



# “Give up Activism” and Change the World in Unknown Ways: Or, Learning to Walk with Others on Uncommon Ground

**Paul Chatterton**

School of Geography, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK;  
p.chatterton@leeds.ac.uk

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This article reflects on a politics of hope, silence and commonality through some extended conversations with members of the public during a demonstration which shut down an oil refinery in Nottingham. My reflections concern the concept of uncommon ground, where there are encounters between activists and their others. While conversations on uncommon ground highlight the entrenched nature of many social roles, possible connections open up by highlighting how they are always emotionally laden, relationally negotiated, hybrid, corporeal and contingent. Hence, the paper addresses the potentialities for extending dialogue on uncommon ground into common places. A key element relates to the need to transcend the role of the activist, to literally give up activism. This article builds upon normative, participatory and libertarian approaches in Geography which propose what could become possible by working with others towards mutual aid and self-management. In essence, learning to walk with others helps us to counteract universalist solutions and instead assemble toolkits for developing contextualised and workable alternatives to life under capitalism.

## **Introduction**

In this article I want to reflect on a politics of hope, silence and commonality through some conversations I had with members of the public during a demonstration against the Group of 8 Nations (the G8), which centred on blocking an oil depot. I refer to the social and spatial aspects of these encounters between activists and non-activists as “uncommon ground”. These unscheduled encounters have no knowable outcomes, and are highly volatile and unpredictable. They are nothing new and have long been part of the environmental direct action movement, for example, where activists have intervened at sites of road developments, clear-cut logging, airport expansions and housing developments and have temporarily joined with local groups, bystanders and other members of the public to get their point across or recruit potential allies (see Abbey 1985; Bari 1994, 1997; Wall 1999).

However, social movement literature does not help provide a full understanding of what happens on this uncommon ground. Hence, I

develop a critique of the situated meanings of place and identity during environmental direct action (EDA) by addressing some pre-occupations of social movement literature, namely, a focus upon activists finding common ground with others “in resistance” (Routledge 2003); tactics of converting outsiders to various activist causes; a focus on resource mobilisation or action frames which privileges the role of the activist, opponents or potential recruits in social change rather than wider relational connections (Della Porta and Diani 1998; Melucci 1996); and static views of the values and emotions of non-activists. What I point to instead, is the need to transcend activist spaces and identities, to seek creative alliances, to literally “give up activism”. More importantly, I focus on what could come after such encounters on uncommon ground. What are the potentialities for building commonality after such difficult encounters with those we see as “others” or opponents?

The article is in four parts. The first part is an extended empirical investigation based around several conversations I had with drivers blocked by the action. The point in telling these stories is that while they were full of acrimony, blame and difference, they were also full of potentialities. It was personally frustrating. Many things were said but much more was not. It is this space of absence and potentialities, full of desire to radicalise and reinvigorate politics through connections that I dwell on in this article. Reflecting on the subtleties of these conversations, the second and third parts expand the main theoretical themes of the article. The first of these suggests that by acknowledging that protest encounters are emotionally laden, relational, hybrid, corporeal and contingent, possibilities open up for breaking the silences that divide us and overcoming ontological divisions such as activist and non-activist. From the conversations, questions arise such as what roles do we adopt in protest situations, what are our emotional responses, and how can we go beyond pre-determined identities and problematise our positionalities?

The second theoretical thematic is more forward-looking and dwells on the importance of common places. Hence, rather than dwelling on divisions and despair, or our different starting points, lifeworlds and contexts, I explore the idea that spending enough time with others on uncommon ground often reveals shared concerns and fears, and look at the possibilities that arise, not from activists looking to gain allies, converting people to causes, or building a broad social movement, but from taking encounters on uncommon ground as a starting point for a dialogical and normative (ie proposive) politics based upon the need for us all to engage in politics as equals. Again from the conversations questions arise such as where do we go after such encounters, what are the potentialities for extending and translating these uncommon moments into strategies for practical changes and places for building

commonalities, how do we talk about versions of the good life, and how can we build alliances and solidarities from these conversations to implement the changes we talk about with others?

