Liminal adolescence or entrapping marginality?

In his memoir, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, the poet Nick Flynn wrote:

I worked with the homeless from 1984 until 1990. In 1987 my father became homeless, and remained homeless for nearly five years ... Sometimes I’d see my father, walking past my building on his way to another nowhere. I could have given him a key, offered a piece of my floor. A futon. A bed. But I never did. If I let him inside I would become him, the line between us would blur, my own slow-motion car wreck would speed up ... If I went to the drowning man the drowning man would pull me under. I couldn’t be his life raft (Flynn 2004: 10–11).

I begin this chapter with this quote because it captures the fluidity between marginality and centrality in an activist’s biography and how social movement subcultures serve as a space for liminal adolescence. Flynn, a renowned American poet, first met his father while working at a homeless shelter. The memoir features two parallel stories. One is the story of Flynn’s father, which Flynn imagines through bits and pieces that he learns from friends and family since his mother committed suicide when he was an adolescent. The second is Flynn narrating his own biography. Their lives run parallel: both men envision themselves as poets and both struggle with alcoholism. Flynn’s father, both as the charming, young poet and the abusive, homeless alcoholic, haunts Flynn as a ghost and a warning. Flynn’s memoir serves to highlight the themes of narrative, self-representation, the construction of “youth” and biography that I repeatedly revisit in this chapter.

Returning to social movement studies, an ambiguity exists around the predominant participation of youth in “new social movements”. Melucci, in particular, attempts to consider the appeal and the function of social movement subcultures for young people and further interrogates the meaning of youth as a biological category in “post-industrial societies” (Melucci 1989, 1996). However, due to the lack of an ethnographically informed perspective, his analysis tends to be abstract and often myopic.
In this chapter, I consider a number of questions around why social movement subcultures often serve as a form of youth culture. A number of activists construct their involvements in social movements as a liminal, youthful stage in their lives before they transitioning to a so-called adult lifestyle which requires long-term commitment and responsibility, such as dedication to a career and/or a family. For many activists, social movement subcultures serve as a space of extended adolescence. Moreover, someone who has already transitioned into an adult lifestyle can, by entering a movement subculture, revert to a youth culture way of living defined by changeability, temporariness, and lack of responsibility.

This construction of movement participation as a form of liminal adolescence sheds further light on issues of cultural centrality and marginality. As discussed in Chapter 2, cultural centrality is comprised of the demonstration of a number of skills, competencies, and a particular habitus both within the movement and in the Mainstream. Cultural marginality is defined directly in relation to cultural centrality. It is marked often by a squatter’s long-term addiction to drugs and/or alcohol as well as excess aggression, emotional and material dependence on the squatters’ subculture, and displaying a lack of emotional control. I argue that since culturally central people assume that the movement is a space of liminal adolescence in one’s biography, activists who are unable to exit the subculture are constructed as marginal. Furthermore, the very presence of culturally marginal people and their perpetual existence in social movement subcultures dissuade culturally central people from dedicating themselves to the movement on a long-term basis.

Ethnographies that chart the careers of participants in subcultures demonstrate that the period of time a culturally central activist spends within a social movement subculture comprises a career with stages that eventually and ideally lead to retirement. Using a career framework, I contend that the unstated end goals of having surpassed the accumulated stages of an ideal squatter’s career is a sense of self-realization demonstrated through the acquisition of squatter skills, the inculcation of an oppositional habitus in which one has mastered and rejected both Mainstream and social movement subcultural lifestyle and taste norms, and finally, a display of increasing conviction in movement ideals. Again, the self-realization resulting from a successful career in the movement exists in a community which also consists of culturally marginal people who have either never progressed through such stages due to lack of capacity or who have moved through a number of stages but failed to exit the movement. Hence, despite the unstated assumption that self-realization is the inevitable and ultimate goal, such a self-realization is not assured but an achievement.

Finally, by interrogating the assumptions regarding finite time in the movement and the existence of careers, I assert that the path to the autonomous life is highly scripted and fairly exclusive. The cultural specificity required
to be recognized as autonomous is exhibited in relation to the entrance and exit of Karima, an undocumented black East African woman in the squatters’ subculture first introduced in Chapter 3.

The movement as a period of adolescence and the “militant for life” as a marginal old man

Culturally central, activist squatters articulate the assumption that their time in the movement is a finite period of their lives. They associate their time as activists with studying in university and emphasize that upon finishing their studies, they expect to progress to another phase of their lives. In this sub-section, I only use quotes from interviews with female squatters who are culturally central and identify as movement activists. These women narrate their experiences in the subculture differently from male squatters. They readily admit that their time in the movement is determinate and often associate having a family with leaving the movement. Their statements contrast sharply with those of male squatters. None of the men who viewed themselves as active in the movement describe their involvement as limited nor did any of the male squatters interviewed, including those who considered themselves retired, associate having a family as a reason for leaving. Furthermore, female squatters’ narratives tended to be more expressive and emphasized their feelings about their experiences as squatters. This sharply differed from those of male squatters who tended to narrate their experiences according to plots which centered events that revealed squatter capital, such as their participation in a violent eviction, their managing of a campaign, or their involvement in a social center.

Svenke is a punk Swedish squatter with long blond dreadlocks in her late twenties who came to the Netherlands to study in the university. Her entire wardrobe consists of black clothing with strategically cut holes and she has piercings around her body. She has worked in the kraakspreekuur in a neighborhood in Amsterdam for nearly ten years. When I asked her about her future goals, she replied:

I want to finish my studies. I’ve been studying long enough and I want my degree. I want to have a normal life and a nice job. Maybe I can work for an organization. Right now, I live in two rooms and a kitchen, and it’s fine for now, but I eventually want to live in a bigger house and have a child.

Juliette, a Dutch activist squatter, answered that in the future, after she finished her Bachelor’s degree, she planned to learn Chinese in China, and then return to Holland to study in a Master’s program in Asian Studies.
Speaking more specifically about her housing plans, she expected to eventually receive an apartment from the social housing list, explaining:

In the end, I don’t want to squat forever; but maybe in twenty years the house (her squat) is still here and so maybe we don’t need to do that (move into social housing). I don’t want to have kids and I don’t want to get married … I’ve always said that. My family says, I guess it’s not your thing. But other people say, you wait until you are thirty and then you will want kids because everyone wants kids. People do expect it but I just don’t want it … I’m not into doing “the normal thing.”

When I asked Maria, a Dutch activist squatter in her early twenties, about her future goals, she related her current squatters’ life with a point in the future when she imagined that she would desire a different lifestyle, specifically at the age of twenty-eight. At the time of her interview, she had been temporarily renting a room in a friend’s social housing apartment after having been evicted five times in the previous three months. Renting the room enabled her to rest and focus on her studies rather than spend all her time and energy organizing political actions, getting evicted, and moving.

Although Maria appreciated the stability of living in a rental house, she preferred a squatters living group and “to squat out of principle.” Maria envisioned living in social housing as a choice for a twenty-eight year old,
which she clearly deemed as the age for adulthood. To explain why she planned to continue squatting, Maria listed what she appreciated about the squatters’ subculture:

I like this world really very much because almost everybody. People are really active. People are really, like, having ideals where they want to fight for, very they stand for. It’s not like, some students from my school are like they don’t give a shit as long as they have shopping hours and nice shoes, and they are so unaware of politics and stuff. That’s really nice about it and people are really nice, it’s non-commercial and that’s the things I really like.

Following this praise, Maria criticizes the isolation, hierarchy, and prevailing gossip in the scene:

But it’s also, sometimes I think it’s a really closed world where everybody only sees each other and nobody else outside this little world. And also everybody talks about everybody. It’s also like a sorta world on its own. Some people who have, like, think they are, something like not really a hierarchy, but some people think they have more to say than other people. It’s just like actually like a normal society where everybody is dressed in black.

Immediately after she lists her criticisms, Maria corrects herself to reaffirm her view of the squatters movement as full of politically convinced people who actively fight injustice:

No, that’s not really true. I really like to be part of this, I think there are really good people who are active and who are really aware about what is happening in the world and stuff.

She then reiterates her earlier criticisms, specifically its isolation from the rest of Amsterdam, the gossip, and the hierarchy, and states that she is happy that she continues towards finishing her higher education degree:

But sometimes it’s also like you are no better than anyone else. You know it’s also like I said, there is a lot of gossip going around about everybody. That is, sometimes it makes me a little bit tired and then I am glad that I am still in school and I can also meet people outside this little world.

In this last statement, Maria indicates that she expects to become disillusioned with the movement for failing to provide a positive alternative to the Mainstream (“you are no better than anyone else ... it make me a bit tired”). For Maria, finishing her studies has a number of symbolic and material
advantages. Education enables two types of mobility: one in the Mainstream, allowing for more employment and cultural opportunities, and another that enables the freedom to leave the movement if she chooses. It symbolizes cultural centrality and the ability to make choices and have opportunities in a context with a preponderance of cultural marginal people who are partially defined by their inability to function without the subculture.

