

'Anarchy doesn't work unless you think about it':¹ intellectual interpretation and DIY culture

Keith Halfacree

Department of Geography, University of Wales Swansea, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP.
Email: k.h.halfacree@swansea.ac.uk

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Summary *The relationship of theory to a key strand of current radical social and environmental movements—DIY culture—is highly problematic, with the latter tending to reject the former in favour of its own immediacy. This paper argues that, in contrast, 'theory and practice' should be regarded as complementary. Action on the ground can learn from theories of DIY culture, and theories of DIY culture cannot ignore action on the ground. By way of illustration, specific attention is given to the 1996 occupation of some derelict land in London by the group The Land Is Ours.*

Introduction

While we were great at sitting around talking problems through, today's activists altogether prefer doing things. In fact, few talk of 'demonstrations' any more, but of 'actions' and 'blockades' ... their activism has a new name—DIY culture ... Coming from an older generation and, worse, being seen as an ex-activist, I could only do wrong as I embarked on academic research into DIY culture. (McKay 1998a, 20–21)

The relationship of the 'intellectual voice' to many of the novel forms of DIY culture or (non-)organization² that have emerged to fight various aspects of social exclusion through the 1990s is highly problematic, as McKay suggests (see also McKay 1998b; Bookchin 1995). Although highly disparate and consequently hard to generalize, these 'cultures of resistance' (McKay 1996) are united in expressing considerable scepticism and suspicion towards the more conventional pressure group politics within which such an intellectual voice tends to be prominent (see, for example, Abram *et al* 1996; Lowe and Goyder 1983; Short *et al* 1987). Politically committed geography academics have recognized this divide, with Blomley (1994, 383) recently summarizing the situation for those concerned as follows:

we tell ourselves and our students that everything is simultaneously political and theoretical, yet we seem to

have a hard time connecting the two outside the university.

Specifically, 'We have theories about theory and practice, but practice takes a beating in the high stakes debates of academia' (Katz 1994, 71). Theory appears to take place 'at a distance' (Routledge 1996, 401) from the action on the ground, which is unsatisfactory both for committed academics, such as Blomley, Katz and Routledge, and for those directly involved in the actions.

One consequence of the theory-action divide has been a reductionism of each, resulting in a 'killing opposition' (Spivak 1990, 120) between the verbal text and the 'mindless engagement' of activism. Nonetheless, as illustrated in the case study detailed later, there is some evidence of a bridging of the divide, at least between the essential intellectual skill of critical reflection (see Thrift 1996, Chapter 4) and the immediacy of activism, if not always between academics and the activists themselves. In particular, an interest in 'politics' on the part of activists represents a re-engagement with questions of ethics within DIY culture. In addition to this, academics can learn from what takes place on the ground in order to invigorate their own theoretical endeavours and overcome some of the distance between theory and practice. Overall, the intellectual voice, as represented by social theory, and the inspired

here-and-now character of DIY culture can learn and grow through one another.

Overcoming the theory-practice divide

Academics have themselves made a number of attempts to transcend Spivak's killing opposition. First, there is the personal strategy—examined in detail by Maxey elsewhere in this issue—of trying to balance the demands of being an activist with the demands of the academy. This searching for a position (Blomley 1994), which has a longer pedigree within feminist scholarship (see, for example, McDowell 1992), has been explored in detail in the context of DIY culture by Paul Routledge (1996; 1997). Routledge reflects on his involvement in the campaign to resist the extension of the M77 motorway through the Pollok estate, Glasgow's largest green area. Using a highly spatial metaphor, he talks of searching for a 'Third Space' of critical engagement, through which he can cross 'between the locations of academia and activism' (Routledge 1996, 399). He proceeds to outline both some of the barriers faced by the academic to such a position (not least workplace obligations and expectations) and the resources that the academic can bring to activism (notably writing and other communication skills). Overall, however, Routledge's account, whilst recognizing the rewards of entering the 'third space', also suggests much of the difficulty of this task: 'a simultaneous coming and going in a borderland zone between different modes of action' (Routledge 1996, 406) is a challenging experience, especially for those of a less assertive and confident disposition (see Maxey's paper).

An alternative but more indirect way of challenging the divide between theory and practice comes through developments within social theory itself. This challenge emerges both from developments in our understanding of postmodernity and, more specifically, from new emphases within the study of DIY culture. Both approaches argue for the social and geographical necessity of academics taking practice more seriously, which also means getting closer to the events on the ground.