The fourth concluding part suggests some future directions for geographical work which bring together some closely related lines of enquiry, namely, normative ideas which seek a moral basis for human conduct and what is right or good, and proposes what can be possible (Proctor 1998; Sayer and Storper 1997; Smith 1997); work which places considerations of ethics at the heart of geography (Harvey 1996; Proctor and Smith 1999); and participatory, action-based approaches which seek to co-develop theory and action with the "others" of encounters (Smith, Willms and Johnson 1997; Whyte 1990). Here we encounter traditions of popular and participatory education where conversations with unknown others force us to build common ground and engage in the co-production of socially useful knowledge (Freire 1979). Anarchist, autonomist and libertarian inspired ideas of responsibility and reciprocity, collectivism and mutuality are also of relevance. What sets such approaches apart from other radical sentiments such as Marxism or feminism is an explicit desire for horizontality, self-governance and mutual aid. By combining such normative, participatory and autonomist approaches, we can think collectively about what is good and bad human behaviour; counter indeterminacy, particularism and relativism which is sceptical about the possibilities for common ground; and begin to assemble a toolkit for proposing and developing contextualised and workable alternatives. The conversations reported here are merely starting points to addressing these theoretical concerns. But they are useful as through them we see not only division and despair but also openings and possibilities.

### **A Day of Action Against the Group of 8 Nations, Oil and Silence**

Between 8 and 10 June 2004, the leaders of the Group of 8 nation states (UK, Canada, France, Italy, Germany, USA, Japan, Russia) met in the USA for their annual meeting on South Sea Island in the state of Georgia. Under a State of Emergency and a US\$25 million security bill, they were firmly entrenched on this exclusive resort island along with selected official delegates and press, while NGOs, community and campaign groups were kept at bay in the town of Savannah, 80 miles south of the island. Since 1998 when the G8 met in Birmingham in the UK, solidarity actions have been multiplying across several countries to protest against the unaccountability of decision-making within the G8 and their strategic priorities for the global economy. In the UK, the Dissent! Network (see [© 2006 Editorial Board of \*Antipode\*.](http://</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

www.dissent.org.uk) has been organising against the G8 since October 2003. Its specific objective has been to reinvigorate a broad, locally grounded alter/anti-capitalist movement in the lead up to the G8 summit at the exclusive Gleneagles resort in Scotland in 2005, whilst also using this as a stepping stone to develop support for wider ideas and actions beyond the capitalist present.

On 9 June, members of the Dissent! network organised a solidarity action in the UK. Around 30 people took part, blocking an access road to a major oil depot on the outskirts of Nottingham using a tripod made from three scaffold poles (see Figure 1). The oil industry was chosen as a convenient target as it represents western societies' dependency on a finite fuel source which underpins current US-led geopolitical expansion and military aggression, climate change and pollution, and unsustainable and energy intensive forms of production and consumption. The protest started at 9 am and lasted just over three hours causing a gridlock on roads in the industrial estate as well as on approach roads. When the tripod was initially brought out of the back of a van and erected, blocked drivers nearest responded by trying to drive through it or grab it. A number of drivers left their vehicles to challenge, verbally and physically, the protestors who had gathered round the tripod to protect it. Most were drivers of delivery vehicles to the oil depot, but others included industrial products including cement, tarmac, aggregates and a couple of car transporters.



**Figure 1:** The roadblock and the tripod

Tensions reached their highest point during these first few minutes, and a brawl was averted as protesters attempted to engage people in conversations and hand out material about the event.

