

**NAVIGATING**  
**THE REBEL ARCHIPELAGO:**  
**ORIENTATION, SPACE AND COMMUNICATION**  
**IN THE “AUTONOMOUS” SCENE**

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**All the work presented within this dissertation is my own.**

**Signed:**

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# ABSTRACT

This work discusses the dynamics of participants' orientation in the "autonomous scene": the space of participation of autonomous movements, anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian movements practising direct action. My thesis examines how participants make sense of different situations of participation along their trajectory in the scene, and analyses the role played by a variety of communicative practices acting as "means of guidance" or "sources of orientation" inside the scene. It advances a performative understanding of cultural process, by focusing on the changing relationship between spatio-temporal coordination and communication, in a phase marked by the penetration of the Internet and mobile phones.

The empirical analysis concentrates on the case of the autonomous scenes in Italy, Germany and the UK and on a series of global protest events attended by autonomous activists in recent years. With the use of participant observation, interviews and textual analysis I reconstruct how participants maintain a sense of place and a sense of direction in collective action and the specificity of different forms of communication that aid orientation. I develop an understanding of the experience of "autonomous activism" as marked by a striving for orientation in which activists are constantly on the brink of getting lost, because of the lack of a strong "guidance" as in the case of authoritarian movements. The autonomous scene comes to be framed as a navigational space in which many trajectories are possible, and it is down to participants to make sense of their own "itinerary". The thesis concludes that the autonomous scene displays forms of togetherness which recall the ephemerality of other antagonistic or subcultural groupings, yet testify to the problems encountered by social movements in the face of a liquid and individualised society.

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# INTRODUCTION

*I speak of an orientation advisedly. We are concerned with nothing more and nothing less than that. We are concerned with what might be called a sense: an organ that perceives, a direction that may be conceived, and a directly lived movement that progresses towards the horizon. (Lefebvre, 1974/1991: 423)*

"Take a place within the global movement" proclaimed a t-shirt I bought at Frieda, a media and activist centre set up in downtown Rostock during the anti-G8 protest in June 2007. Next to the slogan was an image of a deckchair like the ones the leaders of the 8 richest countries in the world would relax in during breaks between meetings. That image of rest and stillness contrasted starkly with the experience of those days, spent walking on the streets of Rostock, wandering in the protest camp, to-and-froing between actions, meetings and debates. Sipping a coffee alone at the table, in a rare moment of calm, I pondered the question of what taking a place in a global movement really meant, and whether such a thing was possible at all. While I was immersed in these thoughts I eyed a bunch of leaflets and brochures I had gathered from a nearby table, each publicising different events and actions taking place during those days. Then my mind was drawn to the image of the map of the big direct action against the summit, which had taken place few days before. Had all these curious artefacts like maps, protest calendars, guides, as well as leaflets, posters and similar materials something to do with "taking a place within the movement"?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Field note - Rostock, June 7th 2007

There were a series of situations I witnessed while conducting this research which provide some insights about the relationship between a variety of forms of practical information (such as the ones described above) and the way people “take a place in the movement”: a woman panning over a billboard covered with announcements of cultural and political events in a social centre in Rome; a student glancing at the activities publicised on political posters while passing by a street corner in Friedrichshain in Berlin; a group of protesters studying a map of a direct action site on the top of a hill in the countryside of Rostock during the anti-G8 protests in 2007; a young English activist observing with amusement a map of possible skipping sites in London; a squatter alerting his friends after having received an eviction alert on his mobile phone, before jumping on his bike to rush to the site. What do these artefacts and practices tell us about the way in which people “take a place” and move together in a social movement?

## INTRODUCTION

The everyday life of those people who, to different degrees, participate “internally” in activist groups – and in particular in those which are sometimes referred to as “autonomous movements” (Katsiaficas, 1997, Deslandes and King, 2005, Invisible Committee, 2008), is populated by hundreds of such interactions. In these libertarian anti-capitalist movements practising direct action that have been at the forefront of anti-globalisation protests, we often see forms of communication which seem to escape the neat separation between culture and action, discourse and practice. The communication we see in this context does not seem to be much about the diffusion and reception of certain representations of society that is the traditional object of investigation in the field of media and cultural studies. The practices that are discussed in this investigation tell a different story. Rather than as surfaces of representation they can be analysed as having to do with those processes of coordination in space and time which “make the movement move” (Eyerman, 2006: 193). More specifically we can look at these media and related practices as “means of guidance” or “sources of orientation” within processes of collective action, which have increasingly come to resemble a diffused “autonomous geography” (Pickerill, Chatterton, 2006). We might call this space a “rebel archipelago”, whose islands are squats, social centres, bike repair workshops, political houses, eco-villages, organic farms, protest camps, skipping sites, assembly points, benefit nights, pickets, demos and blockades. The *orientational* rather than representational nature of the communicative

practices that predominate in this context of social interaction will be the main argument and proposal of this thesis. In this introduction I want to advance the main concepts and hypothesis that will guide my investigation.

## HOW DO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS MOVE?

Social movements similarly to the social groups, analysed by phenomenologist Alfred Schütz, can be seen as characterized by a common “system of orientation” or shared “schemes of orientation” (1967: 48). This for Schütz is a shared “stock of knowledge” which allows insiders to act in a coordinated way in space and time. In his own work, Schütz often employs the term orientation also to express other meanings, such as the type of inter-subjective relationship we maintain with other people. The term “orientation” itself is a particularly dense and problematic one with which, as we will see in the next chapter, a variety of meanings have been associated. Specifically, in sociology “orientation” is often used in the sense of a disposition towards some abstract entities, as when scholars pointedly speak of a “political orientation” (for example Maloney and Deth, 2009), or of a certain “sexual orientation” (Klein, Sepekoff, Wolf, 1985). This use of the term orientation builds on Max Weber's treatment of the term for whom “action is social insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented (*orientiert*) in its course” (Swedberg and Agevall, 2005: 190). “The idea of orientation is consequently what ties people together for Weber and also what connects them to an order” (Swedberg and Agevall, 2005: 190), as alternatively expressed in the terms “orientation to others” and “value-orientation”.

When using the term orientation to define the object of study in this work, I hark back to the deepest meaning of “orientation”, its spatial one, to define the spatial knowledge, the situational know-how and the practical competence which allows activists to make sense of their presence and interaction with others people in their group in social space. Thus orientation in this text will be primarily explored as an “orientation within” social movements, that is a sense of “familiarity” that fundamentally revolves around knowing “how to get around in the movement” as some activists put it<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, I am also crucially interested in the way in which this “orientation within”, or this internal orientation, is tied to an “orientation towards” - that is a disposition and attention towards,

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Marina – London, 20th January 2009

as well as an engagement with other subjects and objects, and in particular people, media and places.

The process of orientation is a phenomenon that is difficult to grasp at first, because of its taken-for-granted and pre-reflective character. It is a process that, if it might seem “unfamiliar”, is unfamiliar precisely because it revolves around the acquisition of a sense of “familiarity” with the surrounding space, which is accepted as natural and rarely scrutinised (Ahmed, 2006). Despite these difficulties orientation deserves studying, because of its importance, of which we paradoxically become aware when it is absent, e.g. in the moments of disorientation – spatial, temporal and social confusion – which often seem to accompany phases of social isolation or life change; as well as in those moments of revelation, or intense self-reflection, in which we intuitively grasp the apparent “miracle” and intricacy of the connection between our individual orientation and forms of collective coordination in space and time.

One can think here of the amazement experienced when faced with the apparent ubiquity of certain people who seem to be everywhere we go (and they might well think the same of us). How many times have we heard friends and acquaintances say expressions like “I keep bumping into the same people, all the time.. isn’t incredible”? How many times, by the same token, have I thought to myself similar things when meeting people in a certain squat in London who I had first got to know in Chiapas, or being at a demonstration in Rome and bumping into people who I had got to know in a squat in London; or when, randomly, I had got to know people who it emerged were friends of friends, and then said “what a small world”? This dictum heard so many times conveys our own sense of astonishment which is in fact not that different from the one that touches those childhood friends who are not in “the movement”, when they hear with a mix of curiosity and bewilderment about our pending trips, our comings and goings, and sometimes stare at us saying “how the hell did you get into that?”

## ORIENTATION AND CHOICE

These anecdotal situations – which readers might well be familiar with – suggest the way in which the affinity between people pertaining to certain groups is concretely manifested in contexts of proximity, a process which Bourdieu has inspiringly captured in his discussion of taste connected with social positions, and in his passing references to the existence of a

“spatial *habitus*”<sup>3</sup>, such as the one tying together Parisian intellectuals and the Left Bank of the French capital (1984: 270, 432). Nonetheless, Bourdieu's analysis is less relevant when it comes to account for complexity, serendipity, unpredictability and creativity, aspects which – as I will show in this work – are all connected with the process of orientation within social movements. If we treat orientation as a component of *habitus*, we can account for its collective, structural, routine dimension, but hardly for its individual and dynamic one, which is the one I am mostly interested in for the purpose of my investigation.

One of the key aspects to be discussed in connection with orientation is in fact a question that Bourdieu tends to overly neglect in his analysis: the question of choice (Crossley, 2002: 87). To approach orientation as a process tied to choice, we need instead to turn to authors like Alberto Melucci or Ulrich Beck, who have accounted for the importance of the individual in contemporary society, where we make choices that previous generations would not have been expected to make, and we are prized and blamed for them (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Similar is the understanding advanced by Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci, who states that “choosing is the inescapable fate of our time” (1996a: 44): it becomes a must in a world in which “complexity signifies differentiation, high speed and frequency of change, and broadening of opportunities for action” (1996a: 44). This situation of complexity brings about uncertainty that is inextricably tied with the need to choose constantly:

The imperative that immediately arises from uncertainty is therefore the necessity to choose. We thus find ourselves caught up in the paradox in which choice becomes destiny: it is impossible not to choose among the options available in any situation. In order to act in the first place, we are forced to make choices – whenever we move from one system to another, whenever we pass from one time to another, whenever we simply act at all. The paradox lies in the fact that the extension of our actual life-chances – that is, of the range of individual autonomy expressed in the act of choosing associated with the idea of will and freedom – also entails the unavoidable obligation to choose. Even non-choice constitutes a choice, for it signifies rejecting an opportunity, which no less is one choice among the many. (1996: 45)

This continuous need of making a choice about how to be in the world, is deeply tied with our location in a society which appears as a complex maze where it is easy to get lost

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<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu defines *habitus* as “a system of dispositions, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking, or a system of long-lasting (rather than permanent) schemes and schemata, or structures of perception, conception and action” (2005: 43)

(1996b: 17).

Building on this vision of a society and politics dominated by individualisation and the paradox of choice, in this work I look at “activist orientation” as a process with its own autonomy and internal complexity, rather than simply as the projection of certain social structures or mechanisms of mobilisation. By adopting this approach we will be able to account for the specificity of the skills people come to possess, the tools they use and the practices they employ, as well as the obstacles they encounter, while trying to navigate a social space alongside other people pertaining (to different degrees) to their own group. By so doing we want to ask what binds together social affinity and spatio-temporal contiguity into something akin to what Bourdieu calls the “space of social positions” (Bourdieu 1984:128), and what is the nature of the actual though transient physical proximity in a variety of “social occasions”, such as those which have been carefully dissected by Goffman's analysis of face-to-face interactions (1959, 1974)? It is by locating our investigation at the crossroads between these different levels, and in particular the material and the symbolic, that the concept of orientation can advance our understanding of how social groups, and social movements in particular, “get together” and act in a coordinated way, and the contribution of individuals in this process. The rest of the introduction will lay out the basic concepts to be used, before entering into a more detailed review of the relevant literature in chapter 1.

## CONNECTING CULTURE AND ACTION

This work explores the phenomenon of “activist orientation” by way of a theoretically informed empirical investigation, which concentrates on the case of “autonomous” activism — a set of discourses and practices which encompasses a variety of groups practising direct action and pre-figurative politics in the context of “autonomous movements” (Katsiaficas, 1997). In this context I look at orientation as a process of participation in such activism, its possibility and modalities. Orientation is thus approached as the process through which participants in autonomous movements make sense of their “political itineraries” in space and time, and of their changing positions inside “the movement” and in society at large. Particular attention in this context is paid to the communicative practices that provide guidance for processes of orientation in the context of autonomous activism. While cognitive theorists like Tolman (1948) and Lynch (1960) have discussed spatial orientation as a process which fundamentally has to do with

an individual's acquaintance with the surrounding physical environment, in this thesis I will instead discuss orientation as a deeply communicative and cultural process, which has to do with individuals' attachment to a social group as it is suggested in Alfred Schütz's discussion of groups' "schemes of orientation" (1967: 48). For this purpose I am not only interested in reconstructing the workings of the process of orientation but also in examining the narratives and imaginaries that signify and frame this process.

This analysis aims at contributing to the debate about culture and action in social movements that has been developing in recent years (Melucci, 1996a, 1996b Johnston and Klandermans, 1995, McDonald, 2006, Alexander, 2006, Jordan, 2002, Eyerman and Jamison, 1991, Eyerman, 2006). In this context, I aim to use the concept of "orientation" as a heuristic device to analyse the experience of participation in autonomous movements and the forms of togetherness that underpins it. For this purpose I develop a broadly phenomenological approach to the study of social and political participation, which, while looking at issues of communication and culture, is not much concerned with semiotic processes or the formal structure of networks but rather with the question of being-in-the-world, whereby as Csordas has argued "the distinction between representation and being-in-the-world is methodologically critical, for it is the difference between understanding culture in terms of objectified abstractions and existential immediacy" (Csordas, 1994: 10).

This approach stems from the desire to depart from the neat separation between culture and action, discourse and practice, often implied by scholars working in media and cultural studies. Significant examples of this trend are those works which engage with question of representation (of class, of gender, of age) from a discursive perspective (Bell, Garrett, 1999, Gamson, Modigliani, 1989, Fairclough, 2001), often informed by the work of Michel Foucault with his vision of knowledge as a field of power (Foucault and Gordon, 1980). In this context culture is seen as a process that provides action with values, meanings and its ultimate ends (Swidler, 1986: 273). Counter to this vision of culture as neatly separated from action and practice, I am interested in developing an understanding of communication and culture as processes which are deeply entangled with doing, and with the small acts, which make collective action possible.

Insights for the development of this position come from Ann Swidler's adaptation of Clifford Geertz's cognitive definition that casts culture as a toolkit, which "provides people tools with which they construct lines of action" or "strategies of action" (Swidler, 1986: 277). For Swidler "the symbolic experiences, mythic lore, and ritual practices of a group or society create moods and motivations, ways of organizing experience and evaluating

reality, modes of regulating conduct, and ways of forming social bonds” (284). The adoption of such a vision of culture does not imply discounting the role that activism plays in the construction of new values which affect society at large – an aspect which is of utmost importance for understanding contemporary social movements (Jordan, 2002: 7-13). Rather, more modestly I argue for the need to dedicate more attention to a variety of processes of practical communication that have so far been neglected in media and cultural studies, and which can allow for an understanding of that liminal area between discourse and practice, between knowledge and action that constitutes a fundamental part of our everyday experience.

I believe that Swidler’s stress on the role of culture in the structuring of experience is not incompatible with a more complex understanding of culture, which also accounts for the role played by representations, such as the one developed by Jeffrey Alexander in his theory of cultural performance as “a social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation” (2006a: 32). This area of debate provides a variety of useful terms for the current investigation such as the concept of *mise-en-scene* (scene-setting), and the idea of social action as an iterative process that needs continual reproduction similarly to what is asserted in Judith Butler’s discussion of gender identity (1990). If I do not ascribe completely to this school of thought is because I am wary of the formalism that inflects it, and the textual modelling of culture that is adopted in this context (Alexander, 2006b). My understanding of culture can thus be summed up as located halfway between the pragmatic one propounded by Swidler and the more hermeneutic one advanced by Alexander.

Building on the general understanding of culture as a “toolkit” provides us with a framework to make sense of a variety of neglected practices and artefacts within social movements, which so far have appeared unworthy of academic attention, because they did not explicitly convey the larger narratives of social movements. I am talking about those micro and everyday media – leaflets, posters, direction cards, guides, diary listings, calendars – which are so ubiquitous in social movements and in other groupings but which have hardly received any academic attention (some notable exceptions are Srebreny-Mohammadi, Mohammadi, 1994, Thornton 1996). This investigation is animated by the contention, that when dealing with the culture of a certain social group, we must not only look for the “big media”, but also for those more humble and invisible practices of communication which are inextricable from the experience of everyday life, and that need to be understood in connection with interpersonal communication. It is my contention,

that by looking at these communicative practices, we can make progress towards understanding how presence and togetherness is performed in social groups.

## THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE SWARM

Looking at communication as revolving around processes of coordination of action in time and space is an approach that proves particularly fitting for investigating the practices conducted in the context of autonomous movements. These movements fall do not conform to bureaucratisation and professionalisation which resource mobilisation theorists as Gamson considered as a universal necessity of social movements (1975: 107). What we see here are instead forms of informal organising, or dis/organisation (Jordan, 2002: 69) that are accompanied by appeals to horizontality, with the rejection of leaders, as well as of forms of delegation and representation (McDonald, 2006: 17). This trend towards de-centralisation is also the result of the capabilities offered by digital communication. This is suggested by Jeffrey Juris who has seen the emergence of a “networking cultural logics” in contemporary movements, in which the use of computers “reinforces networked-based organizational forms” (2008: 13) and allows for “a new way of doing politics” characterized by “horizontal coordination among *autonomous* groups” (2008b: 14).

Accompanying this shift towards networks as forms of organisation or “dis/organisation” (Jordan, 2002: 69), is what some scholars and pundits have seen as the new forms of display of collective action in space, which appear to overcome the paradigm of the “crowd”, which has been the object of a long-standing, and often pessimistic treatment in European debate (see for example Canetti, 1962). Instead of crowds, techno-optimists like Howard Rheingold have spoken of the emergence of “smart mobs”, brought together by text messages and websites, and capable of coordinating rapidly and without central control (2005). In a similar vein autonomist writers Hardt and Negri, looking at anti-globalisation protests, have celebrated the emergence of “swarms”, flexible assemblages of individuals provided with a “swarm intelligence”, “which is fundamentally based on communication” (2004: 83-84).

If this and similar metaphors have successfully captured the sense of a dispersed and mobile or nomadic constituency – kept together by communication rather than through proximity – little attention has been paid to the consequences of this change in the spatial and temporal conditions of collective action for the experience of the individual

involved in such social movements. The language of “swarms” and “smart mobs” is refreshing and allows some distance from the “irrational” character attributed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by French social theorists Le Bon (1895/2007) and Tarde (1890/1962), to crowds and similar phenomena. Nonetheless, similarly to how Le Bon and Tarde saw the crowd as animated by a collective mind, Negri and Hardt talk of “swarm intelligence” (2004: 88) echoing Marx’s notion of a “collective intellect”. What is lacking in this context is an understanding of the role of the individual, as it were the “honey-bee” in the “swarm”, which accounts for the active and creative ways in which participants contribute to collective mobilisation, and make choices and plans about their participation. Here, the concept of orientation can prove a useful theoretical device, which allows us to overcome some theoretical deadlocks in the analysis of collective action, fully accounting for the double role of participants in activism: as both people embroiled in communicative interactions which cut across space, and mobile subjects traversing and inhabiting space.

To understand the spatial coordination of collective action, we paradoxically need to start from the way in which *individual* participants perceive and live collective mobilisations. This proposal stems from a large body of work that asserts the increasing individualization of society (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, Melucci, 1996, Bauman, 2001). My position is particularly informed by Alberto Melucci’s reading of the individual condition in what he calls a “planetary society”, in which the individual has been “turned into a subject of action; but no less into a terminal point of the process of regulation” (1996a: 91) and “the capacity of individuals to define who they are, and what it is that they are doing and wish to do, is enhanced by broader access to education” (1996a: 92). Building on this position I develop an understanding of individual participants as the fundamental subjects of orientation, people who are constantly engaged in making choices about their participation, and in planning and organising their trajectories in the space of participation of social movements, coping with a situation of spatial fragmentation and liquidity which characterises contemporary societies (Jameson, 1991, Bauman, 2000).

## AN INSIDER RESEARCH

In order to fulfil this task I adopt an interdisciplinary framework, which attempts to bridge the more “cultural” side of social movement studies, and in particular new social movement studies, with the work done on subcultures and scenes in subcultural studies (Irwin, 1977, Straw, 1991). The result is a phenomenological framework of analysis, heavily

drawing on the scholarship of Alfred Schütz (1967, 1973), which concerns itself with the way in which activists make sense of their participation in the social space or the life-world of social movements and in particular, what Haunss and Leach (2009) have referred to with the concept of “movement scene”<sup>4</sup>. This approach is combined with what is essentially an ethnographic methodology, that makes large use of in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations in order to provide an exploration of autonomous movements in Germany, Italy, and the UK, focusing on a series of protests and events which have taken place between 2007 and 2009 (Rostock anti-G8 2007, Climate Camp 2007, Euromayday 2008, anti-G20 2009, Rome anti-G8 2009). The historical period considered in this study is what we could provisionally and rather awkwardly call the “post-anti-globalisation” years. These have been years during which the “global justice movement” (Della Porta, 2006a), or the “movement of movements” (Mertes, Bello, 2004), has entered a crisis and apparently faded away, while a series of single-issue campaigns on climate change, migration control, the financial system responsible for the economic crisis, have gained momentum, bringing about a redefinition of practices and identities<sup>5</sup>. Analysing this historical period of uncertainty and a situation of “impasse” (Colectivo Situaciones, 2009) seems particularly promising for illuminating the workings of activist orientation.

I owe much of my capacity to describe the practices of autonomous activism to having been an insider in some of the groups and events considered in this work. During my university studies in Italy I participated in a media activist group in Turin and participated in different autonomous protests. Then, after completing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Journalism and New Media I went on to work in Chiapas for 5 months as journalism teacher in Zapatista communities. Finally, once in London I got involved in a local social centre and in campaigns against climate change and the economic crisis. This range of experiences has been fundamental in developing an awareness of a variety of problems related to autonomous activism and for formulating hypotheses about its working. While this research is influenced by my affective investment in “the movement” and my personal connection with people inside it, I am alert to the risks of producing an apologetic account of what happens inside autonomous movements. Rather, I aim at teasing out the contradictions and opportunities that characterise my object of study. This attitude is accompanied by a personal political conviction in the idea that it is

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<sup>4</sup> A detailed presentation of the phenomenological theoretical framework and methodology which has been developed for this research is presented respectively in Chapter 1. and in Chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> A detailed definition and description of “autonomous movements”, and of the “culture of autonomy” characterising them is provided in chapter 2.

important for autonomous movements to open themselves to the outside and inform a sympathetic public about their activity – despite all the risks this opening might bring about.

## STRUCTURE OF THE WORK

This thesis is divided in 8 chapters:

**Chapter 1** develops a phenomenological framework for making sense of the relationship between communication and participation in social movements. It builds on the experiential analysis of social and political participation developed by Dubet, McDonald and Melucci and connects it with notions of “life-world” and “scenes”. It proposes a vision of social movements as scenes held together by the presence of a common orientation among its participants, which is largely maintained by the guidance provided by a variety of media.

**Chapter 2** discusses the nature of the scene underscoring autonomous activism, which has emerged out of the crisis of the anti-globalisation movement. It looks at the rootedness of this politics in the history of the libertarian or anti-authoritarian Left and its connection with subcultures. The chapter draws attention to the way appeals to autonomy translate into a celebration of personalism and territorialism. Moreover it considers the centrality of tactics of spatial occupation in this context, and their contribution to the construction of the “autonomous scene”.

**Chapter 3** contains a series of methodological reflections for the development of this work. In this context I locate my work in the encounter between phenomenological analysis and social movement studies, and discuss the relationship between my position as an activist and my position as a researcher. The chapter advances a methodological framework adopting a range of data collection tools, relying on ethnographic observations and interviews, and analysis of activist publicity.

Chapters 4 to 7 examine the findings from my empirical research.

**Chapter 4** discusses the nature of guidance and of the relationship between guidance and

orientation in the context of autonomous activism. Specifically it discusses the specific mode of guidance that shapes orientation in the autonomous scene. I argue that this mode of guidance appears to be characterised by a voluntarist ethic and a striving for hospitality that condenses in a spatial imaginary of convergence. In this situation activists are expected to deploy an intense effort of orientation to participate in the activity of the scene.

**Chapter 5** analyses the interplay of guidance and orientation in the context of the urban autonomous scenes of Berlin, London and Rome. It highlights the role played by concentric communicative rings, characterised by different communicative processes (face-to-face, paper-based media and online communication). From this analysis it emerges that there is an increasing state of dispersion in autonomous scenes, whereby mediated communication allows an overview of an otherwise ruptured landscape.

**Chapter 6** analyses the process of orientation in the context of big protest events, whereby participants are drawn together in an unfamiliar space, and where many decisions need to be made about the direction to be taken and the way to act together. Looking at different phases in the experience of participation, the chapter examines the complex interplay between mediated and interpersonal communication in this context, in a situation in which activists are constantly on the verge of getting lost.

**Chapter 7** discusses the orientation and the forms of guidance underlying the life-trajectory of participants in the movement. In this context it highlights the effort which is required to enter the scene, and the way in which places act as a mooring within the scene itself, while movement media constitute by contrast vectors towards the recognized places or monuments of the scene and towards more transient occasions of face-to-face interaction.

**Chapter 8** contains the conclusions to my work. It sums up the different argument and themes that have emerged from the previous chapters. It argues that autonomous activism, is characterised by a striving for orientation, which reflects the dilemmas of an experience of participation difficult to stabilise because of its complexity and ephemerality.

# CHAPTER 1

## FOR A PHENOMENOLOGY OF ACTIVIST EXPERIENCE

*The ever-changing playing field of this new world and the freely chosen variations in the rules of the game will regenerate a diversity of local scenes that are independent without being insular. And this diversity will revive the possibility of authentic journeys — journeys within an authentic life that is itself understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself.*

*(Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 1968/1996: 56)*

### INTRODUCTION

Studying the phenomenon of activist orientation in autonomous movements, as I wish to do in this thesis, stems from an attempt to rethink the way we look at the relationship between communication and participation in social movements. Specifically, in this work I want to investigate how communication shapes the coordination between movement participants in space, allowing for the “oppositional performances” (Eyerman, 2006) that underlie social movements to be displayed. Thus, instead of looking at the ways in which social movements construct their representations and broadcast a message to the rest of society as Melucci puts it (Melucci, 1996a: 9) here I am interested in discussing the forms of communication which allow participants to make sense of the movement and of its space from the inside (Eyerman, 2006: 194-196). Furthermore, rather than discussing such internal processes from the static and structural viewpoint of networks as in much recent research about political participation (Diani and McAdam, 2003, Juris, 2008), here I am interested in grasping the dynamic forms of cognitive and bodily engagement through which many people acting in concert “make the movement move” (Eyerman, 2006). Thus here my interest is on the micro- and meso- levels of collective action, the levels at which,

to use Melucci's words, "more visible collective processes come into contact with individual *experience* and day-to-day *experience*" (2006b: 2)

As we will see in the course of this chapter, this focus on the individual and performative dimension of movement participation contrasts with the dominant approaches to collective action. I begin by noticing how in recent years, also as a consequence of the increasing interest in the role played by networks in social movements, the process of participation has taken centre-stage. The use of this term is however made problematic by processes of mediatisation and individualisation which seem to displace participation from its traditional location in public space. To dissect the dynamics of this process I turn to the analysis of four different approaches to participation: the *instrumental* view developed in resource mobilisation theory; the *motivational* view underscoring social psychological studies of social movements; the *expressive* view emerging from new social movement theory; and finally the *experiential* view, developed in the work of an array of authors coming from this latter current of social movement analysis.

By following the lead of Melucci (1996a, 1996b), McDonald (2006) and Dubet (1994), and other scholars who have concentrated on the concept of experience for understanding collective action, I develop a framework for understanding processes of orientation. Particularly relevant for developing my position will prove Alfred Schütz's discussion of the life-world, as a space of experience that is characterised by a gradation between immediacy and mediation, proximity and distance (1967, 1973). Using Schütz's model of analysis we can come to see the movement as a "scene", a particular territory of the lifeworld, which is bound together by a common "scheme of orientation", which allows participants to maintain a sense of place and a sense of direction inside the movement. In the final part of the chapter I develop the focus of the research further by advancing a model of orientation as born out of an interaction with media acting as "means of guidance", alongside immersion in the physical environment and connection with other people. Finally I raise a series of research questions to guide the ensuing investigation.

## BEYOND NETWORKS: RE-THINKING PARTICIPATION

In recent years, much of the discussion on social movements has concentrated on the investigation of social networks sustaining collective action (Diani, McAdam, 2003, Juris, 2008). This stream of research is in fact anything but new. Sociological analysis on

networks has developed since at least the 1960s, when a network-like structure was identified in new social movements that contrasted with the pyramidal structure of trade unions and parties (Babchuk and Booth, 1969, Oberschall, 1973). Initially the concept of network was used to study processes of recruitment in social movements, which, as different scholars have argued, often emerged from the extended network of existing participants (Fernandez and McAdam, 1988, Klandermans and Oegema, 1987, Snow et al., 1986). In more recent years the use of this concept has been widened to encompass a variety of other processes related to participation in social movements, such as the so-called processes of “micro-mobilisation”, connected with the everyday context of participation in which individuals are immersed (see for example Tindall, 2004).

The current revival of the study of networks has been triggered by the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement that for some scholars has displayed evident network-like features, a “movement of movements” which for Della Porta and Mosca was underpinned by a “network of networks” (2005). The reason for such a network-like structure was mainly found in the increasing influence played by the Internet and other new media in the anti-globalisation movement, whose de-centralised structure seemed to mirror the rhizomatic architecture of the Internet (Klein, 2002b). Thus in his recent *tour de force* on the movement against corporate globalisation Juris has talked about a horizontal networking logic, in contrast with a vertical “command logic”, as the defining factor of this new politics. This horizontality is celebrated in a movement that is heavily dependent on mailing lists and websites (2008).

Despite attempts such as the one proposed by Juris to identify the “concrete practices” through which “decentred and rhizomatic” (2008: 298) patterns are generated, for the most part the focus on networks has brought about an attention to the structural features of the anti-globalisation movement rather than to its dynamics and the performative processes which construct and reproduce this and other social movements. Here I share Kevin McDonald’s critique that “current concepts of networks appear disembodied and too located in a culture of simultaneity – typically researchers attempt to “map” networks in a way that disembodies them, and locates them in a one-dimensional time” (2006: 37). Moreover, the research on networks can be hardly reconciled with my interest in the personal dimension of participation since, as McDonald puts it, “the image of network expels the senses and the body, it is a flow of abstracted information” (2006: 218).

Despite these evident shortcomings there is a positive aspect that needs to be

recovered from the debates on networks. This is the recognition of participation as an important process within networks, yet with its own autonomy and internal complexity. When examining networks, in fact, scholars explore a variety of micro-aspects of collective action which are important for the development of my investigation, and rightly account for the importance played by friendship and contact with other activists as a way of fostering participation (Tindall, 2004); or the complex ways in which information is circulated among participants in social movements (Juris, 2008). Research on social movement networks draws on the correct assumption of the centrality of participation over other well established processes in the analysis of collective action (and in particular organisation and mobilisation). But it treats this concept in an unproblematic way, without delving into the tricky question of what we mean exactly when we talk about “participation” and what are its dynamics. This is instead precisely the path which I think we need to follow for developing an analysis of orientation in social movements.

The concept of participation has been one of the most hotly debated issues in sociology and the political sciences. In the past scholars like Rokkan (1970) and Croteau (1995) have studied how different categories of people participate in institutional politics, and the correlation between different demographics and the intensity and modalities of such participation. It is however in the context of social movement studies, that the concept of participation has received most attention, while being used in two competing ways. As Sidney Tarrow remarks, on the one hand, participation means “taking part, that is acting so as to promote the interests and needs of an actor”, on the other hand, it means “belonging to a system, identifying with the ‘general interests’ of a community” (1994: 173-174). The first meaning revolves around an *instrumental* vision of participation as a process which is oriented towards a specific set of goals, while the second comes closer to an *expressive* definition of participation, which concentrates on the manifestation of identification with collective action.

While, initially, in the context of social movement studies participation was mostly used as a technical term often deployed in connection with the concept of mobilisation, in the last decades this term has increasingly acquired a moral undertone. This happened especially as a consequence of protests conducted by the so-called new social movements of pacifism and ecologism which emphasised the importance of the influence of citizens in affairs otherwise left to experts (Touraine, 1971, Offe, 1985). Today the crystallisation of such claims is made evident in widespread assertions around the need for a “participatory society”, and in references to the civil society of trade unions, religious groups and NGOs,

as the arena in which participation would take place (Keane, 2003). Condensing the reasons for the rise of the concept of participation in contemporary political discourses, and referring to the work of social ecologist Murray Bookchin, Peter Reason states that:

Participation is a political imperative: it affirms the fundamental human right of persons to contribute to decisions which affect them. Human persons are centres of consciousness within the cosmos, agents with emerging capacities for self-awareness and self-direction. Human persons are also communal beings, born deeply immersed in community and evolving within community [...] Participation is thus fundamental to human flourishing, and is political because, particularly in these times, it requires the exercise of intentional human agency, political action in public and private spheres, to encourage and nurture its development. (1998: 6-7)

At the height of the cycle of mobilisation against neoliberal globalisation, similar normative references to participation came to permeate the discourse of global movements. The big “no to neoliberalism” displayed in counter-summits went together with an underlying message: the need to invent forms of political engagement from below (Della Porta, 2005), as seen in the development of “new democratic arenas” such as the World Social Forum (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007).

Today, references to participation as a normative principle reach far beyond grassroots social movements. The term has entered the vocabulary of local institutions through practices of “participatory budgeting” (Baiocchi, 2005), and become a part of national governments in processes of consultation and increasing references to the need for transparency and accountability (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001); it is also central to NGOs which have often claimed the role of being the key actor of such participatory functions (Mayo, 2005). References to “a need for participation” in processes of decision making are even visible on the websites of international financial institutions, and corporations, in the context of programs of corporate responsibility (Vandenberg, 2000). The widespread and often superficial use of the term “participation” in these latter contexts alerts us to the risk - well highlighted by Melucci - that this concept might be used to imply a containment of social movements within the terms of institutional systems. Thus Melucci cautions that “any correct definition of political participation must restrict itself to institutional action” (1996a: 307). While one needs to be aware of the risks identified by Melucci, I am convinced that the notion of participation can be usefully deployed to express the intervention of individuals in social movements, especially if one defines “participation” as the experience of a life-world as I will do towards the end of this

chapter.

The increasing importance of the term “participation” in contemporary radical political discourse is accompanied by two phenomena which contribute to recasting the location of this process across the private/public divide: mediatisation and the individualisation. On the one hand in recent years we have witnessed the rapid diffusion of digital communication technologies in social movements, with the rise of Internet-based forms of activism (McCaughey and Ayers, 2003, Jordan and Taylor, 2004) and “computer-supported social movements” (Juris, 2005). Digital communication technologies make possible new forms of participation at a distance or “tele-participation” (Nichols, 1994), thus loosening the connection between participation and contexts of physical proximity. On the other hand, we have seen the emergence of individualised forms of collective action, exemplified by ethical consumerism and a politics tied to consumption (Micheletti, 2003, Littler, 2008). These practices, displayed in spaces of consumption such as supermarkets raise questions about the location of participation in the public sphere (Tormey, 2007).

As a result of these processes which modify our understanding of participation, it becomes urgent to clarify what we exactly mean by this concept, as well as to produce in-depth empirical accounts of the emerging phenomena which are deemed to fall under this rubric. This is a task which entails looking in more depth at what established areas of scholarship have identified by that term, paying particular attention to what role is assigned to questions of culture and communication in the analysis of participation. For this purpose, in the following sections I reconstruct the features of four approaches to the study of social and political participation (see Table 1.1 in the next page). These are the *instrumental* view of participation which characterises resource mobilisation theory, the *motivational* vision proper to the social psychological approach to social movements elaborated in particular by Bert Klandermans (1984, 1985) and the *expressive* view of participation established in the study of so-called “new social movements” (Melucci, 1980, 1994, Habermas, 1981, Offe, 1999). Having shown the shortcomings of these different paradigms of analysis and their incapacity to account for the creative and performative character of the individual level of participation, I turn to a variety of authors (Melucci, 1996, Dubet, 1994, McDonald, 2006) who have set the basis for a fourth framework of analysis of social and political participation: the *experiential* view.

	<b>Perspective</b>	<b>View of participation</b>	<b>Relevant Authors</b>
<b>Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT)</b>	Organisational & Political	Instrumental	Tarrow, Tilly, Gamson
<b>Social-Psychological Extension of RMT</b>	Socio-psychological	Motivational	Klandermans, Oegema, Snow and Benford
<b>New Social Movement Theory (NSMT)</b>	Social and Cultural	Expressive	Touraine, Melucci, Habermas, Offe, Eyerman & Jamison
<b>“Experience Movements”</b>	Cultural	Experiential	Melucci, McDonald, Dubet

**Table 1.1: Different types of analysis of participation**

## THE INSTRUMENTAL VIEW

A great deal of the current understanding of participation in social movements stems from the scholarship produced in the context of resource mobilisation theory (RMT). Resource mobilisation theory originated in the American academia during the 70s and soon acquired a central position in the debate on collective action. Prominent contributors to this theory of collective action include Charles Tilly (1973, 1978), Anthony Obershall (1973), Mayer N. Zald (1979) and Doug McAdam (1986). This stream of research is split into two currents (Meyer, 2004): the classic “economic” one, which portrays social movements as goal-oriented enterprises operating within “social movement industries” (Zald, McCarthy, 1987); and the political opportunities version of resource mobilisation theory, mainly associated with Tilly (1995, 1998), which concentrates on the interaction between social movements and the political system, framing them as an extension of institutional politics and more precisely as “contentious politics”. Both currents share an

instrumental or “utilitarian” (Fireman, Gamson, 1979) understanding of the process of participation, which is understood in terms of a rational action to achieve a variety of “public goods” (Olson, 1971, Hardin, 1982) as diverse as peace, higher wage rates (Hardin, 1982: 19), clean air (Hardin, 1982: 128), or abortion rights (Sandler, 1998).

Resource mobilisation scholars are particularly concerned with the strategies developed by social movements’ organisations for attaining certain goals. For McCarthy and Zald what characterises this approach is an emphasis on both the “societal support and constraint of social movement phenomena” (1977: 1213). Here attention is concentrated on “the variety of resources that must be mobilized, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for *success*, and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements” (1977: 1213). Within this approach, the assumption is made that in any given time in society there are always enough grievances to create conflicts and contention (McCarthy, Zald 1977: 1215, Tilly, 1978, Oberschall, 1978). In this context, participation tends to be looked at in quantitative terms. Thus, much attention is paid to figures such as turnouts at demonstrations, riots and other protest events. Coherently with this approach participants are seen as a resource to be mobilised in various ways, and the discussion concentrates on the ways in which social movements’ organisations can maximise participation held as a key factor for movements’ goal-attainment (see for example Zald, Ash, 1966, Giugni, 1998). Questions of culture are rarely approached in this context, while references made to processes of communication are mostly technical. In this context communication is represented as sort of a “meta-resource”, which among other things (consensus building, counter-information) also allows social movements to mobilise participants.

Another fundamental element which characterises resource mobilisation theory’s understanding of participation consists in its positing affiliation to a certain group as a condition *sine qua non* of political participation (for example see Marullo, 1988, Milofsky, 1988, Leighley, 1996). As a consequence most of the analyses which deal with the question of participation tend to focus on the process of recruitment. Thus, little attention has been traditionally paid to what happens once participation has begun, e.g. to the question of “sustained participation” (Passy, Giugni, 2000). This tendency also derives from the fact that most of the organisations which have been analysed by resource mobilisation theorists are characterised by a high degree of formalisation and professionalisation. Specifically trade unions such as AFL-CIO, lobbying organisations and NGOs have been among the typical case studies for resource mobilisation scholars (McCarthy and Zald, 1973).

A major obstacle encountered by resource mobilisation theorists, in their analysis of participation, is the riddle of “freeriderism”. Why would people participate if they think that other people will do the job for them anyway, asked Mancur Olson, a foremost proponent of rational actor theory (Olson, 1965). His answer was that participants attain “selective incentives” (1965, 1971), resources which are only attainable by participating in collective action. Examples of “selective incentives” are cooperation, trust, increased social ties within the community. Nonetheless, this answer is hardly able to explain costly or even dangerous commitment to social movements which is the hallmark of more radical and militant social movements (McAdam, 1988) such as autonomous movements, neither can it account for the role played by emotional connection in sustaining participation (Goodwin, Jasper, Polletta, 2001). To deal with this question, researchers are pushed to move away from the organisational preoccupation characterising resource mobilisation theory and towards explaining complex processes of interaction between collective and individual subjects, which are the object of analysis in the field of social psychology (Katz, Kahn, 1966, McDougall, 2003).

## THE MOTIVATIONAL VIEW

To cope with the theoretical riddle of free-riderism, and more in general with the shortcomings of the simplistic “rational actor” model of collective action, an important contribution has been made by the social psychological turn of resource mobilisation theory, manifested in particular in the work of Dutch social movement theorist Bert Klandermans (Klandermans, 1984, Klandermans and Oegema, 1987). In the influential essay “Mobilization and Participation” (1984), Klandermans argued that “social psychology can expand resource mobilisation theory in an important way by revealing processes of social movements’ participation on the individual level” (1984: 584). Counter to the idea of rational choice which characterised previous approaches to collective action, Klandermans asserted that people would become active only if they were reached by mobilisation attempts. Klandermans adopts a demand-supply model to explain the functioning of participation. In this context mobilisation acts as the link, or as he puts it “as the marketing mechanism of social movements” and “concerns such matters as the effectiveness of (persuasive) communication, the influence of social networks, and the perceived costs and benefits of participation” (1984: 597). To sum up, “demand refers to the potential in a society for protest; supply refers, on the other hand, to the opportunities

staged by organizers to protest. Mobilization brings a demand for political protest that exists in a society together with a supply of opportunities to take part in such protest” (2004: 43). In a later essay, Klandermans and Oegema see the process of mobilisation as characterised by different stages, from a “generalized preparedness” to act in support of a certain cause, to a “specific preparedness” to participate, to end up with “actual participation” (1994). This process of activation is strongly influenced by prospective participants’ expectations about other people’s behaviour. Thus, “expectation that others will participate works as a self-fulfilling prophecy. [...] a collective good *can* motivate persons to participate in a social movement if they expect that others will also participate” (1984: 597).

Combined with this model is a distinction between two forms of mobilisation: *consensus mobilisation* and *action mobilisation*. They are two forms or levels of mobilisation which are present in all social movements, which need to have both supporters who are available to protest and participate directly in their action, as well as more detached sympathisers. The difference between consensus and action mobilisation is to a great extent down to the different quality of the forms of communication which characterise them. Consensus mobilisation is centred on mediated communication, while action mobilisation is mainly tied to contexts of proximity and face-to-face interaction.

For Klandermans, consensus mobilisation “is a process through which a social movement tries to obtain support for its viewpoints. It involves (a) a collective good, (b) a movement strategy, (c) confrontation with opponents, (d) results achieved” (1984: 586). For this kind of mobilisation media are seen as key since, in order to confront opponents, a “paper war is waged to promote or to discourage the mobilisation of consensus” (1984: 586). The media-oriented character of the process of consensus-building recalls William Gamson’s description of social movements’ activists as media junkies, “advocates of causes” (1988: 85) constantly preoccupied with securing coverage of their activities in the news media (1988, 1995).

The case is altogether different for action mobilisation. This “is the process by which an organization in a social movement calls up people to participate” (1995). Unlike consensus mobilisation, this process is seen as firmly rooted in local and face-to-face interaction. Nonetheless, while Klandermans observes that action mobilisation is partly independent from consensus mobilisation, he maintains that “action mobilisation cannot do without consensus mobilisation” (1984: 586). Direct face-to-face relationships are fundamental at this level, since as Klandermans and Oegema observe friendship or

workplace ties are usually the main channels through which new people are introduced to a social movement organisation (1987: 520). The prominence of face-to-face communication is also due to the fact that action mobilisation needs to be concentrated in specific social milieus and physical locales, since “a movement can fight where it is strongest, in sectors of society with strong movement networks where it can organize many people” (1984: 588). An example of the role played by spaces for facilitating mobilization is offered by Zhao’s description of the mobilization of Chinese students during the Tienamen Square protests in 1989 (1998). He argues that the particular shape of the university compounds facilitated the “predominance of mobilization” (1998: 1523).

Resonances with some of the themes developed in the work of Klandermans can be found in the influential stream of research on framing, initiated by American scholars Snow and Benford (1988, 1992, 2000). Adopting the concept of frame originating from Erving Goffman’s work on people’s behaviour in public places (1959, 1963, 1974), Snow and Benford are fundamentally concerned with the ways in which movements construct meanings for participants and opponents. In particular they identify three levels of framing. The first is “diagnostic framing”, which has to do with the definition of the social problem around which mobilisation arises. The second is “prognostic framing”, which revolves around the proposal a solution to address a grievance. Finally, the third level, of framing – precisely called “motivational framing” - directly addresses participant motivations, serving as “a call for arms and a rationale for action” (2000).

While Klandermans proposes a rather simplistic understanding of the way in which prospective participants respond to social movement messages, framing scholars allow for the importance of processes of interpretation by movement audiences. This is captured with the concept of “frame alignment” which is defined as the “linkage of individual and SMO [social movement organisation] interpretive orientations such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals and ideology are congruent and complementary” (Snow, Rochford, Worden, Benford, 1986: 464). Nevertheless, similarly to what happens in Klandermans’s own work also in the scholarship on framing, the focus on motivation goes hand in hand with a disregard for the question of the modality of the participation. They neglect the question of “how” people participate in favour of “why”. My research, on the contrary, is focused on the very question of how participation happens.

## THE EXPRESSIVE VIEW

The expressive view constitutes a third stream of analysing participation, which stems from the theory of so-called “new social movements”. By using this term a number of theorists – including French sociologist Alain Touraine, his Italian disciple Melucci (1995, 1996a, 1996b), as well as German scholars Jurgen Habermas (1981, 1987) and Claus Offe (1999) – tried to capture the traits of a wave of social movements appearing after 1968. Ecologism, peace, gay and lesbian activism came to be seen as evidence of a paradigmatic shift from the workers’ and anti-colonial liberation movements which had - up to that point - received most scholarly attention. For Alain Touraine these new movements pointed to new conflicts emerging in the passage from an industrial to a “programmed society” dominated by technocracy (1971). Reviewing the wide stream of research on new social movements, Vahabzadeh highlights four defining features. First of all “new social movements are cultural or social in their focus and action” (2003: 11). Second, “new movements take place within the civil society as opposed to political society” (2003: 11). Third “new movements employ various strategies to alter individual or group identity and values as well as promulgate new or alternative lifestyles” (2003: 11). Fourth, “new movements mostly engage in direct action through different social networks or cultural institutions” (2003: 11).

What puts the accent on expressive rather than instrumental action in this characterisation of new social movements is the fact that they do not seem to be preoccupied with the process of taking power, or influencing policy decisions. Rather, fitting with Habermas’ analysis, they can be seen as engaged in a conflict against the under-pinnings of an overall system and its attempt to colonise the “life-world” (1987). For Habermas:

the fact that in welfare-state mass democracies class conflict has been institutionalized and therefore pacified, does not mean that protest potential has been altogether laid to rest [...] new conflicts arise in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization; they are carried out in sub-institutional – or at least extraparliamentary – forms of protest [...]. The issue is not primarily one of compensation that the welfare state can provide, but of defending or restoring endangered ways of life. In short, the new conflicts are not ignited by distribution problems but by questions having to do with the grammar of forms of life. (1987: 392)

The importance placed on ways of life and on the personal sphere in new social movements

is an aspect which is underlined by many authors in this area (Touraine, 1981, 1988, Melucci, 1996a).

Particularly influential for understanding the nature of new social movements has been the interpretation proposed by Italian sociologist Melucci, who attempted to pin down the references made by both Touraine and Pizzorno to the centrality of *identity* in social movements (Touraine, 1988, Pizzorno, 1964), by defining “collective identity” as a “process” rather than as an essence – a process which “is constructed and negotiated through the ongoing relationships linking individuals or groups” (1996a: 67). For Melucci,

[i]dentity is what people choose to be, the incalculable: they choose to define themselves in a certain way not only as a result of rational calculation, but primarily under affective bonds and based on the intuitive capacity of mutual recognition. Such a remarkable affective dimension is fundamentally ‘non-rational’ in character, without yet being irrational. It is meaningful and provides the actor with the capacity of making sense of their being together. (1996a: 66)

As this quote demonstrates, identity is not seen by Melucci in foundationalist terms. In fact for Melucci “collective identity allowing [social networks] to become actors is not a datum or an essence; it is the outcome of exchanges, negotiations, decisions, and conflicts among actors” (1996a: 4). It is “an interactive process through which several individuals or groups define the meaning of their action and fields of opportunity and constraints for such an action” (1996a: 67). In this context, identity is not only an internal process but is connected with the spread of movements’ meanings in society at large, in a context in which “the challenge [of social movements] is made manifest in the upsetting of cultural codes” (1996a: 9) and “collective action by the sheer fact of its existence represents in its very forms and models of organisation a *message* broadcast to the rest of society” (1996a: 9).

Such emphasis on the expressive character of new social movements is particularly developed in the work of Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison who have gone even further in asserting the centrality of symbolic practices in new social movements (1991). Eyerman and Jamison, who have studied different forms of cultural practice in social movements such as slogans and political songs (1998), liken the articulation of a movement’s identity to a form of social learning (1991: 55). They argue that:

Organizations can be thought of as vehicles or instruments for carrying, transporting, or even producing the movement’s *meaning*. But the meaning, we hasten to add, should not be reduced to the medium. The meaning, or *core identity*, is rather the cognitive space that the movement creates,

a space, for new kinds of ideas and relationships to develop.” (1991: 60)

Here the construction of the movement’s identity is tied to ongoing cognitive processes which have to do with the creation and circulation of meanings.

The tradition of new social movement theory proposes an alternative treatment of processes of participation to the one advanced by resource mobilisation theory and social psychological approaches to collective action. Here questions of culture and communication are seen as key elements of the activity of social movements in a society where symbolic processes have become crucial (Melucci, 1996a). Nonetheless, it is my contention that in this area of literature there is a risk of reducing the action of social movements to a purely symbolic level, and to nothing more than the production and circulation of a collective identity. Counter to this reductionist temptation, I believe that if we are to understand processes of participation in social movements, we need to couple the cognitive approach proper to the expressive view on participation with an emphasis on the body and on spatiality which is the hallmark of the experiential view of participation.

## THE EXPERIENTIAL VIEW

There is a fourth way in which we can approach the question of social and political participation so as to be able to better account for the personal and performative aspects of collective action: the experiential view. While instrumental, motivational and expressive approaches tend to picture participation as abstracted from specific contexts of interaction, the experiential approach brings not just cognitive practices but also *embodiment* and *spatiality* to the foreground, so helping us understand the performative level of collective action, which constitutes a central interest in this thesis. The concept of “experience” is one to which different definitions have been assigned, and a review of these is beyond the scope of the current chapter<sup>6</sup>. Suffice it to say that for the purpose of this work I understand experience as a process of embodied engagement with the world, along Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body” (1945/1962: 82).

In the study of processes of social and political participation references to the concept of experience have been made by a variety of authors (Milbrath, 1965, Negt, Kluge,

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<sup>6</sup> For such a discussion the reader can refer to Feenberg’s essay on experience and culture (1999).

1972, Nie, Verba, Kim, 1974). Among others, American political scientist Lester W. Milbrath used this term to discuss personal predispositions to participation, which depended on people's education, family upbringing, and socialisation (Milbrath, 1965). Notable is the use made of this term by German cultural theorists Negt and Kluge who adopted the German word *Erfahrung* as a polemical device in their discussion of the proletarian public sphere (1972/1993). They employed this notion to express the concrete and material character of publicity, and removed the sense of abstraction they saw as marking Habermas' discussion of the bourgeois public sphere. By talking of a "proletarian experience", they wanted to encompass not only the reception of newspapers, and other modern media, tied to the participation in public debates which constituted the bulk of Habermas' public sphere, but also the experience of the "sphere of production" in the context of the workplace.

An individual worker – regardless of which section of the working class he belongs to and how far his concrete labour differs from that of other sections – has "his own experience". The horizon of these experiences is the unity of the proletarian context of living [*Lebenszusammenhang*]. This context embraces both the ladder of production of this worker's commodity and use-value characteristics (socialization, the psychic structure of the individual, school, the acquisition of professional knowledge, leisure, mass media) as well as an element inseparable from this, namely his induction into the production process (1993: 6).

In recent years the concept of experience has become a focus of increasing attention from a variety of scholars connected to the Tourainian tradition of social movement analysis: Kevin McDonald (1999, 2006), Francois Dubet (1994), and Melucci (1996a, 1996b). In all these different works the adoption of the concept of experience is geared at foregrounding the complex subjectivity of actors which cannot be reduced to the specific "logic of actions". Moreover, especially in the work of Melucci and McDonald, the use of the term experience is characterised by an emphasis on *embodiment* and *spatiality*, which - as I will explain at the end of this section - constitute fundamental elements for developing my own understanding of the experience of participation in autonomous movements. It is worth reviewing in detail how these three authors have approached the question of experience.

Francois Dubet has worked on the concept of experience, beginning with his analysis of the education system in *Sociologie de l'expérience* (1994). Dubet asserts that "the sociology of social experience aims to define experience as a combination of action

logics which connect the actor with each of the dimensions of the system. The actor is required to articulate different logics of action and it is the dynamic engendered by this activity which constitutes the subjectivity of the actor” (1994: 105). This definition of experience is combined with three fundamental assertions: that social action does not have unity; that social action is defined by social relationships; that social experience is the result of a combination of different logics of action. Dubet sees in particular three logics of action at play: 1) integration, as involvement in a community of belonging; 2) strategy which casts society as a market; 3) subjectivation which focuses on the construction of the individual as a subject (1994: 10-15). Through the use of the concept of experience, Dubet aims at departing from a vision of the actor as unitary and coherent, and to convey its instability and complexity. For Dubet “the actor constructs an experience belonging to him beginning from a logic of action that does not belong to him and that is given to him by the different dimensions of the system” (1994: 136). By using the term experience Dubet asserts that social action cannot be completely reduced to specific logics, but is rather marked by ruptures and contradictions; nevertheless he does not pay much attention to the personal level of experience.

Kevin McDonald has built on Francois Dubet’s project of a “sociology of experience” in his text *Struggles for Subjectivity* (1999), where, similarly to Dubet, he underlines a mismatch between actors and social logics. McDonald argues that

once we accept that the social world is made up of multiple terrains which no longer cohere in the way that the Marxist and functionalist traditions believed, we can no longer consider sociology as the study of societies. But this does not condemn us to a vision of social life seen as a meta-narrative, either celebratory or despairing of fragmentation. On the contrary, it outlines the need to encounter the experience of social actors confronting these different logics. (1999: 9)

Building on this general framework McDonald goes on to examine the “struggle to articulate experience, to produce relationships” (1999: 10) by looking at people facing a variety of social problems, where they often resort to anger and violence instead of achieving a properly defined subjectivity. Setting questions of experience at the centre of analysis as McDonald does, implies going beyond the instrumental and the expressive paradigms that disregard the importance of the body underscored in the scholarship on embodiment, in particular in the work of Csordas (1994). For McDonald

The instrumental (strategy and opportunity) accounts and the identity (expressive, community,

*communitas*) theories mirror each other. The instrumental theories exclude the body in order to focus on the rational actor. The expressive theories introduce the body, but within a theory where the person is dissolved into categories of holism. [...] we encounter this same opposition between the “instrumental” and the “expressive” constantly rehearsed in debates about movements, framed in terms of “strategy” and “identity”. To begin to make sense of what is at stake in [...] grammars of embodiment, we need to break with these theories of catharsis, of order and disorder, of holistic ritual opposing the fragmentation of the modern world – all dating from the late nineteenth century, and all reflecting in different ways the primacy of the representational over the embodied. (2006: 216)

Here the stress is put on the “doing” which is visible in a variety of forms of collective action related to “healing, touching, hearing, feeling, seeing, moving” (2006: 37). These practices are, according to McDonald, framed by “grammars of embodiment, as experience, as mode of presence and engagement in the world” (2006: 37).