To further explore what demarcates her life currently from the one that she envisioned for herself in the future, she replied that she imagined that she would grow tired of the lack of privacy of group living and the amount of energy required to maintain a squatter’s life:

Maybe when I’m twenty-eight, I still want to squat. Maybe, because it’s like, it’s quite intensive to live in a living group or to have to move all the time. You don’t have so much privacy … you are living with four or five people. There are always people in your house, and there are always stuff going on in your house. It can be really nice but sometimes when you want to be by yourself and you want some peace or quietness, sometimes it’s difficult. And also because squatting takes a lot of time. Most of the time, you have to build your own house because a lot of time the electricity is not working and stuff like this and it costs a lot of time to search out all the permits, and to get a lawyer, and blah blah blah, yeah, I think it’s almost a day job if you want to search it really good.

She then hesitated, uncertain if, in fact, at age twenty-eight, she would become weary of the squatter’s life. She quickly concluded by comparing herself with Peter, the oldest squatter in the Netherlands:

Maybe when I’m twenty-eight, I feel like, okay now I want some more quiet and a more stable environment but maybe on the other hand I think, no I want to still keep squatting, I don’t know. I can imagine, at a certain point, that you feel like maybe then I would like to have a social renting house and still be part of the action world but not like moving stuff all the time.

You know Peter? He did a lot of stuff. But I think if I will be like this on his age … I don’t want to be like him on that age.

Maria refrains from talking about Peter more in-depth, stopping after emphasizing that she does not want to be like him at his age.

For a number of culturally central, activist squatters, they encountered figures such as Peter very quickly upon their initial involvement with the squatters movement. Most middle-class, culturally central squatters avoid elucidating in-depth what precisely disturbs them about these figures and echo Maria’s sentiment, merely encapsulating their hesitancy by stating that they do not want to, “be like him at his age.”
Margit, a Dutch activist squatter, deftly articulates what seems too difficult or uncomfortable. She compares the outlook that she acquired from her middle-class upbringing with attitudes of poor and culturally marginal squatters in her first living group:

The first squat was really some kind of awakening for me … I was brought up in a family that was really nice and well-educated, we were never really poor … it was never really bad. I met some people there who were really, like … with less opportunities, they didn’t have the opportunities to study, they were working in building construction work. Some other people were working as a cleaner … I found it a social structure that I never knew. It was like, woah, I never knew about this side of society. But it also hard because some people used drugs … it was kind of an aggressive atmosphere.

I was always … I think I was brought up with the idea that there were so many opportunities in life. And these people who had another kind of philosophy, like life is hard. They were not so hopeful or not so enthusiastic about living.

Margit then describes both how she considers a state of uncertainty and lack of ambition to form a part of adolescence. She proceeds to describe how a number of squatters in her first living group existed in an extended period of adolescence that she found inappropriate. By focusing on squatters who she considers marginal and problematic, Margit articulates an ideal biographical timeline as well as her expectations of “normal” professional and lifestyle choices:

Most of them were older and I was used to the idea, I am maybe still a bit used to the idea, that you have an adolescent period until, like, maybe until you are twenty-five and then you really know what to do with your life. You have a perfect job, you have ambition, you get a house, you get a car, you get a child, etc. etc. And these people were like thirty-five and still doing construction work and still not happy with their lives and still not knowing exactly what to do and still I would say, like, messing around a bit. I would say a negative word. Of course they have their … ideas and dreams. But for me, it was like, you are pretty old already, how come these dreams never already came true? Or something like that. Yeah and most of them were smoking marijuana which I do not disapprove of but my idea is that you do it when you are an adolescent like you want to try out everything. You have a period smoking marijuana.1 But when you’re thirty-five, I’m like, ok, get over it now. I mean, it’s a kind of phase that you should have left behind. When you’re thirty-five or something and they were still doing that. It was, for me, it’s a kind of sign, it’s like, for me, this kind of behavior is for people who don’t take really take their life serious.
So far, I’ve provided examples of young (early twenties), culturally central, women who identify as activists in the movement and envision their time in the subculture as a finite period in a linear timeline of stages that constitute their biographies. In contrast, Adam and Ludwic are two older male Dutch squatters in their early forties. Adam initially squatted when he was in his late twenties and then left the movement for ten years before returning to a squatter’s life, while Ludwic became a squatter after he had raised children and divorced.2

When Adam describes his first period as a squatter in Nijmegen, he emphasizes the pleasure and excitement. He enjoyed the community living, the feeling of belonging to a group, and the satisfaction of fighting against injustice by working at the kraakspreekuur. He appreciated collaborating in communal projects with his fellow squatters, such as by building wooden bike racks to solve the problem of lack of bike parking rather than rely on the municipality to construct them. Adam elaborates:

The moment that I was not squatting, when I was living in a rental house or something, that I noticed that I didn’t feel so connected with the squatters’ community, let’s say compared to when I was living in a squat. The moment I am living in a squat, I had this feeling that I was connected to some kind of struggle and that is nice to be feeling, I think.

When I asked him why he stopped squatting, he answered vaguely, saying he could not remember his reasons but that he had “had enough” and that he had wanted “to concentrate on other things and do something new.” It was difficult for me to ascertain if he sincerely could not remember his reasons or felt uncomfortable discussing them with me. He then explained that he moved from Nijmegen to participate in New Age therapy training in a small village in the south of the Netherlands. Adam did not finish the training and shortly afterward found himself homeless in Nijmegen, sleeping in shelters. He eventually obtained a rental house on account of his homelessness. Years later, after a number of housing situations, he returned to living in a squatters’ community in Amsterdam.

Ludwic similarly emphasizes the community lifestyle as one of the main reasons he squats and that squatting allows him “to be free.” He proclaims that he never became an adult, which he defines as “fitting into society, to have a house, to have a life, and a car and a tree in the backyard.” When I questioned him, mentioning that earlier, he had been married with foster children, he replied:

When I was married, of course, I had to provide for my family and I couldn’t do the stupid things that I do now, like squatting, like drinking, maybe do some drugs, go to a festival for one week, sometimes I don’t come home, I sleep in other places, you know. I parked my car in front of
my door here in Amsterdam for two years, I got a ticket every day, and I didn’t pay it. So totally irresponsible.

Most people think that squatting is a political thing. For me it’s a social thing, even if I could rent a place for free, just stay legally in a place, and don’t pay any rent like a caretaker, I wouldn’t do it. What’s the excitement of living like this? I like the excitement, I like to take risk. I like to try new things. I don’t want to be a slave of my own habits or society. I want to live free. I want to leave whenever I want. For me, it’s like five minutes, I take my hard disk out and I’m gone.

These narratives complicate the discussion of youth and the functions of movements as liminal adolescent periods in the biographies of activists in social movement studies. New social movements scholar, Alberto Melucci (1989), devotes considerable analysis to the appeal of social movement participation for youth as well as the quality and the character of such involvement. According to Melucci, “youth” participate in social movements for a limited period of time and for particular issues, and that after their period of mobilization, eventually activists are drawn into other channels, such as the market or other institutions.

Melucci contrasts this form of limited participation with the image of the “militant for life figure,” which he argues “was tied to an objective condition and a specific class culture” (Melucci 1989: 78). He elaborates that for new social movement activists, “Involvement in public-political action is perceived as only a temporary necessity. One does not live to be a militant. Instead, one lives, and that is why from time to time one can be a public militant” (Melucci 1989: 206). He further states that the different processes, tensions, and conflicts within movements:

Makes individuals commitment to them risky and uncertain … the experience of being involved in a movement is both temporary and highly fragile. The quality and length of individuals’ commitment depends very much on the resources available to them. (Melucci 1989: 215)

Melucci’s writing on youth cultures and social movements proves, at turns, to be both problematic and illuminating. His analysis is based on a myopic vision of a uniform, homogenous, undifferentiated group called “youth” which does not exist. It assumes middle classness, whiteness, cultural centrality, a background of higher education, and European welfare state entitlement on the part of the social movement activist youth who seeks thrills and rites of passage to prove themselves. As a result, his analysis falls short for any social movement participant who does not possess these privileges and/or has already faced a number of challenges that are outside the types offered by social movement communities, such as violent confrontation with the police.
However, Melucci’s problematic myopic assumptions are identical to those within the squatters movement itself. Consequently, his analysis elucidates the motivations of the participation of activists with such backgrounds as well as adding insight into why these social movement subcultures can become spaces of retreat from the challenges of the Mainstream.

Melucci’s characterization that social movement actors view their participation as a temporary necessity before they progress onto other stages of their lives conforms to how the four women activist squatters (Svenke, Juliette, Maria, and Margit) represent their period of mobilization within an imagined timeline of their lives. These women assume their involvement in the squatters movement is provisional and that by studying in higher education, they acquire the skills and resources necessary to live and work in the Mainstream as middle-class professionals. Their dedication to complete their higher education is one of the resources to which Melucci refers when he notes that individuals’ commitments to social movements depend on available resources.

Melucci’s analysis does not consider how activists imagine the duration of their participation is formed and negotiated within a context of a social movement community. In the case of the squatters movement, the relatively short-term involvement of culturally central squatters and the permanence of culturally marginal squatters impact how participants envision the length of their involvements. Nancy Whittier, in *Feminist Generations* (1995), a study of activists in a radical women’s community in the United States, found that activists’ participation and their construction of their identities as feminists were formed in relation to both the larger political generation of which they were members and the micro-cohorts of activists with whom they worked. Hence, the quotidian interactions with other people within a social movement community tremendously impact how activists imagine the quality and duration of their participation.