A leaflet prepared for the day read “no war for oil, combat climate change now” (see Figure 2). A small number of unprepared police arrived with some difficulty and rather than making any quick arrests, played a role as mediator to reduce the high tensions between the protestors and the drivers. No arrests were made and the unsanctioned demonstration ended peaceably at a negotiated time just after midday. The protestors left the scene with the tripod and only after leaving the area did the police make several, unsuccessful, attempts to search members of the group to gain details. While the protest was successful in its aim of closing the depot for several hours, I was frustrated as many activists did little, beyond expected social relations, to engage with those whom they had disrupted. Below are some reflections on conversations that I had with delivery drivers during the three-hour road block. Each takes as its starting point a comment made by one of the drivers.

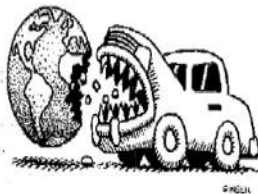
### Conversations on Uncommon Ground

*“I agree with your aims but not your methods. How do you expect to get the public behind you when you’re causing all this disruption?”*

The first conversation concerned the validity of the methods we used on the day. A tripod made from scaffold poles was erected on a



**No war for oil!**



**Combat Climate Change NOW!**

### Sorry for the inconvenience...

**... but this is nothing compared to what is happening in Iraq, or the problems caused by climate change across the globe, now and in the future**

This week at the G8 Summit, the leaders of the eight richest industrial countries are hiding away on a remote island, carving out the future of the rest of the world. Oil is expected to be high on their agenda. G8 finance ministers have urged the world’s oil producers to massively increase oil production to drive down prices.

This comes at a time when thousands of people have died in wars over oil, and when climate change, caused by burning fossil fuels is starting to cause chaos across the globe. Recent panic predictions of rising prices following the Saudi terrorist attacks, show how vulnerable our daily lives are to our global addiction to oil.

So who’s to blame? Recent panic. We are all part of a fossil fuel economy, but the real criminals are governments and oil companies. We in the UK are in a powerful position to influence this. We politically and financially support oil companies such as Total and Texaco, and we collude with the Bush administration in waging war for oil.



**We are ordinary people who have had enough of being led towards environmental destruction and war. We are blocking these oil companies in protest against the G8 controlling the worlds future.**

For more information on resistance to the G8, see [www.dissent.org.uk](http://www.dissent.org.uk)

Figure 2: The leaflet

crossroads on the industrial estate which intentionally blocked access to a number of industrial plants including two oil depots, but also other firms including building materials merchants. One protestor climbed to the top of the scaffold poles, using a common technique from the anti-roads movement, so that police or other people could not lower the scaffold without causing personal harm to the person at the top. Normally, specialist units or the fire brigade are called in to deal with this which takes several hours. The level of disruption caused, blocking all access in or out of the road, created tension, with many people demanding to know why they were being unfairly targeted. The vast majority of people who were blocked were lorry drivers who couldn't reach their depots to either pick up or drop off deliveries.

After the initial tension calmed down and people realised the nature and extent of the road block, some people told us that they understood our points about climate change and the links between oil and war ("sorry for the inconvenience . . . but this is nothing compared to what is happening in Iraq or the problems caused by climate change across the globe" read the leaflet). However, while many agreed with our aims, most expressed the view that our methods were at fault. The fact that we had stopped the traffic with no prior consent and refused to move for three hours was a source of widespread anger and outrage. There was also anger that we had stopped the whole of the local traffic system rather than just the gates of the oil depots. I suggested that the aim was to cause a high level of disruption for a short period of time to force discussion on crisis issues which we all faced like climate change, our dependency on oil, and why Iraq was invaded. I went on to say that I do use other tactics like lobbying MPs, but they didn't really seem to bring about change, as our government seemed unwilling to tackle to root causes of climate change and war. Taking direct action was a way to bring us together so we could rethink politics collectively rather than relying on elected officials. I was reminded of a quote used by civil rights campaigners: "when injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty".