The social theorist Zygmunt Bauman (1992, 12) understands postmodernity as 'a perception of the world, rather than . . . the world itself'. This perception involves a radical scepticism of the promises of order-through-rationality that characterized modernity. As Smart (1993, 102) expresses it, postmodernity presents 'the prospect of living *without*

securities, guarantees and order, and *with* contingency and ambivalence'. Within such a postmodern condition, Bauman (1987; 1992) has advocated that the intellectual needs to take on the role of 'interpreter', which corresponds more closely to the epistemological foundations of such a society. This is in contrast to the era of modernism, whereby the role of the intellectual was as distanced 'men [sic] of knowledge', working hand-in-hand with the state to enshrine their 'legislative authority'.

The interpretive style of intellectual activity is fundamentally hermeneutic—indeed, it corresponds to Giddens' (1984) notion of the 'double hermeneutic'. It is concerned with 'communication between systems of knowledge enclosed within their respective stocks of knowledge and communal systems of relevance' (Bauman 1992, 22). The intellectual 'experts' whose task it is to achieve this communication are required to possess:

a unique capacity to lift themselves above the communication networks within which respective systems are located without losing touch with that 'inside' of systems where knowledge is had unproblematically and enjoys an 'evident' sense. (Bauman 1992, 22)

This is precisely *not* to promote a 'heroic' status for academics but to recognize that they have specialist skills that are often different from those of the people they study. In Berman's (1984, 123) words, academics must be able to 'read the signs in the street'. Such a skill is necessary not least because, again drawing on the incisive insights of Spivak (1988), no one group should be regarded as having a privileged insight into its own history and existence. As Routledge (1996, 413) acknowledges, we must be aware of the:

danger of an uncritical alignment with resisters on the assumption that they know all there is to know without the intervention of intellectuals.

Academic interpretation can be undertaken through the use of the conceptual apparatuses of social theory. Here, in contrast to the notion of according a legislative status to such theory, concepts are principally illustrative devices to aid translation, and are of greater or lesser significance within particular situations. Nigel Thrift (1987, 405) expressed this distinction well when he talked of theory as a 'hand torch' rather than a 'searchlight flooding every nook and cranny of society with light'. Whilst one might wish to qualify this metaphor with respect to its

'single-sourced vision', the idea of theory as 'modest ... with a lighter touch' (Thrift 1996, 30) captures, I think, the essence of its role—indeed, its strength—within the interpretive framework (see also Halfacree 1998a).

Studies of the social movements that include DIY culture have also appreciated the need to re-engage academics with the action on the ground. For example, with the shift from the positivist instrumentalism of Resource Mobilization Theory, with its emphasis on the rationality and social integration of the actors involved (Gladwin 1994), to New Social Movement Theory, there has been an increased recognition of the need to explore the cultural articulation of these groups within the vicissitudes of everyday life. This is not least because of the fundamentally symbolic role to society as a whole that the protests themselves play out (Melucci 1989; Szerszynski 1998); they cannot simply be judged on their 'results'.

In the remainder of this paper, I will focus on social theoretical insights from one key author associated both with a Bauman-esque notion of interpretation (see Maffesoli 1987) and with an interest in new social movements and DIY culture, namely Michel Maffesoli. Using his concept of neotribalism as a heuristic device with respect to an action by the land rights movement *The Land Is Ours*, I will demonstrate both its value as an interpretative device (theory illuminating practice) and how what took place on the ground supports some of the critique of this and related ideas (practice illuminates theory). Whilst this does not go so far as to transcend fully the theory-practice divide in the way suggested by Routledge's third space, it does, in a modest way, bring the two together and at least resists their killing opposition.

Introducing the neotribal condition

The concept of 'neotribalism' is central to Maffesoli's (1996) discussion of postmodern society, in which the 'polydimensionality of the lived experience' (Maffesoli 1989, 4)—sociality—has increasingly surpassed more formal, abstract and fixed positions—the social—as the organizational basis of everyday life. The new collectivities that emerge, within which the individual can find everyday meaning, are defined in terms of a 'multitude of individual acts of self-identification' (Bauman 1992, 136). It is an *elective sociality* (Maffesoli 1996, 86). Thus, in line with much work on 'new social movements' (Gladwin 1994), 'objectively' defined class positions

are down-played—but not eliminated—in favour of 'common experience', the 'true motor of human history' (Maffesoli 1989, 4). Reflecting their *puissance* or 'will to live' (Maffesoli 1996, 31)—an irrepressible celebration of our humanity—people are gathering together to 'bathe in the affectual ambience' (Maffesoli 1991, 11) in their search for community and belonging, the loss of which appears to be a defining moment of the postmodern condition. These groupings comprise the postmodern neotribes.³

Looking at the character of neotribes in greater detail, Maffesoli's (1996) emphasis on the celebration of the lived experience is linked to a dionysiac 'spirit of the times' or a more embedded and sensuous engagement with the world. We become *re-enchanted* with the world, conjoining an 'aesthetic aura', a 'communal drive', a 'mystical propensity' and an 'ecological perspective'. All of this reflects a popular perception of the 'failure of the myth of progress' (Maffesoli 1996, 32) associated with the 'cold' social-based rationality of modernism. Here, we can see clear similarities with Bauman's (1992) explanation of postmodernism, but Maffesoli develops this with his emphasis on the importance of re-enchantment.