Whittier, however, depending on her interviews with highly educated, reflective, and articulate women with pasts in the radical women’s movement, reproduces a narrative assuming the cultural centrality of all participants. It is likely that the radical women’s movement during the period that Whittier examined was diverse and composed of more than highly educated, assertive and articulate women. However, with an approach that relies on narratives without observation, the impact and perspectives of the inarticulate and ineloquent, whether or not such individuals are culturally marginal, are often rendered invisible.

In the case of the squatters movement, the existence of culturally marginal, older men—often addicted to drugs and alcohol, dependent on the movement both socially and materially, and consequently, lacking the capacity for independence, much less “success” in the Mainstream—serves to deter long-term commitment for those who are culturally central. The militant for life to whom Melucci refers is not merely the product of a
particular class culture, and thus a hero to be admired. In this subculture, the activist for life is a ghost figure to be avoided into becoming at all costs. Such figures are not discussed nor gossiped about (see Chapter 2 for the relationship between authority and gossip). Rather, they serve as warning tales, referred to only by a first name, such as, “I don’t want to be like Peter.”

Moreover, Melucci’s writing on youth in social movement communities resonates with the self-representations of Adam and Ludwic; two examples of marginal, older men. According to Melucci, youth as a category and stage of life reflects a symbolic and cultural definition more than a biological condition:

People are not young simply because of their particular age, but because they assume culturally the youthful characteristics of changeability and temporariness. By means of models of juvenile existence, a more general cultural appeal is issued: the right to turn back the clock of life, to question professional and personal decisions, and to measure time in ways that are not governed solely by instrumental rationality. (Melucci 1989: 62)

Adam, by returning to the squatter’s subculture ten years after he had decided to leave that stage of his life, shows the ability to “turn back the clock of life,” by returning to the pleasures of community living that he so fondly remembered from his experience squatting in Nijmegen. He could erase his failed studies, his years of homelessness, and the vagueness that surrounds the reasons for his initial departure from the squatters movement, by re-entering the squatting world in a new city and committing himself to it. Meanwhile Ludwic’s self-narrative exuberantly celebrates temporariness and non-instrumental rationality. He squats to act irresponsibly and for the fun that derives from the risk, refusing to espouse political rhetoric to justify his actions. His statements are particularly striking because he is a man in his forties, who claims to have had a wife and raised several foster children, behavior which demands responsibility and commitment.

The womb

These sets of statements can be divided into several different categories of oppositional pairs: women versus men; youth versus middle age; culturally central versus culturally marginal. Rather than reify various poles of comparison, I’d rather focus on how these categories (with the exception of gender) exist on a continuum that define each other. The lines between youth, middle age, culturally central, and culturally marginal are fuzzy and indeterminate.
A twenty-two-year-old squatter, occasionally employed as a dishwasher in a restaurant, who grocery shops by dumpster diving, resides in a squatted living group, works at the kraakspreekuur, breaks doors every Sunday, and spends the entire day smoking marijuana, drinking all night, and sleeping until 4 p.m. to recover from the hangover and the partying from the night before, is a youthful, subcultural, and social movement activist. The same squatter, living the identical lifestyle twenty years later, is culturally marginal.

There is a repetition, circularity, and inertia to the social movement subcultural life that is simultaneously comforting, marginalizing, and entrapping. The fear of this inertia is implicit in the narratives of the young women and encapsulated by their invocation of marginal older male figures. On one level, social movement communities offer opportunities for skill acquisition, identities, and roles for people who are marginalized in the Mainstream. On the other hand, the predictable circularity of the squatter's life in which one can accumulate squatter capital ultimately fails to provide challenges once one has mastered all the tropes. As per Maria’s remark (“You know Peter? He did a lot of stuff.”), it’s possible to progress through the different stages of a career in the movement but still be “stuck” in the subculture without having acquired the skills to function in the Mainstream.

Melucci provides insights into why social movement communities can paradoxically serve as both spaces for personal growth and inertia:

Participation in collective action is seen to have no value for the individual unless it provides a direct response to personal needs ... a group might simply become a site of self-centered, defensive solidarity, protecting individuals from their insecurity and allowing them to express their needs in a convivial environment ... the difference between an orientation towards collective goals and a purely defensive enjoyment of the security offered by the group is nebulous.

Today’s social movements contain marginal countercultures and small sects whose goal is the development of the expressive solidarity of the group, but there is also a deeper commitment to the recognition that personal needs are the path to changing the world and to seeking meaningful alternatives. (Melucci 1989: 49)

In connection to this point about the appeal of social movement communities to youth, Melucci also claims that complex, post-industrial societies fail to provide opportunities for “youth” (again, without any differentiation for class, gender, race, ethnicity, and the types of skills that comprise centrality versus marginality) to undergo a formal rite of passage which enables a transition from youth to adulthood. This lack of ritual detrimentally “prolongs the youthful condition even when the biological conditions for it no longer exist” (Melucci 1996: 126). Furthermore, the absence of ritual impedes “youth” from challenging themselves and learning their capabilities:
Today it is difficult in youthful experience to take one’s measure against such obligatory passages; that is, to gauge one’s own capabilities, what one is, what one is worth; for this means measuring oneself against the limit, and ultimately against the fundamental experience of being mortal. Initiation awakens the person from the juvenile dream of omnipotence and confronts him/her with the powerful experience of pain and suffering, even the possibility of death. Today’s wide range of symbolic possibilities is not matched by concrete experiences that test individuals to their limits. The indeterminateness of choice and the attempt in any case to postpone it as much as possible, keep young people in the amorphous, comfortable, and infantile situation of the maternal womb, where they can feel at ease with everything seemingly possible. (Melucci 1996: 126)

Melucci suggests that the appeal of collective action for “youth” is that it allows a type of rite of passage that is not available in “complex, post-industrial societies.” However, since the youth themselves choose collective action as a form of rites of passage and since the value of participating in collective action is that it provides a direct response to personal needs, Melucci characterizes this challenge as being an inauthentic:

fake challenge which does nothing to modify the deep weakness of the personality and leaves intact the condition of indeterminateness – that is, the position of standing before the threshold of the test without entering into the world of the limits and risks of the adult life. (Melucci, 1996: 127).

This fake rite of passage offered by the movement indicates why the narratives of the more culturally central women all featured the role of education and family in their lives because they represent stages and rites of passage outside of the movement. With higher education, supposedly impartial authorities evaluate one’s academic abilities. While with regards to committing oneself to a family, the responsibilities and the skills necessary are not the types for which the movement offers for training. For example, living in a squatted living group, if one dislikes one’s housemates, one can move out and squat another house or merely wait until the eviction. Peter, the veteran squatter referred to by many as the symbol of the marginal old man, once said to me, “Eviction has more than one purpose” With this statement, Peter obliquely explained that he no longer desired to continue residing with his living group and that eviction would eventually solve this problem for him rather than his having to move out or resolve the conflict. Such an attitude reveals a highly contextual and fleeting attitude about relationships, one that contrasts with the types of commitment and responsibilities needed for emotional configurations such as a long-term partnership, interdependence with a family, or where one is depended upon by a child.
Activist careers in the movement

With the ambiguous role of the movement subculture as either a space of training and self-realization or a space of entrapping marginality, it's helpful to examine what exactly it means to have a career within a social movement. David Graeber, in his ethnography of the alternative globalization movement, paints a portrait of the career of the “typical direct actionist,” from one's entrance to the state of semi-retirement (Graeber 2009: 251). According to Graeber, initially activists become “politcized” in high school through the punk scene or in college via campus organizations. After leaving college, they then intensively live and work as activists from one to ten years. Supporting themselves in part-time or casual jobs and residing in group houses or squats, they are members of political groups and attend meetings several times a week, with that number exponentially increasing before large-scale mobilizations. Graeber characterizes this first phase as impossible to sustain for an extended period due to its overwhelming intensity. Hence, activists often take long-term breaks in other countries, by partaking in solidarity projects in Latin America, hanging out with the radical left in Europe in squats, participating in radical environmental groups who conduct tree-sits, or working on an organic farm. Graeber’s career description applies to the international activists who make up a part of the squatters movement in Amsterdam (see description of hippies in Chapter 1).

The activist subculture that Graeber describes comprises “active” participants and self-proclaimed semi-retired ones. Careers, families, and partners often provide reasons for retirement. A number of people attend graduate school, where they remain involved until they drop out of activism when they commit to their careers. He concludes that from their late thirties and onwards, activists usually burn out and withdraw except for occasionally attending actions or parties, from which Graeber deduces that semi-retirement is inevitable.

A few ethnographies of subcultures offer insight by charting the careers of subcultural participants. Fox (1987), in her ethnographic research on punks in the American Midwest in the 1970s and 1980s, found that punks hierarchically organized themselves into subgroups according to the intensity of individual commitment to the punk counterculture and their performance of a punk fashion and lifestyle. With more intense commitment, the more exclusive the subgroup becomes. Hardcore punks consist of participants who demonstrated the strongest devotion to the punk lifestyle and value system and who possessed the highest status. Softcore punks were less devoted than the hardcore to the oppositional punk lifestyle and had relatively less status than hardcore punks. However, the hardcore punks considered the softcore’s involvement as sufficient and generally viewed them as transitioning towards hardcores. The preppie punks, who Fox characterizes as minimally committed, viewed their punk personas as a costume, and
comprised the largest portion of members of the punk scene. The softcores and hardcores disdained the preppies due to their lack of conviction and interest in participating fully in the scene. The fourth group, the spectators, were outsiders interested in the punk scene who attended punk nights at clubs and who literally watched the other three groups.