As a consequence of such emerging forms of action, for McDonald “the social sciences today are confronted with the task of constructing ways of knowing that are able to understand grammars of human experience and public spheres, not as disembodied messages but as embodied experiences of resonance” (2006: 225). For McDonald, looking at the action of these and other movements which are involved in the creation of *spaces of experience* challenges us to break “with the Cartesian separation of body and subject” and “places the senses and the body within action” (2006: 225). This discussion is particularly important for the purpose of my investigation since, while developing this understanding of experience, McDonald is often looking at direct action movements similar to the ones which are examined in my own investigation.

Further insights on the experiential perspective can be drawn from the work of Melucci, who - particularly in his later work, *The Playing Self* (1996b) - shifted from a focus on identity to an interest in experience. While McDonald and Dubet have mostly shied away from anchoring their definition of experience to the phenomenological tradition, in the introduction of this book, Melucci declares explicitly his intention of developing a “phenomenology of everyday experience” (1996b: 1). By using the term “experience”, Melucci is particularly concerned with excavating the individual dimension of collective action in a context in which this becomes the “level where new forms of social control are exerted and where social action originates” (1996a: 106). In this context, while society is highly individualised, in turn individuals are highly socialised (1996a: 106).

Particularly important in the interdependence between individuals and society is

the role played by modern communication technologies, which, for Melucci brings about a “seemingly limitless expansion of experience” (1996a: 106). Because of the vast amount of information available to individuals “the life-horizons within which experience is constructed are no longer charted solely or even primarily by the material conditions of life, but also, and more significantly, by systems of signs, by the imaginative stimuli to which we have irreversibly become exposed” (1996a: 125). For Melucci

a society that uses information as its vital resource alters the constitutive structure of experience. The way we conceive reality and ourselves is changed in its cognitive, perceptive, and emotional dimensions: the representation of space and time, the relationship between possibility and reality, the link between natural phenomena and their symbolic elaboration are affected. Experience becomes an artificial construct: the product of relations and representations rather than of circumstances, the laws of nature or contingency. (1996b: 1-2)

As a consequence people have an abundance of symbolic resources, allowing for complex and multiple self-definitions which are enacted through continuous choices (1996b: 1-2).

The centrality of information in a society which many scholars, including Melucci have referred to as an “information society” (Melucci, 1996, Webster, 2002, Mattelart, 2003) has important consequences on our experience of space. This is in fact a major concern in the *Playing Self* (1996b) in which at different points Melucci reflects on the relationship between mental space and physical space. In a society dominated by modern technologies of communication, our experience of space is increasingly mediated:

Images bring us constantly into contact with spaces alien to our direct physical experience. Planetary space is by now a routine datum of our daily lives, and we increasingly relate to spaces that extend even beyond our planet. With the massive reduction of time required to transit great distances, and with the accessibility of practically every point on the globe, the symbolic expansion and perceptual contraction of space are further reinforced” (1996b: 17).

Faced with increasing possibilities of mobility and exposed to information about faraway places, the relationship with our body is radically modified:

As we are getting used to inhabiting a space lived principally on the symbolic plane, the relationship with our bodies tends to be sundered. The body thus loses its spatial skills and its ability to test its own limits. We must then resort to physical exercise and to hobbies to relearn the elementary skills required to move in physical space, to measure distance in terms of our own physiques, to handle

objects. (1996b: 17-18)

This quote evidences how for Melucci the increasing importance of new communication technologies, and the abundance of information they convey, brings about a contraction of bodily experience. The symbolic and cognitive expansion brought about by mediated communication also means a partial loss of our bodily interaction with the surrounding environment.

While Dubeat's discussion of experience is more concerned with the complexity of subjectivity and the mismatch between actors and logics of action, both Melucci's and McDonald's treatment of this term foregrounds questions of *spatiality* and *embodiment*. These two dimensions of experience have traditionally constituted the objects of analysis for phenomenologists like Husserl (1977), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Schütz (1967, 1973). According to these authors we need to understand spatiality as a deeply interrelated process, wherein our experience of space depends on the interaction between our body and the world, and at the same time, our experience of the body depends on the environment in which the body is immersed. To further understand this connection between body and spatiality, Schütz's (1967) treatment of the concept of "life-world" is particularly relevant, and provides a series of useful categories.

## THE LIFEWORLD: UMWELT AND MITWELT

The origins of the concept of life-world harkens back to the early days of phenomenology and in particular to Edmund Husserl's *Crisis of European Sciences* (1936/1970). In later years, this concept has been the object of a series of new interventions, and in particular the one by the Austrian social scientist Schütz (1967, 1973), who tried to combine Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness with Max Weber's sociology of action. In *The Structures of the Life-World* – the book summing up Schütz's thought edited by Thomas Luckmann – the lifeworld is defined as "the region of reality in which man can engage himself and which he can change while he operates in it by means of his animated organism" (1973: 3). It is the world within reach which is self-evident and taken for granted. In another passage the life-world is defined as the "province of my corporeal acts" whereby "everyday reality introduces me to tasks, and I must realize my plans within it" (1973: 35), or yet as the realm of our "common *experience*" (1973: 68).

According to Schütz experience of the life-world can take essentially two forms (see

Table 1.2): it can be *direct* or *indirect*, *immediate* or *mediated* (or mediate as sometimes Schütz puts it). People who participate in a certain group, on the one hand share a common physical environment: the *Umwelt* (to be translated as environment or “around-world”). On the other hand they share a mediated reality, made of symbols and abstract “typifications”: the *Mitwelt* (a neologism to be translated as “with-world”) (1967: 20-22). These two types of experience (mediate and immediate) are however not completely separated from each other. Rather mediated and immediate experience should be seen as “two poles between which there are many empirically transitional forms” (1967: 69).

The *Umwelt* of face-to-face communication is characterised by proximity and co-presence with other subjects who share our same time and our space: our *consociates*. The relationship constituted in this context is very intense since:

When I am in a face-to-face situation with you, I can point to something in our common environment, uttering the words “this table is here” and, by means of the identification of lived experience in the environmental object, I can assure the adequacy of my interpretive schemes to your expressive schemes. [...] We have then, the same undivided and common environment, which we may call “our environment”. The world of the We is not private to either of us, but is our world, the one common intersubjective world which is right there in front of us. (1967: 171)

Similar is the description proposed in *The Structures of the Life-World* (1973). Schütz here talks of a “pure we-relation” which takes place in face-to-face interactions, “in the community of space and time, in the vivid presence of the fellow-man” (1973: 66). This situation is characterised by immediacy and a richness of perceptions shared with others in a “community of time” and “community of space”, whereby “experiences are not only coordinated with one another, but are also reciprocally determined and related to one another” (1973: 66-67).

Schütz’s description of the *Umwelt* as a central dimension of human experience resonates with the crucial role played in social movements by places and situations of proximity (e.g. Polletta, 2002, Evans 1992, Tilly, 1999). To capture the “emplaced” character of social movements Melucci spoke of “movement areas”, encompassing a “multiplicity of groups which are dispersed, fragmented and submerged in everyday life, and which act as cultural laboratories” (1989: 60). In the American context, Sara Evans coined the notion of “free spaces” to describe places like the churches where the black civil rights movement first developed or voluntary associations which allowed people to get together, learn civic skills and participate to “experiments in democracy” (1986: 192-195).

She argued that “for a well-developed consciousness of broader community and generalized, active citizenship to emerge requires ways for people to build direct, face-to-face and egalitarian relationships” (Evans and Boyte, 1986: 191). In a similar vein, Arturo Escobar in his study of Latin American social movements has argued that their culture “sits in places”, since attachment to place is a fundamental part of the way they operate and resist to domination (2001).

<b>Temporality</b>	<b>Persons</b>	<b>Intersubjectivity</b>	<b>Lived world</b>	<b>Spatiality</b>
Then - past	Predecessors	We-relationship	Vorwelt	Because-motive
Now	Consociates	Concrete/pure we-relation	<b>Umwelt</b> (directly experienced social reality)	Here
Now	Contemporaries	Thou-they orientation	<b>Mitwelt</b> (mediated social reality)	There
Then - future	Successors	They orientation	Folgwelt	In-order-to motive

**Table 1.2: Schütz's model of the life-world (from Lanigan, 1988)**

Where the *Umwelt* is marked by proximity, place and face-to-face interaction, the *Mitwelt* is characterised by distance and abstraction in the relationship with distant others – what Schütz calls *contemporaries*: “those men with whom I do not wish actually have a we-relation, but whose life falls in the same present span of the world as mine” (1974: 69). From the immersive and rich communicative exchange characterising the experience of “encounter” with “consociates”, here we move to the more limited expressive and perceptual possibilities which are available in communication with the broad sphere of “contemporaries”. The relation with contemporaries is characterised by a more abstract communication, populated by “representation rather than the experience of a concrete Other” (1974: 76). For Schütz, the world of contemporaries is “stratified according to levels of anonymity” whereby “the more anonymous the type (by means of which a contemporary is experienced) the more strongly objectivated is the meaning-context that is foisted upon

the Other” (1974: 80). While making experience more anonymous, mediated experience also widens our reach, putting us in contact with far-away places and events: “through technological developments there has entered a qualitative leap in the range of experience and an enlargement in the zone of operation.” (1974: 44).

The role played by the mediated interaction (the *Mitwelt*) in the context of social movements is illustrated by the increasing importance acquired by mediated communication in the context of a “media age” (Couldry, 2000a), a period in human history marked by ubiquitous mediatisation (Thompson, 1990, Bennett and Entman, 2001) and by the phenomenon of media saturation (Johnston, 1998). As a consequence of the diffusion of modern communication technologies the contemporary experience is marked by a process of time-space compression (Harvey, 1989: 98). Social relationships appear to be increasingly place-disembedded because of “the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space” (Giddens, 1990: 21). According to some scholars like Mark Poster, places have thus lost their central role as magnets for participation:

Contemporary social relations seem to be devoid of a basic level of interactive practices that, in the past, was the matrix of democratising politics: loci such as the agora, the New England Town Hall, the village church, the coffee house, the tavern, the public square, a convenient barn, a union hall, a park, a factory lunchroom, and even a street corner. Many of these places remain but no longer serve as organizing centres for political discussion and action. It appears that the media and especially television have become the animating source for political discussion and action. (Poster, 2001: 178)

New media and the Internet in particular appear today as responsible for such processes of dis-embedding from place as signalled by the emergence of the “virtual places” of web forums and chats (Adams, 1997), where similar processes of identification usually seen in physical places are manifested (see for example Kendall, 2002).

This phenomenon is particularly important to take into account for the analysis of social movements, which, as I have argued in the discussion of networks at the beginning of this chapter, appear increasingly dependent on the communication capabilities offered by the Internet (see for example Keck and Sikkink, 1998, Jordan, 1999, Meikle, 2002, Kahn and Kellner, 2004). In this context Juris has described contemporary social movements as “computer-supported social movements” (Juris, 1995) using modern communication technologies to maintain wide-ranging networks across national borders. While internet and new media have allowed for social movements to form networks at the

global level, this has not necessarily meant a disappearance of “movement rootedness” in places. Internet and new media can instead be seen as contributing to a different articulation of places (Howley, 2005, Jansson, 2007) rather than an erasure thereof. In fact, with the rise of social networking sites, it has become increasingly apparent how the internet and new media rather than creating new “virtual communities” (Rheingold, 1993), by and large detached from specific places, in actual fact reconfigures the extended social networks that emerge out of face-to-face relationships embedded in places (Boyd, Ellison, 2007). What we face here is thus an ambiguous relationship of the internet and new media with *Umwelt* and *Mitwelt*. This will constitute an important element of analysis in this thesis.

## MOVEMENT SCENES

For the purpose of the current discussion we can find a useful empirical operationalisation of Schütz’s treatment of the lifeworld in the contemporary scholarship on “scenes”. This phenomenon as discussed in the study of subcultures and countercultures is in fact characterised by a similar focus on experience as its defining element (Pfadenhauer, 2005), and similarly in relation to the concept of lifeworld it is characterised by a complex articulation between immediate and mediated experience. By introducing into the social debate the theatrical metaphor of “scene”, John Irwin wanted to suggest “that these worlds are expressive — that is, people *participate* in them for direct rather than future gratification — that they are voluntary, and that they are available to the public”; in this context, the participant was seen as an “‘actor’, self-consciously presenting him- or her self in front of audiences” (Irwin, 1977: 23). Similarly to the elements which emerge from Schütz’s analysis of the lifeworld, scenes are social contexts in which participation is framed as the “inhabitation of the *territory* (as opposed to ownership of property)” (Gelder, 1997: 12). Being part of a scene comes down to “hanging out” at certain sites, as suggested by Phil Cohen in his analysis of working class youth in East London (1972).

Fundamental to the notion of “scene” is the construction of a context of proximity, or in Schütz’s terms an *Umwelt*. This correspondence of groups and territories was already noticed by Robert E. Park who spoke of “moral regions” in the urban fabric which were “not necessarily a place of abode. It may be a mere *rendez-vous*, a place of resort”. He described them as “detached milieus in which vagrant and suppressed impulses, passions and ideals emancipate themselves from the dominant moral order” (1925/1967: 44-45). In

a similar fashion, Frederic M. Thrasher presented the gangland as a space which, “with its intricate tribal and intertribal relationship, is medieval and feudal [...] the hangout of the gang is its castle and the centre of a feudal estate which it guards most jealously” (1927/1973: 1). The gangland was for Thrasher “a geographically and socially interstitial area in the city [...] that is, pertaining to spaces that intervene between one thing and another” (1927/1973: 225). Proximity and sense of place as the factors tying together a certain group is also a central concern in Whyte's famous account of an Italian slum in Chicago, emblematically titled *The Street Corner Society* (1943).

Despite the centrality given to immediate experience in scenes, they appear to be increasingly tied to processes of mediation, which allow participants to make sense of the dispersed places and events constituting them. An example of this process is offered by Sara Thornton in *Club Cultures* (1996), where she discusses the role played by micro-media and niche-media in maintaining the clubbing scene as a visible space. Micro-media like flyers, listings, fanzines, pirate radio, e-mail lists contribute participants' ability to accumulate what she refers to as “subcultural capital” (1996: 186), an expansion on Bourdieu's definition of “cultural capital” (1984: 80-82). Subcultural capital constitutes an element of distinction available to people who are “in the know” in a particular subculture. Niche-media instead comprises specialist magazines which report about the styles and activities characterising a certain subculture. Media thus contributes in making a scene visible beyond its elusive contexts of proximity. For Stephen Duncombe (1997), responding to the dispersion of the alternative scene, the so-called “bohemian diaspora” (Carr, 1992), scenes can increasingly only be perceived through the mediated experience offered by a variety of artefacts, such as concert listings and tour diaries (Duncombe, 1997: 60).

These different treatments of processes of mediation in subcultures stem from years in which the internet had not yet put its stamp on the workings of life-style groupings. In recent years a variety of authors have attended to this fundamental question, often concluding that the penetration of digital communication technologies has contributed in making subcultural and countercultural groups more dispersed and ephemeral. In this context new media are often seen as hubs which allow participants to maintain social relationships in-between transient face-to-face gatherings such as festivals, and rave parties, in which ephemeral tribes are formed and then dissolved (Hodkinson and Deicke, 2007, Williams, 2006, St John, 2009). The impact of the internet on subcultural groups is thus contributing to making scenes more and more mediated, thus increasing the importance of the *Mitwelt* over the *Umwelt*, of indirect experience over direct experience.

Apart from subcultures social movements can also be looked at as embedded within “scenes” or more precisely within “social movement scenes” (Haunss and Leach, 2009).

[...] we conceptualize scenes as action-oriented social structures which are less rigid than milieus, less volatile and less culture-oriented than subcultures and less demanding and all-encompassing than countercultures. Scenes are social places where subcultures, countercultures and social movements meet and influence each other. By action-oriented we mean that active involvement rather than merely passive consumption or a shared social background is necessary to be part of a scene. Scenes are enacted and re-produced by their participants. (Haunss and Leach, 2009: 13)

Looking at the autonomous scene, that is, the scene of the autonomous movement in Germany, Haunss and Leach see social movement scenes as spaces in which social movements encounter countercultures and subcultures. They suggest that participation in this space draws upon activities in squats, political bookshops, cultural and community centres, is highly fluid and it is governed by a “hierarchy of engagement” (Haunss, Leach, 2009: 15). People who spend more time in scenes acquire more influence, and despite the absence of formal roles there continues to be a difference between organisers and participants.

The notion of a “social movement scene” provides a much needed general concept to encompass the dispersed events and places which constitute the space of autonomous movements, what in the introduction I referred to with the term “rebel archipelago”. However, once we adopt the notion of scene, we are immediately faced with the task of clarifying what we mean by it. As William Straw has in fact poignantly argued, the concept of scene is tainted with indeterminacy. It “evokes both the cosy intimacy of community and the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life” (Straw, 2002: 251). In order to achieve a minimum of analytical precision when using this term, we need to ask with Straw “is a scene the group of people, as they move from place to place? Is it the places through which they move? Is it the movement itself?” (Straw, 2002: 256). The response Haunss and Leach provide to the question raised by Straw, when developing their definition of social movement scenes, is a naturalistic one, which simply identifies a scene as a “set of places”. This answer however adds little to the understanding what is a scene and how does it work. It is my contention that in order to excavate the working of social movement scenes we need to finally go back to the main concept discussed in this thesis: the question of “orientation”.

## ORIENTATION AND GUIDANCE

In response to the question “what is a scene?” raised by Straw we should answer that it is *“a symbolic space held together by a common orientation shared by its participants”*. This proposal is inspired by Schütz’s analysis of “group territories” as spaces underpinned by a common “scheme of orientation”, which is shared by members of a group allowing them to act in a coordinate fashion (1970: 89). Building on Schütz’s discussion of orientation, we can advance a definition of “orientation” as *a practical knowledge which allows individuals to make sense of their place and direction in space as part of a group*. Common orientation is a fundamental element in social movements, since, as Eyerman puts it, they emerge “when groups of disparate and ever-changing individuals sense they are united and *moving in the same direction*” giving way to a “choreography of protest” (2006: 19). But where does this common orientation originate from?

In the final section of this chapter, I want to advance a schema of analysis of the process of orientation in social movement scenes, focusing on the relationship between orientation and communicative practices. Following Schütz, we can see social movement scenes as spaces which exist insofar as they are bound by a “common orientation” among their members. Schütz argues that: “[a]ny *scheme of orientation* presupposes that everyone who uses it looks at the surrounding world as grouped around himself who stands at its centre. He who wants to use [it] successfully has first of all to know his standpoint in two respects: its *location on the ground* and its *representation on the map*” (1970: 90). Following Schütz, we can argue that the presence of a set of places is not enough for a social movement scene to unfold, if these places are not accompanied by mediated representations such as maps. Thus we can see orientation as the result of engagement with both immediate (the “location on the ground” in Schütz’s terms) and mediated (the “representation on the map”) experience of the world, with both *Umwelt* and *Mitwelt*.

Beginning with the immediate character of orientation a key reference can be found in David Seamon’s *Geography of the Lifeworld* (1979). Even though Seamon refers only in passing to the question of orientation, the object of his work is the “environmental experience of groups” and the way he approaches this comes close to the sensibility which underlies my investigation. Seamon contrasts cognitivist and behaviourist understandings of environmental experience, arguing that “cognition plays only a partial role in everyday

spatial behaviour” and that “a sizeable portion of our everyday movements at all varieties of environmental scale is pre-cognitive and involves a pre-reflective knowledge of the body” (1979: 35). Rejecting the behaviourist stimulus-response model of understanding of spatial behaviour to be found in behaviourism, Seamon espouses Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, proposing that “the body holds within itself an active, intentional capacity which intimately ‘knows’ in its own special fashion the everyday spaces in which the person lives his typical day” (1979: 35).

Among the targets of Seamon’s critique are authors like Edward Tolman and Kevin Lynch who have advocated a vision of spatial behaviour as revolving around the possession of “cognitive maps”. Tolman developed his argument about cognitive maps studying the way-finding behaviour of rats (1948), which he sees as developing “cognitive maps”, abstract schemes of mazes, thus becoming increasingly capable of navigating them. In his famous book *The Image of the City* (1960), Lynch adopts a similar understanding of orientation. He argues that spatial behaviour is dependent on a “mental image” (1960: 2) of the environment. For Lynch, “just as this printed page, if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognisable symbols, so a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an overall pattern” (1960: 3). For Seamon the problem with this tradition is its “insistence on explaining spatial behaviour through an imposed *a priori* theory”, be it the cognitive maps or the stimulus-response model (1979: 35).

A similar attention to the immediate and bodily character of spatial behaviour is developed in Sara Ahmed’s work on orientation in her book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). She argues that orientation has to do with the extension of our bodies into space (2006: 15). For Ahmed orientation is in fact “a matter of how we reside in space, of how we inhabit space” (2006: 17), as well as the faculty we use to find our own way through space. “To be orientated is also to be turned towards certain objects, those that help us find our way. These are objects which we recognise, so that when we face them, we know which way we are facing. They might be landmarks or other familiar signs that give us *anchoring-points*.” (Ahmed, 2006: 1). In other words an *orientation within* the world is always connected with an *orientation towards*, with an engagement with some portions of it. From this description the process of orientation emerges as a deeply relational phenomenon, premised on the individual bodily engagement with other subject and objects.

While Seamon’s and Ahmed’s respective discussions of orientation rightly

emphasise the embodied nature of spatial experience their work faces another danger. They risk reducing orientation to a purely bodily dimension, thus disregarding the symbolic, cognitive and mediated processes, which, as Melucci has rightly noticed, are increasingly important in our experience of space (1996b: 1-2). Recently, Shaun Moores has criticised Seamon's disregard for the way in which communication technologies articulate everyday spatial experience (2006). He argues that a "daily newspaper or an evening television news programme may be used in routine rituals and 'habitual' practices of dwelling – helping to facilitate feelings of at-homeness and existential insideness for social actors. This evidence quite clearly contradicts the hasty conclusion that places are necessarily eroded by mass communications" (2006: 3). Instead of following those authors who see media as responsible for creating a situation of placeless-ness (Meyrowitz, 1985), we need to adopt an understanding of media as agents responsible for "re-cast[ing] the organisation of the spatial and temporal scenes of social life" (Barnett, 2004: 59).

Evidence of the role played by media in shaping our spatial orientation is offered by Rekha Murthy's analysis of "ambient street media". Examining flyers, posters, stickers, found around Central Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Murthy claims that they are fundamentally "orientational" rather than representational: "providing information about local activities and groups, they help other people to find their way around" (2005: 89). A similar vein is explored in the work of Gillian Fuller who analyses the "signage" of airport terminals, focusing on the figure of the arrow (2002). He affirms that the forms of practical communication available in this context construct "a diagrammatically conceptualised space, which *guides* movement and behaviour" (2002: 242). They allow us to "efficiently navigate the procedures that synchronise daily activity and collective behaviour" (2002: 237).

The ubiquity of *orientational media* in everyday life suggests how our contemporary experience of space is deeply bound to communication technologies and cannot be reduced to a purely bodily dimension. Thus, in order to make sense of the connections between communication and orientation, we can refer to "guidance". It can express the way in which different media and media-related practices provide a common orientation to social movement participants *from a distance*. More precisely we can define means of guidance *as those media and connected practices which "guide" members of a group with a common orientation – that is a common sense of direction and sense of place in the lifeworld, allowing for the spatio-temporal coordination of collective action*. Following this definition, processes of guidance can be seen as contributing to the symbolic

construction of social movement scenes, in a process of *mise-en-scene* (scene-setting) which signifies the space in which action takes place (Alexander, 2006b).

The importance of guidance in contemporary societies is particularly evident, in the context of social movements, where artefacts like banners, flags and similar media are used not only as a vehicle of expression of a certain identity but also as an indication of the route to be followed by protesters (Eyerman, 2006: 194-196). Guidance can be seen as taking different shapes according to the nature of the movements involved. Authoritarian movements emphasise centralisation and univocal direction for collective action (Berezin, 1997). Thus in this context we can speculate that individual orientation would appear to be overly dependent on collective guidance, and thus have a limited degree of individual autonomy. To the contrary, with more de-centralised social movements, such as autonomous movements, we could speculate that the lack of a strong guidance is made up by the presence of an intense effort of orientation from the part of individual participants (see Table 1.3). Building on this hypothetical schema in this thesis I will inquire what the specific relationship between guidance and orientation is in the context of autonomous movements.

	<b>Authoritarian Movements</b>	<b>Libertarian Movements</b>
<b>Guidance</b>	Strong	Weak
<b>Orientation</b>	Weak	Strong

**Table 1.3.: Hypothetical pairings of types of guidance and orientation**

Guidance is a central element in the analysis conducted in the following chapters. Nevertheless, it is important to account for the fact that guidance is only one among different “sources of orientation”, since as we have seen in the proceeding discussion, orientation also has a strong bodily dimension. Thus alongside guidance, we can use the term *grounding* to express our acquaintance with the surrounding environment and the role played by places in aiding orientation, and refer to *company* to express the role played by other people who can help us find our way in social movement scenes (See Table 1.4). In this thesis I want to investigate the specificity of these different sources of orientation, and

and their interplay.

Sources of orientation	Type of experience
Grouding (Places)	Umwelt
Company (People)	Umwelt / Mitwelt
Guidance (Media)	Mitwelt

**Table 1.4: Sources of orientation**

To understand the interaction between different sources of orientation, and specifically, between media and places, we can refer to Henri Lefebvre’s analysis of “texture” developed in the *Production of Space* (1974/1991). A texture for Lefebvre “is made up of a large space covered by networks or webs” (1991: 222) and “the theory of space describes and analyses textures” (1991: 132), rather than the texts which are the object of study of linguistics and literary critique. Textures, like texts, carry their own meanings, contained in “blanks (i.e. the contrast between presences and absences) and margins, hence networks and webs which have a *lived* sense”. Textures are shaped by communicative and mediated processes, but they tend to centre on places or “*monuments* [which] constitute the strong points, nexus or anchors of such webs” (1991: 222). In fact, for Lefebvre, “the properties of a spatial texture are fixed upon a single point: sanctuary, throne, seat, presidential chair or the like.” (1974: 225). Textures constitute essentially a structure of experience influencing the behaviour of individuals and groups and providing them orientation in space. According to Lefebvre: “the texture of space affords opportunities not only to social acts with no particular place in it and no particular link with it, but also to a spatial practice that it does indeed determine, namely in its collective and individual use: a sequence of acts which embody a signifying practice” (1991: 57). Drawing on this discussion we can see processes of guidance as revolving around the creation and maintenance of the texture of social movement scenes. By way of texturing, guidance can be seen as actively influencing the orientation of participants in space, constructing both concrete paths and abstract representations of space, which help

individuals to make their way.

To understand the way in which *orientational media* or better *means of guidance* are responsible for “texturing” the space of social movement scenes, we can tentatively identify different logics of guidance, which express different relationships between media and places. Maps, posters, flyers, signposts and other artefacts, all incorporate a different relationship with space and places, which needs to be thoroughly dissected to understand how guidance concretely shapes participants’ orientation. Specifically, we can propose the existence of three different logics of guidance: demarcation, indication and mapping (see Table 1.5)

<b>Type</b>	<b>Logics of guidance</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Boundary	demarcation	Presence and boundaries	landmarks, flags, inscriptions, graffiti
Vector	indication	Discrete portions of the scene: specific events / places	Posters, flyers, events publicity
Map	mapping	Spatial / temporal overview	maps, calendars, listings

**Table 1.5: Logics of guidance**

Let's now tentatively outline the nature of these three logics of guidance:

- 1) *Demarcation* refers to those forms of guidance which are contiguous with the places they refer to, like flags and banners signalling the leftist political leaning of a certain place. Here guidance revolves around signalling the presence and boundaries of the scene.
- 2) *Indication* refers to those forms of communication which publicise from a distance specific events or places part of a scene. Examples include posters, and flyers publicising specific events or activities.
- 3) *Mapping* refers to those forms of guidance which purport to give an overview of a

certain field of social and political activity. It is the case for maps but also of other devices such as listings or calendars. This logic of guidance corresponds to Lefebvre's category of "representations of space" (1991: 45).

I suggest that these different logics of guidance can be seen as contributing in texturing the social movement scenes in different ways, constructing varying relationships with places and places.

Having established the analytical schema of my investigation I want to advance three research questions to guide the empirical analysis to be conducted in chapters 4-7:

- 1) What is the relationship between guidance and orientation in autonomous activism? What form does orientation take in this relationship?
- 2) What are the main sources of orientation for activists? Are they people (company), media (guidance) or places (grounding)? What is their specificity and how do they combine?
- 3) Which ideas of togetherness and coordination are reflected in the process of orientation in the autonomous scene?

Having put forward this general framework of analysis and related research questions, in the next chapter I will discuss the specificity of the social movement scene analysed in this investigation: the autonomous scene that is the scene of autonomous activism. Then in the following chapter I will advance a methodological framework for conducting this investigation.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have developed a general theoretical framework for the analysis of orientation in the context of autonomous movements. I began by drawing attention to the strong emphasis that current research on social movements puts on participation. In fact, in recent years, the notion of participation has acquired moral and ideological connotations in contemporary social movements, and is currently accompanied by a sense of confusion about the "place" or position of participation, which is due on the one hand to the increasing mediatisation of political and social activities and on the other hand to processes of individualisation of collective action. Trying to dissect the meaning of

participation in this changing landscape, I have reviewed a variety of approaches which have proposed different understandings of participation: the *instrumental* vision of participation characterising resource mobilisation theory, and the *motivational* and *expressive* approach, and finally the *experiential* approach, which is the one I espouse in this thesis.

In order to further study the experiential view of participation I have proposed to combine the experiential approach with a vision of social movements as scenes in the lifeworld, or more specifically social movement scenes. Building on Schütz's analysis of experience I proposed to look at these scenes as a complex imbrication of mediate and immediate communication. While some authors define scenes as simply a set of places, I have proposed a more complex definition of scenes, as dispersed territories which are held together by the presence of a common orientation.

To clarify what was meant by orientation which constitutes the main concept of the current investigation, I have turned to the phenomenological work of Sara Ahmed and David Seamon. In this context we see orientation as a profoundly "bodily" process, which is linked with one's immersion in the environment. However, I have argued that in a mediatised society we also need to account for the role played by media as sources of orientation, or further, as a means of guidance in the lifeworld. Along with bodily *grounding* in space and the *company* of other members of a group, guidance provides participants with a common sense of place and a common direction for the display of collective action. Concrete examples of guidance can be found in a variety of communicative practices, which are deeply embedded within the environment and contribute in "texturing", thus providing paths for individual orientations to follow. In the conclusion of this chapter I have advanced a framework of investigation comprising 3 different levels of analysis and have raised a series of research questions which will guide the investigation in this thesis.

In order to make this rather abstract model for the understanding of the process of orientation more culturally and historically specific, in the next chapter I turn to the analysis of the autonomous scene, which constitutes the territory of autonomous activism. Looking at a variety of practices and discourses manifest in direct action groups in recent years I argue that in this context we see a common celebration of the ideal of autonomy, as both spatial autonomy from mainstream society – as it is displayed in the practices of occupation of buildings and protest sites – as well of personal autonomy, in which much stress is put on the importance of individual self-determination. This libertarian and

voluntarist attitude has important consequences on the display of processes of guidance, and on the development of processes of orientation, whose dynamics will be empirically dissected in the later chapters.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE SCENE OF AUTONOMOUS ACTIVISM

### INTRODUCTION

Pushing against the fence of the “red zone” of a global summit. Climbing on the window of a corporate headquarter about to be occupied. Barricading inside a squat or a social centre which the police wants to evict. Cycling across the city to block the urban traffic, setting up a protest camp next to an airport; a coal-powered station, or other symbols of industrial and military evil. Dancing on the tarmac to reclaim public space from the dominance of car culture. The construction of antagonist spaces, or “counter-spaces” (Lefebvre, 1991: 381, 383) such as the ones illustrated above, has been a common thread of contemporary direct action activism: from anti-climate change activists in the UK, to campaigns against the casualisation of labour in Italy and anti-gentrification groups in Germany. The different counter-spaces which unfold in these and similar contexts can be seen as constituting the “islands” in a “rebel archipelago”, that is the different “stages” of one among many social movement scenes: the “autonomous scene”.

Having outlined in the previous chapter the theoretical model for the analysis of individual orientation in *social movement scenes*, in this chapter I turn to the general features of the “autonomous scene” which constitutes the object of my investigation. I define the *autonomous scene* as the space of participation of contemporary “autonomous movements” (Juris, 2005, Katsiaficas, 1997, Invisible Committee, 2008): anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian movements stemming from the tradition of the libertarian Left (Kitschelt, 1989). To reconstruct the features of these movements and the “autonomous

activism” which is practiced in them, I begin with the crisis of the anti-globalisation movement, and the ensuing phase of latency or limbo (Colectivo Situaciones, 2009), what I refer to as “post-anti-globalisation”, which is the historical setting of my investigation. From this crisis an increasing division has emerged between the “horizontal” or anti-authoritarian sector encompassing grassroots collective and transnational activist networks, and the “vertical sector” constituted by Marxist parties, trade unions and NGOs (Juris, 2008a). Counter to an array of authors who identify “horizontal” activists as anarchists (Epstein, 2001, Graeber, 2002, Day, 2005), I adopt the looser label “autonomous” (not to be confused with autonomist as for Marxist autonomist), to advance a cultural understanding of contemporary direct action activism.

Having set the general background of my discussion, I proceed to review different “sources of autonomy”; that is the historical predecessors which inform the “culture of autonomy” underscoring contemporary autonomous movements. Specifically, I consider the influence played by an array of cultural and political traditions: anarchism, autonomist Marxism, and non-violent direct action, paying particular attention to the three national contexts considered in the empirical investigation: Italy, Germany and the UK. Then, I discuss the overlaps between subcultures and autonomous movements with their common valuing of individual self-determination. In the final part of the chapter, I describe the autonomous scene as characterised by the pursuit of the “occupation of space”. I view this as part of a pre-figurative politics which revolves around the construction of “alternative spaces”, which constitute the different “havens” of the autonomous scene.

## POST-ANTI-GLOBALISATION: WHAT NEXT?

Whatever happened to the anti-globalisation movement? To understand the nature of the “scene” of autonomous activism we need to start from the story of rise and decline of the anti-globalisation movement, which for some years became the focus of attention for analysts of collective action (Eschle, Maiguashca 2005, Della Porta, 2006a, Held, McGrew, 2007). At the turn of the millennium a global movement – according to some scholars the first global movement – entered the political stage (Della Porta, 2006a). It was made possible by the convergence of different souls of the radical Left, united against the common enemy of global neo-liberalism (Fotopoulos, 2001, Starr, Adams, 2003). It targeted global summits, organised by international political and financial institutions like the IMF, the WTO, and the G8 with spectacular mass direct actions (Juris, 2008a).

Moreover, it created its own social as well as spatial imaginary based on the mottoes “Another World is Possible”<sup>7</sup> as well as “a world where many worlds can fit”<sup>8</sup>, and its own counter-institutions such as the World Social Forum (Teivanen, 2002). The events of 9/11 and the beginning of the global war on terror severely shook the anti-globalisation movement and shifted attention towards militarism (Juris, 2008: 344). Counter-summit demonstrations decreased in turnout in the years after the “bloody battle of Genoa” of the anti-g8 protests in 2001: the sense of a “common ground” seemed to be lost (Turbulence, 2009).

To be fair, the anti-globalisation movement was never really a unitary actor, with a common identity, and a shared set of goals, as other movements in history were, for example the Civil Rights movement in the US. The anti-globalization movement always comprised of very different and sometimes irreconcilable groups (Wall, 2005: 3-4): take for example the “Teamsters and Turtles finally together”, the trade unionists and the ecologists who unexpectedly joined forces on the streets of Seattle (Juris, 2009). Commenting on the broad alliance displayed at different protest events around the turn of the millennium, Della Porta, Andreatta and Reiter observed that “[t]he movement against neoliberal globalisation has networked together families of movements very different from each other. Their aggregation is often fluid and comes about on the basis of political affinities” (2006: 58). Internal diversity was a fundamental feature of the anti-globalization movement, celebrated at times but cursed at others when it led to differences in political strategies and tactics. Despite the cultural contamination between different groups, the anti-globalization movement has remained to a great extent an ad-hoc coalition of forces; something akin to a “parallelogram of forces” as Graham Chesters has put it (2004). Exemplary in this sense has been the case of the protests in Prague and Genoa in which different groups of protestors took different routes and employed different tactics (Routledge, 2003), rather than marching all together.

Useful for identifying the different streams in the anti-globalisation movement is the classification advanced by Jeffrey Juris who proposes the existence of four different sectors in what he calls the “movement against corporate globalisation” (2008). The first is the institutional sector, bringing together NGOs, political parties and unions. It is characterised by formal organisation with clear leadership. The second is the “critical sector” of Marxist parties and unions. While it has a grassroots character it puts a strong

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<sup>7</sup> This is the motto of the World Social Forum

<sup>8</sup> This is the Zapatista motto, which has been adopted by many anti-globalization activists

emphasis on centralisation and organisational control. In fact, the first two sectors share a “vertical” character reflected in a “commitment to representative democracy, based on vertical leadership, political representation, majority voting and electoral politics” (Juris, 2008: 119). The latter two sectors are “networked based movements” and “militant anti-capitalists”. They differ in their focus with network-based movements working in diffuse and transnational contexts, and militant anti-capitalists identifying more with local collectives and campaigns. Despite their differences, these two sectors share a variety of elements, such as references to the tradition of anarchism, the use of consensus-based decision making and a “horizontal” character (Juris, 2008: 70). Horizontal groups are characterised by a pursuit of direct action and by the rejection of formalised organisation and hierarchies (Juris, 2008: 71). Counter to the instrumental politics which is associated with parties and NGOs these groups practice a “pre-figurative politics”, that is a politics in which the means rather than the ends of political action are particularly important (Breines, 1982).

Horizontal groups and vertical groups entered into increasing conflict since the beginning of the noughties, during a hazy period of de-mobilisation and transformation. This is what colectivo Situaciones identifies as a phase of limbo (2008), and what I tentatively call “post-anti-globalisation” to express its uncertain and transitional character. The clash between the horizontal and the vertical sector of the anti-globalisation movement was already visible during the big protests in Seattle, Prague, Genoa, which marked the peak of the “global wave”. On these occasions groups practising direct action have been accused by more moderate organisations of escalating the conflict, and giving bad press to the movement (Chesters, 2004).

This internal conflict has progressively evolved into a separatist attitude from the side of horizontal groups, which often have set up their own events and protests aside from the official ones. At every World Social Forum since 2002, a Youth Camp was organised, which stood in opposition to the official Forum and was meant as a space for “horizontal activists” to gather (Nunes, 2004). Since then, similar “autonomous fora” have been organised at the European Social Fora in Athens (2006) and Malmoe (2008). This separate development of the horizontal area was further evidenced in the occasion of a new series of counter-summit direct actions G20 in London in April 2009, and at the UN Climate Conference on Climate Change (COP15) in Copenhagen in December 2009, which saw horizontal groups working independently from vertical ones. Moreover, in recent years, a series of “horizontal” single-issue campaigns have emerged and consolidated at the

European level. These notably include No-border, Euromayday, and Climate Camp .

No border is an international network campaigning against migration control. It denounces the nefarious effects of the securitarian policies of the European Union, nicknamed “Fortress Europe” on migrants. It has set up protest camps in different hotposts of the conflict on migration, such as the French sea-port town of Calais where many migrants get stranded while trying to make their way to the United Kingdom. Euromayday is a continental network of activist groups campaigning against the “precarisation of labour”, that is the lack of social guarantees and wage security faced by the many people who work on flexible, part-time contracts. It concentrates on the organisation of a yearly demo, which takes place on the 1st of May, and sharply criticises the inertia of trade unions in face of labour precarisation. Climate Camp is a movement against climate change, born in England in 2006. It has mobilised against airports, coal-fired power stations, and corporations blaming them for being “climate criminals”, responsible for the rise of temperatures and the destructive effects this has on the environment and people around the world. As the name suggest it concentrates on the organisation of a yearly protest camp against climate change. In recent years, the movement has spread to other countries including Germany, France and the Netherlands.

Alongside these public campaigns, during the years of post-anti-globalisation, we have also seen a consolidation of grassroots projects which Richard Day counts among what he calls “un-branded tactics”, providing “non-hegemonic alternatives to the neo-liberal project” (Day, 2005: 38). Examples of these practices are Indymedia centres, Food not Bombs, Social centres. IMCs Indymedia centres are alternative media groups reporting on campaigns and events from an activists’ perspective (Pickard, 2006). They reflect the increasing importance played by the Internet and new media in direct action movements as a channel for information and a tool for political organising (Bennett, 2003). Food not bombs is a practice which emerged in the 80s in the US and follows a simple commandment: “take food that will be wasted, use it to make vegetarian meals and serve it for free to people who are hungry” (Day, 2005: 40). Finally, Social centres are occupied buildings used for social activities and political organising (Montagna, 2006). This practice, which will be discussed in more detail in the final section of this chapter, emerged in Italy in the 70s, evolving in its forms in the last 30 years. During the phase of anti-globalisation protests “the model has been enthusiastically adopted elsewhere” in Europe and in the US (Day, 2005: 41).

These different campaigns and projects testify to the separate development taken by

the horizontal area of the anti-globalisation movement in the last few years. Moreover, these different phenomena are marked by the deployment of tactics and strategies that make them irreconcilable with the type of instrumental politics that is nurtured within so-called “vertical” groups. First and foremost, they concentrate on the pursuit of direct action, as the preferred way to intervene on perceived evils, avoiding appeals to the government (Day: 2005: 40) to solve these problems. As Day suggests horizontal groups are “driven by an orientation to meeting individual/group/community needs by direct action” (Day, 2005: 45). Secondly, these practices are marked by a rejection of strong organisational structures and the parallel pursuit of a “dis/organisation” as Tim Jordan puts it (2002: 137), whereby activists adopt “disorganised co-ordinations that reject hierarchy and leadership” (Jordan, 2002: 137). Thirdly, in these campaigns and projects we see the celebration of a “pre-figurative politics” a term originally coined by US New Left activist Wini Breines (1982) to express the participatory politics of social movements emerging since the 60s and 70s:

The term prefigurative politics is used to designate an essentially anti-organizational politics characteristic of the movement as well as parts of the new left leadership, and may be recognised in counter institutions, demonstrations and attempts to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics. Participatory democracy was central to prefigurative politics. Anti-organizational should not be understood as disorganised. Movements are organized in numerous obvious and often hidden ways. My use of the term anti-organizational should be understood to mean principally a wariness of hierarchy and centralized organization. The crux of pre-figurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the lived practices of the movement, relationships and political forms that “prefigured” and embodied the desired society. (1982: 6)

Coherently to this idea of politics, horizontal groups aim at constructing in the “here and now” the alternative world which is advocated, rather than investing all hope in the achievement of a socialist Utopia (Epstein, 1991, Melucci, 1996a, McKay, 1998). How are we to define the type of activism developed in this context, beyond the provisional definition of “horizontal” activism?

## **ANARCHISM FOR THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY?**

As the polemics between “verticals” and “horizontals” has become harsher in recent years, the need for a new definition of the horizontal area as an independent political subject has

become something of an urgent task. Some scholars have seen in these groups a revival of Anarchism (Epstein, 2001, Graeber, 2004, 2009 and Day, 2005). This thread has been notably initiated by Barbara Epstein who asserted that anti-globalisation activists were “anarchists in inspiration” (2001: 1). She argued that “[t]he intellectual/philosophical perspective that holds sway in these circles might be better described as an anarchist sensibility than as anarchism per se. “Unlike the Marxist radicals of the sixties who devoured the writings of Lenin and Mao, today’s anarchist activists are unlikely to pore over the works of Bakunin” (2001: 1). According to Epstein:

For contemporary young radical activists, anarchism means a decentralized organizational structure, based on affinity groups that work together on an ad hoc basis, and decision-making by consensus. It also means egalitarianism; opposition to all hierarchies; suspicion of authority, especially that of the state; and commitment to living according to one’s values. [...] For them, anarchism is important mainly as an organizational structure and as a commitment to egalitarianism. It is a form of politics that revolves around the exposure of the truth rather than strategy. It is a politics decidedly in the moment. (Epstein, 2001: 1)

David Graeber, an activist and anthropologist, who has been at the forefront of this attempt to define horizontal activists as anarchists, made a bolder claim in an article published in the *New Left Review* (2003). He asserted that the global movement as a whole was anarchist in its ideology, going as far as saying that anarchism constituted for contemporary radical movements, their ideology of reference – what Marxism was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (2003). For Graeber, “most of the creative energy for radical politics is now coming from anarchism—a tradition that they have hitherto mostly dismissed—and that taking this movement seriously will necessarily also mean a respectful engagement with it” (2003):

The very notion of direct action, with its rejection of a politics which appeals to governments to modify their behaviour, in favour of physical intervention against state power in a form that itself prefigures an alternative—all of this emerges directly from the libertarian tradition. Anarchism is the heart of the movement, its soul; the source of most of what’s new and hopeful about it. (2003)

Similar remarks as to the anarchist nature of contemporary radical social movements have been made by other authors, such as Richard J. F. Day, who sees contemporary direct action groups as a continuation of the tradition of anarchism (2005), and Uri Gordon who

argues that anarchist politics is at the heart of contemporary radical social movements (2007).

In spite of these contributions, it is my contention that defining contemporary activists as “anarchists” contributes to a misunderstanding of their practices. It is undeniable that among different “horizontal groups” there are many references to the anarchist tradition and that this ideology and its history continues to constitute a source of inspiration as well as an element of identification for many activists. Nevertheless, seeing these cultural references as the indication of a direct historical continuity between contemporary activists and anarchist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century is an oversimplification. Let me detail my argument in a series of points. First, there is an evident risk of missing the historical specificity of contemporary forms of activism by attempting to make a contemporary social phenomenon, characterised by an high level of complexity and internal diversity, fit into a clear-cut category imported from the 19<sup>th</sup> century; namely, anarchism. Second, such definition reduces social movements to the political level, asserting their correspondence to a specific ideology, thus disguising the fundamental cultural and social character of contemporary social movements (Vahabzadeh, 2003: 11, Melucci, 1996a). Third, by assimilating all horizontal groups to anarchism there is a danger of neglecting the influence played by other political identities and ideologies in this area. In particular, the role of ecologism, queer activism, and autonomist Marxism should all be accounted for. For these reasons, we need to adopt a looser definition capable of encompassing the array of cultural references relevant at this level. Thus, I propose to use the term “autonomous”, rather than “anarchist”.

Apart from the negative reasons for adopting the term “autonomous” there are also positive ones. This is, first and foremost, a term often adopted by actors themselves, as evidenced in the Italian (*autonomi*) and in the German case (*Autonomen*), where references to autonomist Marxism rather than anarchism are dominant among those groups practising direct action. In certain cases there is a mix of references to anarchism and autonomy as happens with Greece where anti-authoritarian activists calling themselves *Αναρχο-αυτόνομοι*. In France the case of the Tarnac 9, a group of activists who was temporarily in jail for suspicion of terrorism, has contributed to the popularisation of the new label *anarcho-autonomie*<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, while anarchism is by itself a negative term (from the Greek root *ἀναρχία* standing for “absence of rule”), autonomy (from the

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<sup>9</sup> See for example the article “La «mouvance anarcho-autonome» placée sous surveillance” appeared on Liberation. Retrieved at <http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/0101257813-une-mouvance-anarcho-autonome-aux-contours-mysterieux>

Greek αὐτονομία standing for “self-rule”) is a concept which foregrounds a more constructive self-definition, which appears to better reflect the pragmatic attitude of contemporary activists. Within the academic debate, different scholars have referred to the term “autonomous” for discussing contemporary forms of direct action activism. This is the case of Deslandes and King, who have coined the term “autonomous activism” (2005), of Chatterton and Pickerill, who have discussed the nature of “autonomous geographies” created by a variety of activist projects (2006), as well as of other authors, who have written about “autonomous politics”, even when using this term as synonymous with anarchist politics (Gordon, 2007).

A further factor that argues for the adoption of the term autonomy instead of anarchism is the polysemy of the former term, which can help us encompass many of the elements associated with contemporary direct action politics. Following the contribution of an array of authors who have described the practices of groups pertaining to the anti-authoritarian or autonomous area we can identify five different understandings of the concept of autonomy:

- First: different groups in this area testify to a desire for autonomy from political institutions and distrust towards representation and delegation (Melucci, 1996: 9, Katsiaficas, 1997: 7).
- Second: autonomy is celebrated as the principle underlying forms of self-management and collective decision-making, where people are seen to decide autonomously and by themselves (Chatterton, Pickerill, 2006).
- Third: autonomy expresses the importance of individual freedom and self-determination as pursued in this context (Melucci, 1996: 92) where individuals do not take orders from organisations but act “according to their own will” (Katsiaficas, 1997: 8).
- Fourth: autonomy can be seen as the active process of decolonization of the lifeworld from a system which continuously attempts to encroach it (Habermas, 1987, Katsiaficas, 1997), pitting communities against both the market and the state.
- Fifth: autonomy resonates to the valuing of locality and proximity, and the creation of “autonomous zones” (Bey, 1988/2008) which is an hallmark of the groups of this sort (Starr and Adams, 2003, Chatterton, Pickerill, 2006).

For the purpose of this thesis, I will particularly concentrate on the third and fifth meaning of autonomy, the autonomy of individual participants, and the autonomy of space. These are in fact fundamental elements when it comes to understanding the forms of orientation allowing for the coordination of collective action at this level.

Building on the foregoing of this discussion for the purpose of the current investigation I define my field of study as *autonomous activism*. This is to be understood as the set of discourses and practices which are established within *autonomous movements*, that is anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist social movements which constituted the horizontal sector of the anti-globalisation movement. There is however, a sixth dimension of autonomy which makes this definition of the field of study yet more problematic. It is the autonomy of different *autonomous groups* from one another, the fact that the connections that exist between them are flexible and often ad-hoc, following a format of “disorganised co-ordination” (Jordan, 2002: 137). This situation makes talking of “autonomous movements” as social movements with a coherent identity and subjectivity difficult to sustain. Therefore, in the final part of this chapter I will propose to see autonomous movements as a fluid “scene” binding together different independent “autonomous groups”. Central to the existence of this scene, is the presence of a common culture, what we could call the “culture of autonomy”, whose different cultural influences will be reconstructed in the next section.

## ROOTS OF AUTONOMY

References for the culture of contemporary autonomous activists have to be sought as far back as the famous split between Marx and Bakunin in the First International. Anarchism rose as a distinct political movement since the accusations launched by the anarchist leader against the father of communism of being a reckless “authoritarian”, because of his assertion that taking the State would have constituted a necessary step towards the emancipation of the masses (Ward, 2004: 7). Between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers like Proudhon and Kropotkin developed a different anarchist vision of the other society: a society based on federalism and mutual aid (Day, 2005: 92). Anarchist movements developed in different countries in the US and in Europe, and made a great showing during the civil war in Spain in 1936. Nevertheless the anarchist project was dismissed by both liberals and Marxists as a naive form of Utopian Socialism (Day, 2005: 92-93), and defeated on the terrain by the rise of Communist and Fascist totalitarianisms

(Marshall, 1992: 539).

For a revival of some of the libertarian ideals initially propounded by anarchism, one had to wait until the protests of the 1960s, culminating in the student movement of May 1968, from which a New Left was born, which distanced itself from the Old Left of Communist Parties and trade unions. According to Marshall, “not all the New Left could be described as libertarian, let alone anarchist”. Nevertheless “the mainstream of the New Left undoubtedly espoused many classic anarchist ideas such as workers' control, decentralization and direct action” (1992: 542). Thus, Daniel Cohn-Bendit the spokesperson of the Parisian movement would call himself “a Marxist like Bakunin was”, while Rudi Dutschke, the leader of German 68ers would present himself as “both an anarchist and a Marxist” (1992: 560).

Apart from the strong showing of the student movement, the 60s and 70s were also the stage for the development of a variety of “new social movements” (Melucci, 1980, 1996a). Examples of these social movements are the ecologist, feminist and the anti-nuclear movements which went beyond the conflict between labour and capital underscoring the workers' movement (Touraine, Wieworka, Dubet, 1984: 209-227) and testified to a shift towards post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1977). While being partly connected with the student movement, new social movements did not necessarily share its socialist orientation. They concentrated on a libertarian critique of bureaucracies and technocracies and their attempt to regulate social life (Touraine, 1971), and were characterised by a network-like structure, with the presence of small groups bound into flexible ad-hoc coalitions (Kriesi, Koopmans, 1995).

Despite the differences between New Left and New Social Movements, there were points of overlap at the level of cultural and organisational forms. To account for the connection between these two sectors, political scientist Herbert Kitschelt located this social phenomenon in a new pattern of political division characterising advanced capitalist society: left-libertarian vs. right-authoritarian (1990). In this context, both New Left and New Social Movements together with the parties which emerged from this milieu and especially the Green Party appeared to be characterised by a “left-libertarian” orientation:

They are “Left” because they share with traditional socialism a mistrust of the market place, of private investment, and of the achievement ethic, and a commitment to egalitarian redistribution. They are *libertarian* because they reject the authority of the private or public bureaucracy to regulate individual and collective conduct. They instead participatory democracy and the *autonomy* of

groups and individual to define their economic, political and cultural institutions unencumbered by market or bureaucratic dictates (Kitschelt, 1990: 180)

Thus, while the New Left remained tied to a Socialist ideology and the New Social Movements appeared to centre on a critique of bureaucracy, these two political streams were strongly intertwined and often shared structures of mobilisation and social milieu. The category of *left-libertarian* reflects the nature of an array of movements which developed in the anti-authoritarian area during the 70s.

An important influence for shaping the contemporary “culture of autonomy” has been played by the autonomist Marxist movements. These movements developed in the years after 1968 in Italy and Germany. In Italy the so-called long '68, a decade of protests against the State transformed the country into a cultural and political laboratory. A complex coalition of groups emerged which came to be referred to as *Autonomia* because of its intention to make workers *autonomous* from the control of the ICP (Italian Communist Party) (Wright, 2002, Lotringer, Marazzi, 1980/2007). The ideology of this area was *operaismo* (workerism), which saw the working class preceding and pre-figuring the re-structurations of capital. This “Copernican shift”, first proposed by workerist theorist Mario Tronti in *Operai e Capitale* (1966/2006), went together with calls for the “refusal of labour” which sharply contrasted with the bargaining strategies and productivist philosophy heralded by official trade unions.

*Autonomia* brought about more diffused forms of organisation which contrasted with the centralisation and bureaucratisation of the ICP and of official trade unions. While a series of prominent groups like *Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua* constituted the backbone of the movement – what went under the name of “organised *Autonomia*” – an important role was played by local collectives, self-help groups and *cani sciolti* (unleashed dogs, a term used to describe activists who sharply refused organisational control) (Katsiaficas, 1997: 24-25). Among them featured countercultural groups like the *Indiani Metropolitani* (Metropolitan Indians) and the “creative *Autonomia*” of Bologna self-styled “Mao-Dadaists”. Reflecting on the diffuse character of the movement, Sylvère Lotringer who visited Italy in 1979 described *Autonomia* in Deleuzian terms as “the body without organs, anti-hierarchic, anti-dialectic, anti-representative. This is not only a political project. It is a project for existence” (2007: 8). The movement collapsed towards the end of the 70s as a consequence of increasing police repression and political violence, with the emergence of terrorist groups (Katsiaficas, 1997: 51-57).

“Although the Italian movement was dispersed, its lesson and legacy were a

powerful influence further North” (Katsiaficas, 1997: 57). In fact Italian Autonomia had a strong echo in different social movements around Europe and particularly in Germany with the rise of the “Autonomen” (Geronimo, 1992, Katsiaficas, 1997). In opposition to Italy, in Germany the student movement did not manage to create an alliance with sectors of the working class. Centrifugal tendencies within the student movement brought to the dissolution of the SDS (German Socialist Students) which had been at the forefront of student protests (Della Porta, 2006b: 97). Disappointed by the disarray of the student movement, activists turned to a *Randgruppestrategie* which concentrated on mobilising marginalised members of society, “petty criminals, drug addicts and drop-outs” (2006b: 40).

