

Vidaver / 18 August 2003 / Notes on Theoretical Concepts Applicable to Understanding the Woodward's Squat

1.

Farr suggested that I write a three-fold account. First, a description of the action: what was the Woodward's Squat, the 92-day event, phenomenon, occurrence? Second, a first-person narrative of how I came, personally, to be involved, and what I did during those days with, perhaps, some discussion of the aftermath and targetting that took place to ensure I would not stay involved with ex-squatters. Third, a "theorizing of the squat." I am not fond of the term "theorizing" but I would like to talk a little bit tonight about the range of theoretical concepts that might be brought into a more detailed explanation of this series of events.

2.

The first and greatest triumph of the Woodward's Squat (beside the success of the occupation itself and the experiment as a semi-cooperative semi-self-managed semi-lumpen street encampment) was the consolidation of the occupation and associated activities into a nominalised form that gained universal acceptance. The building was popped on 14 September and by 16 September the newspapers and television newscasts had already accepted this unique local "news item" as "The Woodward's Squat." This item was subsequently accepted as "The Woodward's Squat" not only by supporters but by law enforcement and privacy security, health agencies, social workers, local businesses, city and provincial government officials, and even the courts, though with hesitation, confusion, and reluctance. The Woodward's Squat, of course, had no juridical status. It was not a legal entity that could assume responsibilities, take on debts, or act in any other fashion as a person within the juridical system of Canadian law and society.

If the Woodward's Squat cannot be conceived as a juridical entity asserting claims and acting as a corporate entity, how else can it be conceived? If it was not a juridical entity what kind of entity was it? Was it even an entity at all? My sense of how to proceed with these questions inches towards backing up into what I think is a related, even requisite, question. What kind of evidentiary base should serve as a working ground from which to conceive of the squat as an entity? Since I have accumulated so many documents pertaining to "The Woodward's Squat" it seems like a natural enough place to begin: with an inventory of the documentary residue that accumulated. If we prepare such an inventory in accordance with the general practices of the Canadian archival profession, we, first of all, look at how a document or series of documents came into existence. We trace their provenance. A document, the doctrine goes, is always either the residue of an action (probative) or an instantiation of an action (dispositive) or is supportive of another document that is either of those. Of course actions require actors so with the case of any given document when you

know the action, you know the actor. So we can, presumably, take every document produced from "The Woodward's Squat" and follow it back to a juridical or natural person.

Once we have determined who the players were we can trace how they interacted over the 92 days, thereafter, and in the lead-up. Where'd everyone come from? Then we could also group the players according to their interests, class interests, or however you'd like interests to be specified. Certainly there were immediate interests surrounding the squat: who would get the money? Who would leverage themselves into a position of acknowledged authority over negotiations? Who would get the money and what would they be permitted to do with it? How would it be parlayed into longer-term concentration and control of neighbourhood resources?

By following a route into identifying agents through the documentary residue we won't, however, arrive at a concept of the Woodward's Squat. We only arrive at an aggregation of individuals and organizations. Either we identify the squat as the conflict and cooperation amongst the aggregates, a kind of short-hand, for a variety of coordinated, uncoordinated, semi-coordinated, moments. The aim is to arrive at the conception of the squat that is rooted in a face-value empirical reality of individual agents while retaining a larger, extra-juridical notion of the squat without appealing to a battery of pomo theoretical concepts with a life of their own.

3.

*WSquat (→) came into being
bastard squat spin-offs*

(4 "horizon")

The Peoples' Opposition (Jim Leyden) opens the building. Twelve people stay over the first night and engage in intense debates over voting-rights within the administrative structure of the squat, whether or not to speak with police, whether or not to let new residents up the ladder, how to present themselves to the media. By Day 03 the attempt to keep people out has failed and the composition changes dramatically. Street people arrive. Anarchists arrive. Everyone is granted a vote at general meetings. Affinity groups cluster around competing goals, strategies, tactics.