Fox’s work demonstrates an interesting relationship of fluidity and mutual dependency between the four groups. She argues that participants in this subculture gradually transition from one group to another as their commitment to punkness increases. The “core punks” – which included the hardcores and the softcores – often began their careers as spectators to the punk scene, in which they experienced the core punks ignoring or ridiculing them. Spectators then progressed into softcore punks, meaning that they espoused a provisional conviction for punkness. This transitory dedication coincided with their use of marijuana, alcohol, and amphetamines. Their consumption contrasted with the hardcore punks, who demonstrated a totalizing commitment to punkness and who sniffed glue for recreational drug use, which Fox notes has a more damaging and long-term impact than the drugs used by the softcores. Lastly, a symbiotic relationship existed between the core punks and the preppies in which the latter, who were often middle class, supported core punks financially as well as serving as an Other against which the core punks created an identity.

Marsh, Rosser, and Harre (Gelder and Thornton 1997), in a study of football supporters in the UK, use a career framework to analyze the social structure of football supporters. This study illustrates a linear hierarchy of increasing commitment in which supporters begin as “novices,” sitting in one section of a football stadium filled with young boys. They eventually join the section of the stadium for the “rowdies,” where they have opportunities to establish their reputations for fighting, behaving like a “hooligan,” or manifesting their ability to drink heavily. Eventually, the rowdies who had established themselves with the most formidable reputations according to the value system of football supporters, sat in the section of the “town boys.” After completing advancement through these three different stages of being a football fan, a supporter will eventually retire to attending games by sitting in sections of the stadium with “older” fans (older than twenty-two), accompanied by their wives or girlfriends.

The squatters’ subculture offers its own set of structures from which one can establish a career and accumulate capital within the movement. The different stages reflect increasing capital, the seeking of and obtaining more responsibility, gaining higher prestige and status within the movement for having demonstrated a number of skills, having mastered and rejected both Mainstream and movement style tropes, and displaying a mounting sense of conviction. These various stages offer squatters a sense of self-realization that conforms to an ideal activist self who is the product of a specific historical, social, and political context.
The three biographies that follow illustrate these ideals and their failed by-products. The first individual, Jacob, who eventually retired into the life of a middle-class professional with leftist politics, serves as an example of a movement success story. The next story features Dirk, who entered the movement in a comparable way and similarly advanced through the stages of an ideal career, but remained in a state of inertia and fails to exit. The third biography tells the story of the famous Peter, the oldest squatter in the Netherlands, and the most referred symbol of failure in the movement.

As a result of methodological coincidence/convenience all three of these biographies are of male squatters, and their communications reflect a highly gendered narrative style. I was introduced to Jacob as someone who had been active in the squatters movement as a young person, so Jacob’s story was from the viewpoint of someone reflecting on his past. Dirk’s identification as a retired squatter was unexpected since I had met him while working as a cook at a voku and had assumed that he considered himself an active squatter because he lived in a squat and worked at a squatted social center. Consequently, his narration of himself as retired provided a helpful example of someone who straddles exit and participation. As for Peter, his story is based on a combination of the negative gossip about him by other squatters and my own personal experiences with him.

Regarding the impact of gender on narrative style, as I wrote earlier, men tend to narrate their stories according to a plot in which they construct a number of linear events that correspond to squatter capital; a trajectory that demonstrates an increasing sense of conviction and skills which ultimately lead to self-realization. In contrast, women often represent themselves more modestly, not emphasizing their actions and movement successes, and discussing instead their feelings. To be clear, women squatters are as involved in high profile movement activities that build squatter capital as male squatters but they refrain from representing themselves in this manner and avoid discussing their accomplishments in squatter capital terms.

**Jacob**

Jacob’s story is the ideal movement narrative. Originating from a disadvantaged background, he entered the movement without class-inherited privileges and skills, and thus, was wholly self-realized through the movement. His socialization in the movement could be traced by his progressing through various stages in a squatter’s career, accumulating capital, until he mastered all the skills possible within the subculture. He then felt bored and frustrated and left the squatter subculture to concentrate on his education in the Mainstream, eventually completing a PhD abroad, and returning to Amsterdam to work as a researcher and purchase a house with his partner, transitioning into a middle-class life.
When I interviewed Jacob, he claimed that he was “old” at age thirty-two. He describes his youth as “disturbing.” The state removed him from his family when he was five and placed him in foster care. At fourteen, he moved back to live with his mother but that “went wrong” and so the state sent him to a different foster family, who, after a period of time, suddenly asked him to leave. Having no place to go, Jacob moved in with some friends and then “went squatting” as a young punk at the age of fifteen. Jacob remarks, “I took control in my own hands so I started squatting. At that time I was a punk and a part of the subculture. Squatting was part of the subculture and a solution for my housing problem.” Jacob views his decision to squat as a way to take control over his life, a feeling that the state, his biological family, and his foster families had denied him throughout his childhood.

Jacob immediately accumulated capital within the movement by squatting his own house. After a year and a half of living in his first squat, a small apartment that he shared with another person, he arranged to legalize it with a rental contract, which increased his squatter capital. During his first two years in the squatters movement, he developed, “from being a sorta party punk to a more political person. I joined the squatters movement more and basically became an activist.” He describes his life in the movement:

There was always something going on, full time. You could always go somewhere and help someone build a house, there was always a problem with the owners, so you could always do actions around that, there were always evictions that were going to happen, there were always small things that were always going on within the movement. People would make radio, cafes, restaurants, there were all kinds of things you could get involved into ... I also started doing the squatting hour.

In addition to the plethora of activities that structured his life, the squatters movement provided Jacob with opportunity to create projects and to develop into a persona that he was denied in the Mainstream:

When you are sixteen or seventeen, you have nothing, and squatting a place was like a big playing ground. You have nothing but ... when you break the doorway, and then you open the door, and there are buildings like this, just for you. You could just do everything. So on the one hand, you are just absolutely no one and everyone thinks that you will end up somewhere bad, but at the same time you have all the opportunities in the world, and that was the nice thing; ... You could just start a cafe, you could just start organizing concerts.

While the Mainstream was a place which refused him possibilities (“you have nothing ... you are ... no one”), the movement enabled opportunities and creativity.
During his teenage years, Jacob radicalized, stating that nothing in particular occurred that spurred this radical shift. Instead, he relates his radicalization more to his youth in which he easily conformed to peer pressure and the expectations of the movement as well as the lack of responsibility and material pressure. Jacob comments:

It’s partially because there is a movement that is radical and you are young and you want to belong to the movement so you start taking over opinions. And, of course, that is partially peer pressure, you know that. And you start to read about things and you start getting involved in violent confrontations with the police, and that helps to radicalize you. I don’t know. There is some way of canalizing your own anger and disappointment in things, these are more personal reasons … You start romanticizing the revolutionary action or these kinds of things. It becomes part of your daily environment and when you are with other people who are also radical, you easily take it up … It became a daily activity … You had no real material worries to find a job or anything. I could just hang out all day and do actions and these kind of things.

During this period, while living in his first squat, he was involved in an enormous squat with beautiful gardens, which housed 120 people that had once existed as an orphanage. Jacob describes this squat as “disorganized,” because the group that had been managing it was either “bought out” – meaning that they had accepted money to leave or had received replacement housing, and moved out of the building. Of the original group who had organized the building, ten people refused to leave. However, the house was then “invaded” by “disorganized people,” who Jacob describes as people who lived in the squat to avoid paying rent, refusing to contribute financially to the house, and many of whom had serious drug problems. Consequently, they overwhelmed the group who was managing the house and it developed into “a problematic area,” where Jacob saw “disturbing” things, such as “junkies half dead in the hallway” and people “putting baskets full of shit in their fridge.”

Jacob found himself bored with living with one other person in his small, legalized squat and moved out to squat with four people. The group squatted an immense building that had survived a fire in Old South, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Amsterdam. The squatters extensively repaired the building for months and opened a cafe. This squat existed for seven years before being evicted. Jacob left this space after two years to squat two monumental buildings next to each other that had been empty for five years in the Canal District, another exclusive area in the center of Amsterdam.