Similarly to what had happened in the Italian context, the German movement became entangled with the youth counterculture which thrived after 1968 with its “patchwork of self-help groups, cooperatives and communes” (2006b: 41). It was from this terrain, that a series of groups emerged which came to refer to themselves as *undogmatische Linke* (non-dogmatic Left), beginning in the early 70s with the *Spontis* (from spontaneity) a network of collectives clustered around the newspaper *Wir Wollen Alles* (We Want Everything). These groups engaged in direct action both in factories and in the city holding a belief in a “spontaneous and autonomous organisation of the working class” (2006b: 103) resonating with the theory of Rosa Luxemburg. Towards the end of the 1970s, groups pertaining to this radical area of the libertarian Left came to refer to themselves explicitly as “Autonomen” (Geronimo, 1992: 9).

Autonomist Marxism had no comparable influence in the UK where the New Left after 1968 mainly turned to Trotskyism, and concentrated on solidarity campaigns in favour of struggles of national liberation. In this country the anarchist movement had a certain revival during the 80s, in mobilisations in favour of the miners of North England and Wales, and of the printers of Wapping, which prompted the creation of the new situationist anarchist group Class War (Franks, 2006). However, compared to its continental counterparts, in the UK the anti-authoritarian Left showed few signs of strength, and remained mostly anchored to the traditional schemes of class struggle and the model of anarchist federations. An important role in reviving the libertarian tradition in the UK was instead played by the emergence of non-violent direct action since the beginning of the 80s.

A further fundamental influence on the development of the culture of autonomy has been played by the tradition of non-violent direct action (NVDA) (Epstein, 1991, Jordan,

2002: 60-65). As Barbara Epstein explains in her insider account of the US non-violent direct action movement “[t]hese mobilisations were made up of people who believe in non-violence, practice decision-making by consensus, and employ the tactic of mass civil disobedience” (Epstein, 1991: 1). In this context the practice of *affinity groups*, consisting of ten to fifteen people was developed, which came to constitute the “movement’s basic unit”. The adoption of the structure of affinity groups allowed the movement to maintain flexibility during blockades while also providing activists with a micro-community where it was possible “to talk issues through” and cope with repression (1991: 3).

Non-violent direct action also saw the development of *spokescouncils*, a procedure which is still employed today by many activists in the anti-authoritarian Left such as in the case of the UK Climate Camp movement. Through this method affinity groups were furthered organised in clusters, each having its own “spokes” to represent them in meetings:

[w]henver a decision had to be made (often several times a day) the clusters would meet to work out their views and arrive at consensus. Anyone who disagreed strongly with a collective decision had the right to block it, although it was understood that this power should not be used unless a fundamental moral issue was at stake. Each cluster sent a “spokes” to a “spokescouncil” that met with the clusters; runners were sent between clusters and spokescouncils, bringing questions to be addressed to the clusters and conveying the decisions to the spokescouncils. Spokes were rotated daily, so as to discourage the emergence of a leading group. (Epstein, 1991: 3)

This blueprint of political action soon crossed the Atlantic, becoming particularly popular in the context of disarmament and anti-nuclear campaigns in Germany and the UK. In Germany tactics of non-violent mobilisation became particularly prominent in an array of campaigns to block the construction of nuclear reactors (Joppke, 1993). In this context, the rapid diffusion of this format of protest seemed to underlie a rejection by some adherents of the anti-authoritarian Left in the country, and of the violent politics which had been brought about by the RAF (Rote Arme Fraktion) and by the more militant wings of the Autonomen (Mushaben, 1986). In the UK, instead, non-violent direct action acquired prominence in the context of disarmament campaigns.

Well known is the case of the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp established in 1981 to protest against the Cruise nuclear missiles being stored at the US-leased RAF base in Berkshire. The action captured the attention of the media, also because of its feminist and queer character, since many of the women that partook in it throughout the

years were lesbian. In the context of this protest, the protest camp constituted not only a powerful protest weapon but also a communitarian space. As Sasha Roseneil, who was involved in the action recounts:

Greenham was at once both a real place and a set of connections across space between people and places. It was a community of women who physically lived together at the camp, and it was also a network of women, an 'imagined community' which stretched across Britain and beyond [...]. Compared with conventional forms of politics, and even other social movements and alternative communities, both the camp and the network were 'structureless'. Greenham lacked many of the institutions which serve to freeze communities and political organizations. No constitution, no article of association, no standing orders to govern meetings, no executive committee, no membership list, no officers, no annual general meetings, no head office existed. This meant that the internal lay out of the land was constantly changing, always moving. (2000: 68)

The "camp culture" which developed during the mobilisations in the 80s had a strong influence on the "new environmental movement" of the 90s in the UK (Doherty, 2000). Protest camps like the one of Greenham Common became a common feature in the anti-road protests of the 90s in the UK, during which, through a series of blockade tactics such as tree-sitting or building tunnels, activists attempted to "reveal their moral superiority through non-violent resistance (Jordan, 2002: 62).

During the 80s and early 90s in Italy, non-violent direct action came to be adopted by groups within the ecologist movement, especially in the context of the anti-nuclear campaigns developed during the 80s (Della Seta, 2000). Then, during the years of anti-corporate mobilisations non-violent direct action inspired the practices developed by the activist group Tute Bianche (White Overalls), which invented and popularised the so-called "padded block tactic", using foam rubber, plastic shields and other defensive weapons as a way to break through police lines without engaging in violent confrontations (Jordan, 2002: 74-46).

## THE INFLUENCE OF SUBCULTURES: DiY

To understand the "culture of autonomy" which underlies contemporary autonomous activism, we cannot stop at the level of the history of anarchism, autonomist marxism, new social movements and non-violent direct action. Particularly important for understanding the development of the culture of autonomy is the role played by youth cultures or

subcultures which, along with Ken Gelder, we can define as “groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do, where they do it” (2005: 2). Different authors have noticed how autonomous movements have adopted a variety of cultural forms and styles originating from subcultures such as punk, reggae or rap (Haunss and Leach, 2009).

Looking at the German Autonomen, Jan Schwarzmeier noticed the importance played by the reproduction of a certain style and clothing, “which reclaims elements of Punk and Rock” (2001: 28), while the conflict between Autonomen and right-wing Skins seems to recall the enmity between mods and rockers (2001: 209). Schwarzmaier sees in the Autonomen parallelisms with subcultural heroism and a nurturing of conflictuality which is tied to the celebration of subcultural authenticity. Similarly, Gun Cuninghame, examining autonomous movements in Italy in the 70s, notices that “youth subculture was linked to the political subculture of *autonomia*, “alternative” practices being politicized and made oppositional” (Gun Cuninghame, 2007).

The resonance of subcultures with political radicalism was made particularly evident with the emergence of punk at the end of the 70s in the UK. This antagonist subculture bore the influence of a variety of previous cultural and artistic movements, including surrealism and Dada. It made references to anarchism to define its stance towards mainstream culture as clearly evidenced by the famous Sex Pistols's single “Anarchy in the UK” (O'Hara, 1999). While the anarchism cultivated in this context often reflected a nihilist attitude, some components were highly politicised. Indicative in this sense is the assertion made by the punk band CRASS according to which “German got Baader-Meinhof [the terrorist group]. Britain got punk but they can kill it” (McKay, 1996: 89). The emergence of punk marked a revival of the anarchist iconography, with the A of anarchy, rapidly spreading on T-shirts and jackets, provoking the horror of old-fashioned anarchists like Murray Bookchin (1995).

During the 90s, the connection between subculture and radical politics has been manifested in the criss-cross between conflict and carnival typical of the so-called DiY culture. For Stephen Duncombe DiY is “at once a critique of the dominant mode of passive consumer culture and something more important: the active creation of an alternative culture. DiY is not just about complaining what is but actually doing something different” (1997: 117). Likewise Holtzman, Hughes and Van Meter define it as

the idea that you can do for yourself the activities normally reserved for the realm of capitalist production (wherein products are created for consumption in a system that encourages alienation and non-participation). Thus anything from music and magazines, to education and protest can be created in a nonalienating, self-organized and purposefully anticapitalist manner. (2007: 44)

Looking at the phenomenon of “protest / party” of the 1990s, with protests resembling festive celebrations, George McKay proposes to look at DiY culture as a kind of 1990s counterculture” which brings together “youth- centred and directed cluster of interests and practices around green radicalism, direct action politics, new musical sounds and experiences” (1998: 27).

The DiY culture is not characterised by a highly coherent set of values and practices. To the contrary it appeared as a rather haphazard “combination of inspiring action, narcissism, youthful arrogance, principle, ahistoricism, idealism, indulgence, creativity, plagiarism, as well as the rejection and embracing of technological innovation” (1998: 2). It is tied to a celebration of togetherness which can be seen in the context of protest camps and protest parties, which come to constitute the stage on which “an emancipatory politics of pleasure or autonomy” (1998: 44) is pursued. What we see in this context is fundamentally a *pleasure politics* which as Tim Jordan notices “offers the possibility of a self-interested and self-righteous definition of social change”. However this attitude brings about a series of dangers since “[t]he necessary solipsism of such politics opens the way to mysticism and disengagement from society” (2002: 151).

Key to the deep overlap between autonomous activism and subcultures, manifested in the context of the DiY culture, is the valuing of individual pleasure, creativity and self-determination. While subcultures “can be understood as collective expressions and celebrations of individualism” (Muggleton, 2000: 79), in the tradition of the libertarian autonomous Left we often find references to the importance of individual freedom and self-realisation which are perfectly condensed in the Old Autonomes motto “Politik in der ersten Person” (politics in the first person). Here, rather than of individualism with its rather negative connotations we could talk of a “personalism”, using a term introduced by Paul Lichterman when looking at contemporary American activism (1996). For Lichterman, personalism “supposes that one’s own individuality has inherent value, apart from one’s material or social achievement, no matter what specific connection to specific communities and institutions an individual maintains” (1996: 6). It can be found in “ways of speaking or acting which highlight a unique personal self”. In opposition to individualism, personalism is always constructed in relation to a community:

Personalism upholds a personal self that lives with ambivalence towards, and often in tension with, the institutional or communal standards that surround it. But we should not reduce personalism to its most selfish or privatizing manifestations: personalism does not necessarily deny the existence of communities surrounding and shaping the self, but it accentuates an individualized relationship to any such communities. In contrast with a political identity which is defined by membership in a local, national or global polity, a traditional religious identity that gets realized in a fellowship of believers, or a communal identity that develops in relation to a specific community, the personal self gets developed reflecting on individual biography, by establishing one's own individuality amidst an array of cultural, religious or political authorities. (1996: 6)

The phenomenon identified by Lichterman strongly resonates with the type of relationships which is established within autonomous movements, in which connection to a community of friends and comrades is a fundamental aspect in the experience of participation (Haunss and Leach, 2009).

This trend towards personalisation is accompanied by an heavy investment in alternative spaces, similarly to what happens with different subcultures which are characterised by the centrality of the "inhabitation of territory" (Gelder, 2005: 12). In conclusion, autonomous movements present different points of overlap with subcultures and countercultures. First, they are characterised by a valuing of individual self-realisation. Second, they nurture their own spaces of aggregation and action, similarly to the way in which subcultural groups are embedded with scenes.

## OCCUPYING SPACES: THE AUTOMOUS SCENE

As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, the creation and occupation of alternative spaces is as a common feature of contemporary direct action activism, what in this work I refer to as "autonomous activism". Richard J. F. Day in fact asserts that "direct action movements are about building spaces, places or *topias* in the most literal sense of the term" (Day, 2005: 216). Squatting, protest-parties, protest camps, bike rides, blockades are all example of practices which "involve the *occupation of space*, a physical occupation that emphasises an embodied presence [...] where the actors put themselves at the centre of a contested space [...]" as Kevin McDonald has rightly noticed (2006: 17). Similarly to the way in which subcultural and countercultural groups develop an attachment to specific places or hang-outs autonomous activism appears to be engaged in the continual

construction of pre-figurative spaces where to experience and display alternative ways of life to the ones proposed by neo-liberalism (Day, 2005: 216). To express the centrality of space within direct action politics Chatterton and Pickerill have talked of “autonomous geographies” (2006) to describe “those spaces where people desire to constitute noncapitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation” (2006: 730).

A foremost example of this centrality of the creation of “spaces” in autonomous activism are social centres, one among many “un-branded tactics” listed by Richard Day when discussing contemporary direct action movements (2005: 210-216). Social centres are squatted buildings, often former schools, hospitals, which are transformed into social and political projects, but often also in alternative cultural venues which cater for alternative youth (Ruggiero, 2001). They emerged in Italy during the 70s within autonomous movements, and their development stemmed from the autonomist view of the city as a “social factory”, whereby the process of capitalist creation of value was seen as spreading well beyond the manufacturing sector, progressively engulfing the whole territory. Many social centres soon became the stage for the development of a “small-scale independent economy” based on cultural production and consumption (Brophy, 2007: 176). In recent years, many of them have lost their political commitment and have progressively transformed themselves into alternative commercial venues. Despite these shortcomings this practice has widely spread in other countries in Europe and beyond (Day, 2005: 40).

Besides social centres and practices of squatting, the construction of alternative spaces can be seen in the context of direct action protests. Concrete examples of this trend are a variety of what Day would call “un-branded tactics” (Day, 2005: 40-48) such as Reclaim the Streets, Critical Mass and protest camps. In the case of Reclaim the Streets, the anti-road protest movement which developed during the 90s, and continues to thrive in different countries, streets are blockaded to protest against the dominance of car culture by dancing on the tarmac (McKay, 1998: 124). Similar are the practices of Critical Mass, a parade of “critical cyclists”, which every month in different cities around the world, disrupt car traffic by “becoming the traffic” themselves, e.g. by cycling together as a group (Carlsson, 2002). A further example of the creation of protest spaces is provided by protest camps, which as we have seen were developed since the 70s and 80s in the context of non-violent direct actions (Doherty, 2000). Commenting on this stream of practices, US activist Starhawk argues that practices of “occupation” of space revolve around “claiming a space

and redefining it, disrupting business as usual [...] embodying the joy of the revolution we are trying to make” (2002: 151). Here the creation of alternative spaces becomes a condition for the unfolding of individual and collective self-determination.

As Day notices these different spaces of aggregation and protest are not Utopian spaces, since they are not accompanied by a revolutionary view of totalising transformation (2005: 42). Rather we should look at them, by referring to Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia” (1986). Alternative spaces, are fundamentally other spaces which exists in the present rather than abstract spaces to be realised in the future. Insightful for capturing the nature of these heterotopian spaces, is Hakim Bey’s influential concept of “temporary autonomous zone” (Bey, 1985/2008, Day, 2005: 91, 101). For Bey:

The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form itself elsewhere / elsewhen, before the State can crush it. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can “occupy” these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace. Perhaps certain small TAZs have isolated whole lifetimes because they went unnoticed, like hillbilly enclaves – because they never intersected with the Spectacle, never appeared outside that real life which is invisible to the agents of Simulation. (Bey, 2008: 101)

Central to the idea of the TAZ is its “immediacy”, the fact that it can exist only insofar as it is anchored to contexts of proximity and face-to-face relationships:

As soon as the TAZs is named (represented, mediated), it must vanish, it *will* vanish, leaving behind it an empty husk, only to spring up again somewhere else, once again invisible because undefinable in terms of the Spectacle. The TAZ is thus the perfect tactic for an era in which the State is omnipresent and all-powerful and yet simultaneously riddled with cracks and vacancies. (Bey, 2003: 101)

Key to autonomous zones is their being beyond the bounds of everyday life, their subverting the logic of spatial domination and the power of the Spectacle. They dissolve and reform elsewhere and have a very ephemeral existence. However besides temporary autonomous zones, Hakim Bey accounts for the presence of more lasting spaces what he calls PAZ (Permanent Autonomous Zones) (2008: 101).

Permanent autonomous zones constituted by long-standing projects like social centres, alongside the temporary autonomous zones unfolding in the context of protest

events can be seen as the elements composing the “social movement scene” of autonomous activism: the “autonomous scene”. Haunss and Leach see the autonomous scene as a space of political organising and social aggregation in which autonomous movements interact with subcultures and countercultures. Analysing the autonomous scene in Berlin, Haunss and Leach, describe it as a complex and concentric environment:

The autonomous movement has a countercultural core and cuts across a number of milieus and subcultures, including youth, students, punks, anti-fascists, gays and lesbians, the alternative subculture, social workers, the homeless, and the unemployed, among others. In this case the scene is larger than the movement – it forms the social pool from which the movement draws its members. The scene bleeds out beyond the boundaries of the movement – there are few movement activists who are not also part of the scene, but a sizeable number of participants in the scene who are not active in the movement. A counterculture forms the core of the autonomous movement and thereby the core of the scene in which the movement is contained. (2009: 8)

This concentric nature of the space of autonomous movements had already been noticed in the analysis of autonomous movements in Zurich by Hanspeter Kriesi (1984). Drawing on Kriesi’s analysis, in *The Subversion of Politics* (1997) activist / scholar Georgy Katsiaficas put forward the following description of the space of autonomous movements:

Within the activist core can be found crystallization points whose variety is indicated by different symbols: collectives, action committees, coalitions, squatted houses, activist communes, and, when their sectarian tendencies are under control, even hierarchically organized groups with ideological underpinnings. Together with unaffiliated individuals, they constitute the base from which actions and programmatic impetus are initiated. They rely on the the next level, the scene, for their everyday political-cultural sustenance. Alternative institutions with no explicit political content are part of the scene, as are cafes, music clubs, street hangouts, and parks. Active sympathizers include people who are caught up in movement mobilizations and occasional meetings. Passive sympathizers refer to financial supporters, readers of the alternative press, professors who discuss ideas and actions in their seminars and classes, workers who contribute ideas to colleagues, and so forth. The fluid character of these movements means that people often move between levels or even participate simultaneously at different points. (1997: 191-192)

According to Haunss and Leach the *concentric* character of the autonomous scene is accompanied by the presence of a “hierarchy of engagement”, whereby involvement in the movement, is fundamentally based on presence (2009: 12). Those people who spend more time in the scene and in its recognised locations will be the ones which will have more

influence on the activity of the movement (2009: 13). Thus at the centre of the scene are those activists who “are the most convinced believers in the countercultural world-view, the most conscious practitioners of the countercultural life-style, the most engaged defenders of and contributors to the scene’s infrastructure, and the most consistent participants in the movement’s activities”. Then - moving to the following social circle - “scenes require only part-time participation and affect only a limited sphere of one’s day-to-day existence” (2009: 11).

When discussing the “autonomous scene” Haunss and Leach focus on urban spaces of participation of autonomous activism, identifying different local scenes, such as the autonomous scene in Berlin or the autonomous scene in Hamburg. In the context of this investigation, I am looking at the *autonomous scene* as a translocal and transnational space, which spans across different countries in Europe and beyond, and which comprises many local scenes, such as the autonomous scene in Berlin, Rome, and London which will be discussed in chapter 5. Another point of contention with Haunss’s and Leach’s discussion of the autonomous scene, is that in their description they almost completely concentrate on the role played by places, overlooking the importance of events. For the purpose of my discussion I want to account for both these elements when analysing the working of two sub-scenes within the autonomous scene:

- 1) the urban autonomous scene: it is manifested in occupied spaces such as squats and social centres, benefit parties, activist workshops and other similar spaces.
- 2) The global protest scene: it encompasses counter-summit protests and big direct actions, drawing a large number of international participants.

To sum up, the notion of “autonomous scene” is a useful theoretical device to make sense of the importance played within autonomous movements by practices of occupation of space, and the construction of alternative spaces or “heterotopias”. These spaces include the temporary autonomous zones of protest events and actions, and the more “permanent autonomous zones” of social centres and similar kinds of “occupied spaces”. The question which needs to be raised in the empirical part of this investigation, is what are the forms of orientation, and what the connected communicative practices, which allow for such dispersed array of places and events to be perceived by activists as part of a common autonomous scene.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have sketched out the nature of autonomous activism which constitutes the field of study for this investigation about activist orientation, paying particular attention to the nature of the space which underlies it. I have begun by locating autonomous activism within the anti-authoritarian or “horizontal” sector of the anti-globalisation movement. Counter to scholars who see horizontal activists as anarchists I have proposed the looser definition “autonomous” which better allows to account for the different cultural and political references which inform the “culture of autonomy” of contemporary direct action activists. Having provided a general definition of my object of study I proceeded to conducting a brief historical reconstruction of the development of a culture of autonomy out of the tradition of anarchism, of the New Left, of autonomist Marxism, and youth subcultures. Finally I asserted how autonomous activism centers around tactics of spatial occupation which are characterised their reclaiming of space, as evidenced in the importance played by social centres and protest spaces.

What we see in this context are clear similarities with practices originating from subcultures with the importance played by hang-outs and contexts of proximity. It is for this reason that we can apply the subcultural notion of scene, to autonomous movements, as Haunss and Leach do when talking about the existence of an “autonomous scene” (2009). The autonomous scene is a space of political action and social aggregation, which comprises two sub-scenes: the urban autonomous scene centering around social centres and other occupied spaces, and the global protest scenes, unfolding in counter-summits and similar contexts of protest. The question to be raised at this point is what are the forms of orientation which allow for these dispersed places and events to be perceived as part of a common scene?

In the empirical chapters, I proceed to analyse this process by drawing on interviews and observations taken at different places and events in Italy, Germany, and the UK. I begin by looking at the mode of guidance which binds together the autonomous scene and the spatial imaginary which underscores it. Then in chapter 5 I turn to the analysis of orientation in the urban autonomous scene, looking at the cases of Rome, Berlin and London. In chapter 6 instead I analyse the processes of orientation unfolding in the global protest scene, concentrating on the case of the protests against the G8 in Rostock in June 2007. Finally in chapter 7, I look at the forms of orientation underpinning

the life stories of different participants, paying attention to the presence of different entry-points and anchoring points in the autonomous scene. In the next chapter, chapter 3, I will advance a phenomenological methodology for the analysis of processes of orientation in the autonomous scene, which combines ethnographic observations with interviews and textual analysis.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **REFLECTIONS ON METHODS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Before delving into the empirical part of the investigation in this chapter, I deal with issues of methods. I begin by examining a series of epistemological approaches regarding my understanding of the process of research, ethical questions concerning my own position in the research, and the relationship between my role as activist and researcher. Subsequently, I detail the personal and intellectual trajectory through which I have come to identify the object of analysis considered in this work, alongside a series of relevant research questions. Then, I turn to the choice of specific methods, advocating a loose ethnographic framework, which, besides participant observations, draws heavily on life story interviews and textual analysis. I operationalise this framework through a research design adopting an “extended case” composed of multiple instrumental case studies, with each one drawing on observations, interviews and textual analysis. In the final sections of the chapter, I move to a more technical discussion of the way in which I have combined different data collection techniques (interviews, textual analysis and participant observation). Finally, I discuss how I have dealt with processes of interpretation, in order to connect the evidence coming from these disparate sources.

#### **A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ACTIVISM**

This thesis investigates the process of individual orientation which underpins participation in the “autonomous scene” (Haunss and Leach, 2009) which is the space of participation within autonomous movements. As I have suggested in general terms in chapter 1 that the perspective I adopt to look at the process of orientation can be termed a *phenomenological*

one. This epistemological position is informed by Merleau-Ponty's assertion of the "primacy of perception", according to which consciousness is dependent on our immersion in the environment (1962). Central at this level is the phenomenon of "corporeality", for which "insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent on my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way that I do not choose" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 440). By ascribing to this position, I reject "rational choice" approaches to participation (Olson, 1965), which view people as disembodied individuals acting in a void. To the contrary, I see activists as actors who are always embodied in lived social situations which strongly impinge on their possibilities for decision and action.

This general phenomenological sensibility is combined with my concern that communication and culture have too often been reduced to issues of representation (Csordas, 1994), as asserted in the introduction and in chapter 1. In order to depart from a representational paradigm for understanding communication, my analysis focuses on questions of experience. In this way it builds on the work done on this issue by a variety of scholars including Alberto Melucci (1996a, 1996b), Francois Dubet (1994) and Kevin McDonald (1999, 2006). This experiential focus is operationalised through the use of the concept of "life-world", which has been advanced in the work of Alfred Schütz's (1967, 1973) and is to be seen as space of the common experience of different groups. The value of this model for the purpose of my work consists in the distinction between immediate and mediated experience, or, in Schütz's terms, between the *Umwelt* and the *Mitwelt*. These categories can aid the analysis of the dynamics of orientation and its embeddedness within processes of immediacy and mediation.

Another element I draw from the phenomenological tradition is the broad paradigm of social constructionism. In particular, I am indebted to Berger's and Luckman's analysis of processes of social interaction (1966). I subscribe to their vision of society as a context in which "man's self-production is always, and of necessity, a social enterprise", whereby "men together produce a human environment, with the totality of its socio-cultural and psychological formations" (1966: 2). Drawing on this premise I operate with a view of society as a lived context of ongoing interactions in which subjects are heavily involved in meaning-making activities. Accordingly, for the purposes of my research, I prioritise processes of cultural interaction over structural features, that are instead the focus of functionalist and political economic approaches to the study of society and social movements. This has important consequences for my view of social movements, which for the purpose of my study are not to be seen as well defined and coherent actors deliberately

intervening in public affairs, as has been propounded by Charles Tilly (1998). I rather look at social movements following Melucci's assertion that they are "systems of action, complex networks among the different levels and meanings of social action" (1996a: 4). At this level the concept of a social movement scene outlined in chapter 1 provides a useful category to define the context of my investigation, the space in which processes of orientation unfold.

The endorsement of a social constructionist viewpoint has important epistemological consequences for my understanding of the relationship between academic research and the social world. In this context, I comply with Alberto Melucci's assertion that "the *concept* of social movement, along with all the other concepts to be presented for analytical purposes [...] are always *objects of knowledge constructed by the analyst*; they do not coincide with the empirical complexity of society" (1996a: 21). Coherently to this assertion, research should not pretend to objectively represent social reality. It should always be understood as a modelling and a simplification of the complexity of social processes. Cognisant of the subjective and analytical character of the process of research, I approach the field of my research along the lines of what Glaser and Strauss define as "grounded theory" (1967/2006). This concept describes a research strategy, which delves into empirical investigation after having formulated a series of preliminary hypotheses. Adopting a grounded theory approach also entails a particular understanding of the connection between macro- and micro- levels of social analysis. Specifically, I aim at discussing a range of macro- phenomena by studying a series of micro- contexts of interaction, and studying orientation in specific scenes in order to gain insights about the more general working of scenes and orientation.

Central to my research approach is a focus on the individual level of the process of collective action, which stems from Touraine's (1988, 2000) and Melucci's (1996a, 1996b) argument that the individual's struggle to make sense of an uncertain world is the best place to look for today's structural forces in action. In this context, it is important to clarify that I do not ascribe to an atomist vision of society as composed by different individuals with a total control over their thoughts and actions. This choice rather reflects the intention of accounting for the central roles acquired by individuals in social movements and in society at large. As Melucci contends, "contemporary social movements affirm the necessity of addressing the individual dimension of social life as the level where new forms of social control are exerted and where social action originates" (1996a: 106). This is a consequence of the increasing socialisation of the "individual dimension" and of

“individualisation of social problems” (1996a: 106). My decision to concentrate on the individual level of experience is also due to utilitarian considerations. First, it is my contention that the level of individual experience offers a privileged viewpoint for understanding the influence played by different forms of communication on processes of participation. Second, I believe that the question of individual participation continues to be relatively neglected in the study of social movements. Hence this kind of analysis provides us the opportunity to make a useful and original contribution to the research in the field.

## ACTIVIST RESEARCH?

Another important question to be addressed in the development of this methodological approach is the relationship between my position as a participant in autonomous movements and my position as a researcher of autonomous movements. This is not only an epistemological but also an ethical question, which needs to be carefully excavated. To do this, let me start with a brief recount of my own experience as activist. I started to be interested in politics since the beginning of high school, having been brought up in a politically moderate family, my father having served as an MP for a Christian Democratic party for 2 years. My political socialisation took shape in high school when I acted as a student representative where I participated in two school occupations. This continued into my university years, where I took part in a variety of student-led initiatives and campaigns. During this period, I also participated in different protest events, including the demonstrations at Genoa in July 2001. After completing my BA and MA, I volunteered in different Zapatista communities in Chiapas as a journalism teacher, and visited autonomous and indigenous communities in Guatemala and Honduras. These events have deeply marked not only my personal experience, but also my view of politics and activism, furthering my interest in the process of collective action and the role played by communication in this context.

In recent years, I have been mainly participating in the activity of autonomous movements, in the role of a sympathetic journalist reporting on protest events and campaigns for the Italian leftist daily newspaper *il manifesto*. This experience has allowed me to explore a variety of practices and events which would prove also interesting for the purpose of my research. Beside this work as a journalist, I have been directly involved as an activist participating in different campaigns, and in particular in the collective of rampART, one of the most long-lived social centres in London. Because of my engagement

in these two roles, I cannot claim to be a neutral and external observer of the activity of autonomous movements. Instead, I am aware of being influenced by my emotional connection to the phenomena I am studying.

In recent years, a range of authors have pointed out the impossibility of locating oneself outside of the social field, which is the object of one's investigation, and have underlined the questions of power which arise doing research. Exemplary of this debate is Donna Haraway's call for the development of a "situated knowledge", a proposal which draws on insights coming from Feminist standpoint theory (1988). This type of research, rather than pretending to develop a "total" understanding of social reality, recognises that every type of knowledge is always partial and reflects the political position of the researcher, and also, the "politics of academia" which influence the way in which the researcher operates.

In the specific case of my research, one of the dilemmas, which I had to face revolved around the need to account for the relationship between my position as researcher and my own participation to the social movements I was studying. One possible point of reference in this context was provided by the tradition of "action research" which attempts to combine research with the striving for social change (McNiff, Whitehead, 2006). Within this approach, research is seen as a catalyst for problem-solving, whereby researchers are demanded to work in conjunction with "communities of practice" (McNiff, Whitehead, 2006).

Stemming from this longstanding "heretic tradition" of sociological analysis in recent years, within the anti-globalisation movement there has been much talk about the development of a common model of "activist research" (McIntyre, 2006) and militant ethnography. This term has been used to refer to the way in which research conducted can help develop an understanding of the social field in the space of action and through its own practices, in view of enhancing action and strengthening self-reflection. While I sympathise with this perspective, my adherence to it is only partial. This is because I am aware of the risks entailed by the position of "organic intellectual" (Levinson, 2001) and the danger of making research completely dependent on strategic concerns of specific organisations.

Notwithstanding this distance of my position from the activist research paradigm, it is important to account for the ways in which my positions as an activist and a researcher are connected with each other. Since I was an activist before becoming a researcher, my investigation unsurprisingly emerges out of a series of questions and interests, which had

developed while participating in the social movements I would later study. This personal experience has been key to an in-depth understanding of the ways in which social movement scenes work, and it has allowed me to formulate a series of hypotheses to be tested in my research.

Similarly to the way that Paul Hodkinson defines his position in his research on the Goth scene, I would consider myself, for the purpose of my research, as a sympathetic “critical insider” (2002: 4). While, on the one hand, I cannot deny my emotional investment and my support for the groups and individuals I have studied, I also believe that research needs to be critical, that is capable of identifying the contradictions in the phenomena it investigates. The espousal of a critical attitude towards my object of study is probably made easier by the fact that I have not been heavily involved over a long period of time. I do not have the strong affective ties to social movements which characterise core activists, and which, in my view, might obstruct the development of a critical attitude towards this object of study.

My vision of the interaction between researchers and social movement participants comes near to the “contractual relationship” described by Melucci (1996a: 391). For Melucci, researchers and researched are bound in a two-way relationship based on “the mutual recognition of a demand for cognitive resources”. Movement participants provide researchers with information in turn the researcher can help participants elaborate their identity and attain a better sense of their own action. For Melucci in contemporary societies “knowledge becomes a desirable resource for actors”. In this context it is possible for “a negotiative relationship” (1996a: 391) to arise between researchers and movement participants. In the context of my own research, I have tried to make the time informants have dedicated to me worthwhile for them as well. Specifically, I have consistently provided informants with transcripts of the interviews. This is material which participants often find precious for purpose of documentation or as a vehicle for self-reflection on their participation in the movements. Moreover, I believe that the findings of my research can be of use for activists in terms of aiding them to refine their strategies and communicative practices.

To sum up the discussion developed in this section, while I have adopted a critical stance in the context of this study, I do not claim to be a neutral and objective observer of the activity of groups pertaining to the autonomous scene. This critical approach has rather to be seen as a “situated” practice. It is deeply connected with my own participation in the autonomous scene and with my commitment to the politics practised in it. In other words,

if I am critical it is because I believe that research on social movements, also when sympathetic with the object of study – as it is my case - should not indulge in a congratulatory or apologetic attitude. Rather, it should be able to tease out the problems and contradictions aside from the virtues and opportunities, which emerge from the analysis of autonomous politics. Practically, fulfilling this task requires a research strategy that can gather a broad variety of data while at the same time be capable to reduce its complexity of the social world in order to produce a substantive interpretation of social phenomena. In the next section, I account for the path along which I came to develop a specific research direction along with a set of specific research questions.

## FORMULATING A RESEARCH STRATEGY

My current research project is the final outcome of a long process of exploration and reflection about the issues of media, space and social movements. My initial research project dealt with the use of cognitive maps and other forms of information visualisations in the culture of the anti-globalisation movement. I was interested in how such mapping practices reflected the peculiarity of culture and ideology in the “movement of movements”. Methodologically, I approached the question by looking at the use of mapping practices in different European radical think-tanks, artistic groups and research institutes.

This project, however, presented me with a series of dilemmas. The quite abundant literature on the topic made it difficult to differentiate my own approach from the existing scholarship. Moreover, it felt difficult for me to adopt a critical stance to the object of study, maybe because of my own engagement with practices of information visualisation. I was unsatisfied by a methodological focus which for a variety of reasons, concentrated on the level of production. Thus, I progressively realised that my interest rather lay in the engagement of social movement *participants* with alternative forms of communication for coordinating their action. Eventually, this recognition was accompanied by a shift of interest from the analysis of abstract cognitive spaces, such as the ones represented by information maps, to the investigation of the physicality of spaces of communication and action, such as the “movement areas” described by Alberto Melucci (1996a).

This process of reflection on my research project and on the inconsistencies piling up in the attempt to keep the two diverging lines together, matured during the summer of the first year of my PhD course. From July to September I made an overland trip from

Venezuela to the US. During this journey, I visited different media activist groups and popular movements. It was a follow-up to my work as media activist in Chiapas the year before. Through this experience, I came to realise how the spaces which I was visiting were networked together by two parallel flows: the flow of activist information, and the physical flow of activists and volunteers between these places and from abroad. I progressively realised that the question of the relationship between communication, mobility and presence in social movements provided a more interesting direction for research. It also appeared to me to be a more ambitious direction since it was concerned with underlying sociological questions rather than with the more technical ones which tended to arise when considering forms of information visualisation.

Parallel to the emergence of this new interest, a series of research questions were starting to develop in my mind. How was it possible for different groups to create communicative affinity and converge spatially despite scarce organisational or ideological coordination? How was the circulation of information among different places interwoven with activists movements from a place to another? What had this phenomenon to say about the nature of contemporary global activism and the role played by individual participants within it? Eventually, I decided to embark on a new research project focusing on the relationship between communication and space in social movements. At that point, the question arose about which groups I would consider to analyse. My decision fell on autonomous movements for a variety of reasons. First of all, these were the groups in which the relevance of the process of orientation appeared more evidently because of their condition of apparent structurelessness (Freeman, 1972). Secondly, this choice depended on practical reasons. These movements were ones I was quite familiar with from having directly participated in different occasions in their activity, and from having a number of friends who were involved in them.

While looking at these movements I decided to focus on the European context, concentrating in particular on Italy, the UK and Germany. This choice was due to a range of considerations. I was primarily interested in comparing different national situations to assess the validity of the process I was investigating beyond specific local contexts. Secondly, these countries were ones I was familiar with for having spent time there and for knowing the native language. Finally, these were contexts in which autonomous activism had been a prominent phenomenon in the last few years. When looking at these different movements I decided to adopt Haunss's and Leach's definition of autonomous scene, as a space of aggregation and mobilisation underscoring them. Combine with the adoption of

this concept I developed a series of research questions detailed at the end of chapter 1. Specifically I asked: how do activists orientate themselves in the autonomous scene? And what are the communicative practices responsible for such orientation?

## CHOICE OF METHODS

In order to attend these research questions I had to assemble an ad-hoc methodological framework trying to combine methods coming from different fields of study, and in particular social movement studies, to media and cultural analysis. Drawing on these different traditions of analysis I have come to develop a research approach, which combines *ethnographic observations* with *semi-structured interviews*. In this section, I detail the nature of these different research methods, and the way in which I have tried to amalgamate them in my own methodological approach.

In recent years, ethnography has become an increasingly popular method in the study of both social movements (Escobar, 1998, Cunningham, 1999) and subcultures (Thornton, 1995, Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, Hodkinson, 2002). They can be seen as envisaging an “ethnography of the life-world” (Pfadenhauer, 2005), which instead of studying the customs of distant communities is “geared towards the discovery of foreignness in the seemingly familiar” and the study of “post-traditional communities” (2005: 3). Relying on the toolkit of ethnography, scholars are capable to provide “thick accounts” (Geertz, 2000) to convey the complexity of social actions and the specificity of different social situations. In the context of social movement studies, a recent example is David Graeber’s ethnography of the Direct Action Network (DAN) in the US which centres around the protest against the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001 (Graeber, 2009). In this context, Graeber describe his work as “an attempt to describe and to capture something of the texture and richness and underlying sense of a way of being and doing that could otherwise not be captured in writing” (2009: 14-15).

Ascribing to such a “pure” ethnographic framework which focuses on description and avoiding the development of substantive arguments, is not suitable when one’s aim is to develop a general social theory to be applied also to other groups than the one which are specifically analysed. This is because one of the basic tenets of ethnography is leaving behind all theoretical premises (Jacob, 1987, Van Maanen, Dabbs, Faulkner, 1982). This patently contrasts with “grounded theory” vision of a deep interaction between theoretical and empirical research, which constitutes the general direction I want to take in this

investigation. For the purpose of my research, I do not intend to write off completely the ethnographic method. It is instead my contention that this type of research has proven a useful component of my own methodological framework, insofar as it could be combined with a substantive analytical framework.

I found a valuable term of reference for developing my own methodology in Paul Lichterman's notion of "theory-driven participant observation", which he has applied in his study of ecologists and religious groups (2002). Lichterman has underlined how in the case of social movement research there are many problems with the use of participant observation. According to him, this stems from the fact that people usually identify participant observation with what he calls field-driven participant observation which usually concentrates on a descriptive level of analysis. Counter to this approach he proposes what he calls the "extended case method" which "bids a participant observer in the field 'to extract the general from the unique' to move from the micro to the macro." (2002: 122) In this context, we do not have to approach the field of analysis with innocent eyes as it is claimed in traditional ethnography. Rather "we start with pre-existing theories of the macro. We write theory in our field notes from the very start" (2002: 122) and "our observations will never be completely raw [...]". This type of understanding of ethnographic work, allows for a focus on specific processes within social groups, avoiding temptations of encompassing all of their actions and behaviours.

A more operational term of reference was provided by Jeffrey Juris's ethnographic method for the analysis of global activism (2008). In his extensive study of the anti-corporate globalisation movement which is condensed in *Networking Futures* (2009), Juris combines in-depth description and a solid analytical framework, mainly informed by Castells' theory of the "network society" (1996). Furthermore, he adopts a variety of methods beyond the traditional ethnographers' toolkit, such as qualitative interviews, analysis of Internet websites and of activist publicity. Finally, in his methodology he accounts for the complex spatial setting of the groups he studies. He adopts what he calls a "multi-scalar ethnography" (2008: 18) which takes the lead from George Marcus's "multi-sited ethnography" (1995), to "track" the action of participants in a global and mobile environment. Along Juris I would define the type of ethnography I am developing in this research a "multi-scalar" one, which is an approach that looks at different scales of action and specifically the global and the local.

If we are to use the ethnographic paradigm in any meaningful way in a world marked not only by people's mobility, but also by flows of images and information, we

need to break away with the holistic view of social actors which underscores traditional ethnography. This entails, as Nick Couldry suggests, us rethinking “the sites of agency and reflexivity in a mediated world” (2003b: 40), accounting for the way in which modern media contribute in reshaping social space. For Couldry, “we need an ethnography that adequately reflects the complexity of how media flows together produce the mediation of our social life” (2003b: 48). This constitutes the basis for what he calls a “passing ethnography”, which “attempts to engage with the texture of our dispersed but mediated lives” (2003b: 53). Couldry’s proposal to rethink the ethnographic method deeply informed the development of my own methodology in which I combine an awareness of the emplaced character of action and an interest in the way media are responsible for such process of emplacement of subjects in space.

While my methodology can be broadly defined as ethnographic because of its attempt to provide a “thick account” of the process of participation, it is also characterised by a central focus on the level of individual experience which can hardly be excavated with the tools of ethnography. The investigation of the process of activist orientation entails delving into the way individuals make sense of their participation and make continual decisions about it. For capturing this aspect, another fundamental inspiration for the development of my own framework comes from the tradition of the study of “life history” (Bertaux, Kohli, 1984), and its application in social movement studies (see for example Polletta, 2002). As Blee and Taylor have asserted “life histories in social movements are [...] oriented toward understanding the activist experience of individual respondents over time, or to exploring the interaction between macro events such as protests and social movement with individual actions and identity” (2002: 103). The life story approach, which usually employs in-depth unstructured or semi-structured interviews, is well suited for theory driven research since, as Bertaux and Kohli claim, “they are a rich ground for the formulation of substantive theories, which are conceived of as interpretations rather than as scientific explanations” (1984: 215). For the purpose of my research, the life history approach represents a useful expansion of my overall ethnographic framework. Technically, I combine this approach with the technique of semi-structured interviews.

Interviews are one of the common methods in social movements’ analysis. In fact, as Kathleen M. Blee and Verta Taylor assert, “interviews have always been central to social movements research as a means of generating data about the motives of people who participate in protest and the activities of social movements networks and organisations” (2002: 93). Specifically, semi-structured interviews are important for gathering

information about the *experience* of participants (2002: 93). Contrary to the structured interview, where the researcher follows strictly a questionnaire that she has prepared beforehand, in the case of semi-structured interviews the researcher “relies on an interview guide”. This “includes a consistent set of questions or topics, but the interviewee is allowed more flexibly to digress or to probe based on interactions during the interview.” (2002: 93) As Blee and Taylor point out, “semi-structured interviews are particularly useful for understanding social movement mobilisation from the perspective of movements actors and audiences” (2002: 93). More importantly, “semi-structured interviewing allows scholars to scrutinise the ways in which messages of social movements are received by members, targeted recruits, intended audiences and others” (2002: 96). Specifically, for the purpose of my research interviews will be used for investigating how participants make sense of the different communicative practices and media which allow them to gain an orientation in the scene.

Apart from ethnography and life stories my approach is also indebted to the tradition of the specific methodologies developed in the field of media and cultural studies, and in particular to textual analysis. When studying the process of orientation and the communicative practices connected with it I am interested in excavating the symbols and meanings which underlie it. While my own approach attempts to move away from a focus on representations in the study of culture, I am interested in the role media play in constructing the world in which we act. Nevertheless, I am convinced that too much research in this field has tended to convey an image of media and texts as separated from material reality. This research is instead underlaid by an interest for the way in which media actively shape our space (Couldry, McCarthy, 2004).

To sum up, my methodological approach is, in broad terms, not only a phenomenological one, but also an ethnographic one. More precisely, I move within the framework of an “analytical ethnography of the life-world” as it is exemplified in the ethnography on youth scenes (Pfadenhauer, 2005). Apart from being analytical, my ethnographic approach is “theory driven” (Lichterman, 2002) and “multiscalar” (Juris, 2008b: 18). Furthermore, it is characterised by an awareness of the way in which media shape the “sites” in which action unfolds. To extend my approach so as to account for the centrality of individual experience I have gained insights from the life story method which focuses on the way individuals make sense of their world (Bertaux, Kohli, 1984). Finally, I am indebted to a cultural studies understanding of society, as shaped by processes of mediation and the symbols and meanings media convey.

This methodological framework is developed by relying on the use of case studies. Case studies are employed in a variety of areas of social research, including in social movement studies. As David A. Snow and Danny Trom explain, one could even argue that all social movements' research is based on case studies since it derives its data "from research on a particular movement, or a stretch of time in a movement's career [...]". "Yet, technically speaking, [...] the case study is but one research strategy for examining the social movements and movements related processes" (2002: 146). The adoption of case studies as the general *modus operandi* can be combined with a variety of data gathering techniques, thus allowing for a "triangulation of multiple methods or procedures that include but are not limited to qualitative techniques such as ethnography" (2002: 146).

Case studies differentiate in single and multiple case studies (Stake, 1995: 3). While a single case is studied deeply for a long amount of time, multiple cases, instead, are studied less intensively and in view of the aim to provide exploration and explanation or to ground a comparison of different situations. Thus when adopting a "single case" approach, it is difficult to generalise findings to a population and sampling is rather problematic. A multiple case study (also defined as collective case study), instead, "may be designed with more concern for representation" (Stake, 1995: 4). Another factor, which differentiates different forms of case study, consists in the task which is assigned to it. In this context, we can either adopt *intrinsic* or *instrumental* case studies. While the latter is used "when we want to accomplish something other than understanding a particular case", the former is undertaken when "we are interested in studying it, not because by studying it we learn about other cases or about some general problem, but because we need to learn about that particular case" (1995: 4). A further difference revolves around the way in which the specific cases are approached. In this context, case studies can be "explanatory", "exploratory" and "descriptive" (Yin, 1994: 1). While the first model provides an understanding of a certain situation, the second is commonly used in a preliminary phase of a proper case study investigation, and finally the third provides the researcher with an overview of a certain situation without engaging in "how" and "why" questions, that are instead typical of the explanatory type. Yin claims that each of these types has to be connected with different kinds of research questions, ranging from focusing on actors and general events to attempting to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying patterns governing a situation (1994: 12).

For the purpose of my research, I decided to concentrate on a shared "extended case" (Lichterman, 2002) consisting of multiple *instrumental* case studies underscored by

an *explanatory* approach. In other words, my focus was not much on the specificity of each case. Rather, in view of developing a substantive theory, I prioritised the analysis of the commonalities among geographic and cultural contexts and the practices conducted in them. Within this general research design I chose a range of case studies without pretending to represent comprehensively the autonomous scene. They nonetheless provide a reasonable overview of a variety of practices and groups which I include within the definition of autonomous movements.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA GATHERING

The general “extended case” (Lichterman, 2002) of my research is the “autonomous scene” in Europe, and specifically its manifestations in Italy, Germany and the UK. The choice of this field of study was due to heuristic and utilitarian consideration. First, the autonomous scene constitutes an important phenomenon in our contemporary society, if not for the relatively small number of participants, then because of the fact that the groups pertaining to it have been at the forefront of many recent global mobilisations. Second, the autonomous scene appeared as the most promising case to develop my theory of the working of orientation in social movements, because of its fluidity, and the importance which in this context is assigned to space, as we have seen in chapter 2. Third, I had directly participated in the scene, and I have different contacts within it, making it easier for me to approach this scene.

Within this general “extended case” I selected three main case studies: the autonomous scenes in London, Rome, and Berlin. Part of the reason for their selection was connected with questions of access and previous experiences. The choice of London was suggested by the fact that I have been living in this city during the course of this research and I was directly involved in the autonomous scene there. Rome was selected for being a city I was familiar with and where I had a series of acquaintances which could introduce me to this environment. The choice of Berlin, lastly, was justified again by a series of personal contacts which I had there and by my knowledge of German. Apart from these utilitarian reasons, these scenes were also prominent cases of autonomous scenes at the European level. Apart from these three main cases, I also selected different four protest events: the protests against the G8 in Rostock in June 2007, the Climate Camp against the expansion of Heathrow airport in August 2008, the anti-G20 protests in London in April 2009, the anti-G8 protests in Rome in July, 2009. Later I decided to prioritise in my

analyses of orientation in protest events on the case of the anti-G8 mobilisation in Rostock, which were particularly interesting for the complex spatiality underscoring them, and for their strong autonomous component. In this way, I attempted to represent the different situations which together make up the autonomous scene: the urban autonomous scene and the global protest scene.

For gathering data in these different cases I employed three forms of data collection:

- 1) semi-structured interviews with activists about their experience
- 2) participant observations of the settings and spatial practices
- 3) textual analysis of movement media

Let me now detail how these different data gathering tools have been used in my research.

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

For this investigation, I conducted 47 semi-structured interviews (see the Appendix) with activists, lasting around one hour on average. The purpose of interviews was reconstructing the individual experience of participation in the scene with particular attention to the way in which participants made sense of it, and orientated themselves in it. Interviewees were drawn from the three main scenes considered in this investigation and from the protests events I analysed.

The selection of interviewees followed a snow-ball sampling technique. Specifically I recruited prospective interviewees from the people I had got to know during my fieldwork in the different scenes. This is usually worked by securing a contact with activists in a specific group by contacting them via e-mail or through personal contacts. Then from this initial contact I would try to get further contacts and so on, until I felt I had a reasonable number of interviewees available to cover that specific scene. While proceeding through this process of selection, I also paid attention to questions of representativity, trying to balance my sample in terms of nationality, age, gender, level of involvement in the scene and diversity of groups represented in it. In terms of gender women accounted for one third of the interviewees, reflecting the fact that men are the overwhelming majority in the

autonomous scene.

Interviews were mostly conducted in a neutral environment, often in cafés, so as to make interviewees feel confident with talking about reserved and critical issues. Interviews were semi-structured and were guided by an interview protocol organised around seven main themes to be covered in the course of the conversation. I started by asking generally 1) how they started to get involved in the scene and the reasons for their initial involvement. Then I moved to inquire them about 2) their trajectory of participation in the scene, 3) their use of different media, 4) their connection with specific places, 5) their relationship with other people in the scene, 6) situations in which they had feel lost, 7) their view on the sustainability or unsustainability of participation in the autonomous scene. These themes were not necessarily discussed in this order. Moreover, I left room for interviewees to touch upon other topics. Interviews were conducted in the local language (German, Italian and English), profiting from the fact that I am a native Italian speaker, and possess a proficient knowledge of German. Interviews generated over single-spaced 500 pages of transcripts. These were maintained in the original language also during the phase of coding and interpretation in order not to lose the linguistic diversity of the political jargon conveyed within autonomous movements.

### *Participant observation*

While interviews generated most of my data, the role played by participant observations was also important. In the three autonomous scenes which I studied I conducted observations over a period of two months for each of the cases. For this purpose, I visited social centres, attended scene events and gatherings and conducted explorations of alternative neighbourhoods hosting the scene. The main aim of participant observation was to reconstruct spatial practices of participants as well as examine the distribution of media in the physical environment. Specifically, I paid attention to how certain media, such as posters and flyers, were present in certain places rather than others, and the way in which participants interacted with them. Observations were also conducted at the different protest events comprised in my fieldwork. In this context, I attended actions and demonstrations, concentrating on the way in which people interacted with one another and with a variety of media during the protests. To extract data from these observations I kept a diary where I would initially take brief notes immediately after conducting the observation, and I would write them up few hours later or the following day, so as not to

miss important details of my observations.

### *Textual analysis*

The third data gathering technique which I adopted for my analysis is textual analysis. The use of textual analysis in my investigation was mainly aimed at reconstructing the nature of the practical information made available to activists and the rhetoric and imagery underlying it. During my fieldwork I gathered a folder of activist publicity materials found in activist places and at social and protest events. This included flyers, posters, brochures, action guides, maps, listing magazines, calendars. Moreover I maintained an archive of relevant activist websites on my computer. At the end of every month of the fieldwork I would go through the material I had gathered in the previous weeks and I would take notes on the nature of its content. Specifically, in the case of websites I concentrated on the ways in which schedules of events and other practical information were made visible and the rhetorical forms which were applied to organise this information. As for flyers and posters the analysis concentrated on the language which was used and on the visual codes and metaphors which were employed. Finally, in the case of mailing lists I concentrate on the ways in which events and places are communicated, and the way in which participants interacted with one another.

## ISSUES OF INTERPRETATION

In order to make sense of this disparate material gathered during my fieldwork, I have developed a coding technique adopting the use of situational maps, tools of narrative interpretation, and triangulation of different data. In order to make sense of the different data I aggregated textual data of field-notes, interviews, and textual analysis. This textual material consisted of a total of over 800 pages single-spaced. To analyse this quantity of data I proceeded in five stages.

In *stage one*, general insights for developing working hypothesis about the working of orientation were drawn from the analyses of field notes. Specifically, I identified different loose general themes to guide the process of coding.

In *stage two*, I turned to the preliminary coding of the interviews, which constitute the major part of the data I gathered. For analysing interviews, I combined thematic

coding following the general categories emerged in stage one with an “open coding” approach aimed at identifying possible new patterns (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

In *stage three*, the same procedure was adopted for coding textual material. At the end of this stage, I had around thirty different patterns ranging from the profile of participants, to the trajectory of their participation, to their understanding of media, people, and places as sources of orientation and their specificity at this level. Around half of them were clustered in the themes developed in stage one, which were progressively refined through an iterative process. The other half instead was not fitting within those themes. At this point I was faced with quite a complex series of categories and sub-categories, most of them unrelated to one another.

The next step in the process of interpretation, *stage four*, entailed using situational maps on the model of the ones proposed by Clarke. This technique is “intended to capture and discuss the messy complexities of the situation in their dense relations and permutations” (2003: 559). Practically, I drew different patterns emerging from my data on the map, and then proceeded to connect them with arrows and writing captions explaining what kind of relationship existed between different elements. To simplify the map I progressively clustered these different patterns in general themes such as disorientation, dispersion, distance, flexibility, convergence and the like. Tinkering with the map I tried to reduce the number of elements and relationship to a manageable number.

Drawing the map however did not constitute the end point of my process of interpretation. In fact, as Clarke asserts, situational maps should be seen as tools for telling stories, rather than as full-fledged interpretations (2003: 561). The final phase, *stage five*, entailed condensing the relationship drawn on the map in verbal description, following the narrative method of metaphor. Specifically the general metaphor for the interpretation of my subject-matter was a “nautical” one; this was done to express the liquidity of the situation of participation in the autonomous scene. Within this general nautical metaphor I decided to adopt terms such as beacons and compasses to discuss different sources of orientation in the autonomous scene. Descriptions of these metaphors were written in brief memos, which were progressively tinkered and refined. Through this five stage process I moved from tentative general themes, to specific patterns corresponding to those themes, to an overarching metaphor, encompassing all these different themes and their related patterns.

In conclusion, this procedure has allowed me to treat very varied types of data, and

to progressively construct an interpretation of the investigated processes by way of “reduction”. This is a process which is typical of phenomenological analysis, which attempt to condense the basic structure of experience from a host of specific data obtained through the research (Lanigan, 1994). There are evident risks of over-simplification connected with this process of interpretation which in general stem more from the holism which is embedded with a phenomenological approach. It is nevertheless my contention that this is a risk that is worth taking when trying to develop a substantive theory, which goes beyond the level of mere description of social reality.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have established a methodological framework which underpins my investigation on activists' orientation in the autonomous scene. I began clarifying my overall research approach as informed by phenomenology and characterised by a focus on the level of individual experience. Epistemologically, I see research as a process of construction of the phenomena it studies rather than as a neutral analysis of objective reality. In this context the focus on the individual level of experience which characterises my research stems from a specific vision of social reality in a society marked by processes of individualisation. Having explained the epistemological framework of my research I turned to a series of ethical questions and in particular to the relationship between my role as a researcher and as an activist. Rather than as a militant researcher, I think of my role as one of critical insider. This means that while I am sympathetic to the actors I investigate I have tried to avoid an apologetic attitude to my object of study and I have not shied away from teasing out the contradictions of the autonomous scene. In the following section, I have reconstructed the complex path of development of the research project, accounting for the way in which my personal experience has shaped my research. Moreover, I have reconstructed how a general research interest has been transformed into a specific research topic accompanied by relevant research questions. Having explored the general background of my research I have explained my choice of methods. My methodology can be loosely called ethnographic, even though my purpose is more developing a theory rather than providing a “thick description” of my object of study. In this context, the ethnographic method is combined with life history interviews and textual analysis, to account for the processes of meaning making by individuals as well as for the communicative dynamics characterising this field.