Other activists pointed out that groups such as Farmers for Action (FFA) and the People's Fuel Lobby (PFL) had used similar road blocks at oil refineries and depots in 1999, 2000 and 2001 to protest against rising fuel prices. Wasn't it a starting point that we are using common methods, albeit with different motivations? The legitimacy of road blocks depends upon the current acceptance of the demands behind it within wider society. Disruption to preserve abstract social, or common, goods such as the environment or peace is generally seen as unacceptable, unlawful and not tolerated. Such disruption for collective ends challenges the sovereign rights of the individual to accrue profits in a free market. However, disruption aimed at

maintaining personal wealth, the right to use private transport or cheap consumer prices is tolerated, at least for a short time. Nevertheless, direct action techniques like road blocks are an effective and widely used tool for a variety of purposes which can be used by certain groups to break the silence and force discussion on what they see as “threat issues”.

*“I bet you’ve driven here today”*

Conversations often rapidly move from the general to the particular, and hence I was quizzed as to my own role in the issues. How had I arrived? Did I use a car? Admitting that I had used a car, I was then accused of hypocrisy. How can I criticise others for their use of oil, when I depend on a whole host of oil products to do this? Aren’t I contributing to climate change and sanctioning the war in Iraq? I tried to explain that I sometimes have to use car transport as often the alternatives are limited or too expensive, but that I try and reduce my dependency on oil whenever possible, through, for example, using a bike, sharing cars, being aware of food miles, reducing plastic packaging and promoting recycling. As well as changes like these in my daily life, I said, I was also willing to confront the bigger picture outside my home. That is why I was there today. This wasn’t to claim some moral high ground, but to suggest a more pragmatic politics which works towards the bigger picture (climate treaties, reducing energy use, an end to militarization, green transport, less food miles) through intermediate and pragmatic steps which involve compromises (the use of advanced technologies like the Internet by campaigners, car travel to go to meetings or demonstrations, jet travel which facilitates global exchanges).

Defensiveness or moral indignation can be swapped for dialogue. Raising accusations about our inability to escape oil commodities only serves to highlight how all of us, regardless of our ethical opinions, find it difficult to escape them, not least due to advertising and public subsidies. The fact that the lorry drivers talked about car dependency signifies an understanding of the difficulties of escaping “oil” and the pressing need to confront climate change. As one person commented, “if you lot can’t avoid oil, then who can?” The difference is how much we are prepared to acknowledge the contradictions and compromises in our lives, withdraw our support from the oil economy where we can, and pursue alternatives whilst also encouraging others to do so.

*“I don’t care about these issues. I just want to get on with my work”*

Faced by complex situations with no clear friend or foe, cause or effect, it’s a natural reaction to say that problems have nothing to do

with us. In our busy lives, we just want to go about our business. Hence, like many everyday situations there were numerous knee-jerk responses such as “climate change is good for Britain as we’ll have warmer weather”, “I don’t care about sea level rises as I don’t live by the sea”, or “the war was nothing to do with oil, it was about getting rid of Saddam”. Finding common ground doesn’t involve refuting such comments, on the basis of higher morals or superior facts, but finding ways to continue conversations beyond these moments to uncover root causes of misunderstandings or prejudices. Key to continuing dialogue is presenting ideas of social and environmental justice which are attractive enough to be widely adopted as guides for living in the present.

More difficult conversations concern a wider ethics of responsibility which uses the collective “we” rather than the individual “I”. This means scrutinising our daily actions and our, usually unknowing and invisible, collusion in ways of living that have negative effects on others. The effects we have on others (and ourselves) from our working lives are often manifold but are particularly difficult to unravel. Importantly, the prevailing ethics of today’s individualised society champions corporations due to their role as producers of wealth, which makes it difficult to create a blame culture towards them. For example, several people said that their firm would penalise them for the delays we caused, but few would admit that corporate culture was at fault here rather than us. A collective ethics is also of vital importance to tackle generalised global problems such as climate change which are often outside the comprehension of individuals. Oddly, the man I had this conversation with asked me if I would stop the protest if he agreed to come and join us. I said there was no “us” to join. But I said yes, although I couldn’t speak for everyone else. I didn’t see him again.