For Jacob, these houses were, “a political kind of squat, really organized with militants.” At the time that they squatted it, the houses had...
just been sold. The owners immediately took the squatters to court. In this case, the squatters had a legal advantage in that the owners had to deliver the houses empty to the new owners by the Friday after the court case but the city would evict no earlier than the following Monday. The new owners refused to purchase the house with the squatters inside, so the Amsterdam owner offered the squatters 10 percent of the price of the house to leave. The squatters refused. The new owners, from Sweden, then offered the squatters 30,000 guilders, which represented a colossal amount of money when considering that the squatters lived on approximately 500 guilders a month. Despite the financial appeal, the squatters rejected the offer for political reasons. The sale was declared void and the city evicted the squatters on the Monday morning. By the Monday evening, the group decided to re-squat it. The re-squat featured 150 people, dressed in black with ski masks and helmets. They broke away the barricading and reoccupied the house. The squatters remained living in this house for an additional two years since the reason for the original eviction no longer applied. Jacob lived in this last house for a year and half and then left because, “I had enough of the squatters movement at that time. So after five years I had my burnout.” When asked why he burned out, Jacob explains:

It was more that I felt that I had been squatting for five years. You see the same faces, you see the same discussions, you see the same, the same amateurism, you see the same, you know? At a certain point you get fed up, you know? One year in the squatters movement and you learn how to print, you learn to make radios, you learn to break doors, you learn how to fix things, but after a year, you start repeating them. Like in the squatting hour. You get fed up with the alcoholics … You squat houses, people who really make a mess of it and you almost want to evict them … Even the police at that time … sent people who could not find any house to us. We were some kind of social workers.

Jacob then moved to a living group in a legalized squat, where he lived for five years. He started and finished university and then went on to study in a PhD program abroad. At the time I interviewed him, he had just completed his PhD, was employed by a leftist lobbying initiative, and had recently purchased an apartment with his partner.

Jacob’s narrative reflects the successful progression through a number of stages of an ideal squatter career in which he ultimately became self-realized through the movement. He began as a “party punk,” meaning that he lived as a punk squatter without political ideals. Through involvement in the movement and mentorship by older squatters, he then developed into an activist, living his life with a sense of conviction. He learned all the skills available to him such as breaking, building, strategic manipulation,
organization, and non-instrumental acts of bravery, as well as espoused the political rhetoric that he learned during his socialization. Furthermore, he gained tremendous capital because his houses were all movement successes; by being legalized, by developing into long-term social centers with cafes and restaurants, and by being high profile, prestigious actions that embodied movement values, especially the last house where the squatters group rejected substantial financial offers from the owners for the sake of anti-capitalist political ideals, bringing Jacob to the height of squatter capital at the age of nineteen. After having mastered the skills, consumption, and lifestyle tropes of the subculture, he then became bored, rejected it, arranged to move into affordable housing (a living group within a legalized squat), and finished his higher education. In a movement subculture where one achieves self-realization through a series of steps that prove mastery and rejection, the ideal career requires a rejection of the movement after having mastered all its tropes.

On the discursive level of movement biographical narratives in which Jacob’s story is one of successful self-realization, it’s helpful to further explore the aspects of his achievements that are not recognized. Although he frames his autobiography in the subculture along points of squatter capital such as by squatting his own house, legalizing it, squatting, building, and maintaining long-term successful social centers, and organizing actions around houses that held important political symbolism in the movement, the points of his biography that he neglects to highlight seem more impressive. First off, on the level of class, Jacob is especially striking on the backstage of the squatters’ scene because he entered the movement and became an authority figure. His story is exceptional, since a number of authority figures have middle and upper-class backgrounds. Jacob’s open articulation of his background further increases his capital in an environment that asserts a classlessness while assuming the norm of middle-class backgrounds.

Jacob’s story further complicates Melucci’s argument that collective action provides an inauthentic means to test oneself and one’s capabilities in societies that do not provide opportunities for such rites of passage. For someone like Jacob, alone in the world at a young age, his life consisted of a constant test of his abilities. Homeless at fifteen, he impressively arranged for his housing when his biological family and the state had failed him. Furthermore, Jacob avoided becoming a drug addict and/or an alcoholic. In this environment, people who have histories of abuse and with working-class backgrounds such as Jacob’s, tend to be inarticulate or silent, addicted to drugs and alcohol, and materially and emotionally dependent on the squatters’ subculture. As a young punk, more experienced squatters ensured that hard drug use was never in Jacob’s immediate environment. Jacob found the behavior that he witnessed in the squatted orphanage disturbing rather than being drawn into it.
Rather than allowing his background to determine the conditions of his life, Jacob constantly sought challenges and new opportunities. If he only desired security, he could have remained in his first squatted house that he legalized with a social housing rental contract and received government benefits to assist him for the rest of his life. Instead, he moved out and continued to squat, seeking more challenging and politically relevant projects. Despite his disadvantages and his understanding as a teenager that in the Mainstream, “you are just absolutely no one and everyone thinks that you will end up somewhere bad,” Jacob is a success story on the level of the movement and in the Mainstream.

**Dirk**

Dirk is another example of a young man, socialized in the movement, who successfully progressed through a career in the squatter subculture and accumulated capital. However, despite proclaiming himself “retired,” he continues to live in a squat, and exists in an ambivalent relation to the subculture, in which he claims to want to exit but is factually unable to leave. Dirk grew up in a small town in the south of the Netherlands in an orthodox, Catholic family. Due to a difficult situation at home, he ran away twice, succeeding the second time. As a pre-teen, he was compelled by Do-It-Yourself and progressive politics, squatting, anarchism, communism, and left-wing radicalism, ideas that clashed with his family’s conservative values.

Dirk initially went to the Hague because he knew someone from his small town who had run away and joined its squatter subculture. When he arrived, his friend advised him to move to Amsterdam where the scene was larger than in the Hague, since Dirk couldn’t expect to join a living group without knowing anyone or having proven himself. He arrived at the Vrankrijk, a famous squatter bar in the center of Amsterdam. There, people advised him to go to an enormous squatted warehouse called the *Calanderpanden* because it was a large enough space that the residents would allow him to stay temporarily. He slept in this complex for a week before anyone noticed him. Suddenly, he joined a group organized by the kraakspreekuur to squat a house that had been empty for sixteen years. It was an unusual situation because it was a direct project of the kraakspreekuur rather than one initiated by a group to squat a house. The group comprised a random mix of “apolitical people” who lacked knowledge about squatting, including Dirk. The house was also a tremendous amount of work and the people who squatted it were not interested or capable of making the space habitable nor handling its legal challenges.

During this period, Dirk felt lonely, unhappy, and spent most of his time stoned. Eventually, he met some teenage squatter punks his age and they formed a group of the three youngest people of the Amsterdam squatters...
movement. He developed into “a professional squatter.” He learned how to break doors and became the main door-breaker for a kraakspreekuur in a neighborhood in Amsterdam. Dirk squatted a number of empty houses, viewing them as projects to transform into homes, not just habitable spaces. After renovating a house, he and his friends spent their days talking about politics. They did not need to work because they didn’t have housing costs as squatters and they ate by “skipping” food. In his squats, he often created social centers such as a late night, cheap punk bars, or restaurants. His squatter capital comprised of his being a breaker, the number of houses that he squatted and renovated, which showed building skills, and his having organized a number of social centers.

He also demonstrated skills in strategic manipulation and organized prestigious actions that gave him “scene points.” He was evicted from one house located in Old South, the most elite neighborhood in Amsterdam, because the owner claimed that he had to urgently renovate. When six months had passed and the owner still had not begun renovation, Dirk organized a re-squatting of the space by sixty people, which he defined as “an action squat.” An action squat is when one squats a house not necessarily to inhabit it but to make a principled public statement on behalf of the squatters movement. Often, these action squats are short term, are squatted despite the high probability of eviction, and hence, impractical for long-term housing.
Dirk and his group “action squatted” this house to protest how the Old South neighborhood council avoided the enforcement of a law that a third of all housing should be social housing available to low and middle-income people. Instead, Old South is a posh neighborhood with a heavy concentration of expensive real estate where only wealthy people can afford to reside. By squatting a group of houses in this neighborhood and by robbing a nearby construction site every night, the squatters felt that they protested against the neighborhood council’s housing policy and the bourgeois ambience of the neighborhood.

Although these houses were only squatted for two months before they were re-evicted and during which the squatters spent the entire two months barricading it, Dirk describes this summer as the best time of his life. When I asked him why, he responded:

Because we felt strong, because it was fun, because it was summer and it was a great place. Because we had nothing else to do and we were young and we didn’t have jobs. It was our kingdom. It was a big vacation. Even though it was about having a place to live, it wasn’t so much about politics but it was social. It was like, “Hey, I live here so piss off.”

The group consisted of Portuguese, Dutch, Brazilian, Polish, New Zealand, Czech and German squatters. The Portuguese squatters proved particularly useful because they somehow managed to steal everything required for the house. Every morning, Dirk handed them a list of what the house needed and by the evening, the Portuguese delivered the goods. For the eviction of this house, the squatters group decided to comply with the tradition of the squatters movement to confront the police with the posture of, “we are never leaving,” and throw paint bombs. At the eviction itself, the squatters got carried away and despite their earlier agreement, threw everything at the police.

After squatting for a few years, Dirk then moved into a legalized squat and continued intensively participating in the squatters’ subculture. At a certain point, he stopped working at the kraaksprechuur and withdrew from the movement to focus on his career as a musician. Ironically, at the point in which he claimed to retire from the squatters movement, he moved back into a squat because he could no longer pay the rent at the legalized squat. He moved into a well-known activist squat with a notorious mafia owner and a campaign to defend the house and ruin the reputations of the owners. Dirk had already established himself with ample squatter capital, by being a door-breaker, working at the kraaksprechuur, having squatted a number of houses, and having successfully organized an action squat with an infamous riot at its eviction which earned him “scene points.”