Neotribes differ from the 'true' *Gemeinschaft* communities of 'historical' tribes in that they are actively achieved rather than being something one is born into. They also differ in that an individual can move between different groupings within their everyday life-worlds. Hence, we have the fluidity of sociality over the fixity of the social. Moreover, rather than regarding such a society as the undifferentiated 'mass' so reviled by modernist political thinkers, Maffesoli recognizes a 'mass-tribe dialectic', with the individual in flux between being a member of the mass and 'crystallizing' into specific groupings: 'a constant movement back and forth between tribes and the mass' (Maffesoli 1996, 99). (As Chambers (1994) suggests in a different context, we are indeed in a world of migrancy.) In this way, the individual can live a more fulfilling 'plural' existence within the 'polyculturalism' (Maffesoli 1996, Chapter 5) of the social body.⁴

Neotribal promises: *The Land Is Ours* at Wandsworth

In order to explore the potential of the neotribal concept to DIY culture and its activities, I shall focus here on one of these groups and, more specifically,

Table 1 Aims of *The Land Is Ours*

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- *Land for homes*: use of ex-industrial sites for social housing, especially innovative and communal projects. Planning presumptions in the countryside to allow settlers to live on their own land and a new *Caravan Sites Act* to give travellers somewhere to live
 - *Land for livelihoods*: action to prevent the destruction of habitats and landscape features by intensive agriculture. Subsidies and planning to be redirected towards small-scale, high-employment, low-consumption land uses such as organic smallholdings
 - *Land for life*: protection and reclamation of common spaces in town and country, and the end to enclosure of streets, playing fields, play and informal recreation areas and city farms and allotments. A right of access to uncultivated land in the countryside. Reform of the planning process away from the developers' interests. A public registry of landownership and an introduction of community ground rents
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Source: *The Land Is Ours* 1995

on one of its key actions to date. This was an action with which I was involved for the first two days, although much of the material examined here comes from the group itself, notably their very thorough website (*The Land is Ours* 1998).⁵

The Land Is Ours styles itself a new 'land rights movement for Britain', with its principal aims given in Table 1 (see also Monbiot 1998). It was founded in early 1995, but hit the mainstream media headlines in May 1996, when around 500 activists occupied 13 acres of derelict land on the banks of the River Thames in Wandsworth, London. The aims of this action were to highlight the misuse of urban land, the lack of provision of affordable housing and the deterioration of the urban environment. The site was destined at the time to become the ninth major superstore within a radius of a mile and a half! The new occupants cleared the site of rubble and rubbish, and went on to build a village from recycled materials and to plant permaculture-based gardens. Due to some very effective PR and other support, it took five and a half months for the owners, Guinness, to get them evicted.

There are many features of the Wandsworth occupation—wittily christened 'Pure Genius' (after a well-known advertising slogan for Guinness)—that tie it into the sorts of ideas expressed by Maffesoli. This facilitates its interpretation as neotribal.

- *The actual occupation itself*. The target of the occupation and the very nature of the action was kept secret until we arrived at the site. This heightened the participants' sense of excitement. The intention to hold some kind of 'action' had been publicized in advance, with the instructions being to gather at Hammersmith Unemployed Workers' Centre on the Sunday morning. Once there, we were given a leaflet (shown in Figure 1) with some

details as to what was to take place (although an accurate location was not given, so as not to alert the authorities), before boarding a number of coaches that took us down to Wandsworth. The site was quickly and unproblematically occupied and people fanned out across it to investigate. The whole event and the gathering of people it involved was very much an act of elective sociality, with a strong sense of the bathing in affectual ambience, community, belonging and re-enchantment that is a key feature of neotribalism. Gathering in Hammersmith, travelling to the site by bus, entering the site; all saw a remarkable degree of celebratory coming together in a common purpose.