4.

Of course, there are the actions that were not documented, either accidentally missed or intentionally avoided surveillance and residue. Secret meetings. Inimate encounters. Smoking. Injecting. Defacing. The images that could not be obtained because the VPD confiscated or threw a camera to the ground or forced the witness off the street. Or those actions were witnessed but not recorded or they came out in testimony straight or embellished. And don't forget the invented actions (the time so-and-so took on the dealers singlehandedly) and the actions that were planned that didn't occur. The squat imagination.

In asking for a theoretical discussion of the Woodward's Squat are we attempting to apply conceptions of agency to the mass of semi-differentiated individuations? For example: the biopolitics. You had to be there, puking? I woke up to a big pile of human feces next to my head, still in my counter-interpellation suit, next to the kitchen. Adam said, "You sure it wasn't dogshit?"

5.

The category "gutterpunk" is crucial to distinguishing the first two weeks of the squat from the last two weeks. What a fucking difference in recomposition of the class. Such a category applies to individuals. Friends of the Woodward's Squat consistently used "resident" through the communiques. The city social worker addressed "campers" with instructions on leaving. Then, of course, the term "homeless" is perhaps at the root of all apparatuses. "Protestor" and "activist" too. Each term serving the strategic aims of the enemy. Where is our class nomination?

6.

Let me stop, later on in the day, with these remarks and attend to the task at hand. I am editing a volume of writing and documents under the name "The Woodward's Squat / Autonomy & Apparatus." I'm employing an intuitive sense of what these two terms are without any theory of autonomy. However, the documentary residue tends to accumulate around apparatuses and even the articulation of the autonomous squatter is very much posed vis-a-vis the RSA and ISAs. Rabbitt masks up in the courthouse to defy the apparatus, for instance. Ought we speak then of autonomous "moments" with the frightening prospect of invoking a delusion about "zones" where, temporarily, autonomy is located? Whenever the spectre of metaphysics arises I start thinking about food and waste. Autonomy might be "tracked" in relation to needs of the organism. Who cooked? Where did the food come from? Who ate? An entire book could be written on struggles around the kitchen and toilets. A second kitchen opened in defiance of the first one. There was then an attempt to build a third one in the Cordova geto. The struggle of "autonomy" versus "apparatus" was itself constant *within* the management of the facility: are we feeding ourselves or are we providing a social service? Different kitchen regimes imposed different orders, answers these differently, or posed the questions themselves differently. Nonetheless, most of the documents are evidence of apparatus-actions or statements by organizations attempting to subsume the squat within its own structure: first, the Coalition of Woodward's Squatters and Supporters, then the Woodward's Social Housing Coalition, then the Portland Hotel Society, which won. Any questions?

7.

It's true: activists opened the squat. But activists didn't run it. Nor did they close it up. One danger in preparing to decide on which theoretical concepts to engage

in discussion of the squat is that most of the existing concepts have been forced on us by the activists. The media and state/social agencies as well, but, because these are so obviously enemy notions, they don't sink too far into our thinking. How did the activists impose a conceptual scheme onto the squat? After the nominalisation was successful then they worked with media closely (Jim Leyden & APC) to ~~announce~~ tie the reification to a set of demands upon government, primarily the provincial government. These demands were revised over two weeks to include those put forth by Chris Livingstone pertaining to aboriginal presence in the building after redevelopment. However, the very idea of demands was not challenged directly. The residents who either had no truck with demands, did not wish to address apparatuses, or could not risk doing so, simply did not participate. And this non-participation was a very strong, even militant, aspect of the life of the squat. The activists may have argued over the nature and scope of the demands but use of the demand-form stood. It is worth noting, however, that the demands seemed to operate primarily as a "public reminder" rather than as any specific bargaining points. No meetings ever occurred with public officials during which demands could be negotiated ~~etc.~~ By the end of the squat the APC members had withdrawn and Leyden had simply resolved to work with city officials and the Portland one-on-one to end something that couldn't be controlled any longer. PHS had even hired Leyden and Livingstone in the last two weeks to help take the squat down.

them.