According to Dirk, moving into this house began his “retirement” from the movement. Despite his retirement, he then became involved into the drama of living in an activist squat, with criminal owners, thugs, and
undocumented people residing in the house. In the non-squatted floors of this house, the owner placed people with whom he had vague relationships, mostly undocumented people whom he employed as well as people the owner called, “his friends.” For a while, these “friends” of the owner, who Dirk calls thugs, caused problems with their constantly barking dogs and by fighting in the street. Since the stereotype of squatters is that they own dogs and create nuisances in the neighborhood, the neighbors blamed the squatters for the problems. In reaction, the squatters developed relationships with the neighbors to build support.

This squatted house featured tremendous conflict, harassment, and acts of violence between the owners and the squatters. As Dirk articulates it, the squatters slowly “conquered” the entire house since it took years to squat each floor and sometimes they had a matter of hours to strategize and take over the floors. When the owner emptied the attic of the house of its tenants, the squatters sneaked in and “conquered it.” In reaction, a tobacco store next door to Dirk’s house, which never actually sold cigarettes, informed the squatters, “starting tonight, you will have problems.”

The owner then hired people to go to the second floor (which was still not squatted) and terrorize the squatters below them on the first floor. The squatters conjectured that the owner hired a number of street thugs, provided them with cocaine, and advised them to wreak havoc in the building. The thugs then pissed onto the floor until their urine went through the ceiling and into the squatters’ kitchen below. The thugs made a tremendous amount of noise and threw furniture out the window. Dirk found it an odd situation since the squatters expected a more direct form of attack, in which the thugs would kick in the door and try to beat everyone up. Instead, they succeeded in terrorizing the squatters since the squatters had no idea what was going on and what to expect because the thugs were acting outside the norms for knokploeg (hired thugs) behavior.

Eventually, the neighbors called the police resulting in the riot police arriving. This proved even stranger since squatters are accustomed to the riot police arriving to evict them from their houses, not defend them. Plus, squatters abhor the idea of calling the police for assistance and cooperation. After this incident, the squatters occupied the remaining non-squatted floors less dramatically such as when one of the undocumented residents, a quiet, left-wing, Iranian man, gave the group the key to his flat when he moved out.

At the time that I interviewed him, Dirk reaffirmed that he was “retired.” He reiterated how bored he was by the squatters’ subculture and its repertoire of squatting and anti-fascist actions. When he reflects on his time as a professional squatter, he describes himself as, “drowning in squatting and escaping from life. Squatting can become all-consuming. One can spend twenty-four hours helping others out in the name of the cause and because it’s a good thing to do.” According to Dirk, his focus on squatting prevented him from having a personal life, from developing himself, his own interests,
and a sense of who he was. Instead, he focused his energy on learning how to effectively pick a lock or on legal strategies for winning a court case.

Dirk values his current ability to integrate into “society.” No longer a punk, he works as a manager of an organic produce cooperative and emphasizes that his position demands a substantial level of expertise in comparison to the low skills required for working at a supermarket. He has a permanent contract and is considered netjes, a decent person rather than a dirty, marginalized squatter that society holds in contempt. Dirk identifies primarily as an artist and musician. He emphasizes how busy he is with his music and participating in the cultural life of the city. Everything that Dirk accentuates about his current lifestyle contrasts with his teenage, punk, squatter self, who lacked employment, “skipped” food, hung out aimlessly, scorned the Mainstream, and drowned himself in the subculture.

Despite Dirk’s emphasis on having retired from the squatters movement, his behavior manifests ambivalence about both participating in the squatters’ subculture and leaving it. Dirk claims to have surrendered his feelings of responsibility towards the squatters movement. His involvement in the campaign to defend his squatted house is minimal: running paperwork errands and being physically present during the array of legal and municipal proceedings to harass its owners. Yet, he continues to live in the squatters community and dedicate himself to the running of the social space.

Dirk’s contradictory feelings about the squatters’ subculture in which he declares himself retired but continues to participate actively reflects how this community can become so safe, that it’s crippling, and so insular, that it’s suffocating. To retire from the movement signifies surrendering many of the benefits this community offers in a highly alienating urban environment. The scene offers a plethora of parties, social spaces that provide cheap food and drinks, and a general sense of belonging through the relative ease of socializing once one has been accepted in this community. But the same ease can prove crippling since one can drown in the subculture and stop functioning in mainstream society. For someone like Dirk, who has lived his entire adult life in the movement, the subculture feels both safe and boring. Melucci sheds light on Dirk’s ambivalent feelings about the appeals and inertia of the movement:

“A group might simply become a site of self-centered, defensive solidarity, protecting individuals from their insecurity and allowing them to express their needs in a convivial environment … the difference between an orientation towards collective goals and a purely defensive enjoyment of the security offered by the group is nebulous. (Melucci 1989: 49)

To remain in the scene is to continue in a safe and boring vein, sheltering oneself from the stresses of Mainstream life, which often have stricter demands and more transparent hierarchical structures than the squatters’
subculture. Yet, hiding in the scene in order to evade such standards in the Mainstream also signifies avoiding challenges which, as Melucci argues, serve to, “gauge one’s own capabilities, what one is, what one is worth; for this means measuring oneself against the limit” (1996: 126).

In the linear biographical ideal of the movement, Dirk’s story presents a case of inertia. He progressed through the stages of the subculture, accumulated skills and capital as much as possible, and then moved on to rent a room in a legalized squat. Despite the formal transition into becoming a renter which often coincides with retirement from the movement, Dirk continued his life in the subculture. Moreover, the financial obligation of monthly rent proved too demanding for him, so that he returned to reside in a squat, demonstrating a regression in a movement biography rather than progression. I imagine that Dirk, having mastered the tropes of the movement, understands that to fulfill the movement’s ideal of autonomy and self-realization, he must demonstrate mastery and rejection. Thus, he verbally rejects the movement but factually continues to live and work in it. Meanwhile, he remains in this suspended state and refuses to enter the Mainstream.

As stated earlier, there are a number of marginal old men who depend materially and emotionally on the community and lack the capacity to exit. These shadow figures haunt squatters such as Dirk, who persist in a state of inertia, and motivate them to leave the subculture in order to avoid similar fates. Their squatter cohorts have progressed and integrated into the Mainstream, while they remain in the subculture, in their forties, fifties, and sixties, appearing ten to twenty years older than they are, their faces ravaged by alcohol and drug use, drinking at squatted social centers where everyone else is half their age.

These figures, who I characterize as the culturally marginal, in addition to being housed by the movement, have structured their lives around the subculture. If it weren’t for the squatters movement, some may have become homeless, embedded in a program of semi-independent living, or dependent on their families since it may be impossible for them to function independently in the Mainstream world. Having a job, paying rent, connecting electricity and gas services, and other such tasks that one must manage on a daily basis in a highly bureaucratized welfare state do not seem possible for such individuals. Yet, paradoxically, they are able to manage the complex hierarchies and expectations of the squatter social world and arrange for others to take care of them in ways that they cannot take care of themselves. Furthermore, despite their social dysfunction, some are still able to manipulate the social scene to their advantage.

Peter

To reflect on this paradox more in-depth, it’s helpful to consider Peter, a squatter in his mid-fifties who is notorious among all the squatters’ communities.
in the Netherlands as the oldest active squatter. Peter appears at least fifteen years older than his biological age due to alcoholism and being chronically stoned on marijuana. He has been involved in the squatters’ movement since the late 1970s, when he initially moved to Amsterdam. He originates from a working-class background and speaks with a heavy working-class accent. He is one of the few Dutch people in the Amsterdam squatters’ scene who refuses to speak English. His life is the movement. He attends all squatting actions in Amsterdam and, if possible, squatting actions in other parts of the Netherlands. He presents himself at all meetings regarding squatting, takes part in every info-evening, attends every party, eats at every voku every night of the week. To earn money, he receives benefits from the government and he works random jobs for extra cash. He has lived in almost fifty squats over the past thirty years and thirty-eight of them have been evicted. He extols this fact to others.

In the squatters’ subculture, squatters exist more through their reputations and squatter capital than as individuals. Peter has negative capital. Rather than accumulating capital for his deeds and his acquisition of skills, his reputation progressively becomes worse. Various rumors circulate about him. Some squatters claim that despite having participated in the squatters’ scene for over thirty years, he has never squatted his own house—a devastating accusation since squatting one’s own house is fundamental to building one’s capital in the movement. Instead, Peter manages to move into a house as a guest and then succeeds in staying in that squat until the eviction. Due to this fact, he also has a reputation as being an albatross, the bearer of bad luck: when he arrives, eviction will soon follow.

He has a terrible reputation as a housemate in living groups as well. He fails to do household chores or to build. He is known for creating and escalating conflict in living groups by choosing one person in the group on whom he focuses, talking negatively about this person with others, disparaging the others in the group with this person, playing on already existing tensions, and creating strife. He is interested in the prestigious strategic manipulation tasks of squatting and yet is seen by others as not skilled enough to handle the intricacies of legal procedures as well as the strategic elements of a campaign. Ninke, a Dutch squatter who lived with Peter, comments:

With Peter, you first think, okay, at least he’s interested in defending a house and the court case. But soon you realize that he only messes everything up. In the beginning, it’s like, no harm done. But then you spend all your energy trying to keep him out of things otherwise he screws everything up.