- *The site as party*. The sense of celebration carried on throughout the life of Pure Genius, commencing with the first week's long list of events (talks, gigs, addresses). Some 'residents' brought musical equipment with them, from sound systems to instruments, enlivening the scene throughout the day and night. For many visitors, the party atmosphere was perhaps their lasting impression of the action. As one long-term member said, Pure Genius was 'a place where people could be ... allowed to have fun' ('Brendan' 1997).
- *Celebrating the earth*. The space that was created within the Pure Genius site was guided very much by a strong ecological consciousness. This ranged from the colourful murals that appeared, to the efforts of many volunteers to establish permaculture initiatives. The auratic character of the site was also reflected in the poems it inspired, which are presented on the website.
- *The fluid membership*. Whilst there were a number of individuals who were very closely associated with the site throughout its existence, overall the occupation of Pure Genius was characterized by

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE WE GO

WELCOME to this URBAN OCCUPATION. It's a unique action and maybe a bit different from things we've done before. Here's a few practical things you should know. But first, a big THANK YOU to Hammersmith Unemployed Workers Centre for letting us meet here. They'll feel most appreciated if we don't leave their place a shit heap.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Can't say just yet. Somewhere near Croydon. The actual site will be revealed just before we get there.

THE PLAN

Might not seem like it now, but there is one -honest! We will be setting off together in one -or maybe two or three- groups. If we can't occupy our first site, we have another one to go to, and there are other contingency plans for various things which might go wrong. Wherever you are on the way, there should be people with mobile phones who are in touch with what's going on. If we need to come back here to reorganise and go off again, that won't be a defeat -just adapting to circumstances. If there are too many people for the coaches, a group will need to stay behind here and either the coaches will come back and pick you up or you'll be able to go to the site by public transport.

ARRIVING AT THE SITE

At Site 1 -our first objective- coaches will pull up in the road. Tat lorries and travellers vehicles will drive through the site gate. Please get out as quick as you can and get onto the site, following the vehicles. Then we can shut the gate and we've done it! If the site gate is blocked, travellers vehicles will go to another place (they'll know where) and wait. Tat lorries will approach the site another way and unload just off it. If this happens, lots of help will be needed quickly to hump all the tat onto site. If we have to go to Site 2, people on foot will find it easier to enter the site by a different gate from vehicles.

WHAT NEXT?

Let's take 10 mins to look round then have a SITE MEETING. From then on, the people who knew where it was have finished their job and now WE'RE ALL IN CHARGE OF EVERYTHING. No more wannabe field marshals. The obvious first decisions will be: Where's the best place on site for travellers to park? What gate will we use as site entrance? The important first jobs will be getting the tat unloaded, erecting a reception structure near our chosen gate, and leafletting the neighbourhood.

NEIGHBOURS

People will be living on at least one side of our site. **WHEN WE TAKE OUR SITE, PLEASE CELEBRATE QUIETLY.** It's bank holiday Sunday and the neighbours won't appreciate being blasted out of bed by us. Please consider them in everything you do while we're on site. We're here to gain their support and work with them to make the local eyesore into a decent place for all of us.

THE LAW

LEGAL DEFENCE & MONITORING GROUP are monitoring the occupation today (but probably not on later days). They are wearing **bright orange bibs**. Their role is not to take part in the occupation or intervene in any incidents involving the police, but to observe and gather evidence which will help the defence of anyone charged. They also have a **BUST NUMBER** which is 0171-837-6687. Legal help for anyone arrested or assaulted will be available from this number. Ring it if you are arrested or assaulted or witness either of these things happening. Make sure you take one of their **BUST CARDS** which explains your legal rights in more detail. **THANKS to LDMG for their support today. They are always glad of donations to help continue their work.**

Apart from LDMG, we also have a **POLICE LIASION TEAM**. It includes several lawyers. Their job is to talk to the police so you don't have to. They will be contacting senior officers as soon as we're on site. Tell any police who approach you that the Police Liasion Team is in touch with their superiors. **PLEASE AVOID WINDING UP THE POLICE.** It's not what we're here for. We've got much better things to do.

If we are ordered to leave the site by the police under Section 61 of the Criminal Justice & Public Order Act, you may be liable for arrest if you don't do so. Even if the police are wrong in law (which is quite likely) you may still be arrested.

Figure 1 Initial leaflet given to those involved with the Wandsworth action (one side only shown)

fluidity. Some, like myself, were involved for just a couple days at the start, others came down to have a look and participate as the success of the scheme became more widely known, and many just visited on a still more transient basis. The site was actively publicized for this voluntarist character. Fluidity extended to the class, age and gender composition of the site, with the diversity of residents and visitors being striking, from the elderly, to youthful activists, to parties of local schoolchildren. Involvement was encouraged by such things as the 'welcome line' telephone link, whereby people planning to visit the site could arrange to have a site member show them around.

