardening almost impossible – seem to be deleted in website communication. In order to transform abandoned land into flower beds, the gardener has to do a lot of physical work. This may even be experienced as useless work, since nature will take over after a while unless someone cares for these beds. But narratives about such hard labor are always presented in an upbeat manner, as this example shows:

Thank you for a wonderful day! We had to work hard with the flower bed, which was packed with couch grass. But we had a lot of fun, too! [...] It will be amazing to see it grow! (www.tillvaxt.org/tillvaxt-2010/).

By illustrating the entry with a photo showing working children and adults who are trying to get rid of troublesome weeds, the feeling of having fun while doing this work is transmitted, even though it is laborious. The bodies are in motion rather than rest. A girl is laughing while handling a big pitchfork. The gardeners seem to know that they have to get rid of the weeds completely if the boxes are to be replanted. Here, again, the trope of the Recovery Narrative is evident. Nature or wilderness has to be transformed, be made to serve human interest. Couch grass is unwelcome, as any gardener knows.



“Thank you for such a wonderful day!” (<http://www.tillvaxt.org/tillvaxt-2010/>).

The same goes for the next example. Pulling out weeds, an activity that is here described as “grubbing” weeds because of the enormous root system (20 June 2011, www.rosarose.twoday.net/), fulfills expectations of what is expected from successful gardening; it also gives pleasure.

The effort is satisfying. The gardener enjoys the result, which she proudly shows to the photographer. The message is clear: gardening is fun.



“Grubbing”

Conclusions: The Risk of Ritual

In media research the study of rituals has customarily focused on their impact. I, however, have chosen to focus on how rituals are used in communication, and what function they fulfill. In general, we may note that rituals serve the function of minimizing uncertainty in communication, that is, to increase recognition and, thereby, connecting communication according to the systems-theoretical approach. In the communication of activist gardeners, a successful ritual raises awareness and conveys to the recipients a new understanding of urban gardening. Activist gardening is mainly described as self-fulfilling and fun, and as being deeply culturally connected to our ideas of living in social and environmental harmony.

My aim was to show that the communication of the examined activists is deeply rooted in cultural language, and uses rituals. Their communication does not only reflect social activities in the garden. Rather, is “part of a communication process in which the culture addresses itself” (Thomas 2006: 325).

Inspired by Kreinath’s description of ritual performances (2006: 469-470), and applying them to the concept of communication, I can distinguish at least three features of rituals held in common by the websites I have analysed. These rituals show certain forms of

1. Replication: that is, ritual recurs in accordance with the seasons of gardening. Here, ritual symbols of recovery, harmony, togetherness, enthusiasm etc. configure the pattern of communication.
2. Referentiality: that is, ritual invokes the ideal of the permanent presence of a desired form of community and a new way of life. Entries are often based on concrete actions in the garden, which, when communicated, express the idea and desire of a new way of urban life.
3. Efficacy: that is, how the rituals of communication can be established, and how they transform relations in the communication process, e.g., joint action. Messages defined as rituals are clear: they reduce the uncertainty of communication. I did not especially look at this feature, but judging from the attention given urban gardening by mass media (articles in newspapers as well as reports in TV), it appears that connecting communication has taken place, and the public awareness of these actions has increased.

However, ritual can also create new uncertainties. Images that include rituals can create artificial worlds. “This is a world as it happens to be. In this situation, an observer is inclined mistakenly to see symbolic ‘maps’ as having become real ‘territories’” (Thomas 2006: 337). Those, for instance, who have the Garden of Eden trope in mind when visiting the real Prinzessinnengärten in Berlin for the first time, may experience disappointment. During the planting season, it may, for

example, look like a chaotic place full of diverse containers of various garden vegetables in more or less good condition.

The repetition of the fixed flow of ritual symbols of a perfect garden world of pleasure and social harmony can be experienced as boring, and eventually, “rituals become the victim of their own success” (Thomas 2006: 339). Sooner or later the participant may drop out of the communication process, or engage in other playful and entertaining forms of involvement.

Heike Graf is Associate Professor at the School of Culture and Communication, Södertörn University, Sweden. Her recent research has included research on environmental communication and on blog communication. Among her publications regarding this topic is an article “Examining Garden Blogs as a Communication System” in *International Journal of Communication*, no 6, 2758–2779. E-mail: heike.graf@sh.se

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