Perhaps the greatest damage that activists caused to the residents of the squat and to the autonomy and integrity of the squat was this use of the demand-form. How was this damaging? It turned the squat into a representational action which was forced to serve as a tactic within a political campaign. Thus the activists along with the media apparatus could proclaim "The Woodward's Squat is about X." It's about the cutbacks, the need for social housing, the need for a better welfare system. The "X" was specified and demands were formulated around the "X" and then the activist leadership and spokespeople could present themselves to media and utter sentences that pointed to "X" and the demands. Of course it also meant that once "X" and the demands were fulfilled, the leaders would then command the take-down of the squat, as though it was just so much bargaining material. To understand the autonomous aspects of the squat, and there were many, one has to begin by setting the demands to the side. To look at the integrity of the squat is to narrate how the squat survived the attempt to subsume it under a representational action. And this happened primarily through non-participation or active intervention into the self-appointed leadership. Either by physically scaring Jim Leyden or the media away from the squat or by forming secret affinity groups.

8.

Perhaps, then, it is the concept of the "affinity group" that needs to be explored in relation to the Woodward's Squat. It's a concept that partakes both in radical individualist autonomy and a notion of the social that provides for recognition of

autonomy but also ad hoc organizational structure given a specific temporal need.

9. In my proposal for this upcoming WCL issue I state:

The Woodward's Squat was a 92-day housing action in Vancouver that went through many complex transformations and involved thousands of people in a cultural and political experiment. The residents and supporters of the squat attempted to create an autonomous space in which to live together outside of the confines of the commodity form and the behavioral regulation required to maintain that form. Eventually the squat succumbed to neutralization through a coordinated effort of a variety of state and social agencies: police, social workers, courts, city engineers, religious groups, health officials, and "poverty pimps". From September 14 - December 14, 2002, the residents of the Woodward's Squat formed a tenuous community of the homeless, drug users, sex-trade workers, street punks, the mentally and physically ill, the poor, the dying, urban aboriginal youth and elders, political dissidents, and community activists. Hundreds of documentary and creative objects were produced during these three months, in addition to what was reported or represented in television broadcasts and over 150 published commercial newspaper articles.

I'm overstating the case here, no doubt, insofar as I describe the Squat as an "attempt to create" a space. The concept of agency here is too broadly put: the squat was not one big affinity group. There ~~was~~ ^{were} no central planners. A materialist account of the cobbling-together of the squat may not be impossible. There was just too much constant motion and at each point the apparatus was there to say, "hold on a moment there, camper, what was your social insurance number again?" Too many points to identify: think of all the illegals who showed up at the squat or runaways who were reported missing and got deported or returned to their foster parents. The squat was a heat score and this is why so many of the residents in their late teens left soon after the inside occupation: they were looking for an intentional community to live quietly together without landlords or bosses.

Algeria
Childhood

But I'd prefer to avoid using the concept of "community" if possible (likewise "lumpenproletarian culture"). There ought to be a study of the way the concept is deployed with such success in the DTES, by PHS in particular, from their anonymous posters against Geoff Hughes to the City's confidential memoranda which repeat "the community ... as assisted by PHS," "the community... as facilitated by PHS" and so on. It's central to Leyden's framework as well. When interviewed by the media he states, "You know what's going on in that building up there? Community!" The concept of community cannot be used uncritically, if it's even at all recoupable.

10.

But the concept in most need of discussion is "commodity-form." Is it applicable to understanding the Woodward's Squat? It's certainly not a concept that I heard discussed at the squat. Yet there's no economy without it. And there ~~no~~ ^{is} critique of the economy without it either. We might begin with looking at how commodities were exchanged at the squat. But then we'd have to discuss theft and gifts. And the constant dumping of surplus from passersby.