- *Reflexivity of organization and action.* As soon as the initial occupation had taken place, the organizers attempted to assume much less of a leadership role. After about half an hour on the site an open meeting was called, in which everyone got round in a circle to talk about what was going to happen. This pattern was maintained over the life of the site, with daily meetings being held in the first week. In addition, one of the first things that was done when the site was occupied was to leaflet the local area—which mostly consisted of local authority housing—to tell the people what had happened and to invite them to contribute to the future direction of the site (see Figure 2). Many local people responded eagerly to this call, an interest maintained today in the Gargoyle Wharf Community Action Group, which is still trying to influence the future use of the land.
- *A saturated politics.* The rhetoric and, indeed, general feelings expressed by those on the Pure Genius site was of the way in which what was taking place there was *in spite of* 'politics' as usually understood. Characteristic of the new environmentalism, there was a strong feeling amongst participants of the bankruptcy of conventional politics and politicians and the need to bypass this. However, support from the likes of Tony Benn, who raised the case of the site in parliament, was generally received with approval.

A theoretical intervention: the survival of neotribes

Thus far, I have achieved two tasks in relation to the Pure Genius example. Firstly, I have introduced Maffesoli's theory of neotribalism. Secondly, I have used this theory to begin to interpret and hence

contextualize the Pure Genius action within a post-modern sociality. One might say that theory has been deployed to illuminate a current practice. Whilst this has required us to consider the practice in detail—bringing it to the 'centres of calculation' of our 'ivory towers' (Latour 1987)—it has not yet challenged the adequacy of the solely theory-based insight obtained.

However, the practice itself also has something to say to the theory. Indeed, Bauman's very idea of interpretation suggests a dialogue between the two. This voice of practice will once again be approached indirectly, through a further examination of some of Maffesoli's ideas. Specifically, we must consider the survival of neotribes.

A neotribal existence within the sociality of the mass-tribe dialectic is far from unproblematic. Given their 'worked at' origins and their instability relative to the mass, these groupings have to be monitored actively and reflected upon in order for them to persist. Indeed, their elective sociality stresses the existential rewards of *just* 'being together' with like-minded people, an emphasis also given by Bey (1991) with respect to his Temporary Autonomous Zones. Nonetheless, an 'internal morality' is apparent and necessary for the tribe to achieve some degree of coherence. Consequently, neotribes are unlikely to survive for long periods of time—they are 'essentially tragic' (Maffesoli 1996, 78)—as this constant need for self-monitoring ultimately becomes too arduous. Self-monitoring also exposes the impracticalities, contradictions and general insufficiency of a group's beliefs.

Kevin Hetherington has also noted the instability of what he terms 'new sociations'. He suggests that this is not just a reflection of the mass-tribe dialectic but of a tendency for the grouping to be transformed into either *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft* structures (Hetherington 1994; Halfacree 1998b). There is thus a tension between neotribalism and these alternate states. Such a tension between those people happy to move constantly with the mass-tribe dialectic and those wishing to achieve either more or less permanent crystallizations represents a key arena of struggle within postmodern sociality:

- Alternative 1: the turn to a *Gemeinschaft* (tribal) condition involves a 'reskilling of identity'. Such a reskilling involves the growth of support networks, empowering friendships, personal fulfilment, local participation and concern, and the emergence of a

WE'VE OCCUPIED THE DERELICT LAND ON YORK ROAD

What's going on?

Campaigners from The Land is Ours are occupying the site of the old distillery and oil depot, on York Road, SW11. We're building a **sustainable village**, with **gardens** and **public amenities**. We're laying on lots of **events** - music (acoustic only), circus stunts, talks, painting and story telling. Everyone's welcome - please come and join us.

On May 8th, we'll be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the biggest occupation in British history, when demobbed servicemen took over 1000 derelict sites. On May 12th, we'll be handing the land over to people who want to live there or to use it in the longer term. This, if you're interested, means you.

Why are we doing it?

We want to highlight the desperate need to make good use of the **derelict sites** in Britain's cities. They're the best places for the **affordable housing**, the **community facilities** and the **green spaces** our cities need so badly. At the moment they're either being wasted or used for the sorts of developments which tear up communities - such as giant supermarkets and extremely expensive housing.

We want to show what can be done in places like this - and how much better development can be when ordinary people are involved, rather than just big business and bureaucrats.

PTO>>>

The Land is Ours, East Oxford Community Centre, Princes Street, Oxford OX4 1DD. Tel: 01865 722016 <http://www.globalnet.co.uk/~weaver>. We depend entirely on donations. If you can help, please make out cheques to "Land Reform".