In the second part of the chapter, I have moved to outlining the specific research design adopted for this investigation. For this purpose I have adopted the blueprint of an extended case study focusing on three case studies, covering the urban autonomous scenes of Berlin, Rome and London. In addition to these three main case studies I have also investigated a series of protest events involving groups pertaining to the autonomous scene, and in particular the protests against the G8 2007 in Rostock. This design is coupled with the use of three data gathering techniques: semi-structured interviews to gather information about participants' processes of orientation in the scene; participant observation to gather information about spatial practices and the distribution of media across different places; textual analysis of movement publicity for analysing the different metaphors and rhetoric underlying practical information. The final section has dealt with questions of interpretation. In this context, I have ascribed to a narrative method of interpreting of the research data, which uses different themes and "situational maps" as aggregators of the evidence originating from the disparate data collection tools employed in this investigation.

## CHAPTER 4

# SOFT GUIDANCE AND THE IMAGINARY OF CONVERGENCE

*Be prepared.*

*To sleep beneath the stars. To taste adventure. To get stuck in.*

*Be prepared for the future*

*(Flyer promoting the UK Climate Camp, 2008)*

### INTRODUCTION

Processes of mobilisation can be seen as underpinned by forms of organisational guidance which are well captured by this opening quote which invites prospective participants to be prepared. In fact, “making the movement move” (Eyerman, 2006) requires the presence of specific communicative practices, fostering a common orientation among participants, thus allowing for the coordination of action in space and time. When we talk about “guidance” in social movements, as I wish to do in this chapter, the typical image which might come to the reader’s mind is of a political leader instructing followers from a stage or from a TV screen. It is a term which makes us think of leadership incarnated in charismatic individuals like Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, driving his followers to Washington D.C. in the Million Man March in 1995<sup>10</sup>.

This type of charismatic and personified leadership is precisely the one which, as we have seen in chapter 2, tends to be eschewed in the context of autonomous groups because

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<sup>10</sup> On October 16 1995, Louis Farrakhan convened a gathering of over 800,000 people in Washington D.C. to protest against the social ills plaguing the Black community in the US (Lee, Lee, 1996).

it is perceived as authoritarian<sup>11</sup>. What we see instead are claims that autonomous movements are fundamentally leaderless movements, with nobody in particular in command; and also that within the movement there is no hierarchy: the movement is horizontal (see for example Graeber, 2009). These are in fact highly disputable claims. As different scholars have noticed, peculiar forms of hierarchy and leadership are present even in “structureless” contexts (Freeman, 1972). Bumps or hills often arise within groups which present themselves horizontal (Jordan, 2002: 70). Rather than asserting that anti-authoritarian movements and autonomous movements in particular are completely leaderless and horizontal, it is better to speak of a “hierarchy of engagement”. In this context “most members limit themselves to actively participating in the scene’s events, but these events are usually organized by a relatively small group of members who volunteer additional time for that purpose” (Haunss and Leach, 2009: 19). In other words while the autonomous scene is fluid and flexible, there continues to be some distinction between organisers and participants, which is not based on formal roles but on the degree of involvement in the movement.

The question which needs to be asked in this context is what type of guidance is established in this peculiar situation. How is it possible to “make a movement move” (Eyerman, 1996), when it is characterised by diffuse and unstable forms of dis/organized coordination (Jordan, 2002: 66-68)? Are autonomous movements really without guidance as some of their claims to horizontality suggests? Do activists simply orientate themselves by relying on the presence of their peers and on the acquaintance with the “terrain of resistance” (Routledge, 1996)? Or do we rather see the deployment of a different form of guidance than the one proper to more hierarchical and formalised social movements? And if so, how is the guidance which characterises autonomous movements different from that of other movements? And finally what type of orientation does this mode of guidance call forth?

Having discussed in the initial three chapters the theoretical and methodological framework of my investigation, in this chapter I examine the empirical material which has been gathered throughout my study of autonomous activism in Italy, Germany, and Great Britain. I open my empirical analysis by focusing on the dynamics of “guidance” which – as

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<sup>11</sup> A clear exception here is the Italian Autonomist movement especially at the peak of mobilisation at the turn of the millennium when Casini and Caruso came to be recognised as leaders of the movement. Nevertheless they were later lambasted for this role they had acquired. In Germany and United Kingdom a rejection of public leadership appears to be an almost religious creed. Within the anarchist tradition however there are differences as exemplified by Murray Bookchin’s conviction that true libertarians should deal with the question of leadership (1999: 294-295).

we have seen in Chapter 1 – is the correlate of orientation, within the model I presented of the analysis of spatio-temporal coordination in social movements. As I have proposed in chapter 1, guidance is a term which comprises all those mediated and organisational communications which provide people with a common sense of place and a sense of direction in the display of collective action. The metaphors of the means of guidance are the compasses, the maps, the signposts, the guidebooks, and the captains which allow individuals to move with others across a common “group territory”. While in this work I am interested in discussing also the role played by other sources of orientation, such as *company* (people) and *grounding* (places), my main interest lies at the level of the mediated and organisational practices which inform participants' orientation. While in the ensuing chapters I will discuss the specificity of different forms of guidance in the autonomous scene, in this chapter I unveil the overarching dynamics of the specific “mode of guidance” which underscores forms of mobilisation within the autonomous scene. To do this I concentrate on the reliance of autonomous activists on different assumptions about what is legitimate conduct when it comes to communicative engagement with others.

What emerges in the discussion developed in this chapter is that autonomous movements are not completely bereft of guidance. Rather what we see here is a *soft* or *indirect guidance*, a mode of guidance, which stems from a critique of previous models of coordination of collective action. On the one hand autonomous activists dismiss Leninist forms of guidance with their “shepherding” based on an explosive and patronising imaginary of mobilisation, which casts revolutionaries as missionaries proselytizing people and spreading in all directions in the social body. On the other hand they are posed in a fight against the self-ghettoising tendencies inside the autonomous scene stemming from its heritage of “subculturalisation” during the 80s.

Building on these two rejections, the autonomous mode of guidance attempts to combine *voluntarism* and *hospitality* through an “imaginary of convergence”, which is cast against an everyday experience of spatial dispersion. Participants are expected to activate by themselves without being “pushed” to do so, but also to be welcome “on board” once they do so. We can see this mode of guidance at play in the peculiar forms of distribution and in the visual presentation of autonomous publicity, which put an emphasis on curiosity and seduction. Faced with this type of guidance participants are required to have an active orientation in order to participate in the scene. They are expected to choose among different possible paths across the scene, to make an active intervention, combining different possible activities, events, and routes, in their own personal itinerary of

participation. As we will see in the ensuing chapters, these assumptions have important consequences for the type of “orientation” which characterises the experience of participation in autonomous movement, making it more pro-active, creative and self-determined but at the same time more individualised and demanding.

## VOLUNTARISM AND SELF-ACTIVATION

“Who is in charge here?” The question came from a chubby, partially bald man in his late forties, who had been trawling through the flyers piled on a stall at rampART social centre, just a few days before the protests against the G20 summit. The interpellation drew curious and suspicious looks from bystanders. The person was evidently an outsider. In fact, his question was precisely the one that no-one is ever supposed ask in a squatted social centre. “Is he a cop or a spy who has come down to rampART to gain some first-hand information about the organisation of the protests?” I thought to myself. Eventually someone responded, eyeing the man disdainfully, “This is a social centre. Nobody is in charge here.”<sup>12</sup>

The above scene condenses some of the assumptions which underscore the mode of guidance in the autonomous scene. In this context the question “who is in charge?” is one which patently contrasts with the understanding of political action in a context where leadership tends to be written off and people are expected to make sense by themselves of their participation and their contribution to collective action. This position stems from a deep appreciation of self-organisation, a mode of behaviour which is well summarised by Gregor, an Austrian activist who has been participating in different groups and projects around Europe:

We have to accept the responsibility for our actions, our resistance and our attempts to build different forms of community. This acceptance of responsibility is, in my opinion, at the core of autonomous politics. Autonomists share many ideals with the authoritarian Left. The difference mainly lies in organization. You don't believe that you will do the most effective revolutionary work by joining a union and a party and by the following the leadership's instructions. You believe that you will do the most effective revolutionary work by *deciding for yourself* and with the people you trust

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<sup>12</sup> Field note - London, 29th March 2009

Similarly, Stefan who has been active for many years in the autonomous scene in Zurich affirms that, according to his experience, “people have to bring a good amount of motivation along by themselves. You can’t motivate people, you can only destroy an already existing motivation within them”<sup>14</sup>. For Manuele, part of a student collective in Rome, “Our idea is rather that you do things, because you simply want to do them, because you want to do them for yourself, because you are *happy* to do them. This is the fundamental element”<sup>15</sup>. According to Alex Foti, the “inventor” of Euromayday, this attitude stems from a fundamental rejection of “the old politics, of militancy, of duty, and of you have to do this and this”. In opposition to militant politics, he celebrates the new “politics of activism” based on “the idea that you need to have fun while protesting, that there is a fundamental joy in the act of protesting”<sup>16</sup>.

These quotes reflect a voluntarist attitude and a valuing of pleasure in the process of political participation similar to what George McKay identified when examining the DiY culture in the UK (McKay, 1998), as discussed in chapter 2. This position has a direct bearing on the way activists understand practices of engagement with others. What becomes apparent when looking at activist testimonies is the outspoken reluctance to lead people, to give them instructions or “directions” about where to go and what to do. Hannah, a German activist who has been at the forefront of counter-summit mobilisations and autonomous campaigns, exemplifies well this reservation when she asserts: “I normally don’t like to tell people what to do. What I can accept is giving them Aufklärung (elucidation), to explain to people how a certain situation is going to be and then leave it up to them how to organise”<sup>17</sup>. In the same manner, Laura – an American activist based in London – highlights the fact that one should not force people to come to meetings, but it is important instead to give them the necessary space to decide whether they want to do it or not.

Laura: You need to be proactive, and you have to realise it is something within you and you have your own responsibility for it and ambitions towards it. It is kind of like a cycle in a way, knowing that what you do is good, and feeling good about it, and like keep strengthening what you are doing in a

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Gregor - e-mail interview 14th April 2008

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Stefan - e-mail interview 12th April 2008

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Manuele – Rome, 4th March 2008

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Alex Foti – Milan, 20th August 2009

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009

sense.

Q: You have to be self-motivated?

Laura: Yes definitely, especially if you do it for a while. Because I mean you can always call your friends and call them to the meeting, but if you are not really... and you can't really force them either.

Q: Did it ever happen to you. Did you ever drag people to meetings?

Laura: Maybe a bit here, with friends from my course, telling them what is going on here, but I don't feel as though I am dragging them because I know people's personal politics. <sup>18</sup>

What is rejected here is a pushy attitude towards outsiders, exemplified by dragging people to meetings, as though this type of engagement would diminish the authenticity of the process of political involvement. This attitude is particularly manifested in the outright rejections of practices of recruitment which appear at different points in my transcripts, and which are well summed up by Brian – an activist involved in the infoshop 56a: “people can engage as much as they want with this space. But I am not trying to convert them or recruit them. There is nothing to join here.”<sup>19</sup>

These comments testify to the centrality within the autonomous scene of a voluntarist ethic, what we might call an “*ethic of self-activation*” which puts much stress on the fact that people should not be directly recruited, as happens in other social movements, but rather that they should decide *by themselves* whether and how they want to participate. Central to this ethic is a valuing of choice, whereby individual participants are framed as autonomous subjects responsible for making their decisions and taking responsibility for their own actions. In fact, for Francesca, an Italian activist who has been involved in a social centre, “the question of choice is fundamental to our politics. What makes us different from other groups is that we think individuals have to decide, that they need to make the first step”<sup>20</sup>. The risk however is that the ethic of self-activation might be easily turned into little more than a form of “extreme liberalism” which while being all about choice overlooks the importance of commitment and solidarity as Josip, among others, fears<sup>21</sup>. In this context the voluntarist expectations which are posed on activists can

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Laura - London, 25th January 2009

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Brian – London, 13th February 2009

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Francesca – Rome 18th March 2008

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Josip – London, 8th October 2008

make their engagement with the movement demanding, thus discriminating against those who do not have a great amount of self-motivation.

Nurturing the ethic of self-activation is pitted against other forms of radical politics which are particularly criticised by autonomous activists, because considered as authoritarian and inauthentic. Specifically, when explaining the nuts and bolts of the process of mobilisation and political organising in the autonomous scene activists often feel the need to make negative references to practices of mobilisation and recruitment associated with a certain tradition of revolutionary militancy, often identified with the Leninist and in particular the Trotskyist Left<sup>22</sup>. Expressions like “what we do is not like Marxist-Leninist groups”<sup>23</sup>, “that kind of politics destroys motivation”<sup>24</sup>, “this is the opposite of what pertains to our experience”<sup>25</sup> abound in my informants’ testimonies across the different geographic contexts considered in this investigation.

In certain cases this stance might well amount to a “ghostly rejection” of something people have not encountered directly but have only read about or heard of, as Sonia concedes<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, in many occasions it derives from an all too concrete personal experience of frustration with the type of engagement with others seen as typifying Leninist groups. Their intrusive attitude seems to epitomise everything that is wrong with the agit-prop blueprint of mobilisation<sup>27</sup> pursued by Leninist groups. Specifically, people in autonomous scenes often scorn the way these groups chase passers-by, trying to make them go to a meeting, buy their newspaper or sign a petition. “Trotskyists and similar groups were in my face all the time” – recounts Josip, a computer-savvy Croatian activist based in London who was involved in Reclaim the Streets. “They get your phone, they get your number and then they call you straight away to say ‘hey, come to the meetings!’ For me the Trotskyite model was not appealing at all”<sup>28</sup>. Analogous is the tone of Mark, an English activist who participated in all the big anti-globalisation demonstrations at the turn of the millennium, from Seattle, to Prague and Genoa, and has been involved in an activist trauma group. He describes with disdain his first encounter with what he calls

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<sup>22</sup> The enmity towards Trotskyite groups is particularly evident in Great Britain. This circumstance can be explained as a consequence of 1) the stark separation in this country between the socialist Left and the autonomous Left, 2) the relative prominence of Trotskyite groups in this country vis-à-vis other geographical areas considered in this study.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Manuele – Rome, 4th March 2008

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8th December 2008

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Alex Foti – Milan, 20th August 2009

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Sonia – Berlin 14th June 2008

<sup>27</sup> The term agit-prop is the portmanteau of agitation and propaganda, refers to the orthodox Leninist blueprint of mobilisation, stressing the importance of combining written publicity with oral propaganda in public space.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Josip – London, 8th October 2008

“verticist” student societies when he was at the University of Nottingham.

There was sort of this SWP, which always was laughable in the way they organised and conspired. At university there were also faith groups, a labour group, and to a lesser extent a conservative party, and they also all seemed.. I did not associate with any of them and I did not like the way they organised and the way they conspired. It seemed to me this idea of a leader, a party line, a dogma. All those things did not appeal to me.<sup>29</sup>

These testimonies do not reflect an enmity towards the “content” of Trotskyist politics or more generally socialist politics, which in fact - as suggested by Gregor at the beginning of this section - with its anti-capitalist stance has many points of overlap with the ideology of autonomous groups. Rather the rejection regards the intrusive forms of bodily and communicative engagement underscoring the forms of “hard guidance” dominant in Leninist politics.

For autonomous activists a particularly despicable practice is what one might call “shepherding”, which fundamentally revolves around the deployment of a certain *proselytism* that is seen as not leaving room for people to activate themselves. The word “proselytism” carries with itself a revealing, spatial connotation that is particularly relevant to excavate for the purpose of this chapter. The Greek root *πρός- έρχομαι*, means in fact “to go towards”, as when approaching someone on the road, thus resonating with the invasive bodily engagement which is the hallmark of “political agitators”, distributing leaflets or selling their newspapers at the entry-points of spaces of crowding, such as factories, schools universities, cinemas and markets, or mass transit networks<sup>30</sup>. This is a type of engagement that reflects the agit-prop blueprint of mobilisation fittingly summed up by the motto of the *Iskra*, the newspaper led by Lenin before the 1917 revolution – “a spark will kindle the flame”. Here mobilisation is framed as something akin to an explosion through which revolutionaries need to “*send in all directions* the units of their army” (1902:97) in order intercept the already existing areas of discontent.

Not only are autonomous activists opposed to this invasive imaginary of mobilisation, according to which people are explicitly sought out in public space. In fact, what they encourage is precisely the reverse, claiming that the movement should wait for the people to search for it rather than looking for them in the first place. “People come by

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8th December 2008

<sup>30</sup> This is a scene which should be familiar to anyone who has participated in a big demonstration in any European country, where almost invariably one encounters Socialist and Communist groups struggling to sell their newspapers and distribute their leaflets.

themselves, people come to *places*” – claims Sonia, meaning by places mostly the locales of the urban autonomous scene, whose role as “magnets” of political aggregation will be discussed in the ensuing chapter 5. “People look for things themselves” – echoes Marina<sup>31</sup>. While Josip's claims that “while Trotskyist groups were *coming* to me, with anarchist groups it was always me who had to *go* to them”<sup>32</sup>. Thus here an assumption is made that for political participation to be authentic, people have to make the first step: they need to spontaneously volunteer rather than be recruited. The spatial implications of this assumption are well illustrated by the testimony of Manuele, a student active in an autonomous collective at the University La Sapienza in Rome.

Q: Do you ever stop people on the road and speak with them?

Manuele: Not really. It is clear that if someone *arrives* and looks interested in things, we speak with him, we propose him to come and participate. But it is not a modality of Marxist-Leninist recruitment and forced ideologisation. [...]<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, in stressing the proactive character of the process of involvement, the term *arriving* is employed, which suggests an opposite spatial imaginary to the one characterizing Leninist mobilisation. A very similar language and imagery is employed by Gary, an British activist involved in No-borders, when he asserts that in the No-borders group he is part of “if there is someone who shows an interest we make sure that we *encourage* them to *come in*, but we won't go and target someone in the same way that I saw the SWP do with people”<sup>34</sup>.

## HOSPITALITY AND CONVERGENCE

While the resolution to “wait for the people to come” reflects the attempt to go against the paternalism of Leninist politics it can also reflect isolating and self-ghettoising tendencies within the autonomous scene. This danger is signalled by Dario Azzellini one of the animators of the Fels, the acronym of Für Eine Linke Strömung (for a Leftist stream), a German libertarian communist group founded in 1991, and originating from the tradition of autonomous movements in the 80s. Azzellini affirms that the voluntarist approach

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Marina – London, 20th January 2009

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Josip – London, 8th October 2008

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Manuele – Rome, 4th March 2008

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008

characterising autonomous groups “is an idea which we have always criticised”.

It is clear that we are in favour of people activating themselves and that we support them. Nevertheless there is this absurd idea that people... I mean ...If you don't have an historical experience of organising, in the 99% of occasions you cannot organise alone. There is an availability of struggle among people, but then you need to support them, you need to help them create this organisation, because it cannot emerge alone.<sup>35</sup>

Fels, similarly to other groups which emerged around Europe during the 90s, such as the anti-precarity activist group Tute Bianche in Italy, was to a great extent born out of this dissatisfaction with what was felt as a closed and subcultural character of the autonomous scene during the 80s. According to Azzelini Autonomi this approach was “self-referential and Berlin was seen as a happy socialist island”<sup>36</sup>. According to him the practices which were dominant in this context “marginalised all those people who did not have a certain life-style or a certain age, or who did not live in a certain neighbourhood”. While for him a strategy of self-marginalisation—known in Germany as “Randgruppestrategie” (marginal groups strategy)—made some sense at a time in which social democracy was still to some extent the dominant paradigm, this position proves self-defeating in the time of neo-liberalism.

[...] while in the 80s in front of a social democracy which was trying to integrate you at all costs, if you were marginalising yourself you were creating an opposition. When the ideology switches to neo-liberalism, in which you are forcefully marginalised, if you are doing it yourself it is even better. The subculture does not work any more as a form of social aggregation.”<sup>37</sup>

For Sonia who was active in the Autonomi in the 80s, the closure diagnosed by Dario was reflected in the fact that “you always had this idea, I don't know... we did not really care much about how we grow, or how much is our influence, because it was partly *subcultural*: it was a style and a way of living, of doing politics together, and for that there were always enough people around”<sup>38</sup>. Thus autonomous politics mirrors the proselytism of Leninist politics in its rejection of those who do not comply to a certain life-style as it is evidenced by Dario Azzelini when he notices that “during the 80s if you went to an assembly dressed

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Dario Azzelini – Berlin, 16h June 2008

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Dario Azzelini – Berlin, 16h June 2008

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Dario Azzelini – Berlin, 16h June 2008

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Sonia – Berlin, 14th June 2008

in the wrong way you would be called a cop or a spy and kicked out straight-away”<sup>39</sup>. This closure in the autonomous scene resonates with David Graeber’s description of the situation in the US where “in the 1980s and much of the 1990s, the anarchist politics I was exposed to struck me as petty, atomized, and pointlessly contentious – full of would-be sectarians whose sects consisted only of themselves” (2009: 12).

During the phase of anti-corporate protests at the turn of the millennium there were a range of attempts to counter these isolationist tendencies and open up the autonomous scene both in the US and in Europe (Nunes, 2004, Graeber, 2009). That was a time in which there was a general impression that social movements were rapidly expanding and bringing in droves of outsiders, thus also compelling existing groups to open up a bit more<sup>40</sup>. Tommaso refers to how in Rome during the years of anti-globalisation protests “social centre activists were looking to the outside, because many things were happening around”<sup>41</sup>. Similarly,<sup>42</sup> Hande recounts that in Berlin “in that period there was a general enthusiasm about this new big thing that was happening, and there was a general feeling that the scene was letting new people in and interacting more with the outside”.

The rapid adoption of the Internet within activist circles in the mid to late 90s (Jordan & Taylor, 2004) was particularly important for cracking the shell of diffidence surrounding the autonomous scene. Diffusion through the internet provided new ways of informing people outside of the close circles of core activists about actions and campaigns. People coming from hacker circles participated in the anti-globalisation phase of activism (Jordan & Taylor, 2004: 71-73). They helped set up websites and organise hacking labs, introducing among autonomous activists practices inspired by the hacker motto “information wants to be free” (Meikle, 2002). Josip, a programmer who was involved in the anti-globalisation movement in London at the turn of the millennium is unequivocal when he says – “anarchists never got it. Anarchism and openness have nothing to do with one another” and when he claims that he and other “techies” had to fight hard against this culture of “close-mindedness” of anarchist groups based on “semi-secret meetings” which were “crazy and sectarian”. For Josip posting the date and location of organisational meetings on Indymedia – something which infuriated old-time anarchists – was “crucial to show things to people who wanted to get involved, that you are *welcome* – to provide an

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Dario Azzelini – Berlin, 16h June 2008

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Hande – London, 5th March 2009

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Tommaso - Rome, 23rd March 2008

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Hande – London, 5th March 2009

*entry point, an open door, and make sure that the door looks nice and inviting*<sup>43</sup>.

Some of my interviewees recount having made it a mission to be welcoming to outsiders *coming* to the movement, precisely because of their perception of an excessive defensiveness inside the movement's own ranks, a pervasive tendency "to create some outsiders, black sheep to exclude, something different from you" as Marina claims<sup>44</sup>. Emblematic of this effort in creating a sense of hospitality for the people who approached autonomous groups is the case of Mark, a veteran of anti-globalisation and local direct action protests.

when people show interest [...] then it is when you should really respond very effectively and really give them as much as possible. It can also be a very casual show of interest – not of the kind I want to get involved – but it is always some kind of interest and be *welcoming* towards those people who are *turning up* and being friendly with them, rather than being paranoid and being unfriendly with them and thinking that they are infiltrators and staying with your mates. It may be sometimes because someone looks too straight and you are forming a small clique of people who look right, and the person who does not look right is rejected because he does not look cool enough. Or if they don't have enough history or experience... all people start without history or experience, and then I find it arrogant when people say – they have not done anything. We all start with no experience, unless you have the fortune of having some family background.<sup>45</sup>

Mark's plea for hospitality resonates with a broader discourse of openness which became dominant around the turn of the millennium in groups involved in anti-globalisation campaigns (see for example Nunes, 2004). Emblematic of this trend is the World Social Forum's self-definition as an "open space" in its Charter of Principles:

We want to create open spaces for networking, exchanges, celebration, thinking, and action. We believe our ways of organizing and acting should reflect our political visions, and are united in standing for grassroots self-organization, horizontality, for diversity and inclusion, for direct democracy, collective decision making based upon consensus.

An example of the continuing relevance of this discourse on openness is offered by the Climate Camp UK's declaration of principles.

The camp seeks to be as *open* and *inclusive* as possible, providing a space that is *welcoming* to

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Josip – London, 8th October 2008

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Marina – London, 20th January 2009

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8th December 2008

everyone irrespective of age, ethnic background, gender, faith, class, sexuality and ability. We encourage - and aim to provide equal access to participation in the camp. While the camp is a space for open debate and all ideas and opinions are invited, discriminatory ideas and discrimination on the grounds of age, ethnic background, gender, faith, class, sexuality and ability are not welcome.<sup>46</sup>

Welcome tents or “concierges” present at different recent protest camps, to be discussed in chapter 6, in which participants are briefed about the functioning of the camp and different actions and activities are one of the examples in which this idea of hospitality is turned into concrete practices. More references to openness can be seen in the publicity of autonomous campaigns and in particular in forms of practical information like protest guides, which are seemingly aimed at all participants and in particular newcomers, who are not familiar with the workings of protest. In this context, the voluntarism which deeply influences autonomous movements comes to be combined with the effort of including those who have activated themselves. While these claims to hospitality and the practices connected with them, seem to have conquered some parts of the autonomous scene, especially among those groups practising non-violent and creative forms of direct action, as we will see in chapter 7, sectarianism and diffidence towards outsiders continue to dominate in more militant groups.

Summing up the foregoing discussion, we can see the dominant mode of guidance proper to autonomous groups is characterised by a combination of voluntarism and hospitality. Here the recommendation is made that once people have made their way there, once they have “turned up”, they should not feel rejected or excluded. As we have seen in the previous sections this type of approach between individuals and groups is born out of the rejection of both the invasive engagement of Leninist politics and the self-ghettoising tendencies of countercultural and subcultural groups. This critique gives way to a sort of indirect form of guidance in which individuals are asked to do the first step.

The type of spatial imaginary which underscores this mode of guidance can be further appreciated by looking at the discourse on “convergence” which developed in the anti-globalisation movement. At different protests one could find “convergence centres”, places where activists could gather in the days before the protests, and sometimes global counter-summit mobilisations and World Social Forums would be referred to among activists as “convergences”. Furthermore, in North America a series of organisations called “anti-capitalist convergence” sprang up in the late 90s and early 2000s (Graeber, 2009).

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<sup>46</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.indymedia.ie/article/92979>

Probably the most famous one was CLAC (Convergence des Luttes Anti-Capitalistes), which formed to coordinate protests at the Quebec City Summit of the Americas in April, 2001 (2009: 24-25). Building on this frequent use of the term convergence, activist and researcher Paul Routledge has proposed that anti-globalisation mobilisations “can be conceived of as ‘convergence spaces’ that facilitate the forging of an associational politics that constitutes a diverse, contested coalition of place-specific social movements” (2003: 345). Routledge uses the term “convergence space” as a theoretical tool to express the connection between the immediacy of places and the mediate interaction of networks. He affirms that “interactions within virtual space act as a communicative and coordinating thread that weaves different place-based struggles together” while “these connections are grounded in place- and face-to-face based moments of articulation such as conferences and global protests” (2003: 345). Looking at the case of PGA (People Global Action), a network of radical activists which was at the forefront of anti-globalisation mobilisations Routledge argues that “the sustainability of a sense of collective identity when in a spatially extensive network such as PGA is based upon gatherings in particular places”.

When looking at the specific question of the mode of guidance which characterises autonomous activism, we can talk of an *imaginary of convergence* precisely to express the peculiar connection between dispersed networks held together by mediated and in particular computer-mediated communication and physical gatherings. In this context, the presence of virtual spaces of communication does not signal a withering away of physical gatherings. To the contrary, precisely because of the condition of dispersion of activists in their everyday life, these gatherings, and the spaces they create, come to acquire an almost “sacral” character. This is well expressed in the testimony of Konrad who asserts that

in these meetings and actions you see how people feel to be part of a community. But I do not the community of people next door... if you get what I am saying. Normally as an activist you feel you are always a minority, alone among people who do not share your same view of the world. But when you are in a protest, in an action or in a social centre you feel you are many, and that you are together, even though that does not last for long.<sup>47</sup>

In the occasion of gatherings activists physically enact an affinity which is otherwise dispersed, based on one's distant connection to the same networks, rather than on one's embedded-ness in common places. Here we see a clear turning upside down of the

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Konrad - London 25th November 2008

“explosive” spatial imaginary of Leninist politics. *People's physical gathering in space comes to be seen as the result rather than the pre-condition of political action.* As I will show in chapter 5 and 6, when looking at occupied spaces and protest camps, the process of gathering and the places where it is displayed becomes the object of an intense emotional investment, as though because of the dispersed spatial arrangement which characterises contemporary society, people's gathering would be a condition which needs to be purposefully created, rather than a situation which exists *a priori*, as it was instead with the labour movement which could rely on the ready-made concentration of people in the workplace.

## LET THE PEOPLE PICK: FROM LEAFLETS TO FLYERS

The imaginary of convergence and its valuing of voluntarism and hospitality is concretely manifested in a range of communicative practices established in the scene. Contrary to the way in which they are often analysed in social movement studies<sup>48</sup>, communicative processes are not neutral means through which certain messages are spread across society to further movement aims. Rather, as Dario Azzellini claims, “the forms of communication which you adopt depend to a great extent on the forms of organisation. One decides how to organise oneself and consequently one communicates in a coherent form”<sup>49</sup>. This connection between a certain organisational asset and the use of certain forms of communication bears evident consequences within the autonomous scene, whereby in a variety of communicative practices we can recognise the consequences of the voluntarism as well as of the hospitality which characterise the soft mode of guidance of autonomous movements.

The voluntarist idea that people should not be “forced” or “dragged”, which constitutes the core of the *ethic of self-activation*, is accompanied by the deployment of forms of communicative engagement which ostensibly avoids the patronising tones and persuasive means associated with the politics of militancy. Indicative of this situation is Gary's assertion: “no amount of brilliant communication is going to raise a mass movement. There needs to be conditions within people and within society at large to

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<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of this neglect of communication in social movement studies, the reader can refer to the literature review contained in chapter 1.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Dario Azzellini – Berlin, 16h June 2008

facilitate that. That does mean that a good communication would not go a long way”<sup>50</sup>. Here communication is not seen as a process which will automatically mobilise people and make them participate in the movement. Rather, communication is understood by activists as a process which works when it encounters a fertile terrain – only when the people who are intercepted by communicative interactions have already a “good amount of motivations by themselves”<sup>51</sup>.

Curiosity is given a central role in the process of activation. Thus communication comes to be conceived as essentially a process of stimulation, one which has to walk the tightrope of prompting people’s attention without putting them off. “They can engage as much as they want, and there are some processes to keep people interested through advertising and similar things” – affirms Brian. For Tobin, the strategy at play in this context is fundamentally “[t]o pick someone’s curiosity [which] means to poke it and make it say ‘I wonder what this is!’”. For him to create websites or to design flyers is to “make an object which stimulates curiosity and wonder and hopefully leads to a further exploration of what lies behind the object”<sup>52</sup>. Likewise Marina contends that while “people are looking for things by themselves, communication is used to launch some *stimuli* and communicate what you want to do”<sup>53</sup>.

Possibly no case illustrates better this framing of communicative practices than the transition from leaflets to flyers<sup>54</sup>. While, as I have argued in the preceding section, Internet and new media are fundamental in the autonomous scene, it is also important to pay attention to other mediated practices which are more directly bound with physical space and which continues to play an important role in the scene. Within the autonomous scene A4-sized mimeographed or photocopied black and white leaflets which constituted the hallmark of political agitators have been almost completely supplanted by smaller and colourful flyers produced with offset printing. This is not only a technological shift bound to the evolution of printing technologies and falling costs of colour print. It is also the marker of a cultural shift which involves a different understanding of the role of political publicity and of the relationship which it mediates between activists and outsiders. Among autonomous activists, leafleting (in the sense of handing leaflets in public space) comes to

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Tobin - London, 15th January 2009

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Marina – London, 20th January 2009

<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting, that leaflets, flyers, and posters have received very little scholarly attention. In the autonomous scene these forms of communication continue to be very important even in a historical period marked by the prominence of the Internet and mobile media.

be often despised as the icon of an “old” and “boring” way to do politics associated with the labour movement and Leninist groups. Giulia, who was involved in a feminist collective in Bologna around the turn of the millennium, for example, relates – “we never liked leafleting, because it resonated to an old imaginary that was too politically and ideologically connoted.”<sup>55</sup>

The change in the format of publicity does not just revolve around questions of visual presentation. It also reflects the way in which its use is defined: instead of the A4 leaflet which was meant to be handed out in public spaces, often as a support device to accompany recruiting attempts, the quarter-page flyer is fundamentally thought of as something to be “picked up” by people if they are willing to do so. Heinrich sums up well the way in which leaflets and flyers come to mark a distance in the forms of communicative engagement between Trotskyist and autonomous groups when he affirms that “autonomous people leave the flyers lying somewhere, on a table or somewhere similar, while Trotskyist people give it over to you, and if you remain and read, they come to you and ask to you: so what do you think?”<sup>56</sup>. The abandonment of leaflets is not total, and this form of communication is still used sporadically by certain groups in some occasions. Nevertheless, as Dario Azzellini explains - “for the most part, people prefer to do something more sophisticated, that might also have a practical sense, a postcard, a bookmark etcetera. Something which makes sense *taking with you*”<sup>57</sup>. As we will see in chapter 6 this publicity material tends to be mostly available in the locales of the autonomous scene where one almost invariably encounters a stall, a corner, a drawer or a bar where a variety of nice-looking flyers of different colours and styles are piled, and one can see people indulging in front of them, while deciding which one to pick<sup>58</sup>. In this context it is the “interested” individual who is supposed to make a move, by grabbing a flyer, to then go to the event which is publicized there. In this context we can see how the voluntarist ethic underscoring autonomous activism translates into specific communicative practices which put an emphasis on individual spirit of initiative. At the same time the stress on the importance of hospitality is reflected in the use of pleasurable graphics to allure viewers.

To further understand the nature of this shift and the way it suggests an evolution in the mode of guidance of autonomous movements, it is worth looking at the testimony of

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with Giulia – Berlin, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2008

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Heinrich – Berlin, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2008

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Dario Azzellini – Berlin, 16<sup>h</sup> June 2008

<sup>58</sup> e.g. Field note, rampART social centre, London 12<sup>th</sup> November 2008, Fieldnote, Haus Bethanien, Berlin, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2009, Field note, ex-SNIA social centre, Rome, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2008.

Ludovico, who participated in autonomous groups between 1994 and 2001, in a particularly vibrant phase of social movements in Italy. Ludovico was among the initiators of the Tute Bianche (White Overalls), a group active from 1994 till 2001, which campaigned on the issue of the precarity of labour – a crucial grievance for autonomous movements in Italy during that period<sup>59</sup>. Looking back at his experience as a political organiser he notices the development of two phases in the evolution of the forms of communicative engagement practised by his group.

Initially we would go to job-centres and look for precarious workers who were registering in the lists there. In this case, we would adopt a classical methodology, as when you want to mobilise people in the factories, you go to the workers, if you do in front of a school you go to the students. We decided to go in front of that symbol the job centre. What we told to people was to not register in the unemployed list but in the direct action lists. Then we would create these lists of action for people who were interested in acting rather than waiting.<sup>60</sup>

As Ludovico himself concedes, the application of this “classical methodology” was also justified by the fact that many participants came from the experience of an organised party, the ICP (Italian Communist Party).

After this first phase Tute Bianche decided to move to a different communicative strategy. They abandoned the proselytism of this early phase and instead attempted to create a more indirect type of engagement with their possible constituencies. Instead of leaflets to be handed in public space they moved to a communicative strategy centring on “flyers, posters, and a brief intervention from the stage during concerts and cultural events, wearing the white overall and all the rest”. While doing this

We came to discover another public, which was precarious but was under other clothes. The student who was a worker as well, and all a series of figures that were precarious or semi-stabilised. People who were to be found in citizen’s assemblies, social centres, concerts, and in university and other spaces.<sup>61</sup>

Compared with the previous strategy of mobilisation, this one concentrated on a partially mobilised public already present at different events and places in the autonomous scene

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<sup>59</sup> For a discussion of the importance of labour precarity for Italian autonomous movements, the reader can refer to the analysis developed at the end of chapter 2.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008; Interview with Frank - London, 12th March 2009

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008

and in its extended milieu of social and cultural venues.

The forms of communicative engagement characterising autonomous groups reflect a move away from the agit-prop formula of distribution, which is targeted at intercepting available places of crowding such as factories, schools, underground stations, where one can maximise the impact of communication. Counter to this model Sonia highlights that in her experience of activism, the distribution of radical publicity did not have to do with “obliging” people to read something, but rather it was part of a “shared culture”.

It was not going to the factory gates and leafleting but of course we did a lot leafleting at *concerts* and *manifestations*. [...] Then there is a meeting with someone speaking and of course we had a huge table with books, flyers, stickers, but it was kind of a shared culture, it was something [...] where you knew that people wanted to read the leaflet. I never had the impression, oh I am standing close to someone, and obliging him to read. <sup>62</sup>

In this analysis of the distribution of publicity material, we therefore see how behind the shift from a “push” to a “pull” model of communicative interaction lies a different conception of the nature of political engagement and the relationship between activists and others.

Combined with the evolution in the forms of distribution, we see the adoption of a more appealing aesthetic presentation which makes autonomous publicity resemble more and more the advertising of the alternative entertainment circuit. Autonomous publicity comes to incorporate an *aesthetic of attraction*, which departs from what is felt as the off-putting and boring visual presentation of militant politics. This is suggested by Gary, an activist involved in No-borders, when he argues: “we need to make it look more like a nightclub poster. And that sounds terrible. But you know what I mean.... we need the design to look fresh and not as if it had just come out of an archive from the 1930s general strike.”<sup>63</sup> Driven by the principle of *hospitality* autonomous publicity appropriates the codes and the imagery of the promotional communication used in circuits of cultural entertainment, with the adoption of alluring graphics evoking pleasure and play, rather than sacrifice and duty.

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Sonia – Berlin 14th June 2008

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008



Figure 4.1: poster for the Euromayday 2007

The caption reads "continuity of wage and social rights for all"

The rejection of the politics of duty and sacrifice identified with the Old Left and the labour movement results in the development of an aesthetic which not only departs from the perceived greyness of the imagery of militant politics, but also avoids the confrontational visuality of punk which during the 80s constituted the subcultural reference for the autonomous scene around Europe<sup>64</sup>. An example are the posters of Euromayday, the continental day of protest against labour precarity held on the first of May, which was founded in Milan in the 2000, and has rapidly spread to several European cities (see Figure 4.1). Countering the sober aesthetic of the official 1st of May demonstrations organised by trade unions, posters and flyers adopt an ironic and festive

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Brian – London, 13th February 2009, Interview with Sonia – Berlin 14th June 2008

imagery with the use of vivid colours like pink and light green, instead of the canonical red of the labour movement.

In order to stimulate curiosity, activist publicity abandons the text-centred character of militant politics and concentrates instead on the power of images and their power of seduction. “Definitely today you cannot do four pages of discussion on the law of values, to then call for a demonstration on the cost of public transports”, explains Dario Azzellini of Fels. “Neither, you can say however, that it has changed to something completely different. More than anything else we play in a different way today. We pay more attention to art and graphics. We moved from the more punk aesthetics of the 80s, to something more pleasurable, that is easier to read”. He continues to decry “those flyers and magazines with crazy fonts and chaotic lay-outs, in black and white, that you sometimes wonder how people could manage to read these things for more than 5 seconds”. Moving away from this situation “we began in 1993 to do a review called ‘Arranca’, and there we proposed since the beginning the use of a pleasant graphic. And some other groups said that we had sold out, that we had become bourgeois. Now you go into a movement library and you see that all the reviews have this style and that they are *attractive and enjoyable*”<sup>65</sup>.

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, for Dario’s group as for many other groups, this shift in the style of communication stemmed from a broader urge to move away from the subcultural and self-ghettoising tendency of traditional autonomous politics and to open up a movement that was perceived as too inward looking. “The idea was translating pop culture into radical culture”, maintains Alex Foti, who has been at the forefront of experimentations with media activism. “The idea was to bring a generation which had grown up with MTV to reflect about issues of labour in ironical terms. The core of our discourse remained anti-capitalist, but it was wrapped in communicative forms which were up-to-date, suited to a generation, who, thank God, did not have an awareness of the historical defeat of the working class and of socialism”<sup>66</sup>. In this context, popular and commercial culture is not rejected, but is rather appropriated to convey radical political messages to a broader audience than the one of already initiated activists.

We can interpret the emergence of this *aesthetic of attraction* in the publicity of autonomous movements as an attempt to find ways to open up the scene, while maintaining the voluntarist attitude and the ethic of self-activation. By adopting an

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Dario Azzellini – Berlin, 16h June 2008

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Alex Foti – Milan, 20th August 2009

aesthetic based on attraction and seduction, activists hope to mobilise people towards a certain event, without employing the invasive communicative and bodily engagement of proselytism. Thus the aesthetic of attraction that dominates autonomous publicity contributes in constructing a *magnetic engagement* with other people, through which autonomous movements can hope to pull people (rather than push them) to events by stimulating curiosity rather than through appeals to sense of duty or spirit of sacrifice. Such approach dispels the paternalistic tone of Leninist politics, with its unrelenting timber of, as Sonia puts it, “you have to”<sup>67</sup>. Nevertheless there are also evident risks in this shift, whereby political action can be understood as targeting audiences within patterns of alternative consumption. For Gary in fact “the balance can tip too far and the party becomes the revolution itself rather than the means to an end. And also I think there is a danger of trying to look too cool. And that can be as alienating to people as boring publicity”<sup>68</sup>.

## THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF ACTION

In the previous sections we have come to appreciate the features of the soft mode guidance and of the imaginary of convergence which underscores autonomous activism. In this context guidance appears to acquire an indirect character, whereby activists instead of looking explicitly for people wait for them to come; but at the same time resort to a series of forms of communication which might stimulate interest and curiosity, thus making it more likely that some people will eventually come and feel welcome. But what happens once people fall prey to the seduction of activist publicity and “converge” on a certain event or place? The mode of guidance proper to autonomous activism can be further explored by looking at a variety of protest practices, which escape from the formula of the “march from A to B” decried by autonomous activists but are characterised by the construction of a “navigational space” across which multiple possible itineraries are available. In this context participants are invited to make up for the lack of a clear leadership with their own creativity, including spatial creativity. This is the case of protest practices like Reclaim the Streets, Critical Mass, Food not Bombs and the Euromayday parades whose importance in autonomous activism has been reviewed in chapter 2, when talking about “un-branded

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Sonia – Berlin 14th June 2008

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008

tactics” (Day, 2005:40). These phenomena can be seen as “formats of action” – practices which set the general scene for action, leaving participants to orientate themselves within it. This situation recalls role-playing games in which, while the general setting of a story is defined by the guidebook, players are required to generate multiple possible narratives through their interactions (Fine, 1983). Formats of action are characterised by the presence of a variety of “rules” that make them recognisable and reproducible much like TV formats. In *The Anarchist Cookbook* (2004) the Crimethinc collective includes Reclaim the Streets, Critical Mass and other formats of action in its “recipes for disaster”, listing the following ingredients:

Lots of fun people; material for roadblocks; well-scouted meeting spot, route and destination; handbills posters and other publicity announcing the event; fliers to pass out to passers-by during the event, inviting them to join in and explaining the event; bullhorns; banners and flags bearing messages; chalk, spray paint, stencils; mobile sound system; decorative props; games; Polaroid camera and photos to give away; free food, massages, etc. (CrimethInc, 2005)

Formats of action not only provide a recognisable set of rules which allow participants to know what to expect from them and how to orientate themselves within them, they are also often characterised by the deployment of fixed reference points in time and space, which facilitate participants’ orientation and the construction of routines of interaction. The most obvious example is the fixed meeting times and meeting places of Critical Mass. Everywhere around the world the date of this bicycle protest, “invented” in 1992 in San Francisco, is fixed: the last Friday of the month. Moreover, in different cities, year after year, a specific meeting point is maintained. In London it is Waterloo Bridge, in Berlin it is Branderburger Tor, in Rome the meeting point was usually Piazzale Ostiense, but it was then moved in January 2010 to via dei Fori Imperiali, next to the Colosseum, where Eva, a Czech cyclist, was fatally hit by a car. Food not Bombs similarly works with a fixed set of meeting times and places. For example in London Food not Bombs was usually held in Altab Ali Park in Whitechapel on Saturday afternoon.

Because of the existence of these fixed spatial and temporal references, these formats are characterised by a certain automatism, which is often accompanied by claims that nobody is organising them, that they are springing spontaneously out of the blue. “There is no need to organise the Critical Mass”, explains Rossella, “because people will

already know when and where to go. The Critical Mass is acephalous”<sup>69</sup>. “The Critical Mass is an anarchist context, in which everything can happen”, confirms Marta<sup>70</sup>. Similar claims on the disorganised or horizontal character of such events have been made by people involved in Reclaim the Streets. An example is offered by John Jordan’s enthralling description of one of the last massive Reclaim the Streets actions in Shepherd’s Bush.

Imagine: thousands of people emerge from Shepherd’s Bush tube station, no-one knows where they are going – the mystery and excitement of it all is electrifying. Shepherd’s Bush comes to a standstill as people pour onto it; up ahead a line of police has already sealed off the roundabout and blocked the way. A man takes off all of his clothes and starts to dance on the roof of a stationary car. The crowd knows this is not the place: where is the sound system, the tripods. Then as if by some miracle of *collective telepathy* everyone turns back and disappears around the corner, a winding journey through backstreets, under railway bridges and then up of a barrier and suddenly they are on an enormous motorway and right behind the police lines. (Jordan, 1998: 142)

Here we find a description of individual orientation in the navigational space created by the format of action, which in this case, is the result of a miraculous “collective telepathy” which allows people to know which direction to take without need for any explicit guidance.

It is true that these events are necessarily characterised by a great deal of improvisation and spontaneity. Nevertheless, their organisation is often more centralised than the claims of horizontality would suggest. Often in fact there tends to be a core group, sometimes called the “logistics group”, which is responsible for sorting out practical details beforehand. Josip who was involved in the media team of Reclaim the Streets, highlights how the rhetoric of de-centralisation and self-organisation of Reclaim the Streets contrasted with the presence of a core group of organisers meeting secretly in pubs. “We were worse than certain parties”, he laments, “there was more accountability elsewhere”<sup>71</sup>. The deployment of formats of action should not be seen as entailing the complete withering away of the cleavage between organisers and participants, and the absence of organisational guidance. Rather than claiming that in autonomous movements there is no guidance, and participants are simply orientating themselves by following one another, we should see autonomous activism as characterised by a different type of guidance: a *soft guidance or indirect guidance*.

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with Rossella – Rome 21st September 2007

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Marta – Rome 21st September 2007

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Josip – London, 8th October 2008

A concept which might help us describe this type of guidance is the term “choreography of action”, particularly employed by German activists, which has become popular in assemblies and mailing lists both during the mobilisation against the G8 in Germany in 2007 and the protests against the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009<sup>72</sup>. The reference to the term “choreography” in this context communicates the idea that mobilising is about defining a general, rough plan for action, but then the way in which this plan will unfold “is unpredictable because you cannot control what people will do” as Hannah, a German activist puts it<sup>73</sup>. For Alex Foti:

The way we do mobilisation is very different from the way the orthodox Left is known to do it, with a clear leadership which the mass has to follow wherever it says they have go. With us it is different. We don't pull people to a certain place and tell everything they have to do. Rather *we set up the general scene*, where they are going to act. We prepare the *tools* and the *scripts* but then it is up to people turning up, transforming, adapting and interpreting those scripts and using those tools.<sup>74</sup>

Guidance here is not eliminated but is rather made indirect and somehow invisible. It becomes about “set[ting] up the general scene” for action. It is geared towards creating a navigational space, in which participants are expected to orientate by themselves but within a pre-established set of rules and possible paths.

In conclusion, the working of formats of action attests to a situation in which guidance is not eliminated but is deployed in soft or indirect ways. In this context, much expectation is placed on the ability to orientate oneself in the space of participation. Participants are asked to choose among different possible paths within the “scene” which is set up through the use of different means of guidance, including posters, and specific sets of rules expressed in direct action handbooks. This situation resonates with the forms of publicity which have been discussed in the foregoing section, which are based on the assumption of the pro-active character of participants. Thus while autonomous activism continues to employ forms of guidance, these are forms of guidance which put much responsibility on individual participants. And while this condition can be pleasing to some,

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<sup>72</sup> In the advent of the protests against the NATO summit in Strasbourg for example on the mailing list Gipfelsoli a communiqué stated that “After a stage of intensive e-Mail communications both, traditional peace movement and Left wing anti- militarist groups, sat together on a meeting in September 2008 in Frankfurt/ Main. About 130 people participated. In three more meetings this alliance published a considerable call: “no to war! no to NATO!”<sup>3</sup> and developed common positions for the choreography of the coming events in Strasbourg.”

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Alex Foti – Milan, 20th August 2009

it can also prove overwhelming to others raising issues about the sustainability of participation in this context. These issues will be specifically discussed in chapter 7.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have discussed the mode of guidance proper to autonomous activism. I have asserted that autonomous activism is characterise by the rejection of the proselytism of Leninist politics with invasive bodily and communicative engagement. Counter to this type of engagement activists nurture what a voluntarist ethic, what I have called an *ethic of self-activation*. While this position reflects the attempt to depart from the paternalism of Leninist politics, it also reflects self-ghettoising tendencies which in recent years have been addressed with an increasing openness and nurturing of hospitality towards newcomers. The two trends combine to give a spatial *imaginary of convergence* which is visible in the strong investment dedicated to the process of gathering, which comes to be seen not as a pre-condition but as a result of political action.

This resolution has a direct bearing on the communicative practices which dominate the autonomous scene. This is visible in the shift from leaflets to be handed out in public space, to flyers which are instead meant to be picked up by participants themselves. Combined with this “pull” type of distribution of publicity, we also considered the deployment of an *aesthetic of attraction* in the visual presentation of activist publicity. Confrontational aesthetic is abandoned in favour of alluring graphics which convey pleasure and play rather than sacrifice and sense of duty. In this situation we thus see the presence of a *magnetic engagement*, whereby while participants are not explicitly searched for, attractive forms of publicity are adopted which make it more likely that they will “come by themselves”. In the final section of this chapter, I have looked at how the soft mode of guidance proper to autonomous activism is reflected in the context of *formats of action*, protests which follow a certain set of rules and are characterised by an occupation of public space. In this context guidance becomes about through “setting the scene”, that is creating a *navigational space* in which participants are expected to orientate themselves by choosing among many possible different paths which are made available. Thus we can talk of the mode of guidance proper to autonomous movements as *soft guidance* or *indirect guidance*.

What we see in the practices discussed in this chapter is a very different framing of mobilisation and participation than the one proposed in other social movements, and in

particular in the labour movement (McDonald, 2006: 29-31). Rather than a stress on the importance of “unity” and leadership, here we find a valuing of creativity and individual spontaneity. In this situation, the role of orientation becomes key, with a strong stress on the need for preparedness of participants which is well represented in the epigraph that opened this chapter. A series of problems and contradictions of this soft mode of guidance can be highlighted. Here, high expectations are laid on the fact that participants are capable of being pro-active. These expectations can overlook inequalities at the level of experience between newcomers and more veteran activists. Thus while this guidance and the practices which are connected with it, would in theory allow for the most participatory environment possible, all too often it functions only for a select few, especially for those who are almost completely embedded in the scene already.

In the next two chapters I discuss how processes of guidance and orientation interact in the context of two different sub-scenes or “stages” in the autonomous scene. In chapter 5 I discuss the “urban autonomous scene” (or “autonomous city”) clustering around “occupied spaces”, such as squats and social centres. In chapter 6 I examine the “global protest scenes” manifest in various counter-summits and mass direct actions. In looking at these cases some of the contradictions underlying the soft mode of guidance will become more apparent.

## CHAPTER 5

# BRICKS, PAPER AND BITS: THE TEXTURE OF THE AUTONOMOUS CITY

### INTRODUCTION

“How do we find each other?” asks the Invisible Committee in the culmination of the introduction to *The Coming Insurrection*<sup>75</sup> (2009: 19). This question, rather than Touraine's “can we live together?” (2000), has acquired a particular relevance among autonomous activists in recent years. Such preoccupation about the way in which a political community (Lichterman, 1995) can be spatially constituted originates from a perception of increasing social fragmentation and dispersion produced by sweeping social change, where one, along with the Invisible Committee, is driven to ask “who still grows up where they are born? who works where they live? who lives where their ancestors did?” (2009: 35). Despite such uprootedness there are still spaces that provide a base for radical political mobilisation:

[...] vitality has taken up quarters in the so-called “problem neighbourhoods”. It's a paradox that the places thought to be the most uninhabitable turn out to be the only ones still in some way inhabited. An old squatted shack still feels more lived in than the so-called luxury apartments where it is only possible to set down furniture and get the décor just right while waiting for the next move. (2009: 55)

The places to find each other are for Invisible Committee the “problem neighbourhoods”,

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<sup>75</sup> *The Coming Insurrection* (2009) is a book authored by the Invisible Committee. It achieved world-wide fame after an anti-terrorist operation led by French police forces against a group of 9 activists, based in the rural village of Tarnac (thereafter known as the Tarnac 9), deemed to be the authors of the book.

the ones “where there still persists a bit of communal life, a few links between beings, some solidarities not controlled by the state, an informal economy, an organisation that is not yet detached from those who organise themselves” (2009: 36-37).

The Invisible Committee’s search for an alternative space in order to construct an antagonistic subjectivity is but the last instance in a long line of texts and practices of resistance. Radical communities have in fact always relied on the presence of notable places – reference-points in the complex fabric of modern cities. Places like Verloc’s bookshop, the anarchists’ hangout in Conrad’s novel *The Secret Agent* (1907); John Hughson’s waterfront tavern in Manhattan, frequented by “negroes, mulattoes and Spanish American sailors” plotting together before the failed 1741 New York revolt, recounted by Rediker and Linebaugh in the *Many-headed Hydra* (2000: 187-188); or “the unsanitized parts of Alba, Paris, Amsterdam, London and Munich, where the Imaginist Bauhaus, Lettrist International and Situationist International felt at home” (Sadler, 1999: 44).

Nowadays, “problem neighbourhoods” or, put more positively, “alternative neighbourhoods”<sup>76</sup> (Smith, 1998: 295) like San Lorenzo and Pigneto in Rome, Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain in Berlin, Hackney and Whitechapel in London, Nørrebro and Christianshavn in Copenhagen, Gràcia and Tetuán in Barcelona, and Exarchia in Athens, continue to be synonymous with the radical Left and with the autonomous Left in particular (Scharenberg and Bader, 2009, Haunss and Leach, 2009). They deserve this reputation not only for having been until recently the stage of battles with the police but also for being home to numerous activist havens: “occupied spaces” such as squats and social centres, alongside less confrontational but nevertheless politicised bookshops, restaurants, bars and clubs which also constitute “amenities” for the nightly *movida* which often thrive in these areas.

In this chapter, I want to discuss how these places and others come to act as magnets for social aggregation and political participation in the city. Drawing on the previous discussion on the *soft mode of guidance* proper to autonomous activism, which is underlain by a *magnetic engagement* and an *imaginary of convergence*, in this chapter I want to see, in a concrete way, how these processes are at play in the context of one of the scenes constituting the overall autonomous scene: the “urban autonomous scene” or the “autonomous city”. The urban autonomous scene should be understood along with

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<sup>76</sup> In this chapter I loosely adopt the term alternative neighbourhoods to discuss the role played by a variety of districts such as the ones mentioned in this paragraph, as places of abode and aggregation for activists, and as the larger setting in which occupied spaces are often located.

Haunss's and Leach's definition as a urban space of aggregation in which social movement networks form and reproduce (Haunss and Leach, 2009). As we have seen in chapter 1 and 2 the use of the term "scene" and "autonomous scene" is meant to express their emplaced character, the fact that these groups develop an attachment to specific places<sup>77</sup>. Nevertheless scenes are also contexts of intense communicative and mediated exchanges as shown by Sara Thornton's analysis of *Club Cultures* (1996). But what is the specific role media and places play in fostering a common orientation within the urban autonomous scene? Has the diffusion of modern technologies of communication and the Internet in particular contributed to making the scene more fluid and less place-bound?