*“You’re taking food from my kids’ mouths by stopping me working”*

Contrasts quickly emerged between uncivil protestors, who through disrupting the public in their everyday lives, are seen as selfish and only thinking of themselves, and the “decent” public which is stopped from earning a living. Many of the drivers made the situation personal and emotional claiming that as a result of the delay, and hence loss of wages, we were indirectly taking food from their family and children. One of the useful ways to respond to this was to wholeheartedly agree, but also suggest that it wasn’t us doing the taking. Rather, corporate culture, along with privatisation, mergers and its manipulation of government agendas, is responsible for fairly widespread levels of exploitation, low wages and poor conditions for people in many



sectors and places across the world. It is our collusion in, or at least apathy towards, this situation which places many of us in precarious and low-wage employment situations.

There was some discussion about how we all felt exploited in countless ways, everyday. We talked about our dissatisfaction with our working lives, wage levels and relationship with our bosses, that we would like more freedom and control over our time, and what we would do if we didn't have to work to earn money. We pointed out that in the past, protests and disruptions have often aimed at winning better working conditions for people rather than taking them away. We returned to discuss the hauliers who recently blocked roads to ensure decent wages for themselves. Some of us suggested that we could go even further—that starting up workers co-operatives, gaining a larger share of corporate profits and management wages, strengthening trade unions, working less or having more control in the work place, would equate to an even better deal for us and our families.

*“I agree with you but I feel powerless. What can we do? Life's a rollercoaster”*

When the drivers knew we were leaving, some relief was brought to the high levels of tension and we engaged in much more open debate. Several people said they felt powerless, comparing their lives to a rollercoaster where they had no control over the twists and turns of daily life. Issues beyond the home and work were too big to confront, and little could be done.

Powerlessness can create commonality. Faced with trying to understand and unravel inter-connected issues seemingly beyond our control we all feel powerless. But for those without power, admitting a lack of power is the first step to understanding its causes and acting against it. By naming the problem we also start to change it. For hauliers and farmers, for example, direct action was used during the fuel protests due to a feeling that fuel price policy was beyond their control. In that instance, protestors had used the feeling of powerlessness and turned collective disillusionment into direct action. Collective struggle and self-organising to take direct action was seen as the answer.

Responding to comments about powerlessness, some protesters suggested we organise together locally, perhaps through a loose coalition, to challenge the legitimacy of big business, trade union bureaucracies and bosses. One driver told us that such talk was avoiding the point and had nothing to do with politics. In a sentence, politics was delocalised. Organising locally, or in the workplace, becomes detached from political activity, which assumedly is mediated only through the ballot box or mandated officials. Other ways of doing

politics, collectively and locally, are trivialised. It is a telling sign of how disempowered and marginalised we have become in our daily lives. Yet, whatever the outcome of the day, our encounters were political. No matter how trivial or dismissive, such conversations have lasting effects which are too early, and probably impossible, to guess. But how to make them last?

### **Facing Emotions and Hybridity, Giving up Activism, and Breaking the Silence**

As we can see, high tensions, entrenched roles and social perceptions make protest situations unlikely places for discussing emotions, exploring commonalities and breaking silences. Anderson (2003, 2004) rightly points out that a specific activist identity is enacted during environmental direct action, an identity which sets the activist self apart from normal society through particular spatial practices, moral codes and political and cultural preferences. Collective identity is normally strong through strong bonds of trust, loyalty and affection and there is often antipathy to outsiders or non-members (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001). In a similar way, the public enact certain social roles, be it supporter, bystander or opponent. As the conversations during the blockade showed, moral assumptions abound concerning how we ought to live and what is ethical and unethical behaviour.