Why have we chosen this place?

Because, with the right sort of development - making use of the waterfront and the excellent location - it could be wonderful. Also, since Elm Farm was shut down by Wandsworth Borough Council, Battersea people have been deprived of one of their best amenities. We want to restore some of the things the area has lost.

Will we be a nuisance?

We're acutely aware that we're within earshot of people's homes, so no amplified music or other major noise will be allowed on site. This is a **peaceful, friendly and constructive** occupation. If you feel worried by any aspect of what we're doing, please come to the reception tent at the main entrance and tell us what you think, and we'll try to sort it out.

What will happen next?

To a large extent this is up to you. We believe that homeless people and the local community should be the driving forces of development. So please come along and join our meetings. Tell us what you think and what you would like the land to be used for. Then we can work out together how we can put your ideas into practice.

Who are we?

The Land is Ours is a campaign, not an organization. It has no membership and no paid staff. We're campaigning for **sensible land use** in Britain, and **better access** both to the land itself and to the decision-making processes that affect it.

The Land is Ours, East Oxford Community Centre, Princes Street, Oxford OX4 1DD. Tel: 01865 722016 <http://www.globalnet.co.uk/~weaver>. We depend entirely on donations. If you can help, please make out cheques to "Land Reform".

Figure 2 Leaflet distributed to local residents near the Wandsworth site (both sides shown)

distinct form of *life*. Hence, the grouping becomes embedded and 'naturalized'.

- Alternative 2: the turn to a *Gesellschaft* condition involves a 'reskilling of participation' and a development of more abstract means of empowerment. This involves the growth of new institutions and actions through social institutions, such as the political system. Thus, the neotribe becomes transformed into a more instrumental and superficial form of *lifestyle*.

In both circumstances, the intensity of the initial neotribal arrangement is lost and replaced by different types of routinization.

In Maffesoli's terms, the loss of intensity that comes with the routinization of the neotribal condition is to be regretted but is regarded as largely inevitable and so is not dealt with at length. Indeed, celebration of the instant is commonplace within the type of literature reviewed here. This is perhaps given its most extreme expression by Hakim Bey in his discussion of Temporary Autonomous Zones. For Bey (1991, 106):

The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen.

Furthermore, whilst acknowledging the role of what hooks (1991) terms the 'homeplace', or the basis for individual identity and action, some commentators see little problem with the idea of such a homeplace being a relatively temporary 'location', whether real, imaginary or symbolic (compare McKay 1996, 156). Thus, Routledge (1997) acknowledges the key symbolic role that the short-lived 'free states' of the contemporary British anti-roads protests have assumed: Wanstonia, Leytonstonia, the Pollok Free State and so on. In line with Melucci (1989), the short period of time in which these sites exist may be enough to undertake the symbolic challenge to the dominant order via prophecy (displaying an alternative future), paradox (exaggerating dominant cultural codes to bring them to the surface), the Carnavalesque and so on. If so, one could argue that the homeplace, with its associated neotribal groupings, has done its job.

On the other hand, Osborne (1997) develops an interesting critique of the tendency to valorize the ephemeral within Maffesoli's work, with his argument that this work expresses too limited a concept

of aesthetics. The neotribal existence is given as something of value in and of itself. This can also be said of Bey's (1991) ideas, and of DIY culture in general (Bookchin 1995), since 'self and pleasure are entwined in DIY' (McKay 1998b, 23). Of course, the process of elective sociality can be suggested as a response to the existential stresses of the postmodern present (see above) but, more than this, it is seen by Maffesoli as fundamentally aesthetic. In summary:

the virtues of solidarity become autonomous . . . it exists for its own sake; it becomes disinterested, a matter of . . . taste . . . Maffesoli's neo-tribes . . . exist solely for their own ends in what amounts to a kind of narcissism of existence . . . And maybe that is not to do the neo-tribes justice. (Osborne 1997, 127–8, 142)

A focus on the more hedonistic aspect of the aesthetics of neotribal existence overlooks the kind of aesthetics that can be linked more clearly to ethical issues and political projects, with politics and aesthetics regarded as being almost mutually exclusive. Furthermore, Osborne suggests that this limited aesthetic vision takes Maffesoli back towards adopting the kind of legislative role critiqued earlier.

Overall, then, as with much postmodern writing (Harvey 1989), Maffesoli's neotribal concept founders on the rock of (emancipatory) politics, with its elevation of the aesthetics of Being over any ethics of Becoming. We can see evidence for this tendency and the problems it caused for the DIY movement in the Wandsworth occupation when we explore how the neotribal moment tended towards both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* structures.