Guided by this set of questions, I focus on how orientation works in the specific autonomous scenes of Berlin, London, and Rome. These three scenes constitute very different cases of how autonomous politics intervenes in the landscape of contemporary cities. They are very diverse in their social and political history, as testified by their declared ideology, which in the UK is based on the idea of anarchism, while "autonomism" is usually the dominant term of reference in both Italy and Germany. They are also very different in size: the over twenty social centres which populate Rome and the tens of illegally and legally occupied spaces of Berlin outstrip the handful of social centres and infoshops present in London. Finally, the cities in which they are located are very different, both in terms of dimensions and the way in which they interface with the "space of flows" and the "space of places" (Castells, 2000: 14). London is the epitome of a global city (Sassen, 1991), heavily connected with the international economy and buoyed by flows of people coming from different continents. Berlin by contrast is a city in transition undergoing sweeping changes, which, after years of isolation, has become more and more attractive for both investors and alternative youth, and in the process of becoming a global city (Krätke, 2001). Compared with both London and Berlin, finally, Rome appears as a more provincial city but is nonetheless bound to specific global flows of tourism and migration.

While aware of all these important differences, in this chapter I am more interested in sketching out the commonalities existing among these different scenes, and the similarities in the forms of guidance and orientation underscoring them. Specifically, I want to tease out the specificity of different communicative practices available in urban

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<sup>77</sup> For an in-depth review of the concept of social movement scene advanced by Haunss and Leach the reader is invited to refer to the final part of chapter 1.

autonomous scenes (face-to-face, flyers, fly-posters, internet websites etc.) for purposes of orientation across these different scenes. Building on the overlap between Lefebvre's description of textures as "fixed upon a single point" and the concentric nature of the space of autonomous movements asserted by Kriesi and Katsiaficas (as discussed in chapter 2), in this chapter I want to describe the urban autonomous scene as characterised by a concentric texture and "striated"<sup>78</sup> by concentric "rings" of different communicative properties – the *ring of bricks*, the *ring of paper*, and the *ring of bits* (see Figure 5.1). Before I proceed to the definition of these different rings let me notice that these elements should be understood as heuristic categories deployed to analyse the working of the urban autonomous scene. In fact, as we will see in the course of this chapter, the situation is more complex than a simple division of three rings, and there are many points of overlap between the communicative situations occurring within them.

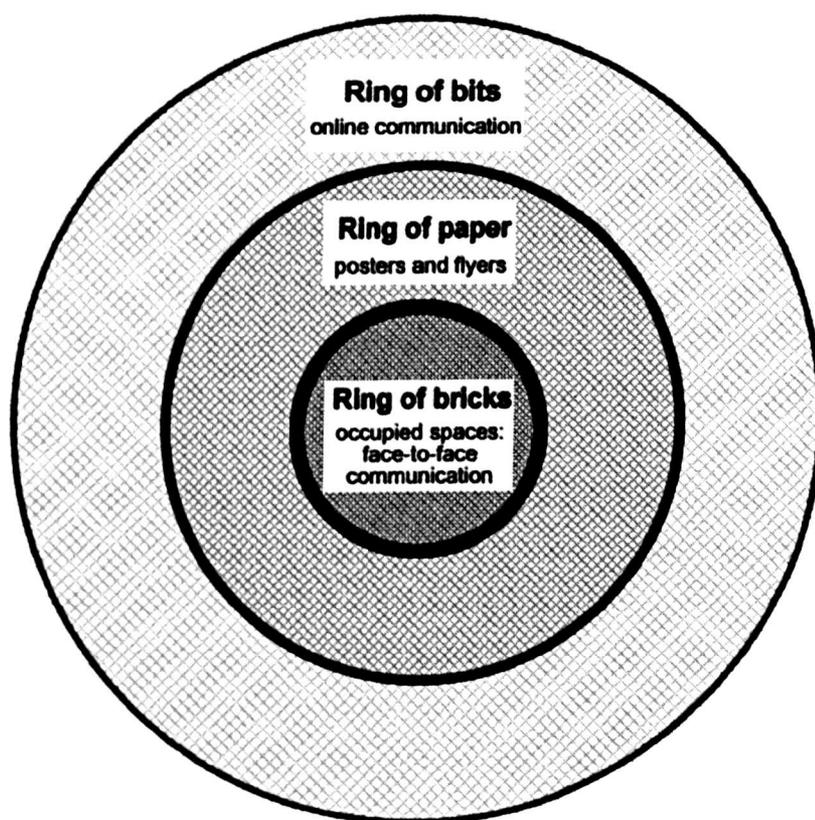


Figure 5.1: the texture of the urban autonomous scene

<sup>78</sup> Here I refer to Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of striated space (2004: 545)

- The first ring, *the ring of bricks*, constitutes the core of the autonomous scene and encompasses those occupied spaces – social centres, politicised squats, infoshops, and the like – which are the veritable *monuments* and *landmarks* of the autonomous scene, and the incarnation of autonomous politics in the city. I argue that occupied spaces represent on the one hand hang-outs for a tightly knit local community of activists, and on the other hand they also become the destination for the flows of urban spectacle and the circuits of alternative entertainment. Despite the apparent crises of evictions, processes of gentrification and factional in-fighting, these places continue to constitute *foci* of participation and communication, which invoke a peculiar *territoriality*.
- The second ring, *the ring of paper*, consists of the distribution of posters and flyers all around alternative neighbourhoods in which occupied spaces are traditionally located. Fly-posters invade *public space* and act not only as publicity for specific events but also chiefly as agents of territorial demarcation, claiming certain streets for “the movement” and away from “the fascists”. Flyers and similar forms of activist publicity pervade different events, and connect subcultural and autonomous scene. Thus the “ring of paper” appears in the guise of an intermediate texture binding together the core of the scene and the looser milieu surrounding it.
- The third ring, *the ring of bits*<sup>79</sup>, encompasses all those forms of digital communication whose reception is by and large independent from the physical attendance of specific places or frequenting certain areas of the city. Activist websites and newsletters provide information about the activities in the scene to a broader audience than the one already inside occupied spaces and in the streets of alternative neighbourhoods. These means of guidance are dominated by a “logic of mapping”, whereby they ostensibly provide spatial and temporal overviews of a scene which is otherwise fragmented and dispersed. At the same time, they have the effect of making engagement with the scene individualised and episodic.

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<sup>79</sup> The use of this term is informed by Mitchell's discussion of the *City of Bits* (1996)

## BETWEEN FORTS AND FLOWS

The first time I entered Forte Prenestino was on a Monday night in the late winter of 2008. Even before entering the space I was already well acquainted with it - from articles in *il manifesto*, from friends who had been there and told me I should go, from seeing a photo of Naomi Klein speaking there, from the memory of a poster publicising an upcoming benefit concert seen along the nearby via Prenestina, and from a cursory look at the website's events calendar. In short, before physically entering Forte Prenestino I was already inside its "myth", and affected by a wonderful sense of anticipation proper to "mythical places".

Having walked down via Federico Delpino, a street lined with modest flats built in the 60s and 70s during a frenetic phase of urban expansion, I finally saw the dim profile of this 19<sup>th</sup> century fortification casting its shadow on the scruffy grassland surrounding it. I passed the gate eyeing a banner hanging from two pine-trees denouncing the ongoing prosecution against the protesters of the G8 protests in Genoa in 2001, and traversed the drawbridge leading into its dungeon of tunnels and underground chambers feeling a bit like an intruder entering a pirate's den.<sup>80</sup>

Forte Prenestino lies in a corner of Centocelle, a working class neighbourhood in the South-eastern periphery of Rome (see figure 5.2). Considered as the icon of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of "centri sociali"<sup>81</sup>, it was occupied in 1986 in the aftermaths of the "Festa del non-lavoro" (Festival of non-work), a demonstration held on the occasion of the first of May to protest against the reformism of the trade unions. A group of local activists broke into the 19th century fortress, which since having been transferred from the army to the city of Rome in 1977 had fallen into a dire state. They made extensive repairs, refitted the building and some started living there. Soon it became one of the most famous examples of an occupied space in Europe (Mudu, 2004). With tens of rooms on different floors, a huge court and an internal park, Forte Prenestino hosts a great number of social and cultural events and has an impressive array of resources: a theatre group, a music rehearsing space,

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<sup>80</sup> Field note - Rome, 28th February 2008

<sup>81</sup> In Italy activists often refer to two (if not three) generations of social centres. The first one characterised by localised, neighbourhood social centres, and the latter been instead typified by social centres which tap into the space of flows of the contemporary city (Mudu, 2004).

different bars and chill-out spaces, as well as courses in qi-qong, capoeira, yoga and contemporary dance. Scores of people live in its premises and camp in the park around the fort.



Figure 5.2: The entrance of Forte Prenestino (Photographer: Maxi Gas<sup>82</sup>)

Abandoned factories, hospitals, schools, libraries and council flats, often left vacant by the state and the manufacturing sector rolling back under neoliberalism are the typical location of “occupied spaces” that stand at the core of the autonomous city. These buildings often still bear the marks of neglect, amateurish repairs and cast their rugged shadow on parks, avenues and streets. The decrepit walls are covered by murals and graffiti, and black and red flags. Banners hang from balconies with half-broken windows. With their unwieldy appearance they stand out against a background of monotonously painted blocks, as spaces which are visibly “other” from the law abiding city. The fact of being “outside of the law”, of being illegally occupied<sup>83</sup>, gives spaces an aura of suspension which resonates with Hakim Bey’s concept of “temporary autonomous zones” (1988/2008). Nevertheless, counter to Bey’s eulogy of ephemerality, occupied spaces seem much

<sup>82</sup> Maxi Gas’s Flickr photostream: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/66194759@Noo/>

<sup>83</sup> Anti-squatting laws are different across different countries in Europe, with the UK and Netherlands being more lenient, and this situation has important consequences for the development of practices of squatting.

less prone to the encroachment of the state. At any threat of eviction slogans like “Wir bleiben alles” (we all remain), “Cox18 resists”, “rampART lives”, appear on banners across the road, on flyers, and on websites promising resistance. In this context occupied spaces seem to invoke a very peculiar territoriality, what we could call an *extra-territorial territoriality* which is manifested in a common defensive attitude epitomised by Forte Prenestino, with its location in a 18<sup>th</sup> century fortification.

This territoriality is made visible in a celebration of place and an intense activity of “place-making” (Schneekloth, Shibley, 1995), evidenced by the names of occupied spaces often originating from local places – as exemplified by the toponyms Kopi (located in Kopeniker Strasse), Rigaer 94 (located in Rigaer Strasse) or New Yorck 59 (located in Mariannenplatz, which takes its name from the previous address of the group which managed it) in Berlin; rampART (from its address in Rampart Street) in London; ex-Snia (from the name of the factory where it is located) and Forte Prenestino (from the name of the fort it occupies) in Rome. A rather extreme though ironic example of the territorialising attitude which characterises occupied spaces is offered by the self-governed village of Christiania in Denmark<sup>84</sup>, a vast area occupied by former military barracks squatted in 1971. Its 1000 inhabitants have come up not only with a name deriving from the local (the area is located in the district of Christianshaven), but also have a flag, a motto and an anthem. A message warns visitors as they depart the “self-governed village” through the main gate: “you are now entering the EU”<sup>85</sup>. Such claims to rootedness in the territory however are tied to a series of contradictions in the context of cities in which the “space of flows” has taken the lead over the “space of places” (Castells, 2000: 14).

Occupied spaces are in fact not only platforms of local political organising, but also city-wide alternative cultural venues. Many use concerts and screenings as forms of self-financing. Some, like Brancaleone in Rome, have progressively lost their political commitment and have simply become alternative commercial venues<sup>86</sup>. As Roberto Ciccarelli states, in an interview with Enda Brophy, “successful [social centres] are integrated into the metropolitan society of the spectacle. In a certain way they function as a business, the work carried out inside is like a cooperative that organizes events and offers

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<sup>84</sup> Even though the case of Christiania is not part of the three autonomous scenes considered in this chapter, I believed it was worth referring to it because of its iconic character and the influence it has had on the imaginary of autonomous activism around Europe.

<sup>85</sup> Similarly the people entering Kopi in Berlin are informed “you are now leaving the capitalist sector”, echoing the announcements at checkpoint Charlie, between the West and East part of the city at the time of the wall. These ironic territorial announcements are a constant presence in the autonomous scene.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Tommaso - Rome, 23rd March 2008

them to the public for a certain price in order to finance themselves but also in order to stay within the market” (Brophy, 2007: 3). The case of Christiania is once again revealing. While this occupied village presents itself as an independent space, it is also the second biggest tourist attraction in Denmark (Moeller, 2009). Famous in youth culture all around Europe and beyond, every year thousands of young people flock to it for a first-hand experience of the community, sitting at its cafés and smoking weed and hash which is sold in abundance on the main cobble-stone road cutting across it, known as Pusher Street but called by local hippies as “The Milky Way”<sup>87</sup>.

Occupied spaces are thus not only places in the sense of an area where a tightly knit community is reproduced, but also the destination of far-reaching urban flows, that is, nodes in the wider space of flows. On the one hand they derive their felt authenticity from the fact of being “heterotopias”, alternative spaces separated from mainstream society, constituting protective havens where a local community looks for a rootedness at the local level; on the other hand, as it is evident in the case of Christiania, they are increasingly the destination of flows of alternative consumption and tourism marked by ephemeral visits and attendance to specific events. As Owens argues in his study on the transformations of the Amsterdam squatters’ movement, occupied spaces have transformed themselves from “anti-tourists” to “tourist attractions” (2009).

Torn between claims to territoriality and the fluidity of contemporary cities, “occupied spaces” display this tension at the level of different communicative practices which are inscribed in them. Threatening messages directed towards the police and fascists such as “bailiffs fuck off” and “this is fascist no-go area”<sup>88</sup> appearing in graffiti and on stickers on the walls and doors of occupied spaces, are sometimes accompanied by more targeted warnings, in the vein of “Shoreditch squat, tourists keep out!”<sup>89</sup> This text appeared on the wall of Bowl Court, a short-lived social centre in the London’s district famous for its intense nightlife, and was directed against those “cool-hunters” and “fashionistas” whose presence is felt as diminishing the authenticity of “occupied spaces” by virtue of their voyeuristic and passive interaction. But it is more generally the scruffy or punk-ish architectural presence of occupied spaces that is repellent to most people, thus indirectly working as something akin to a selection mechanism of those who can feel welcome in an occupied space. “90% of the people would never enter in this place” explains a frustrated Rossella, an activist who is involved in Critical Mass and in the Don

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Konrad - London 25th November 2008

<sup>88</sup> Field note – London, 18th January 2008

<sup>89</sup> Field note – London, 12th July 2008

Chisciote<sup>90</sup> bike repair workshop, hosted by the ex-Snia in Rome. It is a rather “hippie” social centre that lies on the terrain formerly occupied by a chemical factory, abandoned after its explosion. “It is because they think that this is a drug den and that inside here there are criminals or something of the kin”. Because of the “bad fame” of social centres her group, whose purpose was to create a service for the neighbourhood, feels slightly at odds with having their workshop in a social centre. “But there was no other option”, she continues, “where else could we set up this project if not in a social centre?”<sup>91</sup>.

The extraterritorial territoriality invoked by occupied spaces is also weakened by the situation of crisis which pervades many of them. In recent years, many occupied spaces around Europe been targeted by attempts of eviction and normalisation pursued through neoliberal policies of urban regulation (Owens, 2009: 44-46). In Berlin many evictions have taken place and most social centres are now legally occupied through agreements with local city councils. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 2009 one of the last illegal squats in the city located in Brunnestrasse was evicted by police. An article published in *Der Spiegel* asserted that, after the heydays of squatting in the 80s, today “only a handful of squats remain, most of them operating as activist meeting houses. Some squatters have become legitimate rent-paying tenants, others continue to battle with their owners”<sup>92</sup>. In London, squats and social centres come and go as a consequence of frequent evictions. The rampART social centre was an exceptional case for having lasted 5 years. During this period it was an important hub for the local activist community. It was finally evicted in the autumn 2009. In Rome, finally, many social centres like Brancaleone and Villaggio Globale have been normalised and have mostly transformed themselves into alternative commercial venues<sup>93</sup>. Moreover many are under threat of eviction by the current Mayor of Rome, who was a neo-fascist in his youth.

This weakening of occupied spaces is bringing about a situation of geographic dispersion of the autonomous scene. This recalls Carr’s description of the bohemian diaspora (1991). Looking at New York artists at the beginning of the 90s, Carr asserted that they were bereft of a local community because of rising rents brought about by processes of gentrification, obliging the “bohemians” to constantly move elsewhere. A similar situation to the one described by Carr can today be seen today in Berlin, which after the fall of the wall has been undergoing a sweeping phase of so-called “urban re-generation”. In

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<sup>90</sup> Italian for Don Quixote

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Rossella – Rome 21st September 2007

<sup>92</sup> “Straight talk for Tacheles”, Joel Alas, *Der Spiegel*, July 1st 2009,

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Tommaso - Rome, 23rd March 2008

Kreuzberg, where during the early 80s entire blocks of the neighbourhood were occupied, most squats have now become legally rented. Coinciding with this normalisation, activists have dispersed into other districts in the city. As Friedrich relates:

Once upon a time people were mostly living in Kreuzberg and in Schonenberg. Now everybody is living everywhere. Some years ago the scene was more concentrated. People were living more in one spot. Today people live in Prenzlauerberg, Friedrichshain and so on. If you compare it to other European cities it is still more concentrated than London, Athens, Barcelona, where people live all over. Yet it is not as concentrated as it was. <sup>94</sup>

A similar trend of dispersion of occupied spaces is evident in London where in recent years squats have been opened in unusual places like Chelsea and Hyde Park, while traditional squatters' heartlands like Hackney, Brixton and Whitechapel have been undergoing processes of gentrification.

The consequences of this situation seem to be an increasing disconnection between occupied spaces and the alternative neighbourhoods where they traditionally had their roots, and produced disorientating effects. Jack, who was part of a group which opened an art squat in Park Lane, one of the most expensive streets in London, next to Hyde Park, highlights how being in a squat in that "posh" area was a bit like "living in a bubble. When you were getting out of the squat, you would really feel estranged. It was as though your place had been carved out of the city"<sup>95</sup>. In this situation occupied spaces increasingly resemble isolated islands in a rebel archipelago, no longer rooted in the radical milieu of alternative neighbourhoods but surrounded on all sides by the murky waters of the mainstream society they move against. This situation of spatial dispersion makes a reliance on sophisticated forms of guidance more urgent, as we will see when looking in particular at the ring of bits.

Apart from gentrification and police repression, another reason for the crisis of occupied spaces is the more general crisis of the squatters' movement (Owens, 2009), evidenced in divisions between groups managing occupied spaces, and the lack of a strong common identity. "During the peak of anti-globalisation protests social centres in Rome had a central coordination", explains Tommaso. "Its purpose was getting recognition from the city council, which was obtained. But it was also a platform to share information and coordinate the distribution of publicity for campaigns and events. But since some years

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Heinrich – Berlin, 6th June 2008

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Frank – London, 12th March 2009

this coordination does not exist any more”<sup>96</sup>. After the “battle of Genoa” of the G8 protests in 2001, a phase of in-fighting erupted in the autonomous scene in the Italian capital. Today the scene is ridden by clashes between the communist faction of Action-diritti and the Global Meeting Network, comprising those groups which identify themselves with the disobedients led by Luca Casarini. The division inside the autonomous scene in Rome is paralleled in Berlin by the fact that different groups managing occupied spaces are now mostly involved in developing campaigns “autonomously” from other occupied spaces. For Friedrich, who has been in Berlin since the 80s, “once the movement was more together in the sense that you had big assemblies with 200, 300, 400 or 500 people and this today is not happening any more”<sup>97</sup>. He describes the autonomous scene in Berlin as fragmented in “micro-scenes”, such as the “queer scene, the eco scene and the antifascist scene, each with its own people who do not hang out much with another”. The autonomous scene thus breaks down into ideological or single-issue scenes, whereby as Brian an activist in London affirms “people nowadays develop their identity on very specific issues, and there is the risk of a lack of common purpose binding all these things together.”<sup>98</sup> Cognisant of this situation of crisis in occupied spaces, in the next section I want to examine the extent to which occupied spaces continue to constitute a source of orientation in the autonomous scene. Are we witnessing a withering away of occupied spaces as monuments in the autonomous scene, or do they still maintain a central position?

## THE RING OF BRICKS: AT HOME IN THE MOVEMENT

Despite the situation of crisis that pervades occupied spaces in European cities –whether they are illegally occupied, or formerly illegally occupied and currently legal – they continue to constitute a central source of orientation in the autonomous scene. Francesca states, for example, that “the fact of having a space is what draws things together and concentrates people. No matter what space, it gives you something to come together and that is fundamental”<sup>99</sup> This role of magnets on which to “converge” derives from the fact that squatted spaces as well as legal antagonistic community spaces appear as relatively solid points in an otherwise evanescent landscape of contemporary cities. For Gabriel, an Austrian anarchist who has visited different local autonomous scenes around Europe

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Tommaso - Rome, 23rd March 2008

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29th April 2009

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Brian – London, 13th February 2009

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Francesca – Rome 18th March 2008

occupied spaces, they

[...] provide a certain infrastructure, not only for community but also for information. Like if there is a functioning and well-maintained infoshop or social centre in a certain town, you know that by going there you'll get a rundown on what is happening in this town politically, which events will take place...*Such focal points can single-handedly hold scenes together.* To the point where scenes sometimes vanish once such a point is destroyed.<sup>100</sup>

What we see in this and other testimonies is a sense of occupied spaces as magnets in the scene but also as spatial *beacons*, reference points around which long-standing routines can be constructed. In face of the liquidity of contemporary social life, and the “until-further-notice” character of social relationships (Bauman, 2000: 90), the presence of occupied spaces provides a minimum of stability, something akin to “fixtures” in the “texture” (Jansson, 2006) of autonomous scenes. The importance occupied spaces play in fostering a common orientation in the city is particularly revealed in those situations in which such places are scarce or have a particularly short life-span, as it is the case in London. According to Frank, a squatter active in the anti-climate change movement:

In London it seems like a lot of social spaces have quite a high turnaround rate. In Berlin and Copenhagen there are social centres like Ungdomshuset which go on for years and then become established. They allow for a sort of different scene. Even though in England we benefit from the best or the most squatter-friendly laws in Europe, sometimes social spaces can be opened for a few months and then people get evicted. Sometimes they can last for a year or two years. I think that has had an impact on the dispersed-ness, that there are not these *long-running fixed points* that are going to be around for some time.<sup>101</sup>

The ephemeral character of occupied spaces in London means that they cannot become familiarised and recognised by people in the autonomous scene and serve as common reference points. In this way the establishment of a common orientation among activists is obstructed.

Apart from their role as spatial beacons, as forms of *grounding* of the scene in the urban landscape, the role played by occupied spaces in the maintenance of a common orientation is tied to the access they offer to the activist community, and to those intimate social gatherings which constitute something akin to the backstage of more public actions.

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Gregor - e-mail interview, 14th April 2008

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Frank - London, 12th March 2009

Entering social centres like ex-SNIA and Forte Prenestino in Rome, Haus Bethanien and Köpi in Berlin or rampART in London, it is impossible not to notice the conviviality which thrives in these places: circles of people eating together and chatting loudly, activists catching up during concerts and other benefit events, occupiers busying themselves with cleaning and small repairs. Spending time in occupied spaces enables a community to draw together, where friendship and comradeship are fused together and a personalised kind of political engagement (Lichterman, 1995) is celebrated. This community while inclusive for those who are part of it can also appear closed to the outside, as examined in the previous section on the territorial messages inscribed in occupied spaces.

For those people who are involved in the scene, however, the presence of the community which lives or hangs out at occupied spaces allows them to “cope with the detachment from the outside world” which often accompanies this type of activity, as it is noticed by Martin, an activist based in Manchester and active in the No Borders group. “It is a double bind” he argues. “You get to know people who are doing political things and you also have friends to hang around with”<sup>102</sup>. The importance of this supportive community is a consequence of the risks which are involved in participating in autonomous activism, because of the illegal and confrontational character of many of the practices conducted in this context. Due to this situation, as we will see in chapter 7, integration in autonomous scenes is tied to forms of mutual trust and recognition which are deeply linked with face-to-face interaction and frequenting the same places and events.

In recent years, the Internet has come to increasingly provide a means to sustain this core community beyond these physical locales (Lacey, 2005). Many of my interviewees recount the importance played by mailing lists and newsletters in the groups they are part of<sup>103</sup>. In certain scenes such as in London, the relatively scarcity of occupied spaces makes these tools particularly important<sup>104</sup>, as it will be shown in the analysis of the ring of bits at the end of this chapter, as well as in chapter 7. Suffice it to say, at this point, that mailing lists and other forms of online communication are used more as a support device for organising and preparing face-to-face meetings and setting up events, than as a substitute for them. This use of online communication is exemplified by Friedrich when he says “emailing each other is fine for gathering ideas, but when you have to decide there is only

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008, Interview with Mark – London, 8th December 2008, Interview with Frank - London, 12th March 2009

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Frank - London, 12th March 2009

one way you can do it, and that way is face-to-face”<sup>105</sup>. Thus the urban activist community continues to be one in which, in a “media age” (Couldry, 2000a), communication still travels to a great extent through word-of-mouth and by “knowing people who know other people out”<sup>106</sup>.

The importance of face-to-face interactions and word-of-mouth is consistent with the personalism and valuing of immediacy which - as we have seen in chapter 2 - underscores autonomous activism. Nevertheless it also reflects security concerns in face of the perceived continual risk of police espionage. Shielded by the walls of “bricks and mortar”, separating them from the mainstream world, activists say “things that it would be impossible to hear elsewhere”<sup>107</sup>. Things which are secret, because they are “illegal or reserved matters”<sup>108</sup> and cannot be said in flyers, posters<sup>109</sup> or written on the web which the police is thought to monitor constantly (Graeber, 2009: 10-11). For Francesco “when it comes down to things which are illegal these cannot be said through public communication. People have to meet in closed groups, adopting criteria of discretion, and everyone is asked to switch off their mobile phones, and take the battery off to ensure that communication is not intercepted by the police”<sup>110</sup>. Thus the immersion in occupied spaces and organisational meetings taking place there is sometimes combined with a partial and temporal dropping-out from mediated interactions.

Access to the close-knit groups gathering in and around occupied spaces is not automatically guaranteed by one’s mere physical presence in these spaces. As we will see in chapter 7, integration in autonomous groups can take a very long time and is fundamentally down to the acquisition of trust and recognition of others as part of the group. For Susan, an anarchist activist active in the student movement in London, “you have to meet people in person, and know who they are and *trust* them and communicate that way”<sup>111</sup>. Nevertheless, according to many activist testimonies, winning this trust is also to a great extent down to a long-standing frequenting of activist events and of occupied spaces. It is this ongoing frequenting which ensures that one’s “face is not new any more”<sup>112</sup>, that is that one comes to be perceived as a continual rather than a fleeting presence, as an activist rather than as a passing participant.

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<sup>105</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29th April 2009

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29th April 2009

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Giuliano – Rome, 14th February 2008

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Susan – London 12th February 2008

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Susan – London 12th February 2008

Because of the communicative intensity which characterises occupied spaces, inhabiting them provides activists a sensation of immersion in the scene, of being at “home in the movement”, of keeping well abreast of what is happening culturally and politically “in town”. Albert, an English activist recounts that when squatting at the Bowl Court social centre in London, “I was aware of almost everything that was going on. People visiting the place would tell us what they were doing. Other people would bring us lot of leaflets and other things to publicise their events”. When the place was evicted after few months he suddenly felt “out of the loop”, bereft of the sense of connection which he possessed when he was “hanging out” there. “I needed to look again elsewhere, to check on the Internet to understand what was going on, it was a strange feeling of disconnect”<sup>113</sup>. What we find here is a continuing centrality of co-presence as the source of orientation in the autonomous scene. Bodily presence becomes not only a requirement to be involved in practical actions but also the condition for having access to information. Occupied spaces are places in which - as Francesca puts it - “things come to you without the need to look for them”<sup>114</sup>. Presence in this context guarantees exposure: the more one is present, the more one is exposed. Exemplary of this phenomenon are the announcements of upcoming events which are a constant presence in organisational meetings, and which allow activists to be reminded again and again about what is going on in the next few days<sup>115</sup>.

The pre-condition of bodily presence and access to occupied spaces for keeping abreast of what is going in the autonomous scene raises, however, a series of issues of democracy inside the scene, because as we will see in chapter 7, bodily presence is a resource available only to those people who have lot of free or at least flexible time<sup>116</sup>. For Ludovico the risk connected with this situation is that those people who, for a variety of reasons, cannot attend places and meetings are by and large cut off from what is “really” going inside the scene. According to him “the only thing that allows you to have information is living in a squatted house. There information circulates. But if I am not in that house I will not have right to information”<sup>117</sup>. Another risk, highlighted by Francesca<sup>118</sup>, is that people's immersion in a certain occupied space might cut them off from what is happening in other occupied spaces and in the scene as a whole especially in

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<sup>113</sup> Interview with Albert – London 4th January 2008

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Francesca – Rome 18th March 2008

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Thomas – London, 8th October 2009

<sup>116</sup> Specifically in Chapter 7 I talk of a “privilege of presence” as a condition for intense engagement with the scene.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Francesca – Rome 18th March 2008

the context of the current situation of division between different occupied spaces.

Apart from facilitating a concentration of people and thus fostering the exchange of “reserved information” about a variety of events and activities conducted in the scene, “occupied spaces” also constitute a fundamental “distros”<sup>119</sup>, that is, distribution nodes for alternative publicity, in which publications like flyers, brochures, and political magazines are available for people to pick them up. An example of this role of scene locales as sites for distributing publicity is provided by Haus Bethanien in Berlin’s Kreuzberg, whereby the first floor is half occupied by a “documentation area” with stands, shelves and tables replete with brochures, flyers, postcards and small self-produced publications, most carrying addresses of activist websites where people can find further information. On weekday evenings people calmly skim through this cornucopia of activist publicity and frequently carry away with them a few of these items<sup>120</sup>. A further example of “distro” is seen in the tradition of British infoshops, what Chris Atton has poignantly called, in the title of an essay dedicated to them, “the alternative information centre of the 90s” (1999). These activist-run locales are usually shop-fronts of one or two rooms, packed with books, zines, stickers, brochures and flyers, which allow visitors to keep abreast of the campaigns, activities and events which are taking place in their local area. In these places people can have a comprehensive access to autonomous publications which are also available elsewhere in less politically marked places, such as sympathetic bars or bookshops, but not with the same variety.

In conclusion, the *ring of bricks* provides a very dense communicative architecture, as well as a fixed spatial reference point for orientation in the autonomous scene and in the city as whole. It allows people to develop intimate bonds with other activists, bonds which - as I will argue in chapter 7 - constitute a fundamental element for securing individual orientation in the scene in the long run. Moreover, it offers comprehensive access to a quantity of publications, and propaganda material, allowing people to keep abreast about what is happening politically in one’s “area of reach”. The intensity of the orientation which is offered by engagement with the ring of bricks is nevertheless an exclusive one - people require trust and recognition by others in order to be accepted<sup>121</sup>. In this context the ring of bricks acts as a visible *boundary* isolating the core of the scene, and shielding the delicate communications which take place within it.

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<sup>119</sup> The term “distro” originates from the zine subculture to define distribution nodes.

<sup>120</sup> Field note - 20 June 2008, Haus Bethanien, Berlin

<sup>121</sup> The importance of trust and recognition will be thoroughly discussed in chapter 7.

## THE RING OF PAPER: INVADING THE STREETS

Walking down the streets of those alternative neighbourhoods in Rome, which are the traditional base of autonomous movements, one is overwhelmed by the sheer abundance of political posters, stuck illegally to the walls of the city. In San Lorenzo, one of the hotbeds of Roman autonomi, since the times of the Volsci<sup>122</sup>, 70 x 100 cm "manifesti" (Italian for poster) battle with each other to cover every available centimetre of the walls, layer after layer. Young students of the nearby university and creative workers walk along walls wrapped in announcements for benefit parties, alternative concerts, *dazibaos* updating recent news and upcoming events, or placards commemorating the martyrs of the battles between autonomists, fascists and the police during the 70s and 80s. But it is not only in the crowded streets of this picturesque district that posters and other "street media", including graffiti and stickers, are so thoroughly disseminated.

Along the rather anonymous but busy Via Prenestina - which cuts across one of the major popular districts of Rome passing next to the ex-Snia, and the alternative district of Pigneto, and Forte Prenestino, and ends up near San Lorenzo - every tram stop stand is completely covered with "posters" of the autonomous scene, publicising alternative concerts, shows and fairs as well as political events: a reggae concert taking place at the social centre Villaggio Globale, a political carnival parade held in Pigneto, "La Notte Bianca della Sapienza" social night organised by university collectives, an antifascist action in a nearby working class district etc. When the tram halts at the stop, the passengers can hardly avoid noticing the events which are being publicised: publicised events which in fact are more or less the same at every stop on the way, in a refrain of titles, dates, times and locations. Passing along the same route everyday, I could notice how new posters overlay the existing ones, with a weekly cadence, until the bottom layer of posters cannot support the load any more, and the glue breaks and all the posters fall down<sup>123</sup>.

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<sup>122</sup> The Volsci were a political group, part of organised Autonomia during the 70s. It took its name from Via dei Volsci in San Lorenzo where they had a squatted building.

<sup>123</sup> Field note, Rome - 12th February 2008

Similar scenes to the ones witnessed in Rome are common in Berlin, especially in the districts of Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, which are the local nests of the Autonomen, the local breed of the autonomous Left. Oranienstrasse, the main street which cuts across Kreuzberg is marked by a succession of posters, which become denser when they reach a street corner, a bookshop, a bar or other local landmarks. But posters also dominate the quieter streets which intersect the district, often clustering around meeting places: a formerly occupied house, which is still inhabited by comrades, a playground where old and young Autonomen let their kids loose, a sympathetic bar and the like. The high visibility of radical publicity around the district reaches its peak at the underground stations of Görlitzer Bahnhof and Kottbusser Tor, where the pillars of the railway, as well as the walls of the ticket shops are completely covered with publicity for upcoming events, thus intercepting, with their calls for mobilisation, the thousands of people who every day make their way through these bottlenecks connecting the district to the rest of the city<sup>124</sup>.

Beyond the “ring of bricks” engulfing the “recognized locations” of the scene (Haunss, Leach, 2009), lies a more fluid communicative structure: “the ring of paper”. The ring of paper comprises all those forms of paper-based communication which invades the public and semi-public spaces surrounding the ring of bricks. One of the most striking things I have noticed spending time in different autonomous scenes is the immense quantity of paper artefacts produced and disseminated in them, even though we are living in so-called “digital times” (Sciadas, 2006). Not only illegal fly-posters which – as we have seen in the field notes opening this section – are so ubiquitous in the streets of the alternative districts of Rome and Berlin, but also flyers, brochures, direction cards, posters, booklets, alongside political periodicals and radical newspapers.

In those rare occasions in which cultural theorists have analysed the role played by these different forms of publicity and in particular by posters and flyers in the context of youth groupings, they have often tended to approach them as “channels of information”, in line with the “transmission view” of communication, discussed by James Carey (1989: 33). Thus, for example, in her analysis of clubbing culture, Sarah Thornton, sees micro-media like posters and leaflets as the cognitive sources of participants “subcultural capital” which

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<sup>124</sup> Field note, Berlin – 22nd June 2008

provide markers of “hipness” and *being in the know* (Thornton, 1996: 10-11). This analysis of media however runs the risk of reducing communication to a purely cognitive dimension which expels the body and the senses from view. Counter to this limited analysis of the role of micro-media in the scene, I propose to look at them as *means of guidance* which actively contribute to “texturing” the space of the scene, and its construction as a space of “convergence” discussed in chapter 4. Beginning with the analysis of the practice of fly-posting, I highlight its deeply territorial character and its role of *demarcation*, beyond simply publicising events and demonstrations. Moving on to flyers, I notice that when compared to posters, they have less a tendency to sedimentation and are instead characterised by portability. Their focus on events makes them correspond more to the ideal-type of *vectors*, that is a means of guidance dominated by a logic of indication<sup>125</sup>.

The role played by fly-posters as a *means of guidance* in the scene needs to be understood in light of the particular communicative interactions they construct, and as a consequence of their intervention in public space. The peculiarity of fly-posters and similar forms of street communication (*dazibaos*, stickers, placards and the like) is in fact that they intercept passers-by. People are brought in contact with them by the sheer fact of physical proximity, by the fact of living or spending time in alternative neighbourhoods where they are distributed regardless of one’s own sympathy or interest in radical politics. Differing from other forms of communication present in the autonomous scene which require a strong degree of self-activation from participants in order to expose oneself to them, interaction with posters is based on situations where people “bumping into” them. Francesca, an activist based in Rome, recounts of her own experience of interaction with posters affirming “you go around the city and you notice things. Things you might not have looked for in the first place, but which might interest you anyway. When I am on the streets I am picking up things that I see... this event on Monday, the projection on Wednesday and that concert in two weeks time”<sup>126</sup>. Having moved from San Lorenzo to Garbatella, a less radical area of the city, she notices how “you see political posters if you are in a certain area of the city. If you are out of it, you hardly see any.”<sup>127</sup>. Living in an alternative neighbourhood makes it easier to be informed on activities in the scene, since fly-posters tend to be concentrated in those areas and particularly around occupied spaces.

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<sup>125</sup> For a definition of the logic of indication the reader is invited to refer to the discussion developed at the end of chapter 1.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with Francesca – Rome 18th March 2008

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Francesca – Rome, 28 March 2008



**Figure 5.5: Fly-posters at Görlitzer Bahnhof in Kreuzberg, Berlin  
(Photographer Paolo Gerbaudo)**



**Figure 5.6: Fly-posters in Kreuzberg, Berlin (Photographer Paolo Gerbaudo)**

This concentration of posters in certain areas of the city is asserted by Viebman, Mohr and Haunss in the activist publication *Den Mauern einen Sinn* (1999). As a consequence of this phenomenon they argue how posters do not only communicate specific events or activities, but also indirectly signal the presence and intensity of the autonomous scene.

[p]osters hint at a particular aspect of the geography of the city: they mark the places of autonomous/leftist politics, and the places of living of activists. This is because movement posters – counter to party or commercial publicity – are almost always posted by activists and their radius limits itself to the immediate surroundings of political centres and neighbourhoods. Only rarely movement posters penetrate in the inner areas and in the consumption zones of the city, and it is equally infrequent to see them in towns and small cities (Viebman, Mohr, Haunss, 1999: 10-11).

This overlap between the distribution of posters and “the places of autonomous/leftist politics” (Viebman, Mohr, Haunss, 1999: 10-11) can be understood in light of the “spikey” character of their distribution that is connected to processes of territorial control. “When we go to stick posters around we use the normal methodology we adopt in these cases” – explains Maurizio a long time activist in Rome:

If it is the area just around the social centre two people are fine. When we move a bit further from the social centre we might go with a car and someone looking around to check everything is OK. Finally if we go into an area where we know there is a bad bar or club, in that case we go with two cars and we make sure we have means of self-defence”<sup>128</sup>.

Sometimes in order to keep fascists groups from tearing down autonomous posters, small pieces of glass are mixed into the glue, in order to discourage people from ripping them off<sup>129</sup>. Moreover, fights often erupt in Rome and Berlin around the control of fly-posted walls between autonomous activists and neo-fascist groups, and sometimes walls are even patrolled to protect posters<sup>130</sup>.

Posters spark fights between opposing groups because they come to be read as a *territorial claim* on certain areas in the city. “Fascists usually don’t dare to go into areas which are fly-posted, also because that communicates that there are movement people going around the streets, sometimes even patrolling them” asserts Federico, an activist

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<sup>128</sup> Interview with Federico – Rome, 17th February 2008

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Sandy – Berlin, 30th April 2009

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008

who was involved in Tute Bianche. “By the same token I usually don’t dare to go through piazza Bologna where they have their posters”<sup>131</sup>. Thus in this context fly-posters come to act as a warning to political opponents not to enter certain areas, as well as a welcoming message to supporters and sympathisers. In our own terms fly-posters construct a tight *texture* for the autonomous scene in the city, which becomes sedimented in physical space.

To further appreciate the role fly-posters play in the territorial construction of the scene it is worth to looking at situations where they are not available. This is the case of London where fly-posting is almost invisible, apart from some stickers and small posters which I saw affixed to telephone booths and bus stops in Whitechapel and Hackney on the occasion of big mobilisations<sup>132</sup>. This absence of posters in London, as compared to other cities, can be partly explained as a consequence of the relative weakness of the autonomous scene. However it might also be related to the idiosyncratic spatial layout of the British capital. “The fact is that in London it seems as if there were no available walls, where to stick posters on the streets” – explains Carl an activist based in London, who has visited other “political” cities around Europe. “It has to do with how the city is done, and with the fact that many walls are private houses walls. It does not make too much sense to go and stick a poster on a private house.. does it?”<sup>133</sup>. This situation highlights how the spatial quality of the urban fabric has important consequences for the forms of communication which can take place in this context<sup>134</sup>.

Regardless of the particular spatial or social circumstances that make London not an ideal city for fly-posting, what is interesting here is how the absence of these artefacts has important consequences for purposes of orientation in a scene which becomes almost invisible in the streets. Hande, a Turkish woman who was squatting in Berlin and later moved to London notices how “here in Brixton there are some posters but they have to do with very commercial things. I think in Brixton there are some also squatted house and I hear about that, but I can’t see the posters and the flyers, while in Berlin even if you are not involved in the scene you would see them”<sup>135</sup>. “Here in London the autonomous scene is nowhere to be seen in the neighbourhood, nowhere to be seen outside of itself” adds Gemma, an Italian activist who has been involved in a social centre in Bologna and is

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<sup>131</sup> Interview with Giulia – Berlin, 14th June 2008

<sup>132</sup> The only two occasions in which I witnessed autonomous fly-posting in London have been in the days before the G20 protests in spring 2009 and the Climate Camp in Blackheath in summer 2009.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Carl, London – 22nd November 2008

<sup>134</sup> Apparently there are no legal explanations for the relative absence of fly-posting in London compared with Rome or Berlin, since in the UK, there is no heavier punishment for such activity.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with Hande – London, 5th March 2009

currently studying in London. “You don’t even realise you are coming near to a social centre or a squatted house until you bump into it. Sometimes you feel as if you were *blind-folded* while you are trying to find these places. You end there only if you know perfectly where it is.”<sup>136</sup>

The experiential and orientational consequence of the lack of posters in the autonomous scene in London is an important element to take into account, also, because it is an indication of what appears to be a part of a general decrease in fly-posting in autonomous scenes across Europe<sup>137</sup>. “Fly-posting is not as important as it was in the 70s and 80s” affirms Ludovico, an activist based in Rome. “Nevertheless it continues to have some importance especially for the fascists who dedicate much energy to maintain the control of the walls”<sup>138</sup>. For Sandy, a designer of autonomous posters in Berlin “once upon a time you would see even more posters than the ones you see now in Berlin. More places would be fly-posted and there would also be more posters which were not tied to a specific event”. According to him, the void left by the decrease of posters has been partly filled up by an increase of flyers which are “now overabundant and compete in bars and clubs with commercial flyers”<sup>139</sup>. The decline in the use of fly-posters is in part a consequence of increasing repression. Fly-posting exposes practitioners to the coercion of police and special anti-graffiti units, such as the Graffiti in Berlin squad (GIB)<sup>140</sup>, set up in recent years in the German capital. However, this phenomenon can also be explained as a symptom of the more general crisis of the autonomous scene. As Ludovico points out “fly-posting requires lot of organisation. You need to have teams of people going around and ready to face fights and legal consequences. Flyers take less energy.”<sup>141</sup>

The prominence acquired by flyers contributes to re-articulating the texture of the scene, making it more loose and fluid, since - compared with posters - flyers are characterised by their portability and having a greater focus on specific events. The “portable” character of flyers is shown by the fact that they end up in pockets and bags, and from there, in people’s houses to function as a reminder of upcoming events. Susan an activist based in London relates that “every time I go to LARC<sup>142</sup>, I always end home with

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<sup>136</sup> Interview with Gemma, London – 14th February 2009

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Sandy – Berlin, 30th April 2009

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008

<sup>139</sup> Interview with Sandy – Berlin, 30th April 2009

<sup>140</sup> “Inside Berlin’s graffiti war”, *TheLocal.de*, 9th September 2008.

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008

<sup>142</sup> LARC (London Action Resource Centre) is a rented infoshop/social centre located in Fieldgate Street in Whitechapel, East London. It was acquired in the late 90s by a group of activists who had been involved in the Reclaim the Streets protests.

the pockets full of leaflets about tons of interesting things”<sup>143</sup>. The focus of flyers on publicising specific events is instead illustrated by Francesca recounting: “through flyers I know about events... that there is this cine-forum is happening on Wednesday, that there is that demo against the Vatican on Saturday, that there is this alternative fair on Sunday and so on and so on.”<sup>144</sup> In relation to the analysis laid out in chapter 1, flyers correspond to the ideal-type of *vectors*, and act as a means of guidance following a logic of *indication*.

Combined with the adoption of this logic of guidance, flyers represent a different form of distribution than the one proper to posters. Instead of streets and squares, flyers tend to be mostly distributed in *indoor* settings. As we have seen in the previous section, flyers and similar materials abound in occupied spaces within the scene, but they also invade an array of sympathetic locales such as bookshops, bars, restaurants and cafés which comprise the landscape of alternative neighbourhoods. In Berlin, political bookshops play an important role as an intermediate stage in the distribution process. At an autonomous bookshop in the neighbourhood of Mehringdamm I once saw packs of flyers, leaflets and posters of different campaigns stored on the floor. A person working there told me that they were brought there by the organisers of local campaigns, and were put there for smaller groups and individuals to disseminate them into the urban fabric<sup>145</sup>. Compared with posters, finally, flyers are also more present in the context of events, such as during actions and demonstrations, or at alternative social and cultural events, such as anarchist bookfairs or farmers markets where stalls are often set up to provide information about further events<sup>146</sup>.

According to different testimonies, the distribution of flyers tends to privilege those places and events in which activists think they will find people who are sympathetic to autonomous politics<sup>147</sup>. Due to the limited resources (in terms of money and time) of autonomous groups, this strategy of distribution tends to result in a loss of visibility in working class areas and peripheral parts of the city. This is noticed by Gary, an activist who was involved in the Basement, a social centre in Manchester. “This automatically restricts your possibility of reaching people who are not already in the know and you risk reproducing the same kind of closure towards the outside”<sup>148</sup>. The risk of closure brought

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with Susan – London 12th February 2008

<sup>144</sup> Interview with Francesca, Rome – 28th March 2008

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Bruno, Berlin – 28th June 2008

<sup>146</sup> Field note Berlin, 28th April 2008, Field note Rome, 14th March 2008, Field note London, 12th January 2008

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Gary - London, Interview with Bruno, Berlin – 28th June 2008

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008

about by reliance on flyers is a consequence of the different kind of interaction which they afford. While interaction with posters takes the form of haphazard contact – “bumping into” them – the reception of flyers requires a pro-active engagement, as we have seen in chapter 4 when discussing the shift from leaflets to flyers and its connection with the *ethic of self-activation*. It implies voluntary exposure triggered by interest, curiosity and is premised on frequenting certain places and events. The increasing relevance of flyers over posters returns the image of an autonomous scene undergoing a process of de-territorialisation, echoing the developments characterising the ring of bricks. This process can be further understood by looking at the ring of bits encompassing different forms of online communication.

### THE RING OF BITS: MAPPING THE TERRITORY

Social centre websites, Indymedia nodes, activist newsletters and mailing lists – these are all examples of novel forms of practical information that have spread in autonomous scenes in recent years, and are typical of the impact of new media on social movements (Jordan, Taylor, 2004). These media and their related practices should be seen as forming a third, more external and looser ring of the texture of the autonomous scene. Drawing inspiration from Mitchell’s discussion of the *City of Bits* (1995), we could call this region of practice “the ring of bits”. In Mitchell’s own work the rise of new media, and the related accessibility of information irrespective of place, does not automatically mean a withering away of cities, which instead retain an importance in their electronically augmented form (1995). His argument appears to hold true also in the specific context of urban autonomous scenes, whereby forms of online communication contribute to a “texturing” of the space of the autonomous scene that is somewhat distinct from the texturing in the ring of bricks and in the ring of paper.

Websites and other online services connected with the autonomous scene do not seem to be about the creation of virtual spaces separated from geographical reality as some scholars would suggest (Papacharissi, 2002). On the contrary they concentrate on focusing attention to “offline” events and places which make up the autonomous scene. “I use Indymedia to check what kind of events are coming up in the local area” – recounts for example Albert, an activist based in London. Likewise Stefan an activist based in Zurich asserts that “local websites provide me with practical information, announcements and

contacts”<sup>149</sup>. Email-lists function in a similar way, which according to Ludovico, “are useful to get to know events which are taking place in the local area and also to see whether other people are going to go to them”<sup>150</sup>. Thus in the autonomous scene online communication is a tool for “augmenting” embodied and local experience, allowing activists to better engage with the local. However, it is endemic of a situation where engagement with the local seems to require this sophisticated processes of mediation (Jansson, Lagerkvist, 2009).

While providing practical information about local activities, activist websites are pervaded by a territorial discourse which resonates with the one invoked inside occupied spaces. This is evident in the case of the Italian project Ecn.org – Isole nella rete, (Islands on the net), a hub of autonomous campaigns and social centres websites. The project defines itself as “an autonomous zone” as described by Hakim Bey in *T.A.Z* (1988/2008). In the “about us” section of the website the following mission is stated:

Ecn – is a *place* of visibility, of relationship and possible recomposition for all those subjects which have been *fragmented* and *dispersed* by the deep mutations of our society in the last years, subjects who are not aligned with unique thought and surrendered to marginality, subjects who still have a desire of constructing a real movement which can change the current state of things.

In this description the scene is presented as a fragmented and dispersed space which necessitates the guidance of activist websites to perform a process of territorial recomposition. This offers the construction of a sense of place capable of making the autonomous scene visible and legible.

Central to this mission of *territorial recomposition* is activists’ understanding of online communication as a *mapping device* capable of offering a bird’s eye view of an otherwise fragmented and episodic territory. Tommaso, an activist based in Rome, describes Indymedia as an information map that provides a way to make sense of the activity conducted by various local groups:

Indymedia became central in those years because it gave us the vision of having really a medium, which was not any more the individual newsletter, bbs, but a platform on which it was possible to put the communiques, and follow what was going in different parts of Rome, but also in Italy and all around the world. Indymedia became a continuously updated *map* especially when many local

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with Konrad - London 25th November 2008

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008

Indymedia nodes were created after 1999, to keep posted about activities and events<sup>151</sup>.

This discourse about mapping is part of a variety of projects of urban radical cartography that have emerged in recent years. This is the case of the anti-precariness website [ioprecario.it](http://ioprecario.it) whose subtitle reads “did you lose the compass? Here is the map.” The project developed in collaboration between autonomous groups and the Italian leftist trade union Cgil in Rome, intended to “map out” grassroots campaigns and services working on the question of the precarisation of labour. Tatiana, who acted as the coordinator of the website explains that “the format of the map seemed to express the capacity to bring collective action back on the *territory*, giving a concrete representation of reality on the *territory*.” She states that the project was an attempt to “make things encounter, *recompose* the *fragments*, these *pieces* of life and rights.”<sup>152</sup> The use of maps in this context reminds us of Fredric Jameson's call for an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping” to cope with the complex landscape of “late capitalism” (1991).

The spatial fragmentation and complexity which is addressed by forms of radical cartography, is paralleled by a sense of temporal fragmentation which pervades another type of artefact which is very popular in different autonomous scenes: radical calendars. In recent years numerous online activist services have been set up in different European cities around Europe listing social and political events. These calendars, which are sometimes present not only online but also in printed form, stem from the anti-authoritarian Left tradition of alternative listing magazines. Suffice it to say that *Time Out*, the famous listing magazine now available in many different cities around the world, originated from London's countercultural circles in the late 60s and 70s. Nowadays a foremost example of the popularity of these services is Stressfaktor<sup>153</sup> that defines itself as “the events calendar for leftist politics and subculture in Berlin”. Present both online and offline, this service publicises dates of events such as benefit parties, demonstrations and debates, and locations of scene locales such as social centres, bookshops and community centres. A similar project is InfoUsurpa<sup>154</sup>, originating in Barcelona and adopted in London, where it “brings you this weeks events happening in London Social Centres and beyond!” Apart from these comprehensive radical calendars, many activist websites contain more specific ones as is the case with the website of the ex-Snia social centre in Rome, which provides a

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<sup>151</sup> Interview with Tommaso - Rome, 23rd March 2008

<sup>152</sup> Interview with Tatiana - Rome, 23rd March 2008

<sup>153</sup> <http://www.stressfaktor.squat.net/>

<sup>154</sup> <http://infousurpa.co.nr/>

timetable of the different workshops, dinners, and other events taking place in the social centre itself and in the surrounding area. Here we see a situation similar to the one described by Duncombe when looking at the zine scene (1997: 66), in which different forms of communication cope with the condition of dispersion brought about by the bohemian diaspora (Carr, 1991). As a consequence of the crisis of occupied spaces, and processes of de-territorialisation of the scene, web-sites , radical calendars and maps hosted in them come to coalesce symbolic space which is dispersed and fragmented materially, and which therefore is impossible to perceive if not in a mediated form.

The paradox here is that the process of territorial re-composition allowed by forms of online communication is combined with the fact that - compared with other forms of guidance in the scene - they have little direct footing in space as Manuele observes<sup>155</sup>. Giuliano one of the animators of Horus social centre in Rome, which was later evicted in 2009, explains that “the website breaks the simple relationship of territorial proximity. Thanks to online communication, on some initiatives and in particular its cultural initiatives, Horus is more well known, thousand of kilometres away from here, than in the house down the left with which there might be no relationship or communication”<sup>156</sup>. Reliance on online communication erodes the requirement of bodily presence in scene locales and frequenting certain places or areas in the city as a means of gaining an orientation in the scene. Because of this factor, the diffusion of the Internet inside the autonomous scene has contributed to a widening of the reach of autonomous scenes far beyond the spaces encompassed by the ring of bricks and by the ring of paper. Tommaso observes that “now at least in theory many more people can be reached and informed about different campaigns and at a lower cost”<sup>157</sup>. In this situation activists who are new to a local scene can engage with its ring of bits from afar before approaching the inner rings. Susan for example explains how before moving to London she got to know about some social centres and groups active there by searching on Google combination of keywords like “social centres + London”<sup>158</sup>. The presence of the ring of bits has thus helped open up the scene as Friedrich notices “because new people can come to things where they don’t have to know anyone. “It has got a little bit easier to spread infos about for example a bar or popular kitchens. And that is good”. Nevertheless, reliance on the engagement from-a-distance and “tele-presence” afforded by the ring of bits also risks further

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<sup>155</sup> Interview with Manuele – Rome, 4th March 2008

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Giuliano – Rome, 14th February 2008

<sup>157</sup> Interview with Tommaso - Rome, 23rd March 2008

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Susan – London 12th February 2008

individualisation: “people got used to checking their favourite sites and don’t care much any more about other things, which can bring about a separation between people.”<sup>159</sup>

The risk signalled by Friedrich is that engagement with the ring of bits, while providing a bird's eye view over the scene, might end producing a situation of “encapsulation” (De Caeter, 2004) in which activists are all absorbed into their own small mediated worlds. For Konrad a Danish activist based in London “increasingly instead of a place where to go, people go to a web-page often publicising a specific event”. For him in this situation is hard to find “a sense of the underground”, in which “you have these events which come and go, and the people who go to them all have their own personal patchwork of things they go and things they go to”<sup>160</sup>. Moreover this situation risks depriving the emotional connection of intense bodily immersion in a political community which hangs out in occupied spaces and alternative neighbourhoods. Friedrich<sup>161</sup> mentions this danger when he talks of “activists spending time in front of the computer, alone in their room thinking they are part of whatever revolution”. In conclusion the ring of bits, similarly to what happens in the ring of bricks and in the ring of paper, returns the image of a space which appears increasingly fragmented and ephemeral. While through the deployment of forms of spatial and temporal mapping, the ring of bits provides activists with comprehensive representations of what is otherwise difficult to perceive as a whole, it also fosters forms of individualised engagement which can add to the dispersion and fragmentation that already plagues the autonomous scene.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have analysed the role played by different sources of orientation in the context of the urban autonomous scene, and in particular the role of media (guidance) and places (grounding). Referring to Lefebvre’s concept of “texture”, I have identified three different rings in this scene – the ring of bricks (occupied spaces), the ring of paper (flyers and posters) and the ring of bits (online communication), which are all characterised by different communicative properties, and provide a different type of engagement with participants.