Peter has participated in the kraakspreekuur of one of the neighborhoods in Amsterdam for over twenty years. The other members of this kraakspreekuur have tried to kick him out for decades, but have failed. These
groups have rotating membership since most people spend anytime from a few months to a few years maximum participating in a collective of the squatters movement. He succeeds in waiting out the membership until the group forms again. I do not know if he uses this tactic intentionally.

The ethos of the movement is that projects and collectives are open to anyone willing to participate. How this factually functions is that men join groups without being asked, while women often participate when they are formally recruited. If women are not explicitly asked, they tend not to enter collective projects. This model of group membership renders it impossible to remove someone from a collective project. If group members want someone to leave, it requires a concerted effort of social ostracism to cause someone to feel sufficiently unwelcome and disregarded so that they withdraw out of their own sense of self-respect rather than succumb to a hostile group environment. It proves impossible to expel Peter formally because he is pitiful and poses no threat. As for the informal method of social ostracism, Peter either fails to notice the blatant disrespect of his squatter colleagues who try to push him out in this manner or he perceives it but perseveres regardless.

There are various ways to analyze the position of Peter. One way is to see him as someone full of idealistic conviction – the militant for life figure who Melucci romanticizes. In a movement where the majority of people are in their early to mid-twenties, he remains out of dedication to the ideals despite his age. He is permanent where they are temporary. In a community that mocks him, Peter persists to participate actively out of the strength of his beliefs rather than withdrawing out of protest.

Many squatters see Peter's continued dedication to the movement not as a choice that he makes out of conviction but a decision that he makes out of a lack of choice. They believe that he stays in the movement because he cannot function in the Mainstream rather than from a higher idealistic calling. Thomas, a squatter who lived with Peter, remarked, “If Peter wasn’t in the squatting scene, he would be homeless.” In his thirty years in the movement, Peter has learned how to make a life in the subculture without assimilating its internal behavioral norms nor by accumulating any squatter capital, much less achieving a state of self-realization and autonomy. He manages to infuriate people so that he has negative squatter capital. At the same time, many squatters feel enough pity for him that they do not reject him with outward aggression. They lack respect for him but they do not blame him for his incompetence.

Having lived as a squat for two years, I had the good and bad luck of residing with Peter in one of my squats. Every squatter I knew had, at some point, lived with Peter, so this was one of my rites of passage. I lived with him in a colossal squat that featured a sunny garden in the morning, which meant that I often sat with him in the sun, drinking coffee before I went to work, while my other housemates slept until the afternoon to recover from their late night drinking and drug use. Peter also spent his days and nights
drunk and stoned but managed to wake up earlier than the rest. He triggered a mix of feelings in me during our interactions. Sometimes I felt pity, other times, fury, and just as randomly, he charmed me. I never understood whether he was genuinely incompetent or if he feigned it in order to avoid a task.

Once, Peter was lamenting that his girlfriend had left him. Broken hearted, he wondered if he would find another woman. I tried to cheer him up. I told him that he had nice legs and that he could more easily find a new girlfriend if he fixed his teeth and bathed more often. Peter’s mouth was a cavern of decay, a testament to the accumulated neglect from decades of drug and alcohol abuse. He then informed me that he had to wait another three months before he could visit the dentist because he had a psychiatric evaluation scheduled in this period to determine if he should continue to receive public assistance. Consequently, he needed his teeth to be in a horrendous state to prove to the evaluators that he was psychologically unfit for employment. Six months later, he had yet to visit the dentist.

Although in the squatters movement, Peter is universally recognized as the symbol of the marginal old man who activists do not want to become, he presents such an extreme case that his example fails to illustrate the fluidity between marginality, oppositionality, and centrality. Peter’s marginality and dependence is clear cut, an internal Other against which squatters in the movement can create an identity. However, the rest of the marginal old men actually produce more anxiety because they have progressed through the movement, acquiring skills, and accumulating capital. Often they can adeptly build, are exceptional breakers, and have a dedicated presence at political actions and alarms. Despite their successful socialization and their skills, they failed to exit, living in the extended adolescence of the movement, and posing as examples for young squatters as either a possible future or a path to avoid.

The anxiety around the fluidity seems only possible to describe ethnographically. I lived with another old man named Hans in two of my squats, a painfully shy alcoholic in his late forties. Hans had been in the squatters movement for at least twenty years. An excellent builder and breaker, Hans attended all squatting actions in Amsterdam and potentially violent actions, and had gained substantial squatter capital (breaking, building, and instrumental acts of bravery). As a housemate, he was considerate, did his share of chores, and worked hard on renovating the houses where he lived. Despite sharing a toilet, a shower, and having seen each other in various states of undress, I lived with him for almost four months before he spoke to me directly.

In the last squat that I lived in, I found Hans’s presence more enervating than Peter. Although Peter was unbearable to live with, I could imagine that Peter had always behaved this way and would continue to do so, twenty years in the past, twenty years in the future. Hans, on the other hand, was a
capable person whose abilities I respected. He was highly skilled in building and construction, he could manage the financial aspects of his life, he was sensitive, and during the few occasions when he did speak, he was articulate and thoughtful. He loved the music of Kate Bush. He was even handsome, with large eyes and finely chiseled features. He had lived in a legalized squat for a few years and left. To supplement his income as an occasional handyman, he sold drugs, but just enough to support himself, not to earn significant amounts of money. He did not receive public assistance and had erased himself from the welfare state for legal reasons.

In the mornings when I had breakfast before going to work, I used to sit with Hans at the dining table and would often observe him absorbed in his world, quietly eating his breakfast of boiled eggs and buttered toast and recovering from the solitary stupor he drank himself into every night. What was it that had led him to reside in squats for decades in this perpetual state? His childhood? A woman in his past? A chemical imbalance? Or was it the accumulation of small decisions that he made every day that pushed him further into marginality?

I found the combination of his impressive skills and his marginality incredibly disturbing and it provoked fears about my own life. I was unhappy during this period. I had been evicted twice that year already, had moved three times, and been jailed; all of which was obstructing my research to the point of incompletion. I no longer wanted to squat but was having trouble...
obtaining affordable housing in Amsterdam. I felt frustrated in my part-time job in the university and I was unsure if I wanted to continue with my boyfriend at the time. It seemed that my life was also suspended and I developed a dread that despite my education and my skills, this state of inertia and confusion could persist unabated unless I made a drastic change. The line between centrality and marginality appeared very thin and I had the impression that if I continued in this environment, I could easily slip to the side of marginality and get lost.

The scripted path to autonomy and self-realization

The self-realization resulting from the ideal career of an activist in the squatters movement exhibits a number of characteristics. First, an activist should display an increasing commitment to the movement’s ideals and a growing conviction. Second, an activist should ideally acquire and master a number of skills through the practice of squatting. Third, an activist should possess an oppositional habitus in which one demonstrates a constant mastery and rejection, initially of the Mainstream, and ultimately, of the movement lifestyle and consumption norms.

All of these characteristics are encapsulated by the term, “autonomous,” within movement discourse. In his discussion on the ideal of authenticity and self-realization, Charles Taylor describes the assumptions of originality and self-discovery that are synonymous with the meaning of the squatters’ use of the term “autonomous”:

There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s life ... Each of our voices has something unique to say. Not only should I not mold my life to the demands of external conformity; I can’t even find the model by which to live outside myself. I can only find it within. Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. (Taylor 1994: 30–1)

Discursively, originality is essential to this ideal of autonomy and self-realization that results from a squatter’s career. In practice, however, becoming autonomous is highly scripted and culturally specific and requires a constant dialectic between performance and recognition.

The biographies that I have highlighted so far are part of a repertoire of personhood that are easily recognizable to squatters who are successfully socialized by the movement. The accomplished movement activist who
moves onto a middle-class professional life, the retired squatter in a state of suspension, and the marginal old man. All of these figures are classic types understood within the framework of the movement. Only by looking at examples of biographies outside the movement’s repertoire of personhood, can one understand that the path to an autonomous, oppositional, self-realization is highly inflexible and the result of a specific social, historical, and political context which renders it nearly impossible for those socialized outside of such a context to be recognized as autonomous.

In the scripted path to self-realization, the ideal biography has a number of different models. The models of Dirk and Jacob, in which they began as teenage runaways, interested in partying, slowing developing into activists as their convictions grew, trying more challenging projects which both demonstrated their skills and further accrued capital. After having mastered all the skills possible, they retired from the movement. The middle-class student presents another model in which she or he is introduced into the squatter subculture through squatting a house or leftist politics and also becomes more convinced by the politics of squatting with a sense of irony and dismissal, moving through various projects with different levels of responsibility, and finally, after having mastered the skills, retiring from the movement. The details of these biographies vary; such as the types of skills learned, campaigning versus building, organizing versus non-instrumental acts of bravery. Further variety exists in the constitutive moments of a squatter’s career; whether it’s a well-known squatted house, a particularly violent action, a dramatic eviction, or involvement in a successful social center.