Ethical dilemmas: tensions within neotribalism at Wandsworth

In spite of the Wandsworth site ultimately being evicted, locked and secured, and again left derelict, *The Land Is Ours* and others involved generally look back on Pure Genius as a success. Thus, we might conclude that the Pure Genius homeplace fulfilled its role. Nonetheless, through direct consideration of what took place on the ground, we can recognize how some of the tensions within the neotribal condition also manifested themselves on the site. These tensions start to place questions of the ethics of the group's identity and existence centre-stage.

There were tensions linked to the pull of the more *Gemeinschaft* 'life' condition. The central issue here was the way in which Pure Genius members sought

a degree of closure for the group. Neotribal groupings are characterized by the celebration of their identity—in overt styles of dress, language, behaviour, etc. This was apparent with respect to the site's membership, as it has been with recent anti-roads campaigns and the like. Whilst this sense of distinctiveness reinforces the crystallization of the group from the mass, it can also lead to a degree of closure. As such, this puts up a strong cultural barrier against many new potential members of the group. Such a tendency was noted by an *Earth First!* activist at the Newbury Bypass protest (Anon 1997). Indeed, the ritualized element of neotribalism more generally suggests that an individual's crystallization may be harder than Maffesoli implies; in other words, neotribes are often very tribal.

The closure of the Pure Genius group was certainly not always apparent, and was striven against by most of those involved. However, this led to its own problems, especially in the latter stages of the action. Indeed, some of the key players have argued that some degree of closure is necessary for a group to cohere and have any chance of success in its creation of 'community' (Knight 1997; Monbiot 1996). Too much openness at Pure Genius led to the site having problems with the alcoholics, drug addicts, mental cases and petty criminals who became attracted to the site. Thus, a central dilemma—perhaps the central dilemma—for a neotribal group is how to draw the boundaries of membership. As George Monbiot (1996, 2)—a central figure in *The Land Is Ours* and a third-space intellectual-activist (see Monbiot 1998)—argued, lacking conditions of entry led to a 'failure to define who they were and who they weren't'. This issue is also manifest in the tensions between a need for a degree of coherence in a group's strategies and aims and resistance to more formalized hierarchies and leaders. How well did the daily meetings (later weekly meetings) resolve this issue? How well were 'ordinary' members of the site really empowered?

The life of Pure Genius also saw tensions pulling the neotribal crystallization towards the *Gesellschaft* lifestyle pole. This was indicated in a number of ways. First, there was the very transience of the involvement of many members (including myself), whereby people 'did' Pure Genius for a day or two and then went home. Whilst this signifies the openness of the neotribal condition, lack of '24-hour commitment' can also suggest a rather superficial relationship between individuals and the group. Such a situation was especially apparent for the more

middle-class members of the site, whose material needs for a place to live were largely absent compared to those of the homeless participants.

Secondly, much of the discourse around Pure Genius centred on the planning system. In particular, the perceived bias of the planning system in favour of capitalist developers and against 'ordinary' people's needs was stressed. Much of *The Land Is Ours's* effort is given to reforming the planning system—as reflected in Simon Fairlie's (1996) recent book, *Low impact development*. However, this engagement with planning implies both a certain acceptance of its legitimacy and an instrumental (demonstrative) use of sites such as Pure Genius. It also encourages a degree of engagement with the 'saturated' politics supposedly derided and bypassed by the neotribal condition. Thus, we are again left with a central question regarding barriers: how far does a neotribal group go in 'consorting with the enemy' before its attempt to produce its own space (Lefebvre 1991) becomes over-compromised? Indeed, having now transformed itself into the Gargoyle Wharf Community Action Group, are we just left with a more conventional pressure group? (*The Land Is Ours* is considering just this question with regard to its own identity.) The embedding of the campaign has, however, placed local people's interests centre-stage, as was originally intended.