Beginning with the *ring of bricks* I have asserted that occupied spaces are

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<sup>159</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29th April 2009

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Konrad - London 25th November 2008

<sup>161</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29th April 2009

characterised by territorial claims, while at the same time being deeply embedded with flows of alternative tourism and consumption. As a means of guidance they constitute “beacons” in the complex landscape of contemporary cities, but also create a rich communicative environment where people can keep abreast of what is going on in the scene, by talking with other people and gathering political publicity. Moving on to the *ring of paper* I have asserted that posters constitute not only a channel of information but also territorial devices acting as means of *demarkation* of alternative neighbourhoods. Flyers present a different case. With their portability and event-centred character, they constitute *vectors* pointing to specific events. Finally, discussing the *ring of bits* I have argued that online communication, far from creating virtual spaces detached from geographical ones, is deeply responsible for “recomposing” the territory of the scene. While allowing people to engage at-a-distance with the scene, this ring also risks contributing to individualisation and isolation, unless supplemented by access to the other rings.

This function of guidance in the autonomous scene has also been analysed in a historical perspective, paying attention to the transformations which occur within it. In this context, the occupied spaces, which constitute the “monuments” at the core of the scene, appear to be in a phase of crisis, under increasing threat of eviction, and as a consequence of in-fighting between different groups. Similar de-territorialising tendencies are visible in the ring of paper, where posters have been partly supplanted by more portable flyers. In the face of this situation, different practices established in the ring of bits are committed to a labour of *territorial re-composition* of an otherwise ruptured landscape. This is evidenced in the popularity gained by radical maps and calendars which aim to provide an overview of a scene, whose perception appears to be increasingly bound to mechanisms of mediation.

Despite these de-territorialising tendencies, occupied spaces continue to maintain a degree of centrality in the scene, and to constitute a magnet for gatherings. The role played by places in the scene is not completely eroded in an era marked by fluidity and mediatisation. Instead, the role is re-articulated. Instead of being fixed reference points around which routines of participation can unfold, they also increasingly become the destinations of itineraries planned relying on the guidance offered by mediated communication and online communication in particular. Social centres and other occupied spaces which stand at the core of the autonomous scene thus become increasingly reliant on the presence of a mediated sense of place constructed through posters, flyers, mailing lists and websites.

## CHAPTER 6

### MAPS, FLAGS AND SHOUTS: NAVIGATING THE PROTEST SCENE

*Outside Liverpool Street station in the City of London on a Friday evening in March, a band of young people began to congregate. They arrived in ones, twos and threes, most in their early 20s, and could have been meeting up for a regular night on the town. However, the large presence of police inside and outside the station told a different story. [...] The assembled group had come together to play a game called capture the flag, which Climate Camp members say was designed to help those intending to join the G20 protest to "familiarise themselves with the locale" where they intend to set up their tents. [...] Once the game instructions and maps were handed out and the group was split into two teams, members headed deep into the City followed by a collection of police on foot, horses, and motorbikes and in vans. The task, which saw each team dash around the Square Mile trying to locate the opposition and claim its flag, ended in high spirits and without trouble. [...]*

(BBC web report, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2009<sup>162</sup>)

Anthony takes the map out of his pocket and moves his finger along the line marking the fence of the "red zone" protecting the G8 leaders at the Heiligendamm summit<sup>163</sup>. Around him are the other 6 people of the affinity group which has chosen the battle-cry "Mapambano"<sup>164</sup> - a word which is intermittently shouted as an invite to regroup after moments of confusion. Other groups, sitting on the fringe of the footpath running along the hilly fields, seem to be as dazzled as we are and are doing just the same as we do, while opinions fly from mouth to mouth. "It has

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<sup>162</sup> Retrieved from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/7961868.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7961868.stm) on April 22 2009

<sup>163</sup> The g8 summit 2007 took place in June in the seaside spa of Heiligendamm near Rostock in Germany. A large mobilisation took place against the meeting with over 100.000 people participating in the main demo and around 30.000 in the different direct actions which took place on the 7th of June, blockading different gates of the "red zone" protecting the g8 leaders. It was regarded as an impressive showing of anti-globalisation protests after the fall in turnout at the different anti-g8 protests which came after Genoa in 2001, which had been harshly repressed by Italian police.

<sup>164</sup> Mapambano is a Swahili word which means battle or revolution. It was chosen by the affinity group because most of us had met at the World Social Forum in Nairobi 2007, where we had got to know the word.

to be down there", says a German guy with urgency pointing towards a line of trees on the horizon.

We walk down the path, overcome a ditch and we are eventually in sight of the fence, about 600 metres away from us, across a field where a small herd of cows is grazing. It might be the same herd that during the morning had angrily rushed towards a group of riot policemen forcing them to retreat, someone suggests. But behind the "comrade cows" soon lingers a squadron of police horsemen, which once we are in view starts manoeuvring with pompous and perfectly synchronised changes of direction.

The atmosphere gets more tense by the minute, and as people are walking faster and faster, our scant column is traversed by contrasting messages. "Schneller! Schneller!" (faster, faster) - shouts someone suggesting the police are at our backs. "Zusammen, Zusammen" (let's stay together), replies someone else. Eventually we can see the road which we are supposed to blockade and everybody starts to run. "Let's go, let's go, before the police arrives!" And as we rush towards the street we realise there are scores of other people swarming towards the gate, all armed with the same map.<sup>165</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Anyone who participated in global protests during the last decade would have been hard-pressed not to have used a similar kind of map at some point: maps such as those distributed during the protests in Rostock, which laid out the geography of the rural area to be crossed by the "five fingers" of action against the G8 summit in June 2007; the map used by Climate campers to plan their way to the BAA HQ at Heathrow Airport, in August, that same year; maps indicating possible targets for action during protests, such as the ones disseminated during the G20 protests in London; maps detailing the locations of convergence centres, info-points, crash spaces, popular kitchens<sup>166</sup> and other activist services available during the protests like the ones seen at the anti-G8 mobilisation in Rostock in June 2007; or maps hanging from the walls at social centres and from the

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<sup>165</sup> Field note – Rostock, 8th June 2007

<sup>166</sup> Popular kitchens, "Vollskuche" in German, stem from a longstanding Leftist tradition. They are run by collectives and usually serve vegan food at a reasonable price. Many different popular kitchens were present during the protests in Rostock.

billboards of protest camps, distributed in secrecy a few hours prior to the protests, or posted well beforehand on the Internet. What does this ubiquity of maps and similar activist gadgets, and more specifically *orientational media*<sup>167</sup> such as protest guides and action calendars, tell us about the experience of participation and the type of orientation underscoring the “global protest scene”, the scene which constitutes the space of participation of those counter-summits which in recent years have attracted large numbers of foreign participants, with autonomous activists at their forefront?

Beginning with looking at the presence at different protest events of maps, guides, calendars and other contrivances whose ostensible aim is to “familiarise people with the locale”, this chapter discusses the way in which autonomous activists orientate themselves in global protests. To develop my understanding of this process I draw on field notes collected during the anti-G8 protests in Rostock Germany in June 2007, the Climate Camp at London’s Heathrow airport in August 2007, the anti-G20 protests in London in April 2009, the anti-NATO protests in Strasbourg France in April 2009, and the anti-G8 protests in Italy in July 2009. Nevertheless, the main narrative around which this chapter is woven concentrates on the case of the anti-G8 protests in Rostock. This ethnographic material is combined with insights coming from 20 retrospective interviews conducted with activists who took part in these protests.

What is represented here are two years of protest politics, which, in its continuity and diversity, have much to say about the dynamics and evolutions of contemporary direct action activism and the importance of questions of orientation for grasping the dynamics of participation in the global protest scene. I begin by discussing the general nature of the experience of participation in this context and its resonances with the tourist experience. Then I analyse the role played by a variety of means of guidance which are prepared for helping those participating in global protests: not only protest maps condensed in the opening field note, but also protest guides and protest calendars. In the second part of the chapter I move to discussing the interplay between guidance (media) and company (people) as sources of orientation in different phases in the sequencing of experience of global protests. I start by looking at the initial phase of “getting there” and the role played by connection with peers, and internet searches to plan one’s participation. In this examination I notice the individualised logistics of travel that marks this stage. I then discuss the experience of “getting around” during the protests, with the role played by the

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<sup>167</sup> The notion of “orientational media” has been introduced in chapter 1 drawing on Rekha Murthy’s analysis of ambient street media (2005).

protest camp and affinity groups as a source of orientation. Finally I examine how during direct actions, participants struggle to maintain a sense of direction and a common orientation in the midst of a feverish experiential situation.

## ACTIVISTS OR TOURISTS?

The scene repeats itself at every international political summit, whether the G8, the G20 or the UN climate conference<sup>168</sup>. While political leaders and thousands of delegates travel to the protected locations where the summit is going to be held — conference centres, or vacation resorts in the countryside as in the case of the Heiligendamm summit in Germany in 2007 or the Gleneagles summit in Britain in 2005 — a parallel flow of people “converges” on the same location. It is a flow of activists coming from many different countries in Europe and beyond, and in particular anarchist and autonomous groups, which are at the forefront of the mass direct actions which have become the hallmark of global protests in the last few years (Juris, 2008a).

This arrival of international activists has been constantly met with condemnations from the political right scared by the amassing of otherwise hopelessly dispersed “nose-ringed twerps” (as uttered by the Mayor of London Boris Johnson on the occasion of the London G20 in 2009<sup>169</sup>). But criticisms have also come from parts of the traditional anarchist and socialist Left, which has often snubbed these protests as a hideous display of superficial “riot tourism”. An example of such suspicion towards global protests is offered by Federico, an Italian anarchist interviewed in 2003 in the anarchist magazine “Red and Black Revolution”<sup>170</sup>, who, talking about the protests in Genoa in 2001, asserted that: “a majority of anarchists viewed the counter summit as a circus which would feature the same old comedy acts we have all too often seen, and not as a real political match”.

The counter summits have provided publicity for the summits, that much seems clear. If the big guys can't meet in Paris, then they'll meet in Alaska, or they won't bother meeting and just talk to each other by phone. Whatever else they may do, they won't stop the oppression and exploitation just because *a bunch of boy scouts* and Tibetan monks hang off the railings of the Red Zone, or because

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<sup>168</sup> For a discussion of counter-summit protests the reader can refer to Jeffrey Juris's essay “Performing Politics” (Juris, 2008b)

<sup>169</sup> “Here's a slogan for the G20 mob: what do we want? Free trade!”, Boris Johnson, The Daily Telegraph, March 23rd 2009

<sup>170</sup> “Red and Black Revolution” is a libertarian communist magazine

the Black Block sets fire to a few cars and smash a few shop windows. <sup>171</sup>

Avoiding the purist tone which underlies this and similar assertions, it is undeniable that participation in direct action protests resonates with the experience of tourism with its search for the unknown, as manifested in “a series of practices [which] involve the notion of departure, of a limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life and allowing one’s senses to engage with a series of stimuli which contrast with the everyday and the mundane” (Urry, 2002: 4). More specifically, there are clear analogies between the experience of participation in global protests and the culture of backpacking with its “sense of freedom”, “its nomadic style of travel” and its search for itineraries outside of the beaten track (Richard, Wilson, 2004: 3-10).

Reflecting on such similarity, Canadian sociologist Rob Shields has talked of the rise of “activist tourists” (2003). Looking at the protests against the Summit on the Free Trade Area of the Americas held in Quebec City in April 2001 Shields claims that:

'Activist tourists' have become an important issue for customs and immigration practices at national borders, and political activist tourists have been vilified in the media, whether discovered among mercenaries in Afghanistan, working volunteers in Calcutta, observers in Chiapas, or *en route* to a protest rally in Canada. [...] the manner of travel, the demands on service, and activities outside of protest rallies *per se* are all common elements with many other types of tourists or forms of tourism. (Shields, 2003: 1)

Analysing the participation in counter-summits and parallel summits in Porto Alegre, Genoa, Davos and Florence (2005) Italian sociologists Pozzi and Martinotti, have described the phenomenon discussed by Shields as “militant tourism”. They see militant tourism as “a form of temporary use of public space and services, where the global and local dimensions of social, political, cultural and mediatic [sic] life combine in different and intriguing ways”. In this context “spaces, pathways and times of countersummit participants cross the ones of traditional tourism as well as the ones of host city dwellers” (2005: 48). Despite such crossover with mass tourism circuits, participation in global protests displays an enmity towards commercial homogenisation and resembles in its ethical sensibility practices of critical consumption (2005: 48).

Interestingly, assertions of this sort about a similarity between activism and tourism are not always rejected by autonomous activists as an outright snubbing of protest

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<sup>171</sup> “After the dust settles”, Red & Black Revolution, issue 8 , 2004

movements, reducing them to just another form of alternative consumption integrated in the global capitalist market. Often the association with tourism is ironically reclaimed, by appropriating the symbolic codes originating from the field of tourism to depict participation in global protests as a pleasurable experience of exploration and adventure. This is the case of the unofficial protest guide which appeared on Indymedia Ireland<sup>172</sup>, in anticipation of the protests against the anti-G8 summit in Rostock, Germany, in June 2007. It was entitled “Revolutionary Tourist Guide” and offered in its introduction a long display of self-irony on the ambiguous status of the activist/tourist:

All ya need to know to make the most outta your holiday!!! Hello Freedom Fighters and fellow Partivistz, We will float you now with some information we believe they might be important to you for a safe trip to Germoney and we hope an even safer time you spend there! Let's treat this like a travel guide through the wonderful world of globalised Resistance against the G8, in a wall-traumatized Country, again confronted with Barriers, Surveillance, Repression; the model of fear and consume, disinformation and political disposal[...] It's about time to prepare yourself for the ultimate “All Inclusive Rave & Resist Holiday”. Attention - there is no such thing as travel cancellation insurance!! ;) Have a safe trip :) <sup>173</sup>

Particularly explicit in the reclaiming of the tourist imaginary has been the Camp for Climate Action in the UK<sup>174</sup>. Inside the “Toolkit for Climate Action” a cardboard box distributed at the welcome tent of the Climate Camp during the protests against the expansion of Heathrow Airport in summer 2007<sup>175</sup>. Amid the array of brochures, stickers and flyers, activists could also find a guide which mimicked the cover design of Lonely Planet guides. In the logo the word “lonely” was substituted by “only” to compose the title “Only planet” as a stark reminder that “there is no planet B” (a famous slogan of the Climate Camp<sup>176</sup>) i.e. that if carbon emissions are not curbed massively and rapidly, there is no another world to fall back to. Inside the booklet activists could find practical information about a variety of services available in the camp (first aid, kids space, communications, toilets, media tent), a timetable of workshops which would take place in

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<sup>172</sup> <http://www.indymedia.ie/>

<sup>173</sup> Post on Indymedia Ireland – <http://www.indymedia.ie> – 5th May 2007

<sup>174</sup> The Camp for Climate Action is an activist group which campaigns against the root causes of Climate Change, employing direct action against industries and corporate HQs (Saunders, Price, 2009).

<sup>175</sup> The Camp for Climate Action 2007 protested against the planned expansion of Heathrow airport, with the construction of a third runway. It ran from 14 to 21 August and received great coverage from national and international news media. The tents were erected next to the village of Sipson which would have disappeared had the plans gone ahead. Over 1,000 people took part in the day of action which targeted the headquarters of BAA, the corporation controlling the airport.

<sup>176</sup> Field note, 30th August 2007

those days alongside a calendar of actions and demonstrations.

A year after, in 2008, a similar ironic seizure of tourist discourse and imagery was displayed in the iconic brochure produced for the Climate Camp protests against the construction of a new coal power station at Kingsnorth in Kent. Its text mocked the language of travel brochures when proclaiming: “Be prepared. To sleep beneath the stars. To taste adventure. To get stuck in. Be prepared for the future”. On the front page (see figure 6.1 in the next page) it carried a picture of a Swiss knife, the must-have multi-purpose tool coveted by campers and backpackers all over the world. A quantity of protest gadgets emerged from the handle: a megaphone, a clenched fist holding a carrot, a wind turbine, a flower, a saw, a book and a boot.



Figure 6.1. Cover of the brochure for the Climate Camp 2008 held at Kingsnorth

The references to the imaginary of tourism which abound in the publicity prepared for global protests are - in my contention - anything but incidental. To the contrary, they have much to say about the experience of participation in global protests and the type of orientation underscoring it. They suggest how the soft mode of guidance which characterises autonomous activism sets participants in a condition in which, not too differently from what happens with backpackers, participants are asked to choose among a variety of possible paths rather than be shepherded along a pre-established itinerary, as it

happens with the escorted tours of mass tourism. In fact, as we will see in this chapter, lacking the “off-the-rack” orientation offered by formal leadership, and the predictability of the established format of the “march from A to B”, autonomous activists come to experience participation in global protests as the creative exploration of a foreign territory, something akin to a large-scale role-play game.

This ludic framing of the space of participation strongly differs from traditional social movements, and this situation has important consequences on the quality of the experience of participation when compared with what happens in other social movements. “The labour protests were very often organised from the top, so that people were called to come to a demo at the train station and they were handed out banners, flags and other things. And after the demonstration was finished buses came to carry them home again so it was not really self-organised”, affirms Hannah, a young German woman who has been involved in global protests since the time of big anti-corporate mobilisations at the turn of the millennium. “The case is different with our protests, where people have to do the planning by themselves, to be informed by themselves on what is going on and arrange everything on their own”<sup>177</sup>. The soft mode of guidance, which – as we saw in chapter 4 - characterises autonomous activism, puts individual activists in a condition in which they are essentially asked to be “makers of their own way” rather than being “escorted” through the protests. To fulfil this demanding task, protest guides and similar “gadgets” are made available in the weeks and days before the protests.

## GUIDES FOR ACTION

While backpackers travel around the world armed with Lonely Planet and Routard guides, autonomous activists participating in global protest events rely on a different kind of “guides”: direct action handbooks, bust cards explaining how to behave in case of arrest, telephone numbers of legal teams, maps showing the location of different protest targets, calendars detailing the array of events taking place in the course of the mobilisation. As it is suggested in the BBC report quoted at beginning of this chapter, participating in global protests requires an intense effort of *familiarisation* with a space of protest which is transitional and exceptional, beyond the bounds of everyday life. For this purpose a crucial role is played by a variety of “activist gadgets” available on different websites, and

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<sup>177</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009

distributed at info-points, protest camps and protest events.

The most iconic example of this phenomenon is the case of protest maps. These artefacts were a constant and visible presence in the different global protests I participated in between 2007 and 2009. During the protest in Rostock, the veritable “must have” gadget was the direct action map we saw Anthony handling out in the opening field note (see figure 6.2 in the next page). This was however only one among many maps activists would encounter online browsing websites of groups organising or supporting the protests, or on paper at different protest camps and info-points at Rostock during the days of mobilisation: maps of protest camps (figure 6.3), maps of fascist targets around Germany to be attacked in the days before the protest (figure 6.4), maps of possible targets for small actions in the city of Rostock or maps illustrating the route of thematic demonstrations held in the days before the big direct action of June the 7<sup>th</sup>.

At the centre of many of these maps stood the “red zone”, the area in which the leaders of the most industrialised countries in the world would gather and all protest activity would be prohibited. This area was invariably depicted as a heavily bordered perimeter, echoing the shape of a fortress, with three protest camps besieging it from different different sides. This image summed up the rationale of the protest strategy: blockading or even invading the enemy’s space, “the Other against which the movement moves” (Eyerman, 2006: 194) by constructing “counter-spaces” (Lefebvre, 1991: 367) around it. This spatial arrangement was actually not much of a novelty, but rather a re-edition of the counter-summit strategy seen in a range of previous counter-summits, such as the ones in Genoa, Prague, Seattle and beyond, in which maps for protests were also distributed.

With their static and objective bird’s eye view, these maps strongly contrasted with the feverish situation which characterised those days of protest in Rostock, which were marked by restless wandering in the city centre and in different towns nearby, crawling through woods and fields, clashing with police, and the sleepless nights haunted by helicopters hovering over’ tents. Those were days in which, as we will see in the second part of this chapter, going astray and getting lost were an all too common experience for activists. In face of this situation, protest maps symbolically placed viewers outside and above the vagaries of the space of participation, conveying a reassuring impression of clarity and organisation.

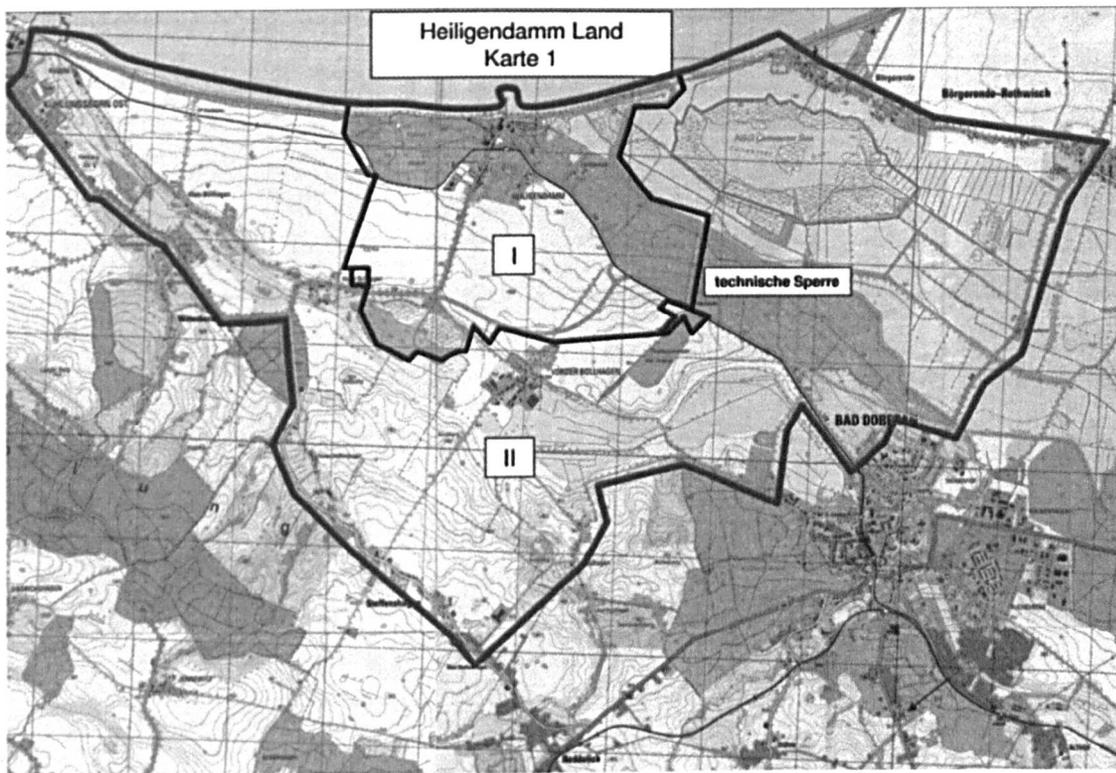


Figure 6.2: Direct action map available during the protest in Rostock<sup>178</sup>

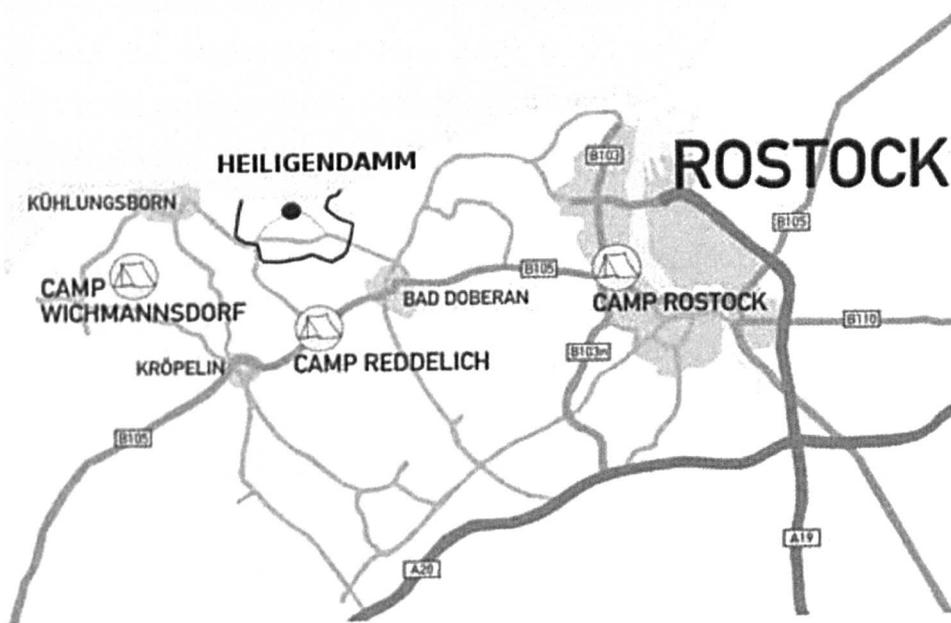


Figure 6.3: Map of protest camps around Heiligendamm<sup>179</sup>

<sup>178</sup> Retrieved on June 22nd 2007 from <http://www.g8wien.blogspot.de>  
<sup>179</sup> Retrieved on June 22nd 2007 from <http://www.camping-07.de>



It's nearly two years that the summit critical organizations and movements prepare this protest, and now here it is: Our *colourful bouquet of offers* to create the protest and to be an important part. In this guide you will find all information which you need for a *colourful* protest in this *wonderful landscape*. You may find not every single action, but there are info-points and certainly internet-cafes [sic] to get actually [sic] information. There are the churches and political parties, the non government [sic] organizations, the movements and many, many groups which have *wide open doors* for you and which say [sic] the G8 what we think about their politics. We even show the G8 the alternatives to do a better job. Better for all people [sic]. Everywhere. *With you and your participation* the protest becomes really *colourful*...<sup>181</sup>

Connected to the discussion in chapter 4 about the valuing of pleasure characterising the mode of guidance of autonomous activism, the Rostock brochure presented the protests as essentially a festive activity. In this context activists were invited to creatively mix the different available amenities to set up their own protest itinerary.

## Choreographie of Resistance

Forefront:	Sat, 2.6.	Sun, 3.6.	Mon, 4.6.	Tue, 5.6.	Wen, 6.6.	Thu, 7.6.	Fri, 8.6.
					G8 – Summit		
<b>International Actioncamps</b> <a href="http://www.camping-07.de">www.camping-07.de</a>							
<b>Caravan for the rights of refugees and migrants</b> <a href="http://www.thecaravan.org">www.thecaravan.org</a>	<b>Big Demonstration in Rostock</b> – with a Migration-related Block <a href="http://www.heiligendamm-07.de">www.heiligendamm-07.de</a>	<b>Actionday Global Agriculture, Demo and Rallye</b>	<b>Actionday Migration</b> Morning: Decentralized Actions	<b>Actionday against Militarisation, War, Torture, ...</b>		<b>Marches to the Red Zone</b>	<b>Final manifestation?</b>
<b>African Day and Protest Against Interior Minister Conference in Berlin</b>	<b>Antifacist Actions in Wismar</b>	<b>Big Opening event (10-1p.m.): „About Europe and beyond“ with Lucille Daumas Morocco</b>	<b>1 p.m.: Big Demo for Freedom of Movement with Concert</b>	<b>Blockades Airport Rostock-Luqa</b> <a href="http://www.g8andwar.de">www.g8andwar.de</a>	<b>(Mass- and flexible) Blockades of Access-routes to Heiligendamm</b> <a href="http://www.block-of.org">www.block-of.org</a> <a href="http://www.gipsisoli.org">www.gipsisoli.org</a>		
<b>European Marches against Precarisation</b> <a href="http://www.anti-rassism.de">http://www.anti-rassism.de</a>		<b>Networking Meetings Migration:</b> 2 p.m.: Opening Plenary, following about 10 Workshops and final Poetry	<b>Evening Event: Freedom of Movement against global Apartheid</b> Talk with guests from 4 continents	<b>Alternative Summit</b> Tue, 5 p.m.: Opening event with Medjane Cisse/Senegal Wed, 7 p.m.: Big Podium with guests from Africa and East Europe: We are here, because you are there – Structural Background of Flight and Migration* <a href="http://www.g8-alternativ-summit.org">www.g8-alternativ-summit.org</a>			
<b>Resistance-Action Bomben- und Freie Rede</b>	<b>Concerts in the Evening in Rostock</b>		<b>Cultural events at/ nearby the Camp</b>			<b>Concert „Music and Messages“</b>	
		<b>Church-Activity in Doberan</b>			<b>„Holy Dams“</b>		

Figure 6.5.: Choreographie [sic] of Resistance<sup>182</sup>

<sup>181</sup> Originally in English. Existing errors have been kept in the quote.

<sup>182</sup> From <http://de.dissent.org> – retrieved on the 2nd of June 2009. The error in English language in the title is in the original and has not been amended

A further gadget in the protest toolkit made available to participants was the “choreographie [sic] of protest” (Figure 6.5) – a protest timetable available on different websites connected with the mobilisation. It displayed a detailed overview of the actions and events. The grid publicising over twenty events, many of them overlapping with one another, testified to the intricacy of the protests against the G8 and of a situation in which, as Anna, a veteran of the protest in Rostock asserts: “many actions are parallel. There is lot of actions which are going on at the same time, and choosing among them involves decisions on tactics and on what level of confrontation, what level of property destruction one is ready to go for”<sup>183</sup>. Similarly to what has been said about the protest guide, this protest calendar suggests that activists set up their own individual protest schedule by choosing among the many possible options available. Trying to explain the popularity of calendars in Rostock and in other protests, Hannah affirms:

you need calendars to structure it, to have your own image of when will I come, what struggles I need to prepare for and so on. In Heiligendamm for example there was one long week of protests. So people who wanted to participate in the protests at the beginning of the week such as the ones on agricultural issues or on military issues had to come before in order to organise for them.<sup>184</sup>

Again here we find a framing of the global protest scene as a multidimensional *navigational space* where potentially an infinite number of itineraries are possible, and it is up to individual participants to weave the pieces together in a meaningful whole.

Some general observations can be drawn looking at the role played by these different protest gadgets. First and foremost, we can notice how emphasising *openness* and a *do-it-yourself* ethos they provide guidance in a space which is otherwise obscure due to the lack of a unified coordination. Maps, calendars and guides bear the promise of structuring what is otherwise partially unstructured. They fragment the experiential continuum of the protest scene into manageable temporal and spatial bits, individual events, places and actions. At the same time they provide an *overview* of these different pieces, leaving to participants the task of weaving these elements together in their own personal protest itinerary.

The importance these panoramic means of guidance acquire in global protests can be appreciated by looking at occasions when they were absent. This was clearly the case with the protests against the G8 in Rome, in July 2009. Despite the importance of the

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<sup>183</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

<sup>184</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009

event and the interest shown by foreign groups in participating in the protest, Italian movements kept a low profile, being still scarred by the consequences of police repression during the anti-G8 protests in Genoa in 2001. The most evident symptom of this lack of organisation was the extreme scarcity of practical information about the protests both online and offline. No specific website had been set up to inform prospective participants about the mobilisation, not to mention the complete lack of printed maps, calendars and guides. Messages sent on mailing lists around during that event testified to the impression of being adrift, left to one's own, without information about what was going on<sup>185</sup>. “[D]oes someone know something about a camp in Italy like Heiligendamm 2007??? is something growing ???”, wrote an international activist on the G8 mailing list. Only to be rebuffed by this angry response: “let's make *riot tourism* and *activist consumers* a thing of the last millennium!” Another activist based in Rome conceded, “we're actually experiencing a lack of coordination and energies and this is causing lots of problems with the usual welcome to internationals”.

While ostensibly *orientational media* such as the ones seen during the protests in Rostock, and absent in Rome, contribute to clarifying the space of action, they can also act in the opposite direction, as *weapons of disorientation* geared against police forces and their attempt to keep the space of protest under control. This is illustrated by the map called “Squaring up to the Square Mile” (see figure 6.6) used during the G20 protests in London. This map was available on London Indymedia and was widely distributed before and during the days of protests in different occupied spaces and connected events. The map was an adapted version of the one used during the J18 protests, on June 18<sup>th</sup> 1999, which brought the City of London to a standstill. It listed a variety of possible targets: financial associations, energy corporations, high street banks, arm firms and rating agencies. Nevertheless, during the big day of protest on April 1<sup>st</sup>, only a branch of the Royal Bank of Scotland near the Bank of England was damaged. The other targets thus acted as a diversion for police to spread their forces<sup>186</sup>.

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<sup>185</sup> The messages quoted in this paragraph were found on the g8-int mailing list (g8-int.lists.riseup.net) in July 2009.

<sup>186</sup> Interview with Jay – London, 30th April 2009

# Squaring up to the Square Mile

G20 • London • April 2009



Figure 6.6: Squaring up to the Square Mile<sup>187</sup>

According to Hannah, a veteran of many counter-summit mobilisations in recent years, protest maps are in fact often used for this purpose. Talking about the mobilisation in Rostock in 2007 she recounts:

Maps [...] marked possible targets for the protest, for example supermarkets which were involved in OGM food, or companies which exploit migrants. Actually I am not really sure if so many people use them. But at least it makes lot of sense because it shoots up publicity and the police says, look they want to visit the supermarket, and so that was an opportunity to bring it into the media and to confuse the police, because for sure they kept an eye on these areas, and if you really want to do something, such as militant actions you would never choose things that were already marked on the map for example.<sup>188</sup>

Here we see the ambiguous nature of orientational media as means of guidance. Devices normally associated with clarity can be used for the opposite end, in fomenting confusion among police forces.

<sup>187</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2009/03/425118.html> on April 10 2009  
<sup>188</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009

Summing up the discussion developed in this section, in the context of global protests we see the prevalence of means of guidance which follow a *logic of overview*, with a detached bird's eye of the space and time of action. These artefacts give a sense of participation in global protests as a highly complex activity for which participants need to be provided with detailed practical information in order to avoid the ever-present risk of getting lost. At the same time, these devices can also be used to create confusion within the ranks of police, thus countering their attempts to control space. While *orientational media* can be considered as the most notable means of guidance available in global protests, they constitute only the more visible phenomena within a complex set of communicative practices acting as a source of orientation.

In the second part of this chapter, I shed a light on these processes, paying particular attention to the interaction between mediated and interpersonal communication in different phases of the experience of global protests. In order to convey the sequencing of the experience of participation in global protests, I take inspiration from the headings used in Lonely Planet guides and identify 3 different stages of the protest itinerary – “getting there”, “getting around” and “getting in”. The first moment (getting there) is the one of planning and travelling to the protests – the moment in which activists, similar to other travellers, plan their trip, book their tickets, look for travel companions and gather information about the practicalities of accommodation and food provision. The second moment (getting around) is characterised by the experience of the protest camp as a refuge for activists and a springboard for action. The third moment (getting in) finally concerns the experience of direct actions and demonstrations at the climax of these events.

## GETTING THERE: THE FLEXIBLE COMPANY

To understand the process of orientation in global protest events we cannot limit ourselves to studying the few days during which activists are gathered around the host site of a counter-summit. While mainstream media representation of global protests tend to portray them as volcanic events suddenly mushrooming in a certain place to then disappear once again, they are almost invariably preceded by a long phase of preparation. In the case of G8 Heiligendamm summit, which took place in June 2007, German activists prepared for over 2 years<sup>189</sup> during which they scouted the settings for different actions,

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<sup>189</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009

identified the places where to erect protest camps and worked on outreach and communication<sup>190</sup>. Websites were set up providing basic accounts of the organisation of the protest and detailed travel information, even though organisers attempted to withhold sensitive information in order to counter police repression<sup>191</sup>.

Despite the centrality of the Internet in circulating practical information about the protests, the German groups involved in the mobilisation also organised a series of “info-tours” which took place in the months preceding the G8 summit. Hannah, who was highly involved in the organisation of the protests, explains that the rationale of info-tours was to “bring planning to the people”.

What we did for Heiligendamm and worked quite well was doing info-tours, of around 20 people travelling all over Europe, also in Mexico, Israel and other countries. And this is something like bringing protest planning to the people, and not expecting if they want to participate in something to come to the meetings. So we went to the people and we did 300 lectures, half of them in Germany and half of them in other countries, and the anti-fascist people also did their own lectures. And I think that was very great because they could have their discussions in their local settings, with their friends, with their political groups, so we showed them the presentation, we showed everything that was planned. We also explained people how the German police is working and what they could expect. So for example no tear gases but water cannons.<sup>192</sup>

Apart from the “official” info-tours set up by German organisers, different local groups around Europe and beyond organised their own preparatory meetings, debates or “info-cafes” to discuss what was coming up and whether and how to take part in it.

A few weeks before the beginning of the protests, I attended a small meeting held at rampART social centre in London. Long-time activists and less experienced people who were interested in going to the protest and wanted to know more about them convened in a small room on the first floor. We shared information we had gathered, such as addresses of websites which was a valuable way to get a sense of how to prepare for the protests<sup>193</sup>. At the meeting I encountered Steve and Joanna, an Australian couple who were travelling across Europe and wanted to participate in the protests. The two had very few contacts with activists locally and therefore seemed a bit nervous about what to do for the protests. In the following days they would send me numerous e-mails and text messages asking me

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<sup>190</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009

<sup>191</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009, Interview with Carl

<sup>192</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009

<sup>193</sup> Field note, 28th May 2007

how I was going to travel there and to confirm certain rumours they had heard, especially regarding border controls. These were in fact things I hardly knew much about myself and had little help to offer in that regard. When I interviewed Steve after the protests he confessed: “it had been quite difficult to make sense of things. It took me some time to get my head around what was going to happen and whether all the stories which were going around were true”<sup>194</sup>.

Venturing into a global protest with few or no existing contacts can in fact prove a rather distressing experience. This is due to the nature of such events, their sheer unpredictability and the dangers involved with participating in them. “If you don’t know anybody it is not that easy at all”, confirms Friedrich, a veteran German activist. “You have to get to know the people, and if you know the people, you can then go to a meeting and meet other people there and *start getting around*. But you need to have to know initially at least one person”<sup>195</sup>. The decision to participate in a global protest appears to be taken not simply because of one’s determination to be part of the protests, but also on the basis of the underlying impression that some friends will go, that one will not be alone going there, and therefore there will be someone to “hang onto”<sup>196</sup> during the protests. “All my friends with whom I share political affiliations were going”, explains Lewis a Hungarian activist based in Brighton, who has been living for a long time in a “political house” with other activists, and has been “hanging out” at a local activist place. “The hype about how good and how big the G8 protest would be in Germany started at least a year beforehand. With that sort of *anticipation*, it was hard to think of not going”<sup>197</sup>.

While activation towards participating in global protests often seems to emerge out of this perception that one’s own dispersed circle of friends, comrades, acquaintances will be going to the protests, the process of planning itself involves a complex interplay between individualised gathering of information on the protests – mostly conducted on the Internet – and the “checking out” this information with friends and comrades, as it is illustrated by Lewis’s testimony:

People made maps to show where the camp is. And then you could also look up on the Internet where is what camp and then you could also talk with people and people you where is which camp and that was the same in Gleneagles. When you go to other places you get the information there,

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<sup>194</sup> Interview with Steve – Rostock, 11th June 2007

<sup>195</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29th April 2009

<sup>196</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29th April 2009

<sup>197</sup> Interview with Lewis – London, 25th June 2007

before through the maps or through leaflets or through friend. People read everyday many web pages. So let's say ten or twenty web pages, and the rest of my group does the same and then we exchange. Or read lot of newspapers or alternative magazines. You have Internet and lot of magazines where you can find information. <sup>198</sup>

Similarly Anna recounts that, approaching Rostock<sup>199</sup>, she was trying to get as much information as possible from her peers, while at the same time seeking information produced by protest organisers made available on the Internet.

I would get as much information as I could through personal contacts, but I was checking much more websites [...] because I wanted to understand by myself what the different kind of tactics were and whether or not there would new tactics going on. I was checking a lot of that with different friends and with different people. went down there still not quite sure which camp I was going to be at because there was one camp designed as relatively autonomous which seemed to be more... but I also knew people that were staying in actual Rostock which were more culture-oriented and I was thinking about that too.<sup>200</sup>

During the planning phase we see activists trying to match their own plans with the their friends' plans, and negotiating their participation in complex networks of friendship, comradeship and love relationships. An example of the issues to be dealt with in this situation is offered by the testimony of Anna, a young Danish woman, who was living in London at the time of the protests. Having been involved in different projects connected with the autonomous scene in London, she initially wanted to go to Rostock together with a Greek friend. Nevertheless their travel plans could not be coordinated, since he planned to go some days in advance in order to take advantage of the occasion by visiting some social centres around Germany. In the end she had to travel all by herself:

I decided to go on my own, not necessarily connected to any group, but I knew that he was going to be there, and I knew that I'd probably find a place to sleep because he was there, and I knew that I would know a lot of other people there, once I got there. Moreover, a good friend of mine had also moved into Berlin at that time, and I knew that she would be there.<sup>201</sup>

The case of Anna is not unique. Many of my interviewees recounted how they had travelled

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<sup>198</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29th April 2009

<sup>199</sup> Interview with Anna – London 22nd November 2007

<sup>200</sup> Interview with Anna – London 22nd November 2007

<sup>201</sup> Interview with Anna – London 22nd November 2007

to the protests on their own. Besides mismatches between travel plans, the reason for travelling alone also had to do with the desire to combine participation in the protests with visits to friends abroad and the “anarcho-tourism”<sup>202</sup> of visits to social centres and autonomous scenes. This is the case of Susan, a British activist who went alone to Germany, because she also wanted to visit Hamburg, a famous heartland of the autonomous scene, and once there she caught up with a friend who then travelled with her to the protests.

I went by myself, but I met people at various places.. I went to some things before then, like a social centre in Paris, on the way... and then I had a good friend who was living in Hamburg who was going there anyway, so I did not need to go completely on my own and there once then I met some people from England. <sup>203</sup>

While trade unions, leftist parties, NGOs and other “organised groups” preparing for the protests invariably book their own coaches or train well in advance, this is less the case for autonomous activists. Prominent autonomous groups set up their own coaches in the case of large mobilisations. But many prefer, for a variety of reasons (such as avoiding police harassment), to move in small teams, using public transport or bringing their own cars, vans and campers. Others, like Susan and Anna, go completely by themselves or just with their partner combining participation in global protests with tourism and visiting friends<sup>204</sup>.

Even when they travel individually, participants are very rarely completely alone as suggested by Anna’s reference to the different people she would meet once in Rostock. They rely on the background presence of what we could call a *flexible company*. This is a peculiar company in which people are together while mostly staying apart – a wide-ranging network of friends and acquaintances that does not neatly coincide with one specific group but cuts across different ones. Within this company, protest participants can maintain a loose but common sense of direction thanks to their ongoing mediated connection through mobile phones and e-mails. But for the rest they need to rely on themselves alone to secure orientation in the space of participation. Being attached to a flexible company rather than of a specific group allows individuals to enjoy more freely the array of possible encounters and amenities which are available in these occasions. For

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<sup>202</sup> Interview with Frank - London, 12th March 2009

<sup>203</sup> Interview with Susan – London 12th February 2008

<sup>204</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007 -, interview with Manuele – Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2008, Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29th April 2009

## **Friedrich, an activist based in Berlin:**

to go in a group it seems easier, but if you go on your own you are more easily integrated into the structure where you go. If you know lot of people who are going to be there, it is OK to go on your own. If you consider yourself part of the whatever leftist, anarchist, autonomous scene, all over the world there are people who are the same, or more or less the same, and you can connect with them, even if you don't know them you connect with them, and then they say come to our family, you can in our actions, you can stay at our house. It is very easy. <sup>205</sup>

Thus the format of the flexible company allows activists to further extend their personal networks of contact and to free themselves from the constraint posed by deep attachment to a specific group.

The individualisation of the experience of planning and travelling that emerges from activist testimonies is essentially made possible by the availability of the Internet and mobile media. These communication technologies in fact allow individuals to maintain connection at-a-distance with their peers in order to flexibly catch up at different times and places during the protests. Nevertheless, another important factor to take into account is the increasing availability of cheap travel options, since the emergence of low cost flights burgeoned precisely at the time of the rise of the anti-globalisation movement in Europe at the turn of the millennium. For Josip in fact “global movements would not have taken place without the explosion of cheap travel and Ryanair. Thanks to the diffusion of cheap flights many people could travel to preparatory meeting and create bonds between groups in different countries which were not possible before”<sup>206</sup>. In conclusion, by looking at activist testimonies of their phase of preparation and travel to global protest we see a situation in which modern technologies of communication and transportation allow individuals to be flexible and travel autonomously to the protests, thus maximising the quantity of experiences and adventures which are available in this context. Despite this individualisation, participants continue to feel the need for keeping in touch with distant travel companions, who provide emotional support, and also a personal point of reference to hold onto, reassuring one is not going to be alone in the protests.

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<sup>205</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29th April 2009

<sup>206</sup> Interview with Josip – London, 8th October 2008

## GETTING AROUND: THE PROTEST CAMP

Outside of the train station a scribbled cardboard signal affixed to a road sign reads "protest camp" with an arrow pointing towards the left. I follow the indication and the flow of the people who are walking ahead of me towards the camp, located on the bank of the estuary of the Warnow river, next to industrial warehouses and vast patches of scrubland. At the entrance stands a 5 meters high wooden tower which recalls the architecture of forts in the American old west, and carries a banner proclaiming "Bienvenue, Welcome, Willkommen, Bienvenidos". Below hangs the less welcoming "police keep out" and close to that the icon of a circle with a backslashed camera, reminding people that photographing is strictly forbidden.

At the entrance of the camp stands the concierge or welcome tent - with two tables occupied by piles of leaflets, brochures and maps for the protest acting as both a welcome point for new arrivals and an info-point for residents on the different actions and activities. "Where can I sleep?" - I ask one of the guys standing at the table. "Wherever you find space really. If you are not connected to any group, you should go in the area for 'individuals', at the bottom of the camp". The camp, organised by autonomous activists in connection with socialist groups, is a grassland of less than 2 hectares, with patches divided up by red and white construction tapes, demarcating the areas where different political groups are supposed to settle: revolutionary socialist parties in one place, Attac in another, the Green Youth in another, and anarchist/autonomous groups and 'individuals' or 'independents' to the bottom of the camp.

The paths running across the camp have been named after political personalities of the radical Left from Arundhati Roy, idol of the ecologists, to Durruti, one of the leaders of the anarchist movement in Spain, to Rosa Luxembourgh, one of the most coveted figures for socialists and Trotskysts. Signposts are spread on the main paths, indicating the location of toilets, popular kitchens, and other "protest facilities". Twenty meters from the concierge tent another map hung on the fence of the camp in placard format bears a satirical depiction of the space of protest. It shows the different camps located around the south edge of the red zone designated for the G8 summit and the

accompanying caption "KINGDOM OF EVIL". A similar lay-out characterised the 5,000 people strong Reddelich camp, where I would move later on in the week and at whose entrance stood the sign "you are now leaving the German Republic". Organised by anarchists and autonomists, the Reddelich camp was divided in different barrios (or neighbourhoods), the Zapatista barrio, the Queer barrio, according to the political affinities of the different groups involved in the protests.<sup>207</sup>

Protest camps have been a constant component of recent direct action protests and counter-summits (Doherty, 2000, Pickerill, 2004). Originating from the tradition of environmental and anti-nuclear direct action since the 70s and 80s (Epstein, 1991), they have not only constituted crucial protest infrastructures but also exist as "heterotopias" (Foucault, 1986), spaces in which to practice and display the alternatives to neo-liberalism (Saunders, Price, 2009). For the protests in Rostock three different protest camps had been set up. The one in North Rostock hosted autonomous activists alongside socialist groups and more moderate organisations. The one in Reddelich was instead set up exclusively by anarchist and autonomous activists and constituted the main base for the direct action which took place on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June. The camp in Wichmannsdorf, finally, was set up by the Clown Army, a street theatre group emerged since the protests against the G8 in Gleneagles, UK, in July 2005.

In face of the unpredictability and risks marking global protests, protest camps come to provide a refuge, where participants can engage with a communitarian experience which Hannah calls "holiday communism":

This common experience of sharing one week or ten days, sitting in the same plenary, facing the same problems, having successful actions together, being beaten up by the police together, but resisting together and seeing the media coverage together and being upset at what they write together, is very important. You can see that it was like that also in other protests like the G8 in Genoa, where the *convergence centre*, the *parks*, the *places to sleep* were all very important.<sup>208</sup>

Using a language which reminds us of Hardt's and Negri's discussion of "multitudes" (2004), Anna claims that protest camps should be seen as "hosts for the swarm" or "bee-

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<sup>207</sup> Field note – Rostock 11th June 2007

<sup>208</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009

hives”, pre-established points where participants can gather and re-gather<sup>209</sup>. Thus from the point of view of our analysis of orientation, protest camps come to constitute something akin to beacons — precious fixed points in a space which is otherwise marked by ephemeral actions, similar to the occupied spaces which stand at the core of the autonomous scene.

In the construction of the protest camp as a refuge and a reference point in the space of global protests, a variety of symbolic practices of *demarcation* become responsible for conveying a transitional sense of place. As we have seen in the field note opening this section, at the entrance of protest camps activists encounter welcoming and warning messages, acting as symbolic boundaries prescribing who can enter and who cannot (see figure 6.7). These boundaries recall the territorial nature of the occupied spaces lying at the centre of the autonomous scene, as discussed in chapter 5. They contribute to sustaining a sense of togetherness pitted against the space of the enemy, in which an impression of stability is constructed in the midst of the ephemerality and unpredictability of protests.



**Figure 6.7 Boundary sign at the exit of Reddelich Camp**

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<sup>209</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28th April 2009

Thinner boundaries can be seen inside the camps themselves, in the construction tapes marking the perimeter of different neighbourhoods or barrios in the camp. Thanks to processes of demarcation between different neighbourhoods in the camp, patches of land come to coincide with specific political and cultural identities. Cultural and political affinity is ephemerally turned into physical vicinity, in a village-like ambience which strongly contrasts with an urban everyday life dominated by relationships stretched across space.

Beside *boundaries* protest camps also abound in *vectors*, that is means of guidance following a logic of *indication*<sup>210</sup>. Examples of these vectors are the messages chaotically affixed on different billboards (shown in Figure 6.8 and 6.9) next to the welcome tent of the protest camps Reddelich and North Rostock: from scribbled post-it messages asking for a lift, to announcements of meetings, plenaries and training sessions, small parallel actions, notices of lost and found objects, and updates taken from Indymedia and carefully copied on A3 pages, to inform activists about events and actions which they could not attend. These messages point to elsewhere and else-when – to events, actions and other activities which reside in the future or in the near past, which can still be participated in or which have been irrevocably missed. While *boundaries* infuse a sense of stability and place to the protest camp, *vectors* always remind activists of its transient and fluid character, of the fact that the temporal rather than the spatial axis is the decisive one in the experience of global protest. Moreover they reveal how despite its claims to territorial autonomy embodied in the boundaries surrounding the protest camp, this space is in fact, not only of a passing “heterotopia” (Foucault, 1986) carved out of the surrounding space, but also crucially a springboard to prepare for the actions and demonstrations taking place beyond its bounds.

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<sup>210</sup> The logic of indication is on the three logics of guidance discussed at the end of chapter 1



Figure 6.8: a billboard at the Reddelich protest camp (Photographer Vincent J. Wong)



Figure 6.9: The welcome tent at Reddelich (Photographer Vincent J. Wong)

Apart from the role of forms of guidance like boundaries and vectors, in order to understand the dynamics of orientation in and around the protest camp, we need also to consider the role of *accompaniment* played by *affinity groups*. As we have seen in chapter 2, affinity groups are teams of activists usually ranging from five to fifteen individuals who are supposed to stick together during the days of protest. The affinity groups provide individuals with an intimate circle of people for emotional needs, as illustrated by Anna:

We were a group of friends and friends of friends. We were not under any particular name. We did not have a particular banner or anything. We just found each other together in the camp and decided to form the group for the length of the protests. We had our small meetings, which were quite social, intimate and funny. When we met we drank, we ate, and we shared chats and jokes. But we would also try to organise ourselves in anticipation of the protests and decide who was gonna go to what meeting, and what we felt like doing.<sup>211</sup>

Being part of an affinity group is not only important for emotional support but also to achieve trust of other groups in the camp. In fact as Anna highlights “if you are not part of any group, it is really difficult to know things and get things done. This is because people trust affinity groups. If it is an individual, if you go to meetings as an individual, it is a bit strange, people look at you suspiciously”<sup>212</sup>. Thus despite this individualisation, the experience of participation in protests once activists enter the protest camp, as highlighted in the previous section, involves being embedded within a specific group if they want to actively participate in the protests. This is not to say that the format of flexible company which characterises the phase of approach to the protests completely withers away in this context, but that in this phase most individuals tend to rely more rigidly on their embedded-ness with a specific group.

From the point of view of orientation, affinity groups constitute a fundamental resource to process information which is circulated in the protest camp as it is reflected in Lewis’s description of the working of his own affinity group:

As soon as we arrived we formed an affinity group, as is the standard process. We would have disparate meetings at first but as the time for action drew closer we became more organised. Individual members of the group would take it upon themselves *to find out what was going on*,

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<sup>211</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

<sup>212</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

*where and when, and who else was involved, and any general gossip.*<sup>213</sup>

Such an intensive process of sharing, interpreting and cross-checking information, performed within affinity groups, is made critical by the fact that, as Anna observes, the stay at the protest camp is an experience marked by a succession of contradictory news:

[w]hile in the camp there were all the meetings going on there, and there was a constant intense swarm of rumours. Different people were talking about what is going on, trying to understand what meetings were going on and when, which people to send to which meetings, and what things were going on, and what the latest news was and all that kind of things.<sup>214</sup>

Spending time with other members of the affinity group and going together to different meetings and events, allows activists to feel bodily attached and maintain a sense of place in a space which is constantly teeming with new people. Nevertheless, affinity groups are far from self-enclosed tribes sticking together for the whole time of global protests. During their stay at the camp, often individuals find themselves leaving behind other members of the affinity group, who are busy in other pursuits, such as contributing to the maintenance of the camp, cooking and cleaning, buying food, or catching up with other people outside of their group, or to cultivate the sentimental encounters which regularly spring up in these situations. While staying at Reddelich I noticed how often affinity groups would split up during the day to allow individuals to engage with other members of their flexible company, and reform in the evening, before the big assemblies taking place in the main marquee of the protest camp. While depending on finding their friends or their friends' tents in the evening, often people found this practically difficult to achieve and were subject to the annoying experience of *getting lost in the camp* which is indicative of a common theme in different activist testimonies:

That happened to me different times. It is incredible how easy it is in those situations not to find each other even though you are a short distance from each other, often in fact in the same area of the camp. In many ways that's OK when you have, I think, when you know a certain amount of people, and different groups, and you know the background of different groups and you can easily move around also if you get lost from people that you know, because there would be people there that know

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<sup>213</sup> Interview with Lewis - e-mail interview, 18th June 2007

<sup>214</sup> Interview with Anna - London, 22nd November 2007

people that you know, somehow.<sup>215</sup>

The difficulty of catching up with one's own peers inside the protest camp is down to a variety of elements which are particularly revealing of the obstacles encountered by autonomous activists. Despite the presence of boundaries that could act as navigational devices, the erratic architecture of the camp, with tents being erected in haphazard ways and little illumination at night, makes it difficult for people to locate their own or their friends' tents and other meeting points. For Anna, this chaotic situation is not a symptom of the fact that protest camps are disorganised, but rather that they are "very complex places where things are changing by the hour, and the landscape is changing around you"<sup>216</sup>.

The disorientation which hampers the experience of participation in the protest camp is, however, not only down to the erratic layout of this space but also to communicative disruption caused by frequent technical breakdowns of activist services. In all the protest camps I visited during my fieldwork special tents had been set up for guaranteeing Internet connection. They worked remarkably well given the shortage of money and resources organisers had to face. Nevertheless, they often had difficulty meeting campers' demands. Long queues could be regularly seen in front of the Internet tent at Reddelich and at North Rostock.