As a result, the steps of a career, the contents of the biography, and the trajectory contain a number of finite and established tropes. Understanding that the tropes are defined and the moments of self-realization are well-rehearsed, to be autonomous then is not a form of original, oppositional self-realization and self-discovery. Instead, to be autonomous signifies conforming to a certain type of homogenization. Melucci comments further on how social movement subcultures, while seeming to offer opportunities for self-realization actually create spaces for homogenization where social movement participants can escape from insecurity:

The more we are exposed to the risks associated with personal responsibility for our actions, the more we require security. We actively search for supports against insecurity. This is why the desire for self-realization can easily turn into the regressive utopia of a safe and transparent environment which enables individuals to be themselves by becoming identical with others. (Melucci 1989: 210)

Ultimately, the terms autonomy, oppositionality, self-realization, and originality, mask a process of conformity to a specific ideal in a community that cannot tolerate diversity.
To further examine this point, it’s best to return to the story of Karima, the undocumented black African woman of a low social class and her inability to integrate into the squatters’ subculture. By understanding her failure, the exclusivity and the assumptions for an ideal path to autonomy are rendered visible. When I asked Solomon, the unofficial authority figure in the group, he told me that they asked her to leave because she was not interested in “an autonomous life.” He added to illustrate his point, “Come on, she liked the Backstreet Boys.” Karima’s story reveals the inflexibility of the script towards self-realization in the squatters movement in which the style by which someone lives their life and thus, exhibits one’s conviction hugely impacts whether someone can accumulate capital and is recognized for having conviction. On the one hand, Karima’s resourcefulness and cleverness are admirable. On the other, her skills and the challenges that she faced and surmounted were illegible in this movement subculture.

Karima demonstrated oppositionality by refusing to remain a domestic servant and being ruled by her mother and her employers. But this oppositionality did not lead to her accumulating squatter capital because being oppressed within a family context is not considered political nor is it recognized as a revolt. In general, squatters tend not to discuss their family backgrounds in order to maintain a fiction of classlessness. Even for those with abusive family backgrounds who may have empathized with Karima, they ultimately relied on the welfare state to care for them, as in the case of Jacob, whether or not they acknowledge the psychological security offered by this safety net.

Karima’s dating men as a means to exit her material circumstances is taboo in a community that promotes a discourse of women living their lives independent of men. The squatters in her milieu originate from countries where abortion is free, legal, and accessible. They could not understand the shame and guilt around extra-marital sexuality and the trauma of the forced abortion by her mother in the Gulf, where abortion is illegal. The months or years that Karima spent saving money to pay the brokers for her visa to Europe, in which she had to surrender a significant portion to her mother, is similarly unrecognizable in a subculture where a number of squatters live this lifestyle to save funds for pleasure trips abroad. Lastly, her negotiations at the border into Europe were similarly incomprehensible in that they fundamentally could not understand the challenges for an undocumented, black East African woman to face European immigration authorities and successfully deceive them. The gulf of experience was too wide and led to a total lack of comprehension on both parts.

Moreover, Karima’s presentation of her accomplishments worked against her. She told her biography to the living group and the squatters in the community, but in a style intended to enlist pity rather than respect. To fit in this community, she had to demonstrate mastery and rejection. Hence, a successful display would have been to narrate her deeds as acts of convictions.
committed with a sense of anger and oppositionality. By portraying herself as a victim and survivor, rather than an outraged, empowered activist, her actions conveyed an underlying motivation for material gain and a hint of possible emotional manipulation, both of which the squatters viewed as crass and lacking conviction. If she had understood the hidden logic of this community, she would have known that to be accepted, she had to participate in the narrative of rejecting material advantages in favor of anti-capitalist conviction. Unfortunately for Karima, such acts that prove anti-capitalist conviction and which accrue squatter capital were fundamentally impossible for her to both understand and commit. After having saved for years for the trip from the Gulf to Europe, why would she risk arrest at a squatters’ political action and subsequent deportation for the sake of scene points?

In addition to the failure in strategically performing oppositionality, to be accepted as autonomous, Karima would have to display a rejection of her culture to assimilate in the culture of the radical left. This rejection would have entailed erasing herself and the culture that she was expected to deny. When she refused to wear a bathing suit out of modesty when she went swimming with her squatters’ community, at a time when the men in the group swam naked, the squatters interpreted this as her exhibiting shame about her body that they found quaint on one level but discomfiting on another. She also was unable to repudiate the aspirations that drove her to Europe, of living a middle-class, suburban lifestyle, exhibited by her taste in music (Backstreet Boys), and her clothing style, a dream that squatters found banal and disappointing. All of these differences, of culture, of global political realities, of class, proved too uncomfortable for her squatters’ community. While they pitied her, they lacked respect for her aspirations and her habitus. Unable to address these issues with her due to the pity, the squatters were left with a deep sense of discomfort. In a subculture where the dominant performance is an articulated hostility, the uncomfortable silence is dismantling. They consequently asked her to leave.

**Conclusion**

With this presentation of squatter biographies, it appears that to live “an autonomous life,” signifies the ability to seamlessly perform a life motivated entirely by conviction. Squatters who are addicted to drugs and alcohol in an environment where drug and alcohol use and abuse are rampant are not autonomous because despite their sincere political convictions, they leave the impression of being more committed to their addictions than to the movement. Thus, the use of heroin is a strict taboo in the squatters’ subculture due to the perception that few people can withstand becoming
addicted. The taboo of heroin contrasts with the status of other drugs, such as alcohol, marijuana, speed, and ecstasy, where the borders around who becomes labeled as addicted are more complicated to define since their use is rampant in the subculture. Thus, the moments when someone is publicly labeled an addict reveals a power relation between the classifier and the classified due to the implication that addiction reveals deep personal weakness and hence, a lack of conviction.

As in the case of Karima, or anyone who does not fit into the two extremes of squatter personhood – the culturally central activist versus the culturally marginal participant – the need for material and bodily security renders a squatter unable to reach a state of autonomy. Examples include the single mother juggling a low-income job, benefits, and raising her children, while illegally subletting an apartment that costs more than her total income; or the undocumented refugee who fled a war zone, has been rejected by the Dutch refugee machinery, and lives in the margins of Amsterdam. They can be tolerated within the community but not treated as equals within the framework of squatter capital and standards for being recognized as autonomous. If one is afraid of the police, lacks interest in participating in violent actions and going to jail, finds barricading and occupying time-consuming and stressful, or feels intimidated by the barrage of paperwork, owners, and lawyers, then the constitutive challenges of the squatters movement serve to disempower rather than be thrilling rites of passages. The inability to handle such stresses causes someone to be non-autonomous because it demonstrates a lack of faith in the movement’s ability to support its members to withstand such challenges. Consequently, the desire for security on a bodily and material level decreases one’s convictions within the strict framework of self-realization that depicts illegible the challenges outside of the bildungsroman of the left activist self-celebrated by the movement.

The myopia of a privileged viewpoint, whether it’s through whiteness, education, European welfare state entitlements, gender, or class, is beautiful in its naivety and sincerity and disturbing in its exclusionary fantasies. In Amsterdam, I attended a talk by an American anarchist activist about the state of anarchism in the United States. The audience, consisting of mainly punk squatters of the Amsterdam left activist subculture, seemed shocked by the speaker’s tales of decade-long prison sentences for the direct action projects of radical left environmentalists, such as burning cars and breaking windows. I asked him why he was so surprised since if these same acts had been committed by any despised minority in the United States, their prison sentences would have probably been longer. The speaker did not know how to respond to my questions and the audience seemed highly uncomfortable and defensive. Afterward, we spoke privately and I asked the speaker if by dressing like a punk, did he honestly feel that he was resisting capitalism? He responded that his fashion style of black clothing with carefully placed holes, piercings, tattoos, and dreadlocks (he was white), reflected his
internal convictions. He then said that in the past, he wore a skirt as a form of resistance but that it proved too inconvenient due to the harassment that he received.

Afterwards, reflecting on his statement, I realized that to be autonomous signifies constantly being able to choose. Choosing whether or not to be in the movement versus the Mainstream, which reflects a measure of cultural centrality and the possession of skills to negotiate contemporary urban life within and outside the movement. On the level of daily life, being autonomous is based on the assumption that one has a safe and secure existence and that to express one’s autonomy is to temporarily choose to be the object of willful precarity and unpredictable violence, whether it’s at the hands of the police or thugs contracted by owners. For anyone whose bodily integrity has been violated or has lived in a constant state of danger and risk, from the visibly queer to the quotidian experience of women managing street harassment throughout the world, it seems a profound contradiction that the autonomous life can only be inhabited by those entitled enough to heroically revel in the temporary suspension of their privileges.

Notes

1 To clarify, when Margit says “smoking marijuana,” she does not mean smoking occasionally, or even once a day. She means people who smoke marijuana from when they wake up until they go to bed and are constantly inebriated.

2 Although I am using this example of Ludwic and information from the interview that I conducted with him, I doubt that he provided accurate details about his life.

3 Jacob was not a baby punk since the term emerged to describe a group of punks in their late teens and early twenties who joined the squatters movement at the same time in the early and mid-2000s. The next generation of punks who followed this group were called embryo punks, playing on the term baby punk.