In its own right and in its tendency towards both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, the neotribalism of the Wandsworth occupation could and often did expose the limits of its aesthetic in Osborne's sense. For example, the emphasis on a certain style of appearance, a hedonistic bathing in affectual ambience and a temporariness of commitment could all too easily elevate these aspects over the intentionality of *The Land Is Ours's* initial occupation. Bauman's (1992, 137) comment that neotribal groupings 'inflammation most and attract most ardent loyalty when they still reside in the realm of hope' applies in many respects to the Pure Genius experiment. Indeed, recognizing this, *The Land Is Ours* originally intended their involvement to be concentrated within the first week of the occupation, after which the site would be handed over to local people and those intending to live there. However, this suggests the development of a much greater sense of the political amongst all participants than proved to be the case. After the first week, the number of people showing a strong active commitment to the site fell to around 30–60. As the weeks went on, those who stayed on the site became increasingly

challenged by their ability to hold the initial vision together. As one long-term participant commented in retrospect, by the end 'the site had failed to have a collective vision of its future that was strong enough to move towards' (Knight 1997). Resistance to the pull of a life condition challenged the communal structure of the group, whilst the difficulties of any sustained commitment to the site promoted the occupation as a kind of lifestyle gesture. In both instances, the lack of an underlying coherent political project weakened the homeplace that was Pure Genius and diverted the focus of campaigning effort from the affectual ambience of the site to the more conventional politics of the Gargoyle Wharf Community Action Group. Given that Pure Genius could only ever have been a Temporary Autonomous Zone (Bey 1991), perhaps this shift was inevitable, but it nevertheless suggests a need for neotribal-type groupings to consider further the issue of aesthetics beyond the immediacy of the collective moment. From studying the way in which Pure Genius played itself out on the ground, we can appreciate all too well how a narcissism of existence can qualify the evaluation of the action as a 'success' in neotribal terms.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that Maffesoli's ideas concerning the postmodern neotribal existence provide useful illuminating tools for interpreting both the emergence and subsequent history of actions such as that staged at Wandsworth by *The Land Is Ours*. In this sense, theory serves a clear organizational purpose, albeit along fairly traditional—if non-legislative—lines with respect to the relationship between the academic and what (s)he studies. Specifically, the activists and anyone else with an interest in the action can learn of the typicality of the Wandsworth events within postmodern sociality, yet also the challenge of reproducing the initial impetus over time. However, the 'playing-out' of neotribalism 'in the street' reveals ethical dilemmas—often relatively unique in detail in each situation—that intellectual thought on its own is unlikely to expose or resolve. From direct engagement with the action, the theory learns of its particularism in this example and of the general ethical indeterminacy of the whole event. Specifically, from the problems experienced at Pure Genius, we can see how the neotribal concept is not quite as emancipatory as its principal theorist—Maffesoli—would have us believe. Supporting

critics such as Osborne, the aesthetic emphasis of neotribalism appears to elevate the hedonistic narcissism of existence over the more ethical ascetic dimension of aesthetics (Osborne 1997). Thus, 'a deliberately generalized, under-evidenced speculation on the character of social life' (Crang and Malbon 1996, 706) can become more rounded and particular through encounters with those that it purports to interpret. In conclusion, whilst anarchy or any other radical social change does indeed require thinking about, thinking without action is an all-too-rarefied abstraction. The intellectual task is to produce an:

informed, systematic commentary on the knowledge of daily life, a commentary that expands that knowledge while being fed into it and itself transformed in the process. (Bauman 1992, 144)

Notes

- 1 A traveller quoted in Earle *et al* (1994, 49), who was responding to the refusal of the *Spiral Tribe* sound system to turn down their music at the 1992 Castlemorton Festival. The term 'anarchy' should be read somewhat superficially in this title, as its relationship to DIY culture is far from unproblematic (see Bookchin 1995).
- 2 The term 'non-organization' has been associated with groups such as the 'Freedom Network' (Travis 1994), which was originally established as a networking body to coordinate actions against the 1993 *Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill*. The term is suggestive of a flexible, dynamic, non-dogmatic and voluntary character. Whilst one can challenge the novelty of DIY culture—both in absolute terms and in relation to academic work—it can be regarded as uniquely postmodern in its 'media-tion' and highly symbolic character (Routledge 1997).
- 3 Maffesoli's ideas have not yet been widely employed within geography: Crang and Malbon (1996) explore some of these ideas with respect to consumption (see also Shields 1992); Halfacree and Kitchin (1996) have applied neotribalism within the context of popular music; and Halfacree (1998b) sees some value in such ideas for interpreting the experience of migration to the post-productivist countryside. As regards DIY culture, Routledge's (1996; 1997) reflection on the Pollok Free State is the best example, although Maffesoli's presence is often quite implicit.
- 4 In a related sense to the idea of neotribalism, Young's (1990) advocacy of 'city life', where people mix and match freely in the common spaces of the city, over the 'logic of identity' implied by 'community' can be said to celebrate more ephemeral forms of everyday existence.
- 5 Besides my own observations, the majority of the material reported below was obtained from *The Land Is*

Ours website (www.envirolink.org/orgs/tlio/) and from the numerous press articles and stories covering the occupation. For space considerations, explicit referencing has been kept to a minimum.

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