Similar problems affected the possibility to communicate with mobile phones while staying at the camp. In Rostock, in fact, many activists struggled to keep their mobile phones charged due to the lack of sockets at the "technical tent". A scene I witnessed at the Reddelich camp one evening while desperate to charge my own mobile, encapsulated the problems experienced by activists in keeping their connection with the telephone network: Over a hundred mobile phones are amassed on the table, plugged into dozens of sockets, with the charger cables all mixed up, everything opened to the public and quite messed up. Scores of people are teeming around the table. Some of them try to get their phones back, having to check in the midst of other devices, using the screen lights of other mobile phones to seek their phones. Others try to find a place for their own mobiles, often having to disconnect other phones because there is no free socket left.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Interview with Jay – London, 30th April 2009

<sup>216</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

<sup>217</sup> Fieldnote – Reddelich camp, 6th June 2007

As I could personally experience during my stay at Reddelich, not having a functioning mobile phone constituted a big problem when trying to catch up with friends and other members of one's affinity group. This was because during the stay at the protest camp, people mostly relied on text messages to decide meeting places and times as reflected by messages like "I am by the big marquee"; "arriving at the camp now. Where are you?"; "I am the beginning of the march next to a big orange banner, Where are you? I am getting a bit bored of staying here" or "Meeting at the Zapatista coffee at 10.30. please come"<sup>218</sup>. One night, having not managed to charge my phone because of the lack of free sockets, I spent over 2 hours wandering around the camp trying to locate my friends before giving up and going back to my tent to sleep<sup>219</sup>.

The association between the impossibility of using mobile phones and the difficulty of catching up with other people, suggests how the flexible type of experience which underscores participation in global protests, crucially relies on the possibility of individuals being constantly connected to the mobile network. In this context, because of the spatially and temporally chaotic situation of the protest camp, if the phone battery runs out, it becomes difficult to arrange where to meet and to catch up. Thus, while the protest camp offers a space of proximity, this does not automatically become a space of immediacy. People continue to rely on the presence of mediated communication to maintain a common orientation with their peers. In this context, if for whatever reason access to mediated communication is restricted, the possibility of finding each other becomes seriously hampered.

## GETTING IN: A SENSE OF DIRECTION

Hundreds of people are gathered on the top of the hill after having marched for around a mile across a rapeseed field. Affinity groups sit in circles, sharing some food and discussing what is going to happen in the next few hours. On the peak of the hill are the stewards of Block G8, the coalition which has been organising this action, wearing blue T-shirts and flags of different colours. Each one of the flags is combined with one of the 5 "fingers" - the different columns of activists which will need to split when facing the police, in order to oblige them to spread as much as possible, thus allowing activists to pass through

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<sup>218</sup> Field note - Rostock, 10th June 2007

<sup>219</sup> Field note - Reddelich camp, 5th June 2007

their lines and occupy the road leading to the main gate of the area in which the G8 leaders and their staff are convened.<sup>220</sup>

During the assemblies which took place in the Reddelich camp before the action, each affinity group was asked to pick one of the fingers, from one to five, going from left to right - finger number three being the central one and usually the one with the highest risk of contact with the police. To add further complexity to the "choreography of protest"<sup>221</sup>, each of the columns had its own five sub-columns, which would be further split if the police lines proved to be too tight to move through as one big column. If the confrontation proved yet more difficult it would come down to affinity groups and "buddies" (the smallest unit of collective action) to make their way through. This plan had been explained by experienced activists during training sessions which had taken place in the camps before the action along with other "activist skills" such as blockading techniques and methods to deal with the use of gas or police dogs.

From the megaphone a woman says "here we go" and thousands of people stand up and re-gather to begin walking down the slopes of the hill, following the flag representing their finger, in our case the green flag, held by a "conductor". The setting would have resembled a Napoleonic battle, with people moving in compact lines through the grassland, if it were not for the presence of 5 huge military helicopters hovering over our heads. After half an hour we were finally through: the police were spread too thin to contain the sheer number of demonstrators retreated to secure the fence gate, while the protesters sat on the tree-line road leading towards the main gate of the red zone of Heiligendamm. Protesters would hold the gate for over 24 hours, disrupting the organisation of the summit leading to deserted press conferences because journalists were unable to travel to the summit location.<sup>222</sup>

**The climactic phase of the experience of participation in global protests traditionally culminates in confrontational mass direct actions which attempt to break into the "red zone" of global summits or other prohibited areas, such as the perimeter of coal power**

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<sup>220</sup> Field note, Rostock - 7th June 2007

<sup>221</sup> For the explanation of this term please refer to chapter 4.

<sup>222</sup> Field note, Rostock - 7th June 2007

stations in the case of many recent protests of the Camp for Climate Action in the UK. Mass direct actions are highly theatrical and performative moments in which activists creatively contribute to the display of complex collective choreographies whose rationale is fundamentally to disrupt the space of the enemy (Juris, 2008b). On the one hand, these actions are geared at producing “image events” capable of capturing “mass media attention, while communicating political messages to an audience” (Juris, 2008b: 88-89). On the other hand they are responsible for the production of “affective solidarity” among participants by way of “ritual catharsis” (Juris, 2008b: 88). Participating in direct actions “activists perform their networks through diverse bodily movements, techniques and styles, generating distinct identities and emotional tones” (Juris, 2008b: 88-89). In these actions people put their bodies on the line, deliberately placing themselves in a situation of vulnerability (McDonald, 2006: 106-107).

These spectacular events are also the stage of complex forms of orientation in face of the complexity and unpredictability of the *choreography of action*<sup>223</sup>. Because of the multidimensional character of mass direct actions, with different “autonomous actions” happening in parallel (Juris, 2008b: 70), the maintenance of a sense of direction can prove far more problematic than a march from A to B, which constitutes the blueprint of what Kevin McDonald has called the “civic grammar” proper to trade unions and parties (2006: 30-31). While these complex actions are designed to create confusion among the police forces sidestepping their attempts of spatial control (Juris, 2008b: 70), they often also create confusion among activists themselves as noticed by Jeffrey Juris in his description of the protests in Prague in 2000 (Juris, 2008b: 62).

Frequently moments of disorientation erupt, in which people do not seem to know any more which direction they are supposed to follow. This is also because there is not someone explicitly leading them towards a certain direction. At the beginning of this chapter a field note captured this difficulty in maintaining a sense of direction in the large direct action which took place on the 7<sup>th</sup> June near Rostock. In that context the “magic wand” to regain a sense of orientation was constituted by the action map which we saw Anthony handling. As I have argued at the beginning of this chapter this and similar forms of mediation are becoming increasingly important for sustaining mass direct action. They make individuals responsible for their own orientation and create some distance between activists and the frenetic experience in which they are immersed.

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<sup>223</sup> The term choreography of action has been introduced at the end of chapter 4 when looking at formats of action like Critical Mass or Reclaim the Streets.

Alongside the by now well established use of action maps, in recent years we have seen the deployment of far more sophisticated forms of mediated guidance with the use of mobile phones and text messages. A case in point is offered by the Climate Swoop, organised by the UK Camp for Climate Action which targeted the coal power station of Ratcliffe-on-Soar. The people who had subscribed on the website beforehand were invited to print out a map of the site to bring to the protest. Then, on the day of the action they started receiving messages telling them where to go: “MORNING SWOOPERS! Just 3 hours ‘til we take over Ratcliffe-on-Soar. Be in Square C7 at 11am to meet your fellow swoopers. It’s time for some action!”. In this context the combination of maps and text messages offers sophisticated possibilities of guidance that go beyond the fixed representations offered by maps alone and allows protesters to act as a “smart mob” (Rheingold, 2005) reacting rapidly to police manoeuvres.

Despite the increasing importance played by maps and mobile media, it is my contention that compared with the previous phases of participation detailed in the foregoing sections, the experience of direct actions continues to be mainly bound up with the *grounding* in the surrounding environment and the bodily accompaniment of other people. Mark, an English activist who has participated in different direct action protests, affirms that:

What matters [w]hen you are facing the fascists or the police, is the person standing next to you on that front line and it does not matter, whether they can send an e-mail or a text if they stand next to you they are standing next to you and that is the best form of communication you can ever have. It is standing shoulder to shoulder rather than peer to peer. <sup>224</sup>

Central to this context is the role of affinity groups, as illustrated in the field note opening this section. Members of affinity groups sometimes hold each other arms to avoid someone being washed away in moments of panic. Shouts like the “Mapambano” used by my own affinity group were used to regroup in moments of confusion.

In these frenetic and highly dangerous situations participants need to keep their ears and eyes wide opened to avoid getting their heads cracked. Tactile contact with other bodies alerts protesters to moments of tension and calm. The observation of the landscape provides information about possible ways to sidestep police encroachment. The sight of police lines provokes changes of direction. The appearance of police helicopters in certain

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<sup>224</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8th December 2008

areas suggests where the clashes are raging. Screams of euphoria or fear, and the noise of bottles and stones banging against riot shields signal the beginning of confrontation. The intensity of the smell of tear gases finally alerts about the vicinity of riot squads. Here bodily senses are deeply involved in maintaining an orientation in the space of protest.

Particularly important in these situations are those symbolic artefacts communicating the evolution of the situation and the changing position of different groups. This is the case of the flags of different sorts, such as the ones used in the big direct action against the red zone of Heiligendamm (see figure 6.10). Apart from their expressing certain messages and identities, the flags help groups maintain a common orientation by indicating a point in space which is easy to track not only because it is in sight but also because other people are following it, or are following other people who are following it. A similar role is played by puppets and other “props” which provide activists with a sense of where their group is heading allowing them to all face towards the same direction, thus avoiding the continual risk of inertia.



**Figure 6.11: A protester waving a flag during the mass direct action in Heiligendamm. The flag reads “fuck yuppies” (Photographer Vincent J. Wong)**

However, probably the most representative source of orientation which characterises participation in protest events are the shouts which we saw represented in the field note at the beginning of this chapter. Shouts provide individuals cues about the evolution in the situation. They act as stimuli in the collective body of protesters triggering fear, rage or euphoria and sparking people to run or halt. Sometimes shouts successfully create a sense of common direction and rhythm in the protest performance. In other occasions contrasting messages can make people swirl in circles, slowly bringing activists into inertia.

This is something I personally experienced when participating in the Climate Camp direct action against the headquarters of BAA, the company owning Heathrow Airport in

August 2007. In the middle of the action, while the police were forming a line to block protesters, I fortuitously managed to swish away from an officer. I ran through a series of courts and finally crawled through a bush, only to suddenly find myself next to thirty people who had also managed to avoid the police line. I instinctively moved towards them, and realised we were on the parking lot of BAA, the target of the action. Officers with riot shields started closing in while we were running crazily in different directions, while the air was pierced by panicking shouts and contrasting messages. "Sit down! Sit down!" was saying someone. "Keep moving! Keep moving!" shouted another. We were easily rounded and cordoned for over 4 hours<sup>225</sup>.

When it comes to direct contact with police, panic often ensues. People run in many different directions in the midst of tear gases and smoke rising from burning cars as I happened to see in Genoa during the anti-G8 protests in July 2001. They are moments in which often people lose contact with their peers and in which people escape haphazardly in different directions. These situations remind us of the fact that crowd control tactics deployed by police forces revolve to a great extent around producing chaos among participants (Fernandez, 2008). In our own terms crowd control tactics have to do not only with dispersing participants but also with disorienting them, depriving them of a common sense of direction. Thus, while the complexity of mass direct actions have to do with avoiding the police's maintenance of spatial control, in turn the police try to re-assert their dominance over space by attempting to disrupt activist's spatial coordination and the maintenance of a common orientation.

In conclusion, compared with the previous stages in the sequencing of protest participation, the experience of direct action is one which has to do to a greater extent with *grounding* one's own bodily immersion in the "terrain of resistance" (Routledge, 1996). A variety of sophisticated forms of guidance provide with help in this situation, alongside less technological but nevertheless highly effective ones like flags and other props. Looking at these different phenomena, direct action appears as the setting of a complex confrontation which revolves to a great extent around maintaining a common orientation while at the same time disrupting the enemy's awareness and organisation.

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<sup>225</sup> Field note - June, 9th 2007

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the forms of guidance and orientation which characterise participation in the global protest scene. This scene encompasses global protests where autonomous activists have participated *en masse* in recent years. While drawing on field notes gathered through my participation in a variety of global protests with a strong autonomous component, between 2007 and 2009, I have focused on the case of the protests against the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany in June 2007. In this context, I have considered the interaction between forms of mediated and interpersonal communication that allows participants to maintain an orientation in the space of protests.

I began by noticing strong similarities between tourist and activist experience because of the exceptional and ephemeral character of participation in protest scenes and the valuing of pleasure and adventure characterising it. In coping with the unfamiliarity of this space a variety of forms of practical information are deployed to guide activists along the protest route, thus implicitly asking individuals to be makers of their own way. Maps, calendars and protest guides present participants with a variety of options which individuals are expected to combine in a meaningful "itinerary". These seem to constitute a form of reassurance in the complex space of participation of global protests. At the same time, they frame participation as a highly individualised and potentially uncommitted experience.

To further investigate processes of guidance, I have turned to the analysis of the experience of three distinct phases of participation in global protests: 1) the phase of preparation and travel to the protests (getting there), 2) the experience of the protest camp, and 3) the experience of direct action. In the first phase, activists are torn between an individualised experience of preparation and planning and the need to rely on a flexible company of friends and comrades, which give them emotional support and a personal point of reference in the space of protest. In the second phase, activists rely on the presence of the protest camp, which constitutes a transitional territory sustained by an architecture of togetherness structured by boundaries of different kind. Finally, in the third phase activists struggle to maintain a sense of direction not only by employing a variety of mediated forms of guidance but also through their bodily immersion in the "terrain of resistance" (Routledge, 1996). Moving across these different phases the experience of participation appears to become more immediate, whereby orientation comes to be bound to a greater extent to the physical presence of the affinity group and to one's immersion in

the surrounding environment.

The experience of participation which is reflected in this analysis is one which has little to do with the mass and almost martial character of protest in the labour movement. On the contrary, participation in global protests strongly resonates with the experience of backpacking tourism constantly torn between the flexibility promised by a *mediated individualism* and the refuge of an *immediate communitarianism* constructed around fleeting contexts of proximity, perfectly exemplified by the case of the protest camp. At the same time access to moments of immediacy which lie at the core of the experience of participation in global protests appears to be increasingly tied to processes of mediation. In this context activists are always on the brink of getting lost if mediated communication breaks down. In conclusion, analogously to what has been said about the experience of protest camp, while global protests bring activists into a more sustained situation of proximity, this does not automatically become a situation of immediacy.

## CHAPTER 7

# COMPASSES AND BEACONS: FLOATING THROUGH THE SCENE

### INTRODUCTION

Anna was born and raised in Copenhagen by a Swedish mother and an American father. She became involved in the emerging anti-globalisation movement when still in high school in the Danish capital, and one of her first protest experiences was during the tense demonstrations against the EU meeting in Goteborg in Sweden in 2001. Inspired by that event she went down to Italy for the European Social Forum in 2002. “In that period *I was still trying to find my own place* within these different groups”, she recounts. “I think I was trying to find something I really believed in because I was always skeptical towards everything I was involved in”. After Florence she went back to Denmark where she got involved in “feminist organising” and the production of a magazine. Then she travelled to a PGA (People Global Action) meeting in Serbia. There she met some people who were based in London. She finally moved to the UK capital in 2004, just at the time of a new European Social Forum. At that event she met many people and rapidly got involved in different groups and campaigns. When I interviewed her, however, she seemed to be in a stage of disillusionment and self-reflection. She had dropped out of some activities and was trying to make her mind up about her future activism. “There is a lot of workshops that are happening, a lot of meetings that are happening, a lot of people that talk about what they are doing”, she explained to me “[...] but I am in a phase now where I am trying to be more careful about the decision I am making. I feel I have been *floating* a bit too much”<sup>226</sup>.

When we look at autonomous activists’ testimonies we often encounter a common experience of “peregrination” in which people have gone through different events, places and groups while trying to “find their own place” in the autonomous movement. This self-

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<sup>226</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

reflexive search for “one’s own place” in the movement scene is a highly performative process through which one’s own orientation in the scene needs to be constantly reasserted and confirmed, because of an “until-further notice” character of contemporary social relations (Bauman, 2000:147). While engaged in this frenetic search for “one’s place in the movement” activists seem to be battling against the ever-present danger of feeling lost, adrift, or “floating” as Anna puts it<sup>227</sup> in a situation in which maintaining a sense of place and a sense of direction can often prove difficult.

In the previous chapters I developed an understanding of the mode of guidance characterising the autonomous scene, and of the interplay between guidance and orientation in two sub-scenes: the urban autonomous scene and in the global protest scene. Specifically, in chapter 4 I argued that autonomous movements are characterised by a *soft mode of guidance*, which is based on the assumption that individuals will activate themselves and will make choices about their participation. Moreover, in chapter 5 and 6 I examined the unfolding of this mode of guidance in the urban autonomous scene and in the global protest scene. In this chapter, I want to examine the consequences of the mode of guidance proper to autonomous movements on long-term individual trajectories of participation and the forms of orientation underpinning them. Drawing on individual testimonies I am interested in unveiling the elements which allow people “to find the movement” and “enter it”, as well as those elements which allow them to secure their ties with it, once they have found it. In other words I am interested in discussing the way in which participants come to identify and interact with certain *entry-points* and *anchoring-points* inside the texture of the autonomous scene and how they construct their orientation around them.

The term “trajectory of participation”, which is the specific phenomenon I am interested in excavating in this chapter, is one that emerges from the analysis of political participation with the use of “life-stories” (Bertaux, Kohli, 1984). In particular in recent years the term “trajectory of participation” has come to indicate the paths which activists follow during their involvement in social movements (see for example Kirshner, 2008). When theorists talk about trajectories of participation they are interested in the connection between certain demographics and types of participation as well as the presence of different “times” or steps in the process of involvement. While adopting the term trajectory of participation I am instead mainly interested in stressing the fundamentally *transitional* character of this process, the fact that social movement participation and autonomous

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<sup>227</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

activism in particular need to be understood in the context of the broader experience of youth, or better of “extended youth” (Melucci, 1996a: 127-131). Thus, in the specific context of this chapter, the use of the term “trajectory of participation” implies that participating in autonomous movements is something akin to a process of traversing, of crossing through, whereby each trajectory of participation has a beginning but often also an end. What are the elements which allow activists to secure their orientation along this itinerary?

To answer to this question, in this chapter, I begin by providing a general demographic analysis of the participants I have interviewed, looking at their age, occupation and upbringing. I suggest how participation in the autonomous scene takes place in a “suspended time”, in which participants are severed from work and family commitments and can engage with radical political participation. Having time is a fundamental condition for participation reflecting the prominence of a “privilege of presence” whereby physical attendance often becomes the only marker of membership. Building on this temporal framework of analysis of the experience of participation I move to discussing the forms of orientation and connected communicative practices underlying different steps in the process of involvement: particularly *entry-points* and *anchoring-points*.

1) *Entry-points* are the channels through which people are introduced to the scene, to its culture, locales and events. The distant *guidance* provided by a variety of media such as books and the Internet constitute fundamental sources of orientation at this level. Nevertheless people also need the *accompaniment* of the presence of friends, in order to overcome the feeling of intimidation which is often experienced during early involvement.

2) *Anchoring-points* are the sites and resources through which one’s own political participation is maintained and regulated in the long term. An important role in this context is played by political groups, meetings, and lifestyle.

Starting with the early phase of involvement, I notice how most participants begin as “strangers to the scene”, and are initially familiarised with it “from afar” in mediated form, through books and reports on newspapers and TV, which are analogous to compasses and maps as means for locating the scene. The process of reaching towards the scene takes the form of browsing activist websites on the Internet and “googling around” to find about

possible groups or activities to participate in. While media and online communication in particular, appear extremely important when it comes to developing a preliminary orientation towards the scene, the accompaniment of like-minded friends constitutes in many cases a condition *sine qua non* for entering it. This is mainly due to the aloof stance against newcomers, which acts as a discouragement towards isolated participants joining in.

Moving to the phase of “sustained participation”, I argue that participants rely on the presence of what we could metaphorically call “beacons and coves”, the sites and resources which allow them to transform episodic interactions into routinised activities. Places and fixed meetings prove particularly important for such a purpose and come to act as something like temporal and spatial beacons that participants can use to avoid ending up adrift. In the conclusion of the chapter I reflect on the problems which are nevertheless encountered by activists in maintaining participation in the long term as a consequence of the “privilege of presence” and of the adoption of soft forms of guidance which have been documented in Chapter 4. Specifically the phenomenon of activist burnout is discussed to show how in this context withdrawal from the autonomous scene is connected with the severing of communicative engagement with it and orientation within it.

## EXTENDED YOUTH AND THE PRIVILEGE OF PRESENCE

“You can be a teenager for all your fucking life”, proclaimed a script I encountered at Haus Bethanien, a social centre in the district of Kreuzberg in Berlin<sup>228</sup>. That message suggested how participating in the autonomous scene is something which has to do with “being young”, but at the same time, how this condition is not simply biologically determined, but rather the result of personal choice. For Alberto Melucci, who has particularly stressed the connection between contemporary social movements and the experience of youth, contemporary societies are marked by a protraction of youth, whereby nowadays “[b]eing young is [...] more than just destiny; it is a conscious decision to change and direct one's own existence” (1996a: 126).

In complex societies an autonomous life-space for the younger age categories is created through mass education. It is the mass schooling that delays entry into the adult roles by prolonging the period of non-work. It also creates the spatio-temporal conditions for the formation of a collective

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<sup>228</sup> Fieldnote, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2009, Berlin

identity defined by needs, lifestyles and private languages. [...] The youthful condition, the phase par excellence of *transition* and *suspension*, is protracted and stabilized so that it becomes a mass condition which is no longer determined by biological age. The imbalances between school and the labour market and a note of stifling precariousness to the extended period of transition: delayed entry into the adult roles is not just freedom, but reflects also imposed and lived marginality, characterized by unemployment and the lack of any real economic independence. (Melucci, 1996a: 119-120)

Young people are pushed to remain longer than before in this “transitional” and “suspended” situation. And while this situation opens up some space of freedom and exploration it also condemns young people to marginality and precariousness (Melucci, 1996a: 119-120). Is the situation described by Melucci reflected by autonomous activists?

Looking at the sample of my informants it is evident how, while the average age is rather low (around 30 years), it is not as low as one would have expected. One finds in fact many adults and young adults and even some elderly people among participants. One of my interviewees was in his early 70s, another in his 50s, six in their 40s and many in their 30s. These demographics on the one hand confirm that as people get older, the more they tend to drop out of the scene. Nevertheless, on the other hand, they suggest an increasing diversification of age within antagonist movements, concurring with what is asserted by of my informants.

“Once upon a time one it was considered crazy if one was still in the radical Left after 27 years old”, insists Dario Azzelini, one of the animators of Fels (Für eine Linke Strömung), a libertarian communist group in Berlin. “In Berlin as in all Germany, the Left has been for a long time a radical youth movement. People *passed* through it. Then, when they were 27 they would start normal life. They would enter the Green Party or the office. We tried to break a bit with this. And now you also see many people in their 30s or 40s, who have their career but they continue to do a revolutionary and antagonist politics”<sup>229</sup>. A similar shift toward a less youth-only composition of the movement is testified by Brian, involved in the 56a social centre in Elephant and Castle in London.

They [the people using 56a] are of different ages and that is a nice thing of this place, the ages are reflected by the people who work here. So on Wednesdays sometimes the guy who works here is 20, and then there is a woman who works here is 65. And it does not seem complex. It does not seem to matter age here. I don't know if it is a new thing in society in general. When I grew up and I was 22,

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<sup>229</sup> Interview with Dario Azzelini – Berlin, 16<sup>h</sup> June 2008

people who were 25 seemed pretty old. It seems the scene is definitely *broken open* a bit more.<sup>230</sup>

The same situation is also confirmed by Jay, an activist who has been involved for long time in Climate Camp:

I think traditionally direct action was the territory of the young, but now you see a broader age range of people involved. The anti-road movement in the 90s would have had younger demographics, they were more concentrated among young people. Also in London you got older people who are single, who can live more like me. Because I am not married I have the *free time* to do this.<sup>231</sup>

This trend in the age composition of autonomous activists should not be taken as a signal that the autonomous scene is finally attracting “normal people”, “working people” or “family people”. Rather what we see here is that even those participants who are not young are characterised by youth-like life conditions, and in particular the availability of free-time, and lack of work or family commitments, as it is highlighted in John’s quote. What becomes apparent at this level is the crucial role played by an extension of that situation of “instability”, “freedom to choose”, and “reversibility of decisions” – which for Alberto Melucci constitute the hallmarks of the experience of youth (Melucci, 1996a: 119-120).

Mirroring this situation is the peculiar occupational situation of my informants. Despite the taunts of “go find a job”<sup>232</sup> made by opponents and bystanders, and the labelling of activists as “idle crusties” in the mainstream media, few activists are actually unemployed. In my sample only 20% declared themselves as unemployed, while 40% were students. The final 40% of my interviewees worked, but often found themselves, in part-time, flexible or short term contracts, all examples of a “precarity”<sup>233</sup> of labour conditions, which contributes in producing a situation of insecurity. This shift in the composition of movement activists to lower levels of unemployed people can be seen as a direct result of policies of welfare state reform, with the erosion of unemployment benefits and similar forms of assistance. Mark, an English activist for example observes how now “there are so few full time activists, because of the lack of the dole. Once upon a time there were a lot of full time activists. There was a hierarchy of unemployed activists, because they could

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<sup>230</sup> Interview with Brian – London, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2009

<sup>231</sup> Interview with Jay – London, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2009

<sup>232</sup> e.g. fieldnote 30<sup>th</sup> August 2009, Climate Camp, Blackheath

<sup>233</sup> Interestingly this condition is one which has been the object of much campaigning from autonomous movements, and in particular by Euromayday (Mattoni, 2009). The term itself stems from the Italian post-workerist debate on immaterial labour, which has already been reviewed in Chapter 2.

dedicate their whole life to it”<sup>234</sup>.

Those activists who are employed often tend to fall in the category of “cultural and social specialists”, which for Hanspeter Kriesi constitutes a “new middle class” of new social movements (1989). Web designer, social workers, campaigners, teachers, editors, copy-writers, university lecturers and researchers, artists and journalists are among some of the typical professional figures to be found in this context. These are all professions which often escape the standard of 9-to-5 work patterns, allowing people to manage their time more flexibly, and thus making it possible to reconcile work with political participation and other activities. Many people work in NGOs, which in certain cases can also bestow people resources to be used for their own political campaigns. “Now there are more people working in NGOs small or large, whose resources they can also use to continue their own activism” explains Mark. “Sometimes, if it is a sympathetic group, they can spend some of their time working for a campaign which is not exactly the NGO’s remit, but is within the wider, broader remit of affecting social change”<sup>235</sup>.

The occupation of my informants illustrates how the working people who participate in the scene, tend to be those who have, if not “free time”, at least that “flexible time” which is afforded by part-time and free-lance work arrangements. This is to a large extent due to the fact that participating in the autonomous scene is bound to the possibility of being physically present in the spaces and meetings in which “the movement gathers” – an availability which Marina calls the *privilege of presence*<sup>236</sup>.

I have heard and experienced this thing many times. If someone for example raises the issue of the difficulty of coming to meetings, the response which is always given is – if you are not there you cannot hope to make decisions. Were you at the assembly? So what do you want, is not that we can wait for you! This is one of the responses which you get more often. Which for me is a consequence of the *privilege to be present*. Clearly it is something which also depends on will. But not all the people can be there all of the time.<sup>237</sup>

Marina goes on to suggest that this “privilege of presence” is fundamentally tied to one’s own life circumstances, and that unemployment or the absence of family and work commitments facilitates participation.

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<sup>234</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2008

<sup>235</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2008

<sup>236</sup> This resonates with Kevin McDonald’s observation that contemporary direct action movements are characterised by an “ethic of presence” (2004: 589).

<sup>237</sup> Interview with Marina – London, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2009

If you are not a person that works little, that has not a family... in other words there are few mothers. You need to have a physical presence, but also a virtual presence, but definitely *you need to be there* and you need to have a certain level of privilege to be there and you need to allow yourself not to work. Which is possible in Britain for English people, who can have the dole, but it is not possible for people who have no rights. But it is like that also in Italy.<sup>238</sup>

The impossibility of satisfying the condition of physical presence can however be partly offset by access to “tele-presence”, that is, by exchanging e-mails and websites and contributing to discussion email lists. For example Marina notices how important it is for those activists who work to be in “a job in which you can stay online all the time. May be you are working, but you can check your e-mail every hour, which makes a lot of difference, because it means that you want to maintain a contact, that you have lifeline, an umbilical cord which connects you to this movement”<sup>239</sup>. Nevertheless, “being physically there remains something impossible to substitute with e-mails, forums or chats”, as Jay puts it.<sup>240</sup>

To sum up, from a consideration of participants’ age and occupation it is evident how participation in the autonomous scene is still to a great extent a transitional process connected with the experience of “extended youth”, which appears to be a broader trend in complex societies as suggested by Alberto Melucci (1996a: 212-218). Even though my informants suggest that the age of participants in autonomous movements is becoming more diversified, participation continues by and large to be contained within a “suspended time”, a phase of instability and creativity which, while lasting only a few years for some people, is extended and stabilised by others over a very long period of time well into their biological adulthood. The importance of a “suspended time” derives from the fact that participation in autonomous movements requires the ability to be constantly present at events and meetings. The pre-conditions to enjoy the “privilege of presence” however are ones which can only be satisfied by a few people, those who do not have family or 9-to-5 work commitments. This situation has important consequences for the ways in which people get involved and remain involved in the scene as we will see in the following sections.

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<sup>238</sup> Interview with Marina – London, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>239</sup> Interview with Marina – London, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>240</sup> Interview with Jay – London, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2009

## BEING BORN IN THE SCENE AND LOOKING FOR IT

One evening, while at a social centre in London, I approached an Italian activist from Rome and asked him whether he would be available to be interviewed for my research. I explained that it revolved around “how people orientate themselves in activism”. He replied half-heartedly saying that it would have been difficult for him to answer my questions since he was “born in the movement”, in other words, he had participated in it from a very young age and therefore it would be difficult for him to explain how one gets to know it. There are people for whom the autonomous scene and more generally the radical Left are from a very early age part of their direct horizon of experience, elements in their own lifeworld, which feel natural and self-evident. These are generally people who have been brought up in metropolitan areas and within leftist families. In many cases their parents brought them to demonstrations at a very early age. The experience of these people is summed nicely in the words of Giuliano, one of the main organisers of the Horus social centre in Rome. “I began in a *simple* way, coming from a family climate and a cultural climate of political activists, which introduced me to an interest for society and the world”<sup>241</sup>.

For the great majority of activists however, getting involved in the autonomous scene is not all that straightforward. Most are those who initially started as strangers or “outsiders” to the autonomous scene rather than being “born in the movement”. Exemplary is the case of Frank, active in social centres in London:

My group of friends was quite apolitical, I did not read stuff in school, and I started to read *Adbusters*, and there was only one friend I had, who was open to discuss globalisation and anti-capitalism but he was kind of very cynical, so he did not feel like doing anything. So I did not really know anybody who was into the more productive, direct action side. [...] I went to university in Leeds for a little bit and there was a social centre called the Common Place, and I ended up going to some gigs there and then they introduced me to everything which was in the social centre, like the zine library, free shop and stuff, *that kind of thing opened up before me*. And then I moved to London and started to... the library house [an occupied social centre] was opening up, and I went along to some of their organisational meetings. <sup>242</sup>

Or as Anna states, “to some extent everyone in his political life has been in a situation

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<sup>241</sup> Interview with Giuliano – Rome, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2008

<sup>242</sup> Interview with Frank - London, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2009

where you get there and don't know what to do"<sup>243</sup>. At the beginning of one's trajectory of participation the autonomous scene is often something outside of one's own direct horizon of experience – something people were exposed to through TV or in the press, but never experienced directly.

Looking at the dominant features in my sample, what is immediately apparent is how few people have had a leftist upbringing. Few are those who were brought up in progressive families. Less still are those who originate from militant families. On the contrary many complain about the conservative bias of their families. "I grew up in a very conservative family", Gary declares. "I had a non-political upbringing", says John. "It had nothing to do with my family"<sup>244</sup>, refrains Friedrich, a German activist. He exemplifies a common tendency among German activists who "talk about their family background being Nazis and all that kind of stuff"<sup>245</sup> as Hande, a German activist of Turkish origins, contends. However, as illustrated by the two testimonies of Italian activists at the beginning of this section, this foreignness to the autonomous scene tends to be less the case in Italy where autonomous movements have a strong sustaining presence due to the network of occupied social centres. Nevertheless even in this context there are many people who come from provincial cities and encountered the autonomous scene only when they attended university.

It is striking how many people have become involved in the autonomous scene after having moved to big urban centres from smaller towns and the country, especially around the time of their university studies. Gary for example recounts how he was raised "in a small town...near Oxfordshire. There was very little available at my 6-form college". The development of political interests often made these people feel "out of place" in the situation in which they were brought up. Mark notices how "[my political leanings] sort of left me in a situation of political *isolation* in the suburb I was in, but nonetheless it felt natural and normal to me"<sup>246</sup>. And when recounting his later experience and the bonds he created with other activists he proclaims that "[...] compared with the frustration I had with my friends from home, which I felt I had a political *distance* with and then I found people who felt the same as me, who felt political, who felt anti-racist, who felt much more of a *community* than those I had accidentally been *born near to* in my local village."<sup>247</sup>

Considering this extraneous quality – outside of both a leftist upbringing and

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<sup>243</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

<sup>244</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2009

<sup>245</sup> Interview with Hande – London, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2009

<sup>246</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8th December 2008

<sup>247</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8th December 2008

metropolitan life — that characterises the “life-story of participation” of many autonomous activists, it is not surprising that accounts of early involvement in the movement are coloured by narratives of exploration made visible in expressions like “I was looking for something”<sup>248</sup> or “I was striving to get in”<sup>249</sup>. During the early experience of political activation often this “search” is not a chase for something specific, but rather an unsystematic and tentative process in which participants through which participant try to find “their place in the movement”<sup>250</sup>. Helen for example recounts: “yeah, I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what it was... or which group to work with”<sup>251</sup>. In this phase activists advance by trial and error, passing through a variety of experiences before finally landing onto the autonomous scene.

This phase of the political itinerary is well illustrated by the testimony of Gary, an activist involved in a No-borders group. His indignation in face of what he felt was the absurdity of the war against Iraq was the flash that commenced his political itinerary. To oppose the war he turned to human rights NGOs, only to feel soon disappointed and disempowered by the “participation” that was on offer there:

I was lobbying MPs and writing letters and stuff like that. And again it was a very disempowering process. But I did not know at the time what else you can do. I mean these NGOs pretty much tell you what to say and then you have got to sign your name. So you are just kind of a tool for them. And I just realised how disempowering the marches were and how disempowering was the lobbying from these NGOs who at the end just want you to write letters and give them 5 pounds a month. I had kind of a period of re-evaluating and cynicism which lasted up till my second year at university, when I was about 21 or 22 where in that intervening time I did not really let go my ideals but I just was *confused* about what possibilities were there for action. <sup>252</sup>

After that experience he went to university in Manchester and also did not find a group which he shared political affinities with, before finally discovering the Camp for Climate Action:

What was in university was mostly not interesting, because it was SWP, orthodox socialists, and it reproduced the same feeling I had with NGOs. The Stop the War Coalition, they just want you to come at the marches, they want you to do very menial tasks like selling paper, they want you to

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<sup>248</sup> Interview with Marina – London, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>249</sup> Interview with Tobin - London, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>250</sup> Here I refer to the opening field note of the introduction, with the script of the t-shirt bought at Rostock which invite to “take a place within the global movement”

<sup>251</sup> Interview with Susan – London 12<sup>th</sup> February 2008

<sup>252</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2008

adhere to a party line. After that I decided to go to the Camp for Climate Action of 2006.<sup>253</sup>

Thus the camp for Climate Action was for Gary the real entry into political activity, the occasion in which he finally felt confident enough to approach the autonomous scene.

Protests and big political gatherings, such as the ones described in the foregoing chapter, in fact offer occasions for opening up the scene. Indicative of this situation is Mark's description of his participation in an Earth First! protest camp.

I was at university at Nottingham, somebody called me through EF!, and asked who could go to this protest. I had a very empowering experience there. Even though the action was unsuccessful I felt a revelation. I felt an immediate bond. I suddenly felt *I had found my place*, and I knew what I wanted to do and it felt right, it felt exciting.<sup>254</sup>

A similar account comes from Heinrich after his experience at the Rostock anti-G8 protests in Germany in June 2007. "It was the G8 when I finally decided that I was not interested in a university career, that I was not interested in a career anywhere... that was more or less always my direction. Because I got to know that people struggle and stay together and that they do it for years. I got to know people who have done it for 30 or 20 years"<sup>255</sup>. Protest events are particularly important for gaining other people's trust because they bring about a common situation of vulnerability, as suggested by Anna:

When you are in an action that consolidates everything, that makes you feel more part of something than anything else does. Because there is a certain amount of trust that gets started automatically. if you have been in that kind of situation you know that you are there with people, you know that they are trusting you and you know that you are trusting them because there is a huge risk.<sup>256</sup>

Nevertheless participation in protests is what for many constitutes the effective entry-point in the autonomous scene, and finally ratifies them into this realm after an initial and usually long trajectory of trials and errors. Before people finally go to protests, what is it exactly that draws them to the autonomous scene? What are the elements that *orientate* them towards it?

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<sup>253</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008

<sup>254</sup> Interview with Mark - London, 8th December 2008

<sup>255</sup> Interview with Heinrich - Berlin, 6th June 2008

<sup>256</sup> Interview with Anna - London, 22nd November 2007

## COMPASSES AND COMPANIONS

Examining the phase of early participation in the autonomous scene we can see how books, newspapers and the internet come to resemble meridians or compasses, because they do not only inform participants about certain events and activities but they also *guide* them there. The search for the scene, in the early phase of involvement is an experience that entails a huge amount of mediated engagement and develops what we could call a “distant acquaintance” with the movement scene. Books, newspapers, Internet – these and other media are prominent during this phase of involvement in which participants “are interested” in but have not yet entered the scene. Gary, for example, recounts how during the early phase of his political awareness he would browse “the internet quite naively and so you come across groups like Amnesty International, War on Want and this kind of thing. And I learned through them some stuff about the worst aspects of globalisation and trade”<sup>257</sup>. Friedrich had a similar experience. Political activation

[...] started in school, when I *read* something about wars and people who don't have enough to eat, and I was asking myself why, is it just? is it fair? And then other people in school had the same question [...] I started getting politicised and I started working for a newspaper at school. That is how I got politicised, of course by *reading newspapers* and stuff. *Watching news* and *watching movies*, you get interested in politics and you don't know what is happening and why is happening and then is other people and *you talk with them and you get politicised*.<sup>258</sup>

“Through my readings I had started to become a bit more radicalised really”, affirms Tobin, an activist who was involved in Reclaim the streets. “Actually through reading people like Naomi Klein or George Monbiot. And I started reading stuff on the Internet, reading more radical stuff there”<sup>259</sup>. “I remember reading Kropotkin and being instinctively anarchist without knowing much about it”, states Martin on a similar vein<sup>260</sup>; while Heinrich from Germany traces back his political conversion to the purchase of the three tomes of Marx's *Capital*. “I went to a second-hand bookshop with my girlfriend and I had still 50 Euros in my wallet and I invested them in *Capital* and then I took them with me and that kicked it off: I thought I should do politics”<sup>261</sup>.

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<sup>257</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008

<sup>258</sup> Interview with Friedrich – Berlin, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2009

<sup>259</sup> Interview with Tobin - London, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>260</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8th December 2008

<sup>261</sup> Interview with Heinrich – Berlin, 6th June 2008

The availability of books and access to the internet is particularly precious for those people who are brought up in provincial contexts because as Gary puts it “you are stuck here in a small town and you don't have regular public meetings, to arrange public groups as when you are in a city centre”<sup>262</sup>. Similarly Tobin recounts:

I did not really know anyone involved in that kind of thing. I come from a position of having no friends who were particularly politically active at all. So I was not in a social circle where you would hear about stuff. So I had to be quite *active*, and probably mostly I found the information I wanted on the *internet* at that point, on the websites of Indymedia, the Wombles and places like that. And then from there I started going out to places, and social centres.<sup>263</sup>

Despite the importance played by engagement with alternative media for becoming “politicised” and acquiring a “distant acquaintance” with the movement, the detached orientation that is obtained in this context is often not enough for securing entrance. It is not enough to be well informed if a person is still secluded. The role of “accompaniment” by like-minded people is often essential to cope with the sense of isolation that is often experienced by people approaching the scene. Anna recounts how during her early phase of involvement she was always going around “with my little friend, and we stuck together for some years in different things that were going on in Copenhagen and different groups”<sup>264</sup>. Likewise, Gary found a lot of support in the company of a politicised friend raised in a leftist family.

Q: Did you get involved together with friends of yours?

Gary: Yes. With friends in my politics class in my A-levels we talked about the war and we would go to small demonstrations and public meetings.

Q: And it was very important to go around with your peers?

Gary: Yes, I mean..at that stage I could not go around on my own because I was young and it was quite intimidating. Not so much intimidating. But I had one friend in particular, who is probably worth to build into the narrative, called Gabriel. We have grown up together at school. He was from a very leftist family and I was not. But we became very big friends and it was with me that I would go to a lot of marches and things and the anti-war stuff. We actually lived quite near some of the big bases like .... Brize Norton. These were the places where the American bombers like the B-52 were flying off to Iraq.

Gary: And he was important for connecting you with the movement?

A: Yes. His family was in the peace movement and their parents would go to demonstrations and they

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<sup>262</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008

<sup>263</sup> Interview with Tobin - London, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>264</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

were going. I mean people were going over the fence and into the airbase, committing sabotage and things like that. The kind of local peace groups were not heavily involved in that. They were kind of nice liberal, they were a peaceful peace group - if that makes sense - but they would go and give solidarity to people who were doing the camps there and other stuff. I suddenly became aware of being there resistance against this, that were people climbing over fences and running into bases. So suddenly protest which was something that had not really existed to me other than historical stuff, like the miners' strike, was something immediate... <sup>265</sup>

The presence of like-minded friends can prove to be a condition *sine qua non* for entering the autonomous scene, because of the diffidence encountered by outsiders trying to approach autonomous movements. In fact, despite the valuing of hospitality discussed in chapter 4, one often finds evidence of a conspiratorial attitude and suspicion towards newcomers, who are often subjected to the suspicion of being “a cop, a spy or something of the kind”<sup>266</sup>. For Jack:

there is a tendency, if one doesn't have a critique of the world that they have already formed, that they have come to the conclusions, that we cannot do anything if we don't smash capitalism, and don't smash the state, that you see more experienced people rolling their eyes. I can feel that if you are in that situation and you don't feel that confident, that would really turn you off and make you feel so intimidated. It is bad to roll your eyes if someone has not come to your viewpoint if you really want to build a movement. <sup>267</sup>

Similarly Frank observes that the phase of initial involvement

[...] is a very difficult stage to bridge for a lot of people. It is a social barrier, since a lot of it is done through groups of friends. It is the same kind of obstacle that you find when introducing yourself to any group. You know they have their history, they have injuries, it takes a while for you to establish a *reference point*, just to get to know those people. <sup>268</sup>

The extent of this closure obviously depends on the nature of each specific group. Non-violent groups such as the Climate Camp make explicit efforts to welcome newcomers. More militant ones do not seem to have changed much from the time when people would be interviewed when entering an autonomous group to check whether they were trustworthy and espoused the political line of the group. As Sonia, a German activist

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<sup>265</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23rd November 2008

<sup>266</sup> Interview with Tobin - London, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>267</sup> Interview with Frank - London, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2009

<sup>268</sup> Interview with Frank - London, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2009

recounting her experience in the 80s and early 90s, states: “if you wanted to enter groups you needed to enter tiny circles beyond the open meetings. You had to make interviews, you had to meet with two people and you will have to speak with them. And if the first round was OK you had meet them again and see”<sup>269</sup>.

The tendency towards suspicion is a predictable consequence of the illegal or “borderline” practices which are often organised in this context and which therefore require the maintenance of certain defensive stances towards the outside. Moreover, also in more friendly groups, there often tends to be an intolerance for the ways newcomers “unsettle the assumptions which are shared among the member of the group”<sup>270</sup>, as admitted by Rossella active in Critical Mass in Rome. In face of this situation, it is not surprising then that isolation and embarrassment are a common painful experience among activists during their early involvement. Some people recount of having taken months to get to know people better and win their trust<sup>271</sup>. Heinrich who would later become a key activist in Fels recounts

Initially I also felt very isolated and very lonely, and sometimes I have also not dared to go to a demo on my own, and if I would go on my own anyway, I would not find it too good. I would also find the demonstration interesting but I would feel as though... I think that people who are very active don't go to demos as individuals, but that they have an appointment with other people who they know. When you see them, they come in groups of 4, 3, 2 people. Are very few the people who are around on their own.<sup>272</sup>

It is not surprising then that as many of my informants notice how “often at meetings you see new faces but of those people you can be sure only a few will still be there in a week”<sup>273</sup>.

In face of the diffidence towards outsiders, fundamental is the role of “friendly insiders” – people who have been active for a certain period and are willing to introduce friends or acquaintances to the scene. Friendly insiders can prove very precious guides for outsiders, taking them through what is going on in the scene and accompanying them in visits and actions. Susan for example recounts how at the time of the 2005 anti-G8 protests in Scotland a group of her friends

were expecting me to know more than them because I was more involved. So I found myself in this

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<sup>269</sup> Interview with Sonia – Berlin 14<sup>th</sup> June 2008

<sup>270</sup> Interview with Rossella – Rome 21<sup>st</sup> September 2007

<sup>271</sup> Interview with Marta - Rome 21<sup>st</sup> September 2007

<sup>272</sup> Interview with Heinrich – Berlin, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2008

<sup>273</sup> Interview with Laura - London, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2009

role of being between people who were totally new to this sort of stuff and people who had been involved for quite a lot of time. I wanted to help out people had been involved and I also wanted to bring new people in.. so i found myself going between, like trying to encourage people to go to the camp and to go to certain actions, but also once I encouraged them to come I could not spend too much time with them because I had to be in the kitchen or I had to go to meetings<sup>274</sup>.

In turn, when Susan was at the beginning of her political itinerary, it was very important for her to know somebody in a group in London “who showed me the *roads* to different things and got me involved in things as well”<sup>275</sup>. Likewise Anna remembers how when she came to London “I met a woman who was involved in rampART when it just opened. When it opened she took me down there and met a few people at that point”<sup>276</sup> and she goes on to describe how from that contact she developed many others which helped her establish in the local scene.

While media are fundamental in obtaining a detached familiarity with the scene, the presence of companions proves crucial to actually entering the scene. Nevertheless, we should not see media and face-to-face engagement, *guidance* and *company*, as two neatly separated elements. Often it is their combination that creates the conditions for involvement. This is well illustrated by the stories of involvement of three participants in Rome’s Critical Mass: Rossella, Livio and Marta. For Rossella, the process of involvement did not involve a “mediated search” for the scene.

In that period I was working in a ludoteca (indoor playground for children) and I was cycling even though and all the parents know about, and one these parents who was himself a cyclist one day tells that he had bumped into some people who were doing the Critical Mass and he was very enthusiastic so he told me you should go as well, because it is really cool. So he gave the details of the next appointment that he had managed to gather and I went to it. There I got to know different people and I started to go for different months and during the spring the thing exploded<sup>277</sup>

Her friend Marta presents us with a different situation. Marta found out about Critical Mass from a guy she was working with in a bar and then followed up through internet searches. “Since I was coming everyday with the bike, he told me – so you should know as well about Critical Mass. I got curious about it and so I asked my brother to check it online

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<sup>274</sup> Interview with Susan – London 12th February 2008

<sup>275</sup> Interview with Susan – London 12th February 2008

<sup>276</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

<sup>277</sup> Interview with Rossella– Rome 21<sup>st</sup> September 2007

and he found the website and the appointment and we went together”<sup>278</sup>. Very similar is the story of Livio, who would later marry Rossella. He got to know about Critical Mass from his sister and then started researching it online.

I got to know about Critical Mass through my sister. She had the news of this thing in Milan because she had been working in Milan for four years. This thing had been created in Milan one year before than in Rome. She had known about it but she had never gone to it when she was there. So having discussed with her I decided to go online and I found the story of Critical Mass, that it had started in San Francisco. I checked and saw that it had also been organised in Rome and that the appointment was on the last Friday of the month. And I did not even have a bike at the time. We recuperated one from my neighbours’ cellar and we headed to the Critical Mass. <sup>279</sup>

These different testimonies show the complex articulations between individualised media interactions and embedding in interpersonal networks, which underscores the processes of early involvement. Cues coming from friends and acquaintances are circulated through word-of-mouth or transformed into keywords typed into search engines which in turn provide directions about where and when to go to “find the movement”. Thus interpersonal contacts and mediated engagement are not opposed but rather coexist and reinforce each other during the early phase of involvement. The effort required to get in does not end once one has entered, since activists also need find ways to not be swept away by the vagaries of one’s own life and the liquidity of the autonomous scene, as we will see in the following section.

### “STAYING PUT”: PLACES, MEETINGS AND LISTSERVS

Aside from “maps” and “companions” assisting newcomers to find the autonomous scene, another important element to be taken into account in order to understand the forms of orientation that underscore participation in autonomous movements is the role played by what we might call “coves” and “beacons” – those elements which allow participants to stabilise their participation and “stay put” in the autonomous scene. In analysing these coves and beacons we turn to the phase of so-called “sustained participation”, an aspect which has often been overlooked by social movement theorists, more interested in processes of recruitment (Giugni and Passy, 2000: 117). For long term, continuing

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<sup>278</sup> Interview with Marta – Rome 21<sup>st</sup> September 2007

<sup>279</sup> Interview with Livio – Rome 21<sup>st</sup> September 2007

participation, Giugni and Passy argue, it is important to possess “a sense of coherence and of a holistic view of one’s personal life” (2000: 117). Looking at the case of Yves, leader in an NGO working on Third World issue, they notice that:

Yves' three main life-spheres are intimately tied to political activism concerning Third World issues. This connection leads him to interact frequently with the protest issue (self-interaction) and helps him to constantly reassert the meaning of his commitment. All aspects of his personal life bring him back to his political activism, thus consolidating the meaning of his action. This process has two important consequences. First, it strengthens his integration into formal and informal networks, as he is still deeply embedded in his previous formal networks and large part of his informal networks are still related to Third World issues. Second, it consolidates his structure of meanings and his strong commitment, as he is locked in his activism, which he has few reasons to abandon. The outcome of this process is sustained participation. (2000: 119)

How do similar processes unfold in the context of the autonomous scene? And how can we look at this process in the terms of orientation?

Stabilising one’s own participation is a particularly important task within the autonomous scene. This appears to be related to the informal structure or even “structurelessness” which characterises them (as seen in chapter 2). In this context there is no availability of forms of membership which are available in more formalised contexts of social and political participation. The problem thus becomes how to maintain groups active in exceptional events such as “actions” and protests without formal mechanisms. As we will see in this section instead of membership cards and monthly bulletins, it is one’s presence in movement places and fixed meetings, as well as frequenting alternative neighbourhoods and subcultural events that comes to provide participants with a “common ground”, a space of co-presence, and therefore acts as an anchoring point in the movement scene.

The stage of early involvement, marked by the experience of exploration and wandering, often gives way to more routinised and place-centred patterns of participation. Thus, here we see an abandonment of the detached familiarity of the early phase of involvement, when people go to see different events and groups out of inquisitiveness or on impulse, as exemplified by Anna. “I don’t think I ever actually go and look for something out of the blue any more”<sup>280</sup>. Two phenomena are particularly relevant on this level. First, we can see a move away from the “explorative” dynamics of the phase of early

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<sup>280</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

involvement, when people go to see different events and groups out of curiosity, as exemplified by Anna's statement. At the same time, we see a shift towards more committed forms of participation, through which activists start to "feel a part of groups, and not just people turning up to things"<sup>281</sup> as one of my interviewees puts it. This suggests how the stabilisation of participation in the autonomous scene is a process that, as Sonia a veteran activist in Berlin describes it, "has to do with squats, with concerts, with frequenting certain pubs, with going to certain events, and constructing out of this sort of relations, structures, which is meetings, and then this more kind of style groups"<sup>282</sup>. In the second part of this section I want to discuss the nature of these two sources of orientation: meetings and lifestyle.

Organisational meetings are emblematic of so much that goes on in social movements. They are not only important to make decisions and prepare actions, but also to create emotional ties and foster trust among people who often engage in risky activities where they need to put their bodies on the line (Polletta, 2002). Within the autonomous scene meetings are particularly important because of the centrality of presence which we have discussed at the beginning of this chapter. There is no possibility of delegation and therefore if one wants to participate one has to be there. The experience of the activists in Rome's Critical Mass<sup>283</sup> reveals the importance of meetings and places for purposes of orientation in the movement scene. Rossella recounts:

We insisted a lot on the fact of meeting each other and not because you have to meet you for a particular purpose: meeting exactly because you are people who share certain things and want to do things together and then meeting up they inevitably produce such things. A meeting which is actually physical with other people has been fundamental for me in all this story and it continues to be and I think it is important for us.<sup>284</sup>

Having enjoyed the experience of meeting each other during the monthly Critical Mass, they decided to organise a weekly event called precisely "one-a-week". "We had found it so useful to meet each other, and to meet each other on the road that we felt as meeting once a month was not enough", explains Rossella. "So we decided to see each other once a week, where we would not be as many as in the Critical Mass, but nonetheless around 15-20

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<sup>281</sup> Interview with Frank – London, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2009

<sup>282</sup> Interview with Sonia – Berlin 14<sup>th</sup> June 2008

<sup>283</sup> Critical Mass is a cycling protest held in hundreds of cities around the world on the last Friday of the month. It is aimed at drawing attention at how unfriendly cities are to cyclists.

<sup>284</sup> Interview with Rossella – Rome 21<sup>st</sup> September 2007

people.”<sup>285</sup> The next step for the group was setting up a bike workshop, the “Ciclofficina Don Chisciotte”, hosted in a shack in the scrubland surrounding the ex-Snia social centre in Rome.

During the summer 2003, we saw each other very often and from that experience, a group was born with very strong ties, which continue to exist to date, because there was much to share among us... and in that summer the idea of setting up a bike workshop at Snia was born, because most of us was living in that part of the city at that time, in East Rome, where there were a big part of the people of the Critical Mass and of the one-a-week.

Rossella explains that they wanted to set up “physically a *place* where you could repair your bike and also... a mental place I would say. A place where developing projects, reasoning on the things we were talking about, beginning realising some things”<sup>286</sup>. Thus in strengthening the bonds of their groups these activists went from the monthly meeting of the Critical Mass, to a weekly event (the one-a-week), to finally having a place of their own: the bike repair workshop.

What we see here is the importance of some fixed points, precisely because of the situation of liquidity characterising social relations. Fixed meeting times and fixed meeting places come to act as anchoring-points, as well as a relief from the cognitive overload of individualised mediated engagements with the scene and other activists. For example, Rossella highlights how a fixed meeting point and a fixed meeting time proved fundamental to sustain the group “without need to use the e-mail and telephone”<sup>287</sup>. She notices how “after five years in the Critical Mass there are still many people whose telephone number I don’t have, because I know that I am going to see them somehow and I don’t even have the need to ask them this telephone number, let’s say”<sup>288</sup>. Interestingly in most collectives and social centres the main assembly is usually organised on Monday night, the first available night after the parties and the rest of the weekend, and the last available night before mid-week nights, often occupied by social and cultural events. Thus the weekly assembly comes to act as a temporal beacon, which regulates the rhythm of activity in the movement scene and provides participants. It acts as a form of anchoring in the way it is a stable, fixed slot in their diaries, and through setting up further events and activities.

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<sup>285</sup> Interview with Rossella– Rome 21st September 2007

<sup>286</sup> Interview with Rossella– Rome 21st September 2007

<sup>287</sup> Interview with Rossella– Rome 21st September 2007

<sup>288</sup> Interview with Rossella– Rome 21st September 2007

Apart from meetings, another way activists come to share a common anchoring in the scene is through the overlap between their own lifestyles. Specific forms of communal living and spending time together provide activists with a shared horizon of experience beyond explicit political activities. Living with together with other activists, as happens in squatting and forms of communal housing, allow participants in the autonomous scene to live in a situation where they do not need to look for a radical community since they already have “political people” at hand. Looking back at a turning point in his involvement, Mark recounts:

I moved out from a rented house and to a radical roots housing coop trying to get *all the elements of my life sorted out*, including how I lived. So I wanted to squat or live in a Radical Roots housing coop which is an autonomous community in all the major cities and countries. Which is also great for *keeping in touch* with stuff political, people talk about it, put leaflets in the house and stuff. <sup>289</sup>

“For me living in a squat was this experience of life and politics fusing together”, reflects Marina, an Italian activist, based in London. “The people you squat with being the same people you do political activity with, whereby there is no boundary between the two and you are constantly wandering together with your small tribe”<sup>290</sup>. Living together in a squat allows activists to better coordinate their daily engagements in one place, without need to find space for their political participation since they are already immersed in it. A similar situation characterises people living in “political houses” – legally rented houses occupied by activists – where inhabitants can rely on the presence of other people willing to go to demonstrations and other political events. Heinrich, for example, recounts:

Earlier it was simply that our flat was very political. We have done many things together. We participated together in the students strike, and we did lot of politics at the university. And we have gone together to many demonstrations. For us it was clear that if there was an anti-Nazi demo, then our flat would go together to that. But then it did not work any more. He did not want to come with me, any more, even though we were going at the same demo.<sup>291</sup>

Another way in which lifestyle comes to provide a common *grounding* for participants is the connection between politics and forms of alternative entertainment, and in particular squat parties and benefit parties which are set up to finance campaigns and

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<sup>289</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8th December 2008

<sup>290</sup> Interview with Marina – London, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>291</sup> Interview with Heinrich – Berlin, 6th June 2008

protest, and which are also occasions in which activists can consolidate their relationships. Anna reports how after having arrived in London she “was going to different parties at different squats, still trying to find out what was going on and things like that”<sup>292</sup>. Similarly Heinrich asserts:

When I was at university, parties were the most important thing. Now it has decreased a bit, but earlier it was always like that. I got to know most people through parties, and there I found the most information. I just go to “Poli-Party” (political parties) because of that. Now I don’t go that often because my girlfriend does not like these parties that much and she is not so much into politics, and she tells me, that in these parties you always speak of fucking politics.<sup>293</sup>

The existence of a shared lifestyles woven around specific places and events provides activists with a common grounding outside more explicitly political activities, thus relieving them from the strife of orientation, from constantly having to purposefully look around for other activists and for political information.

While this overlap between life and politics allows people to better “coordinate all the aspects of their life”, as Mark phrased it, there is also a risk of loss of contact with society at large since as Hande puts it, “it becomes a completely internal world. You become disconnected from the world outside”<sup>294</sup>. Moreover, the strong bonds created in the activist community can prove, as mentioned earlier, exclusive and fence off people who are not into the lifestyle aspect of autonomous politics. Exemplifying this situation is the story of Tobin who after having done a masters degree in social and political theory at the university of Edinburgh arrived in London eager to get involved in the autonomous scene. He relates that during the early moments of getting involved in those groups, “people were a bit suspicious of me because I didn’t dress like an anarchist, or talk like an anarchist”. He goes on to recount how a problem entering the activist community was that while he shared some of its politics, it was not part of his lifestyle.

*For them it was kind of a whole way of life. They live in a kind of very political squat, and hanging out in social centres, and were in activist groups and were putting on benefit nights. I felt that they were not particularly welcoming to those people who had slightly more ordinary lives and wanted to get involved in activism.*<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Interview with Hannah – Berlin, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2009

<sup>293</sup> Interview with Heinrich – Berlin, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2008

<sup>294</sup> Interview with Hande – London, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2009

<sup>295</sup> Interview with Tobin - London, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2009 -

Tobin, similar to others, highlights the risks of ghettoisation in the autonomous scene whereby it becomes difficult to distinguish between participation as a way of life and a purposeful political activity, and where people can feel rejected just because they don't have the type of gear or the hair-cut which is considered normative in certain contexts<sup>296</sup>. According to Gary:

You can occasionally bridge that contradiction and I think the basement did it quite well at its best. It would be getting in.. You sometimes go in there on weekday and there'll be people in their suits who just come down from their office work in their suits, and there'll be dreadlocked eco-radicals, fretting about whether we had enough soya milk. And there would be class struggle anarchists and there'd be people like me going in and asylum-seekers as well. That kind of space created a really fertile ground for communication across the different boundaries which would normally exist in the city. I should qualify that by saying that this was the Basement at its best, and at its worst it would just become a trendy anarcho-lifestyle hang-out. But at its best it bridged that.<sup>297</sup>

The risk is that some people might slip away from the movement scene due to changes in their lifestyle, rather than changes in their political convictions. Nevertheless, it is the existence of subcultural events that allows people who cannot find a common identification in the workplace to find a common ground. As Gary reflects, "at the end of the day you need something to hang onto. To rely on a subculture allows you to have an identity, a common language, common tastes. If you don't have that you don't have a *common meeting point*, a *common place* both in physical and metaphoric terms"<sup>298</sup>.

What emerges from the analysis of anchoring-points in the movement scene is that these points often coincide with "common meeting points", "common places", face-to-face occasions of proximity, staged against a world which abounds in communication at a distance. Here we find something akin to an "un-mediated centre" at the core of the autonomous scene, the contrary of the "mediated centre" which dominates society (Couldry, 2003a). At the core of this *un-mediated centre* lies a kernel of immediacy in which people see each other without having to be purposeful. Nevertheless the un-mediated centre always exists in interaction with the broader social space and media circulations.

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<sup>296</sup> Interview with Dario Azzellini – Berlin, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2008

<sup>297</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2008

<sup>298</sup> Interview with Gary - London, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2008

## KEEPING POSTED OR DROPPING OUT

If at the level of anchoring-points places have a priority over media, nevertheless mediated forms of communication retain an importance. They become significant more as sort of rebound and support devices, rather than as the central means through which participation is secured and reproduced. From the testimonies of activists who are highly involved in the movement scene, activists' websites such as the ones of social centres or political groups are perceived more as a tool of communication that does not offer much more information than what is available within the circuits of word-of-mouth, which are particularly dense in the de-mediated centre. An example is offered by Mary, an American activist in London:

I never go to the LCAP's website really any more these days. It is just a portal for people from the outside to see it, really. And... it is kind of showing what you want to show, what is happening, not really a community. It is good if you are going to a new city and you are trying to find information about it but not when you are already part of a scene.

Likewise, Anna asserts that she does not check out websites, because she gets to know already enough about the movement scene from her encounters with people.

I don't check websites like the ones of social centres often, or I check them once in a while, because most of the time there will be so much stuff that is happening anyway through word-of-mouth that then I don't actually want to know all the stuff which is going on. If I am bored and I want to know about an event and kind of see what is going on I will check it out, if I did not get to know about already through someone else.

As illustrated by these two testimonies of experienced activists, "checking out websites" is something you need to do when you are moving to a new city, getting tired with your existing associations, or in preparation of protest events as we have seen in chapter 6. But it is also important for those people who are periodically dropping out of the scene for a variety of reasons. Thomas' case is exemplary. He is an activist in his late 40s, is active in the climate change direct action movement in London and affected by bipolar disorder. He goes to many meetings and protests, and also actively participates in the organisation and in the production of flyers and videos. Media work is his favourite part of these activities. But during the "downs" he drops out of political activity for some months. Then when he finally emerges from the down phase, he begins frenetically to

reconnect to the movement scene by checking what is reported on Indymedia and other activist websites.

My relationship with the world changes dramatically according to the mood. When I am depressed I don't look at it [activism], when I am out of depression I become a bit of a news junkie following everything that goes on broadcasting, radio four, documentaries. That engagement with the world is dependent on my being mentally well. When I am depressed I don't want to have anything to do with it. When I am well is when it starts getting my attention. One of the way it works is when I look at Indymedia and I notice all the things that have been happening, while I have been unwell. I get a glimpse of *what I missed out of*, or what now seems to be occupying a large number of folks in terms of political issues.<sup>299</sup>

More important than websites, when it comes to keeping sight of the autonomous scene when is too busy to spend time there, are listservs. They allow a way to maintain a connection with numerous different groups. After people have been active in different groups they often continue to receive messages from them. Susan says, "it is just insane... I just look at e-mail after e-mail and I get to know about what is going just by looking at the subject of it – oh this discussion is happening in the feminist forum, or this discussion is happening in Indymedia, and then I just delete it... but at least I know what is happening"<sup>300</sup>. Being subscribed to a listserv allows a way to maintain an emotional connection with groups one is not partaking in any more as it is the case with Gemma who confesses she is still subscribed to the "university collective" she was part of while she was in Italy<sup>301</sup>. Moreover, they keep activists who have dropped out of the movement scene abreast of what is going on, sometimes pulling them back to the scene. A typical case is Tobin's who describes how he re-entered the scene after a phase of disillusionment by following an invitation to an event received in his e-mail box.

I did not get involved in anything for quite a lot of time. I would occasionally read Indymedia or stuff like that, but I was disillusioned, and did not feel I wanted to get involved with anyone. So I did not do anything for a couple of years and then I started to feel I wanted to do something again. After a couple of years, I thought I should whether there were any other groups I should find. I was still on the Reclaim the Streets list. Because I had been in the scene for a while and I had subscribed to different mailing lists. I stayed on those mailing lots and I kept vaguely up to date with things that were going on and then about the time I thought I should do something again, and I happened to get

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<sup>299</sup> Interview with Thomas – London, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009

<sup>300</sup> Interview with Susan – London 12<sup>th</sup> February 2008

<sup>301</sup> Interview with Gemma – London 12<sup>th</sup> April 2009

an e-mail on the RTS mailing list, about a one day conference or seminar thing about social ecology.<sup>302</sup>

This kind of rebound mechanism offered by the connection with listservs, allows for a return to the autonomous scene in the occasion of specific events.

While a mediated connection might be a way to maintain a distant attachment to the scene, this points to the issues and dynamics of “dropping out”. The constant departure of people from the scene is a huge issue of concern among many activists. For Mark, in fact, the main problem in the scene is “burnout and being overwhelmed, and when times are shit just going ‘this is really depressing’ and all those things”<sup>303</sup>. Franz, a 72 year old German activist based in Berlin, reflects how “throughout my political life I have seen waves of friends of mine progressively dropping out because they were going elsewhere or setting up families, or getting a job, or simply because they were getting too old to do certain things”<sup>304</sup>. While exiting the scene has to do with changes in one’s own life-sphere as it is suggested by Giugni and Passy, in other cases it has to do with exasperation with the contempt for newcomers. John who, as I have shown in the previous section experienced rejection when trying to enter the activist community, recounts:

I stopped going to those groups after a while. I tried seriously for six or nine months, to really join those groups. There was no trust, I had not made any friends I guess, that was a big factor. Why did I not? I don’t know that might have been my thought. I don’t drill on it, that does not keep me awake at night. I did not really make any friend. I did not feel trusted.

People who drop out of the scene often highlight as one of the reason the overwhelming need for continuous cognitive engagement which participating in the scene requires, as is well illustrated by Josip's testimony:

Getting out is liberating. Activism is like an octopus that goes around you alive. Getting out is really liberating. I really like that I formalised my relationship with people in academia and that formalisation gives you the freedom if you want to misbehave. In activism you don't know what is behaviour and what is misbehaviour, when you know where the boundaries are, then you can cross them and also when you when the boundaries are, you are likely to have a certain degree of freedom. There are certain constraints. It is like Zizek talking about the tyranny of freedom which is the proper totalitarian system. Because in communist countries you knew what you could say and what not.

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<sup>302</sup> Interview with Tobin - London, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>303</sup> Interview with Mark – London, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2008

<sup>304</sup> Interview with Franz – Berlin 12<sup>th</sup> June 2008

Activism is similar. It is the murky water of an extreme liberalism, that is the ultimate tyranny. In work you get money, in academia you have to give certain things back and that is where your commitment ends. There is more freedom to negotiate that very commitment and to realise that you can negotiate how much... Academia is very interesting. You can rationalise a compromise. With activism it never happens. In one it was very liberating. *It was not sustainable.*<sup>305</sup>

Here we see that it is exactly its liquidity and the lack of clear boundaries between participation and non-participation which make these scenes so unbearable. In this context, on the one hand one, a person is theoretically completely free to do whatever one wants, but on the other hand this freedom can bring about a sensation of being lost, of not being able to hang onto any formal structure. In this context, the negative consequences of the mode of soft guidance of autonomous activism become apparent. Because of the lack of formal and abstract reference points, participants can only find these reference points in situations of proximity. But these situations of proximity require high levels of commitment and investment of time. Therefore for those people who are experiencing shrinking time and rising commitments, the scene becomes something which is difficult to orbit around, whose beacons cannot any more cast their light on one's own life sphere, and for which "maps" and "compasses" can only partly maintain a sense of orientation.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I discussed processes of orientation in the context of long term individual trajectories of participation. I began by considering the demographics of activists to argue that participation in the scene is framed within a suspended time of "extended youth". Participating in the scene requires a "privilege of presence" which is available mostly to those who have lot of free time or at least flexible time, such as students, free lance and part-time workers. Then I moved on to consider the way participants maintain an orientation around two fundamental elements in their trajectory of participation: entry-points introducing people to the scene, and anchoring-points allowing people not to be washed away. In the case of entry-points, participants often rely on the development of a detached familiarity with the movement earned through a mediated engagement with it through books and the internet. In the case of anchoring-points, a series of fixed spatial and temporal points, such as places and meetings, allow activists to construct a spatio-temporal routine that relieves the effort required in the continual exploration of the early

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<sup>305</sup> Interview with Josip – London, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2008

phase of involvement. In the last section of this chapter I turned to analysing the experience of those people who move away from the scene or completely drop out of it. In this context often disengagement from the scene is paralleled by a disconnection from its means of guidance and in particular newsletters, which otherwise work as a rebound mechanisms allowing people to come back in after they have been away for a while. Those people who abandon the scene point to the excessively liquid character of the experience, the lack of formal structure and clear boundaries between participation and non-participation which make participation unsustainable in the long term.

From this discussion the autonomous scene is depicted as a space in which it is hard to enter into, due to the diffidence towards newcomers, and hard to stay in because of the structurelessness which dominates in this context. It is a space in which “people come and people go”, as some activists put it<sup>306</sup>, and in which groups are overwhelmed by the need to be constantly present. Alternative media and in particular forms of online communication provide new compasses and maps to find entry-points in the scene from “a distance”. These elements prove particularly important for isolated individuals who have no primary contact with the scene or its participants. Nevertheless these forms of communication are of not much use when it comes to finding “anchoring-points” inside the scene where politics and lifestyle are deeply interwoven. While this overlap between life and politics acts as a way of stabilising participation, it also discourages people who have commitments to family and work from participating in the scene.

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<sup>306</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007, Interview with Ludovico – Rome, 8th February 2008, Interview with Heinrich – Berlin, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2008

# CONCLUSIONS

*Not till we are lost - in other words not till we have lost the world – do we begin to find ourselves and realise where we are, and the infinite extent of our relations.*

*(Henry David Thoreau, Walden, 1854: 154)*

## INTRODUCTION

I began this work by asking what it means to find a place, or more loosely a sense of place (and of direction), in a global movement and in autonomous groups in particular, and whether such a thing was possible at all. I raised the question of how, in other words, activists orientate themselves in the space of collective action, and what is the role played by communication in this context. Throughout this thesis we have seen activists ceaselessly wandering through the trodden landscape of post-industrial cities following alluring guiding lights, signs, and trails inscribed in the urban fabric. We have followed them to-and-froing between protest camps and actions, universities and occupied places. We have seen them struggling to get to grips with maps, calendars, direction cards, action guides, bearing the promise of orientation. We have witnessed the effort activists need to undertake in order to maintain a sense of place and a sense of direction while traversing the “rebel archipelago”, the dispersed series of events and places in which the autonomous scene is incarnated. At the end of this journey we need to map out the different processes which influence orientation in the autonomous scene.

Now, after having explored different levels and situations of participation in the autonomous scene, and the processes of orientation allowing for participation in this context, I can provide some general answers to the research questions guiding this work. In this chapter, I proceed to amalgamate the findings emerging from the empirical analysis conducted in chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. I construct interpretive linkages between a variety of claims made in these chapters, focusing on the presence of a set of key themes: the dialectic orientation/disorientation, the mediation of immediacy, and the passing conviviality which characterises the forms of togetherness and spatio-temporal coordination in autonomous activism. After having summed up the different chapters and

the specific findings emerging from them I turn to these three fundamental themes. First, I assert that the display of orientation within autonomous movements is deeply tied to the situation of disorientation which marks the experience of participation in this context, as a consequence of the expectation that individuals have to make their own way through the scene. Second, I argue that the communicative practices guiding individual orientation testify to a mediation of immediacy. On the one hand communication in this context is constantly pointing towards contexts of immediacy and face-to-face relationships. On the other hand, given the ephemeral and dispersed character of the scene this can be perceived only through complex mechanisms of mediation. Third, I propose that the type of togetherness characterising autonomous activism is something akin to a passing conviviality, a respect in which autonomous movements reflect the condition of the liquid society in which we live (Bauman, 2000). This raises questions as to the sustainability of the practices conducted in this context. At the end of the chapter I assess the general significance of the findings of this research. Moreover, I account for the limits of this work, and I assess the validity of the methodological framework.

## SUMMARY OF THE THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL CHAPTERS

This work has proceeded to analyse the general research problem of the relationship between communication and the spatio-temporal coordination of collective action, by focusing on the process of individual orientation and its interplay with communicative practices of guidance, particularly the set of processes that provide individuals with a sense of place and direction in the display of collective action.

In chapter 1, I presented my theoretical framework. I began by reviewing different traditions of study of social movement participation, what I identified as the instrumental, the motivational, the expressive, and the experiential views of participation. Having opted for the experiential view I referred to Alfred Schütz's notion of "life-world" (1967) to define the space of participation of social movements. Then I operationalised this concept by adopting Haunss's and Leach's notion of "social movement scene" (Haunss and Leach, 2009), as a space of political organising and social aggregation, where movements interact with other groupings. Finally I proposed that what binds places and events within a certain scene is the presence of a common orientation among its participants. Orientation has been defined as practical knowledge allowing individuals to make sense of their place and direction in the lifeworld, and in different group territories they participate in. Orientation

is maintained by different sources: people's acquaintance with the surrounding environment (grounding), the personal connection with other members of their group (company), but also crucially by a series of organisational and mediated communicative practices (guidance) which provide participants with a shared sense of place and sense of direction.

In chapter 2, I made this rather abstract theoretical model more concrete by outlining the specific features of the autonomous scene, the scene of autonomous activism, including the set of discourses and practices established within autonomous movements. I proposed that contemporary autonomous activism stems from the so-called horizontal or anti-authoritarian sector of the anti-globalisation movement. I proceeded to reconstruct the development of a culture of autonomy as the result of the influences of anarchism, autonomist Marxism, new social movements and practices of non-violent direct action. Then I examined the points of overlap between autonomous movements, subcultures, and countercultures, and in particular their valuing of individual self-determination and pleasure. As a consequence we can look at autonomous movements as embedded within an autonomous scene (Haunss and Leach, 2009), a space which encompasses both the "permanent autonomous zones" of established local projects such as social centres, and the more ephemeral "temporary autonomous zones", displayed in protests events and other activist gatherings.

In chapter 3, I discussed the methodological framework for analysing the issue of orientation in the autonomous scene. I advanced an approach drawing from the tradition of phenomenology and grounded theory and I defined my relationship with the object of study as the one of a critical insider. Then, I laid out a broadly ethnographic method employing interviews and textual analysis, alongside participant observations, organised in multiple case studies. Finally I discussed the technique of interpretation based on situational mapping and narrative metaphors, which was employed in the coding phase.

In the four empirical chapters, which have followed the theoretical and methodological discussion proposed in chapter 1, 2 and 3, I have looked at different aspects and levels of the process of orientation, examining different events, places, and personal testimonies of participation. I have attempted to identify the deep logics of this process, its relationship to places and media as well as people, and the way in which it is underscored by a specific logic of togetherness.

In chapter 4, I opened the empirical investigation by discussing the nature of guidance in autonomous movements - social movements characterised by claims to

horizontality and the rejection of traditional forms of leadership (Jordan, 2002). I argued that this situation of leaderless-ness does not mean that the coordination of collective action should be understood simply as the aggregate of individual efforts of orientation in the space of collective action, as some claims about leaderless-ness seem to suggest. Guidance is not completely eliminated, but is rather made invisible, indirect, and “scenic”. It revolves around “setting the scene” within which people act, a scene where many trajectories are possible. I outlined how this particular logic of guidance is dependent on the voluntarist ethic and the hedonism dominant at this level, and is the result of the rejection of both the paternalism of Leninist politics and the self-ghettoising tendencies of the autonomous scene in the 80s. The consequences of this shift in guidance for the forms of orientation are deep: the experience of participation becomes highly individualised and dependent on the compatibility and overlap between one’s own private life sphere and the sphere of activism. Building on this general picture of the interplay between guidance and orientation, in the next two chapters I moved to the analysis of orientation in two scenes which strongly define autonomous movements: the “urban autonomous scene”, and the “global protest scene”.

In chapter 5, I discussed the interplay between guidance and orientation in the autonomous scenes of Berlin, London and Rome. I showed how these scenes are composed by concentric rings made of different communicative structures: the ring of bricks, the ring of paper and the ring of bits. While the ring of bricks embodies the project of an emplaced politics based in the neighbourhood and woven around a shared sense of place, the external rings (“paper” and “bits”) articulate more fleeting and less committed forms of participation, which tend to concentrate around events rather than places. From an historical perspective, urban scenes seem to be undergoing a process of dispersion as a consequence of gentrification and of the integration of the autonomous scene within mainstream society. In this context we see something akin to a “heterotopian diaspora” similar to the Bohemian diaspora discussed by C. Carr (1991). Sophisticated forms of online guidance such as digital maps and calendars appear to compensate for the spatial dispersion and the situation of crisis of occupied spaces in the city, yet also contribute in individualising orientation.

In chapter 6, I turned to the analysis of the process of orientation in the context of global protest events, focusing on the case of the anti-g8 protests in Rostock Germany, in June 2007, but also drawing insights from observations and interviews conducted at other protest events, such as the anti-G8 protests in Rome in 2009, and the Camps for Climate

Action held in the UK. I showed that within activists' participation in these events we can see evident parallels with the alternative tourist experience. Similarly to backpackers, activists face a space that is unfamiliar but at the same time also possibly a space of adventure and liberation from the constraints of their routine everyday life. While participating in these events, activists move within a "flexible company", an extended and unstable network of peers that provides them with transient emotional and cognitive support in a situation which is otherwise highly individualised. Reliance on this company is particularly important due to the nature of these events which are characterised by a high degree of unpredictability and confusion, as testified by the frequent episodes of disorientation which mark activists' accounts of their experience. This situation of disorientation is capable of creating havoc among police forces that constantly try to maintain control of space. But it can also generate a situation of inertia among participants who can feel left without a sense of direction, having to guide each other by themselves.

In chapter 7, I looked at the long term trajectory of participation of activists across these different scenes, the urban scene and the protest scene - paying particular attention to the experience of time and the question of presence which appears key at this level. In particular, I argued that the experience of participation that emerges from the testimonies is marked by instability and transition. Autonomous activism is to a great extent a youth phenomenon, even though the definition of "youth" is made more flexible in a world marked by the precarisation of labour and "life-long learning". As a consequence of this youthful character, the autonomous scene is a space people flow through, rather than stay in for life. For most it is only a brief and passing experience: few remain inside it in their 30s and 40s, and when they do so, it is mainly by anchoring their own private sphere to the sphere of activism, as with those people who are completely absorbed in the activist heterotopia: people who live in squats with other activists, eat skipped food, and frequent places and events linked with the movement. Apart from these extreme cases of anchoring inside the movement, long term participation requires what I called the "privilege of presence", an availability of free time or at least flexible time in order to attend to meetings and convivial situations in which the social networks underlying the movement are reinforced. Despite the increasing importance of new media, and the possibility for "tele-presence" they offer, co-presence celebrated in face-to-face encounters continues to be a necessary component of radical activism.

In the next sections I condense the specific findings which have emerged from the empirical chapters to discuss three overarching themes: the struggle for orientation

experienced by autonomous activists in the face of the spatial complexity of the autonomous scene; the highly mediated character of the orientation that characterises the autonomous scene; and the experience of passing conviviality that marks the forms of togetherness established in this context.

## A STRUGGLE FOR ORIENTATION

The fundamental question raised in this investigation is the working of orientation, and the relationship between individual orientation and collective guidance – the set of communicative practices allowing participants to possess a common sense of place and a common sense of direction in the display of collective action. The general element that emerges from this thesis is that orientating oneself in the autonomous scene is an intense process. It is an activity that requires much energy and labour from individual participants. It constitutes an aspect which cannot be taken for granted, but to which specific attention needs to be dedicated.

Throughout this work, in fact, we have seen in many occasions activists trying to get to grips with their position and direction in the scene. Looking at protest camps we saw them grappling with contradictory information, handling maps, guides and similar artefacts providing advice about how to participate. Similarly, analysing urban autonomous scenes, in chapter 5, we saw participants trying to cope with a situation of dispersion and instability, by using orientational devices like maps and calendars. Finally in chapter 7, looking at trajectories of participation, we witnessed the intense process of exploration that characterises the phase of early involvement in the scene, in which participants are often familiarising with a movement which lies beyond their normal experience. In all these different contexts, the experience of autonomous activism appears to revolve to a great extent around a *struggle for orientation*, whereby participants are constantly faced with the risk of getting lost or going adrift. In this section I want to inquire into the reasons for this striving for orientation and its significance for assessing the experience of participation available in the autonomous scene.

The reason for the *struggle for orientation* that characterises autonomous activism can be mainly found in the “horizontal” and “structureless” organisational form which is established at this level. As we saw in chapter 2, autonomous movements tend to reject hierarchy and leadership that are seen as authoritarian, even though informal hierarchies, or a “hierarchy of engagement” (Haunss and Leach, 2009) arise in this context. From this

anti-authoritarian position stems a peculiar mode of guidance, a mode of *soft guidance*, or of *indirect guidance*, which draws on the voluntarist principle that people should be responsible for their own trajectories in the scene. In this context participants are not directly sought for as happens with Leninist groups. Rather they are “attracted” towards an array of “convergences” such as activist events and social spaces, where the dispersed constituency of autonomous movements temporarily gather. In this context individuals are expected to make the first step, by getting interested, searching themselves for information and turning up by themselves at these convergences.

Adding to the lack of a strong guidance is the high level of spatial complexity that participants have to face when participating in such convergences. These spaces of aggregation and mobilisation sharply contrast to the unidirectional and almost martial character of protests in the labour movement. Predictable and linear formats of protest such as the march from A to B, are substituted by intricate choreographies, in which different parallel or “autonomous” actions take place, as seen for example in the G20 protests in London in April 2009 or in the protests against the G8 in Rostock in June 2007. The spatial complexity of these actions is geared at countering opponents' attempt to maintain control of space, at disorienting them, by making collective action mobile, flexible and unpredictable. Nevertheless, this situation can also turn against activists themselves who can easily fall prey of confusion and inertia, as noticed when looking at the feverish character of direct actions. Contrary to what happens with the strong guidance or “shepherding” offered by Leninist parties, here activists are mostly left to figure out their position and direction in the choreography of collective action by themselves, with the help of a variety of means of guidance. Protests come to resemble large scale role-play games, in which participants have to choose among different roles and scripts. While this situation opens spaces for creativity, it can also prove overwhelming for individuals.

Apart from the complexity of the choreography of collective action, another reason for the disorientation experienced in this context is the sheer instability of the autonomous scene, which is a consequence of the confrontational and voluntarist character of activist practices. As we have seen in chapter 6, participation in protests is a situation in which as Anna puts it “things are constantly changing, and you need to be updated constantly”<sup>307</sup>. Protest camps are a perfect icon of this ever-changing character of the autonomous scene, with tents being set up overnight in haphazard ways. Despite their comparative durability, urban autonomous scenes are also blighted by ephemerality. This is because of the short-

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<sup>307</sup> Interview with Anna – London, 22nd November 2007

lived character of many occupied spaces, as well as of many groups and initiatives within the scene. The situation of instability of urban scenes is made more intense by the crisis of occupied spaces, which provide with a precious fixed spatial referent in the urban fabric, as seen in chapter 5. This crisis is the consequence of an increasing wave of repression against these spaces, as well as of the weakness of the autonomous scene itself in a phase of latency of mobilisations. In this context events rather than places increasingly come to constitute the magnets around which the scene is organised, adding to the ephemerality of this space of action. At this level, autonomous activism reflects the until-further-notice character of contemporary relationships (Bauman, 2000), and the difficulty of acting together in a situation of uncertainty. Because of this ever-changing situation, participants are forced to keep constantly in touch, to be constantly updated about the places that are available, the events that are coming up, precisely because the presence of these events, places and activities is not guaranteed.

The problems raised by this overabundance of choices available to participants are illustrated well by the testimony of Susan who, as seen in chapter 6, after the protests in Rostock asserted: “there were so many things that were going on, so many actions, so many activities, that I felt difficult to decide what to do”<sup>308</sup>. What we find at this level is a situation of *cognitive excess*, which resonates with Alberto Melucci’s discussion about the contemporary experience of space:

[t]he surfeit of possibilities available to us far exceeds what we can effectively cope with and utilize, and our everyday life is choked with opportunities which we are unable to seize. One need only leaf through a holiday or a catalogue selling merchandise like computers and television sets, with all their options, to feel a mixture of attraction and impotence. Even if we are able to afford it, we could never go simultaneously to the Maldives and the Seychelles, to Florida and to the South of France. Likewise we could never watch the ninety-nine channels on our television set at the same time. [...] Our freedom of choice and the plethora of opportunities which are available to us tell us that our time is short, that we must always leave something behind; it is this dilemma that frequently lies at the source of the fundamental experience of frustration. (Melucci, 1996a: 20)

The experience of participation of autonomous activists sometimes comes to resemble this discomfort in the face of too many possible choices. Activists in fact often complain of being involved in too many things, being subscribed to too many mailing lists, participating in too many group meetings and campaigns. Thus at this level we see the

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<sup>308</sup> Interview with Susan – London, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2008

negative consequences of the voluntarism which characterises participation in the autonomous scene, in a situation in which individuals are assigned a variety of tasks of processing information, which in other movements are covered by bureaucracies and leaders.

In face of this complexity, instability and the lack of a strong guidance, participants are asked to be makers of their own way, to be their own pathfinders, of structuring within their own personal experience what is otherwise uncertain and unstructured. They are cast as “activist tourists”, as seen in chapters 6, to which a “menu of resistance” is made available from which they can ostensibly pick from at their own whim. Participation thus comes to resemble a personal patchwork of disjointed places, events, and activities, which can be made sense only within one's specific trajectory of participation. At this level autonomous activism bears the mark of the contemporary *individualised society*, as described by scholars like Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman, with all its positive and negative consequences. The “individualised society” is for Bauman a society in which individuals are asked to make choices, previous generations would not have been asked to make, in which people have to make up for the fading of collective structures (Bauman, 2001, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This need to make choices constantly can be liberating. It can make people feel they are themselves directing their own experience. It allows for participation to be an experience of pleasure rather than duty. Moreover, it can allow participants to better coordinate political activity with their own unstable private lives. Nevertheless, the quantity of different options made available can overwhelm people's capacity to process all this information. At this level the experience of autonomous activists resonates with Beck's assertion that “how one lives becomes a biographical solution to systemic contradictions” (1992: 137). Translated in terms of our own investigation, individual participants have to solve within their own personal itinerary through the scene the tensions which are irresolvable in its structure.

While autonomous activism purports to be open and hospitable and nurtures a mode of guidance which asks participants to intervene creatively in the display of collective action, its complexity can also prove an obstacle for participation. The intense labour of orientation required in this context can in fact discourage some people to participate in the autonomous scene, as we have seen when looking at the case of people dropping out of activism because they were overwhelmed by the process of participation. Instead of feeling alienated because they are given no choices, participants can feel confused by the excess of choices made available. The high level of cognitive engagement which is required in this

context can thus act as an indirect selection mechanism, which runs the risk of excluding those people who cannot be constantly present in the scene, because they have commitments of family or work, as seen in chapter 7. In a society marked by fluidity and individualisation, autonomous movements tap into the spontaneity and free-time which this condition make available. Nevertheless, they also reflect the typical problems encountered in a situation of liquidity, where the number of choices and the uncertainty of the situation can prove overbearing and make participation unsustainable.

## A MEDIATED IMMEDIACY

A second fundamental question to be answered at the end of this thesis is the specificity and prominence of different sources of orientation for participating in the autonomous scene: *people* (company), *media* (guidance), and *places* (grounding). To answer to this question we can begin by referring to the discussion on personal trajectories of participation developed in chapter 7. There I argued that, while media like books, political songs, newspapers and websites are fundamental sources of orientation for developing a “detached familiarity” with the scene in the early phases of participation, the *company* of friends acting as something akin to travel companions is almost invariably a *conditio sine qua non* to enter the scene. In this section I want to add some general reflections on how these different elements shape orientation in the autonomous scene, focusing on the specificity of media and places, or in Schütz’s term, Umwelt and Mitwelt for purposes of mediation, and postponing the discussion of the role played by people to the final section.

The general trend that becomes apparent from the different situations of participation discussed in this thesis is an increasing *mediatisation* of orientation. The ubiquity of orientational artefacts like maps, calendars, protest guides, and interactive activist websites testifies to the prominence acquired by *guidance* as a source of orientation. The space of participation comes to be heavily signified by a variety of mediated practices which “texture” the scene, by constructing *boundaries* to be crossed, *vectors* to be followed, *maps* to view the autonomous scene as a whole. This importance of mechanisms of mediation for allowing orientation in the scene testifies to how the scene does not exist per se prior to being communicated, but is rather the result of complex mechanisms of mediation that connect places and events with dispersed constituencies.

Among the different *logics of guidance* which have been listed at the end of chapter 1, dominant in this context is a *logic of mapping*, as it is illustrated by the popularity

gained by activist maps and calendars, as discussed in chapter 5 and in chapter 6. These artefacts provide temporal and spatial overviews of contexts of action which would otherwise be impossible to perceive as a whole, because of the complexity and instability of the autonomous scene, which has been discussed in the previous section. In the dominance of this logic of mapping we find resonances to Baudrillard's oft-quoted assertion that "the map precedes the territory" (1983/1994: 1). In Baudrillard's own work, this argument is tied with a view of society as being dominated by a hyperreality which substitutes reality. What is more modestly claimed here is that the "territory" opens itself to participation only insofar as it is made perceivable to participants through complex mechanisms of mediation. Contrary to Meyrowitz's famous argument that media are responsible for eliminating a sense of place (1986), here we find instead a situation in which mediated interactions are fundamental to regain a sense of place.

The importance of mechanisms of spatial and temporal mapping in the autonomous scene also needs to be understood in light of the situation of crisis which affects "occupied spaces", which constitute the *monuments* and *landmarks* of urban autonomous scene. This phenomenon resonates with Carr's discussion of the "bohemian diaspora", which he retrieved when looking at the artist community in New York City, repeatedly displaced by waves of gentrification. Faced with highly dispersed spaces of participation, activist calendars and maps, allow one to see the different islands of the scene, its places, events, and activities as part of a common "rebel archipelago". This phenomenon resonates with Stephen Duncombe's description of the zine subculture in which "dispersed geographically without the resources to build their own physical spaces, [zine writers] chart out a world of bohemianism, overlaying the straight world with one of their own. The Scene may not be a place but it is a community" (1997: 60).

The importance played by a variety of media in the construction of the scene resonates with Melucci's assertion that the contemporary experience of space is marked by a "cognitive extension" accompanied by a "perceptual contraction" (Melucci, 1996b: 17). For him:

Information technology has transformed also another fundamental spatial relationship, that of proximity and distance. Images bring us constantly into contact with spaces alien to our direct physical experience. Planetary space is by now a routine datum of our daily lives, and we increasingly relate to space that extend even beyond our planet. With the massive reduction of time required to transit great distances, and with the accessibility of practically every point on the globe, the symbolic expansion and perceptual contraction of space are further reinforced. (Melucci, 1996a: 17)

Coherently to what is asserted by Melucci in the autonomous scene, relationships of proximity and distance come to be shaped symbolically rather than being simply established physically. This has become apparent when looking at the role played by different boundaries in the protest camp, which transform distant cultural and political affinity into ephemeral physical proximity, or in the role played by posters as a mechanism of a demarcation signalling the presence and the intensity of the scene in different areas.

What role is left for places in this situation? The increasing mediatisation of orientation in the autonomous scene does not automatically mean a demise of the role played by places, as it is suggested among others by Mark Poster (2001). Places continue to constitute a central aspect in the experience of participation, and as we have seen in chapter 6, when looking at social centres and squats in the autonomous city, places and gatherings acquire an almost sacral character. As argued in chapter 7 at the core of the scene, we find intimate contexts of immediacy, “un-mediated centres” which turn “the myth of the mediated centre” upside down (Couldry, 2003a: 90). Despite the high level of mediatisation in the scene, places continue to constitute the “magnets”, the foci of communication and participation in the scene, or “fixtures” in the texture (Jansson, 2006) of the autonomous scene. This phenomenon is coherent with the valuing of immediacy which underscores the “culture of autonomy”, as discussed in chapter 2. Moreover, it reflects the important orientational role played by places at this level.

Places in fact come to constitute precious fixed points of reference or beacons in the otherwise uncertain landscape of contemporary cities, which relieve activists from the effort of ongoing exploration (Seamon, 1979: 56). They provide with a grounding in the “terrain of resistance” (Routledge, 1996), which proves fundamental for stabilising participation in the long term. In fact, as we have seen in chapter 7, while during the phase of early involvement, activists rely to a great extent on the guidance offered by different alternative media, during the phase of sustained involvement, places, along with fixed meetings and groups, become crucial. This aspect of the working of the scene reflects Melucci’s assertion that “multidimensional experience devoid of *fixed spatial referents* creates bewilderment and rootlessness” (1996b: 17). In face of a societal situation which offers few fixed referents, those which are available become “hooks” around which participants can weave time-space routine, which allow them to stabilise their experience of participation. Thus the autonomous scene returns the picture of a context of interaction, in which despite the increasing penetration of new media, places continue to remain fundamental beacons which relieve activists from the effort of ongoing exploration.

What emerges here is thus not simply a withering away of places, as a consequence of processes of mediation (Meyrowitz, 1985), but rather a deep re-articulation of the relationships between media, places, and the people who engage with them. Since participants are highly dispersed in space, alternative media are the only element which can unite them, constructing a common orientation. In turn such mediated orientation is aimed towards a series of concrete places and events in which the distant affinity between individuals can be, even though only ephemerally, turned into actual physical proximity. In this context, places, *rather than being points of departure of collective action, appear in the guise of points of arrival*. This peculiar role acquired by places also reflects the fact that the orientation of autonomous activists is not directed towards utopia, but rather towards heterotopia; not towards an abstract place which while being in no place, is potentially everywhere, but towards the specific alternative permanent and temporary autonomous zones which are already available and open to participation within the activist life-world; in the “revolution of the everyday”.

Places become *destination points* for an intentional community of people who are interested in the same issues or topics more than local platforms of political organisation. Thus the autonomous scene reflects the fact that “a geography of the landscape has given way to a geography of the mind” (Melucci, 1996b: 17). Access to moments of immediacy becomes bound to the presence of a variety of processes of mediation which bind together “bubbles” of immediacy with other bubbles and with the people gathering in them. This situation sharply contrasts with the vision of immediacy propagated by authors who have deeply influenced the culture of autonomy such as Raoul Vaneigem for whom, moments of immediacy would have been an antidote to the abstraction and intense mediation of life which characterise modern societies (Vaneigem, 1967, Vaneigem, Nicholson-Smith, 1983). In spite of this and similar visions, in the autonomous scene immediacy comes to be premised on mechanisms of mediation. The autonomous scene thus returns the image of a space punctuated by un-mediated centres, *bubbles of immediacy*, which are enveloped by complex layers of mediation. In conclusion, the autonomous scene centres on moments of immediacy, but access to these moments of immediacy is deeply mediated.

## A PASSING CONVIVIALITY

The final question to be answered regards the nature of the narrative of togetherness underpinning participation in the autonomous scene. To answer this question I want to

start from the role played by another source of orientation beside the *guidance* offered by media and the *grounding* offered by places discussed in the previous section: the *company* of other people in the scene. A key element that emerges from this thesis is the importance of personal contacts with other people in the scene, in order to maintain an orientation within it. At different points in this thesis, interviewees have remarked on the exquisitely personalised character of the participation available in this context. “You get to know people that is how you go about it” as Anna put it in chapter 7. People come to act as travel companions who can help people to avoid getting lost.

This situation is in fact coherent with the *personalism* which characterises the culture of autonomy, as discussed in chapter 2, and also with recent analyses of social movements which identify in social networks the fundamental aspect to understand collective action (Diani, McAdam, 2003). Here, the *company* of other people provides not only emotional connection with other activists but also with spatial and temporal points of reference for orientating oneself. As we have seen when looking at occupied spaces in the city, access to certain flows of reserved information is only possible when one is connected to core activist communities. Moreover, as seen in the context of protest camps, connection to a group of friends allows participants to process the contradictory information which is circulated in this context, and to maintain a sense of direction in the choreography of mass direct actions.

The construction and maintenance of the companies that populate the autonomous scene is based on the existence of mutual trust and recognition, because of the risky character of the activities which are conducted in this context. As we have seen in chapter 5 and 6, gaining recognition and being accepted by the activist community, is to a great extent tied with attendance of contexts of proximity such as activist places and events. Nevertheless, in recent years online forms of communication have become increasingly responsible for reproducing social networks beyond the temporally and spatially restricted locales which lay at the core of the scene. Within the autonomous scene as in other contexts, social networks are increasingly mediated, often computer-mediated. They are networks which tend to be woven more around the same alternative media, rather than around the same places, around the same activist or social networking websites, rather than around the same neighbourhood bars and the same activist places.

The flexible company is thus a type of company which can only exist thanks to the connectivity offered by mobile media and the Internet. As we saw when looking at protest camps, when this condition is not available, flexible companies collapse and individuals get

lost. In this context, participants are constantly torn between a *mediated individualism*, which is made possible by the capabilities offered by modern technologies of communication and an *immediate communitarianism* constructed around fleeting contexts of proximity. As we have seen particularly in chapter 6, participants constantly try to juggle their connection with specific groups with their desire to move around “autonomously” from other people and groups. Thus the togetherness which characterises participation in the autonomous scene is akin to a *passing conviviality*, in which the intimacy of encounter with other people is constantly threatened by the possibility of individuals to withdraw from it. This situation recalls what McDonald has described as a passage from solidarity to “fluidarity” within activist groups (2002), in which strong attachment to groups is substituted by a fleeting engagement.

What we find here are thus forms of togetherness which are located in between the two ideal-types of the swarm (Hardt, Negri, 2005: 21-22) or the smart mob (Rheingold, 2005), and the neo-tribe (Maffesoli, 1996). Individuals coordinate themselves with one another at a distance, by using sophisticated forms of mediated interaction, made possible by modern technologies of communication. Nevertheless, they continue to feel the need for contexts of proximity, gatherings, assemblies, where a highly inclusive and almost tribal experience of community can be attained. Within the autonomous scene we can see swarms continually morphing into tribes, and in turn tribes dispersing into swarms, as it happens most clearly in the context of global protest events discussed in chapter 6. Thus the type of togetherness which is celebrated within the autonomous scene, is an ephemeral and passing one, in which physical gatherings seem to exorcise the dispersedness which constitutes the normal condition of life for participants.

## OPEN QUESTIONS

This research offers a complex picture of the experience of autonomous activism. It provides an image of a sense of dispersion which is exorcised by attendance at moments of immediacy. It suggests that communication in contemporary activism does not have much to do with the construction of representations, but rather with the structuring of experience. It advances a substantive theory of the spatio-temporal co-ordination of groups, which sees individual orientation as the decisive process, and identifies media, people, and places as the differential sources of such orientation. Moreover, it shows how different forms of practical communication, which have so far been neglected in media and

cultural analysis, can be approached in novel and revealing ways.

Despite, these achievements, this investigation also presents a variety of limits, which apart from my own failings are the side-effects of specific strategic choices made during the fieldwork, and to the prioritisation of certain aspects over others. Let me detail some of the problems that have been encountered at this level. First and foremost, concentrating on the internal processes in the autonomous scene, this thesis has provided with limited insights about the interaction between the autonomous scene and other cultural and political scenes. Secondly, I tended to present the autonomous scene as a rather unitary assemblage, in so doing overlooking the presence of micro-scenes within the larger autonomous scene. Thirdly, because of my interest in the common features of the autonomous scene across different national contexts, I paid limited attention to the geographic difference in the forms of orientation and guidance. Fourth, my analysis of the autonomous scene and of the forms of orientation and guidance which are established in it, does not examine in depth the connection between different levels of engagement in the scene and different types of orientation, apart from the general remarks advanced in chapter 7. Finally, the claims I made are based on a relatively small sample of the autonomous scene and of its participants. Some of the claims proposed here might well apply to certain specific local scenes, or protest events, and might instead prove wrong in other cases. Nevertheless, it is my contention that my discussion identifies correctly a series of general trends.

Some of these limitations are also due to the multifaceted methodology which has been advanced in this investigation, which attempts to capture both the level of individual experience, and the one of collective experience, by using interviews alongside participant observation. Some readers might feel I should have concentrated on one of these two aspects, and might accuse my research of wanting to be all encompassing and underscored by a problematic holism. It is my contention however, that in order to explore a complex analytical concept such as the one of orientation, a wider-ranging exploratory research was required.

Many are also the issues that remain unresolved or only partly resolved after this investigation. First, the role played by different logics of guidance in texturing the scene in different ways has only been discussed in passing. Second, the discussion of the narratives of togetherness underscoring participation in the autonomous scene has only identified some general traits of this process. Third, despite my attempt to historicise my study, by using the category of “post-anti-globalisation”, it has been only partly clarified to what

extent the forms of orientation and guidance which we see in this context are time-specific. Notwithstanding this limits my hope is to have advanced our understanding of the way in which communicative processes structure the experience of participation in social movements.

Future research should refine the conceptual model of analysis of orientation that has been advanced in chapter 1. This could be done by looking at other social groupings, including other social movements or subcultural groups. The validity of the claims that have been made in this research should be tested, and their ability to be generalised assessed. Comparative studies of the orientation of very different social groups, such as localised community groups and nationwide trade unions would prove particularly useful in this context. Research of this type could further excavate the connection between communication and spatio-temporal co-ordination, which in my contention is a fundamental phenomenon to understand contemporary societies marked by fluidity and dispersion.

This research possibly opens more questions than the ones it is able to answer. It calls for further trips and supplementary explorations through which to reconstruct the complex mechanisms which allow for the “miracle” of spatio-temporal coordination of social groups. Closing this chapter we can advance a set of possible new research questions as an invitation for further investigations and a way of looking back at the ground this thesis has already covered. To what extent is an experience of disorientation a common trait of the contemporary human condition, beyond the limited case of autonomous activism? What are the ways through which people can be relieved from the blight of disorientation? But also: what are the positive aspects of this experience of disorientation? In fact, as Thoreau suggests in the quote opening this section, disorientation also opens a space for creativity and self-reflection. It can be a springboard for starting anew, both for social movements and for the researchers studying them.

## CONCLUSION

In these concluding remarks I have connected the different findings emerging from the previous chapters, weaving them around overarching narratives. I began by summing up the content of the different chapters, and the arguments developed in them. Then I turned to identifying different key themes that can help us interpret the process of orientation in the autonomous scene.

I began by discussing the *struggle for orientation* that characterises the experience of autonomous activism. In this context, participants have to put much effort into maintaining a sense of direction and a sense of place in the display of collective action. This situation is chiefly a consequence of the peculiar mode of soft guidance, which is dominant in the autonomous scene. Participants are asked to be makers of their own way and are faced with a variety of options to pick from and choices to be made. While this situation allows for a creative intervention of participants in the display of collective action it can also prove cognitively overbearing and raise the barriers to participation. Here there are clear resonances with the theory of the individualised society advanced by Bauman (2001).

In the following section, I discussed the role played by different sources of orientation in the autonomous scene, focusing on media and places. I claimed that, in the autonomous scene, orientation is becoming increasingly mediated. Means of guidance are heavily involved in texturing the space of the scene, thus suggesting possible paths and affording specific kinds of interaction. Nevertheless, the role played by places as magnets of political action has not completely withered away. They continue to constitute important fixed referents in space, but also become more points of arrival to rather than of departure from collective action.

Then, I turned to the analysis of the logic of togetherness that underlies the autonomous scene. I looked at the role played by company as a fundamental source of orientation in the scene. This company is, nevertheless, increasingly one which is mediated rather than immediate. In a context in which participants are highly dispersed, they develop affinity through the same media, rather than through the same places. The experience of participation here faces a risk of “encapsulation” in which, because of the mediated character of the immediacy which is available in this context, isolated individuals run the risk of transforming themselves into an isolated community.

In then final section, I reflected on the achievements and limits of my investigation and I suggested possible paths for future research, to assess the validity of the model of analysis developed looking at the autonomous scene, when applied to other scenes and social groups.

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## APPENDIX

### Interviews

*Almost all the interviews were conducted in confidentiality and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. Where original names have been maintained name and surname is provided.*

	Name	M/F	Age	Occupation	Interview date	City	Nationality
1	Anna	F	23	Student	22 <sup>nd</sup> November 2007	London	Danish
2	Susan	F	24	Student	12 <sup>th</sup> February 2008	London	British
3	Albert	M	32	Web designer	4 <sup>th</sup> January 2008	London	British
4	Konrad	M	35	Editor	25 <sup>th</sup> November 2008	London	Danish
5	Tobin	M	32	Unemployed	15 <sup>th</sup> January 2009	London	British
6	Mark	M	36	Unemployed	8 <sup>th</sup> December 2008	London	British
7	Thomas	M	35	Social worker	8 <sup>th</sup> October 2009	London	British
8	Tobin	M	42	Unemployed	12 <sup>th</sup> January 2009	London	British
9	Jay	M	39	Videomaker	30 <sup>th</sup> April 2009	London	British
10	Marina	F	28	Social Worker	20 <sup>th</sup> January 2009	London	Italian
11	Rosy	F	33	Social Worker	6 <sup>th</sup> October 2008	London	British
12	Josip	M	32	Programmer	8 <sup>th</sup> October 2008	London	Croatian
13	Brian	M	39	Unemployed	25 <sup>th</sup> January 2009	London	British
14	Laura	F	26	Student	13 <sup>th</sup> February 2009	London	US
15	Peter	M	21	Student	12 <sup>th</sup> March 2009	London	British
16	Frank	M	22	Student	12 <sup>th</sup> March 2009	London	British
17	Asan	M	28	Artist and curator	2 <sup>nd</sup> June 2007	London	British
18	Lewis	M	28	Student	18 <sup>th</sup> June 2007	Sussex	Canadian
19	Marco	M	33	Researcher	12 <sup>th</sup> September 2009	London	Italian

20	David	M	26	Student	12 <sup>th</sup> March 2008	London	Maltese
21	Ludovico	M	37	Shopkeeper	8 <sup>th</sup> February 2008	Rome	Italian
22	Giuliano	M	32	Journalist	14 <sup>th</sup> February 2008	Rome	Italian
23	Maurizio	M	36	Civil servant	17 <sup>th</sup> February 2008	Rome	Italian
24	Manuele	M	23	Student	4 <sup>th</sup> March 2008	Rome	Italian
25	Zoe	F	39	Designer	12 <sup>th</sup> March 2008	Milan	Italian
26	Francesca	F	33	NGO campaigner	18 <sup>th</sup> March 2008	Rome	Italian
27	Tatjana	F	42	NGO campaigner	23 <sup>rd</sup> March 2008	Rome	Italian
28	Tommaso	M	35	NGO campaigner	23 <sup>rd</sup> March 2008	Rome	Italian
29	Livio	M	40	Engineer	21 <sup>st</sup> September 2007	Rome	Italian
30	Marta	F	28	Social worker	21 <sup>st</sup> September 2007	Rome	Italian
31	Rossella	F	32	Waitress	21 <sup>st</sup> September 2007	Rome	Italian
32	Vale	F	37	Unemployed	23 <sup>rd</sup> March 2008	Rome	Italian
33	Alex Foti	M	42	Editor	20 <sup>th</sup> August 2009	Milan	Italian
34	Gemma	F	26	Researcher	14 <sup>th</sup> February 2009	London	Italian
35	Heinrich	M	33	Campaigner	6 <sup>th</sup> June 2008	Berlin	German
36	Franz	M	73	Pensioner	12 <sup>th</sup> June 2008	Berlin	German
37	Sonia	F	35	Researcher	14 <sup>th</sup> June 2008	Berlin	German
38	Dario Azzelini	M	36	Unemployed	16 <sup>th</sup> June 2008	Berlin	German
39	Giulia	F	34	Event organiser	17 <sup>th</sup> June 2008	Berlin	Italian
40	Sandy	M	42	Graphic designer	30 <sup>th</sup> April 2009	Berlin	German
41	Pedro	M	28	Unemployed	17 <sup>th</sup> June 2008	Berlin	Spanish
42	Hande	F	32	Researcher	5 <sup>th</sup> March 2009	Berlin	German
43	Hannah	M	38	Unemployed	28 <sup>th</sup> April 2009	Berlin	German
44	Friedrich	M	38	Unemployed	29 <sup>th</sup> April 2009	Berlin	German
45	Stefan	M	33	Unknown	12 <sup>th</sup> April 2008	Zurich	Swiss
46	Gregor	M	35	Unknown	14 <sup>th</sup> April 2008	London	Austrian
47	Steven	M	35	Unemployed	14 <sup>th</sup> June 2007	London	Australian

## Fieldnotes

*Field notes were taken immediately after conducting observations at different events and places and were later elaborated.*

	Date	Place	Notes
1	30 <sup>th</sup> May 2007	Rostock, Germany	Observation conducted at the Frieda activist media centre.
2	2nd June 2007	Rostock, Germany	Observation conducted at the North Rostock Camp.
3	5th June 2007	Rostock, Germany	Observation conducted at the Reddelich camp.
4	6th June 2007	Rostock, Germany	Observation conducted at the Reddelich camp.
5	7th June 2007	Rostock, Germany	Observation conducted at the mass direct action against the "red zone".
6	9 <sup>th</sup> June 2007	Rostock, Germany	Observations conducted at the Reddelich camp.
7	12 <sup>th</sup> August 2007	London	Observation conducted at Climate Camp against the expansion of Heathrow airport in London.
8	16 <sup>th</sup> August 2007	London	Observation conducted at Climate Camp against the expansion of Heathrow airport.
9	18 <sup>th</sup> January 2008	London	Observation conducted at rampART social centre.
10	28th February 2008	Rome	Observation conducted at Forte Prenestino social centre.
11	8 <sup>th</sup> March 2008	Rome	Observation conducted at ex-SNIA social centre.
12	14 <sup>th</sup> March 2008	Rome	Observation conducted at ESC social centre.
13	14 <sup>th</sup> June 2008	Berlin	Observation conducted in the streets of Friedrichshain.

14	16 <sup>th</sup> June 2008	Berlin	Observation conducted in the streets of Kreuzberg.
15	16 <sup>th</sup> June 2008	Berlin	Observation conducted at Haus Bethanien.
16	22 <sup>nd</sup> June 2008	Berlin	Observation conducted at the demonstration "Dreams need free spaces" in Kreuzberg.
17	12 <sup>th</sup> July 2008	London	Observation conducted at Bowl Court social centre.
19	14 <sup>th</sup> October 2008	London	Observation conducted at the Anarchist book fair London.
20	12 <sup>th</sup> November 2008	London	Observation conducted at rampART social centre.
21	22 <sup>nd</sup> February 2009	London	Observation conducted at rampART social centre.
22	29 <sup>th</sup> March 2009	London	Observation conducted at rampART social centre.
23	2 <sup>nd</sup> April 2009	London	Observation conducted at The G20 protests in the City.
24	26 <sup>th</sup> April 2009	Berlin	Observation conducted at Haus Bethanien Berlin.
25	28 <sup>th</sup> April 2009	Berlin	Observation conducted in the streets of Kreuzberg.
26	30 <sup>th</sup> August 2009,	London	Observation conducted at the Blackheath Climate Camp.