The work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) can help us think about the dialogical nature of these encounters. Here, conversations are always open-ended and concern “becoming” rather than completion (Holloway and Kneale 2000). Hence, a sense of the self comes through the co-presence of the “other” within a conversation. The utterance, the basic unit of analysis, is always situated in a relation to utterances of others and embodies the world view of the speaker. These positionalities can be understood through what Bakhtin (1986) called “speech genres” reflecting the social context of the language used by the speaker. What we see on uncommon ground, then, are dialogical relations based upon uneven power relations between protagonists, reflecting a host of assumed identities based around gender, class, ethnicity and education. In Nottingham, different speech genres were particularly evident, differentiating the (educated, middle-class, smelly, hippy, doley) activists from the (ignorant, aggressive, uncaring, working class) delivery drivers. Such assumed roles frustrate more open-ended negotiations which could reveal commonalities.

However, recognising the emotionally laden nature of such encounters may help us reveal a more fluid sense of social relations and potentialities for connections. Uncommon ground is a site brimming with affect, emotions and ethical interplay. Although little discussed

until recently, these elements, what Pulido (2003) calls the “inner life of politics”, play prominent roles at such moments (see also Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001; Thrift 2004). The problem is not a lack of emotions, then, but their overabundance. Hence, we need to dispel notions that activists are emotionally charged while bystanders are somehow rational, detached or uninformed. Here, encounters between social movement activists and the public entail emotional and moral negotiations between strangers leading to a complex set of responses. Kemper (2001:76) is right in suggesting that “social movements can alienate bystanders through instigating fear, anger, disgust or distrust”. Encouraging commonality would require different emotional responses. But what kind? These may have less to do with trying to mobilise people by promoting a sense of outrage, than looking for emotional connections. We are already connected emotionally to those we think we oppose or are different from.

A further move towards commonality comes from an appreciation that our social roles are always relationally negotiated, hybrid, corporeal and contingent (Castree 2003; Whatmore 1997). It is worth expanding on these. First, assuming an encounter is played as equals, the identity of both activists and non-activists can be challenged and reconfigured. It is not as simple, as in this case, as activist versus lorry driver. We all display multiple, hybrid identities—being radical and conformist, activist and worker, purist and hypocrite, left and right. We also maintain different identities in different contexts (or a spatial division of identity; Anderson 2004), be it with work colleagues, the family, police or with activists. Clearly, the activists were not the repositories of truth nor were they experts on climate change and war, while the bystanders were not simply ignorant of the issues. The key is to acknowledge and understand points of commonality and overlap. Further, a fuller understanding of these uncommon encounters comes from recognising their performed, embodied and highly corporeal nature (Whatmore 1997). This was evident through the highly gendered and emotionally charged performance from both activists and lorry drivers. Quickly, both sides reacted aggressively, using their bodies, to fulfil their roles and define their territory as manual worker or eco-activist, obscuring possibilities for an ethics of commonality or care. Finally, interaction during a conversation about climate change would vary considerably according to whether it took place during a demonstration, over a cup of tea at home, or at a conference.

A blurring of ontologies such as activist–public may help us look for connections and commonalities rather than dwelling on divisions and despair. An ethics based on contingent and relational ontologies is part of transcending fixed or essentialist characteristics. Presupposing the rigidity of social roles, of us and them, expert and bystander,

blinds us to the possibilities of common ground which surround us. The activist identity is one of the ontological essentialisms which obscures common agendas and negates a more hybrid sense of self. An anonymous article written after the 18 June day of action against capitalism in 1999 entitled “Give up activism” (1999) explores how the “activist mentality” sets activists apart through a division of labour where they perform roles as specialists in social change. Through a mixture of fear, guilt, anger, shame or compassion, activists set themselves apart from non-activists through their commitment and self-sacrifice to lead social change and challenge the present system through staged “actions” at particular places. The article goes on to explain that this focus on actions, on the external life of politics, takes the focus away from the potentialities of everyday connections—of collectively challenging social relations in our daily lives which we all continually help to reproduce. Hence, there is a large grey area between the ontological extremes of activist and public. Suggesting that the alternative position to activist is “non-activist” excludes and disempowers the vast majority of the population (Halfacree 2004).

How can such social roles be overcome during protest events and how do we extend interaction and critique and blur the distinction between normal civil society and protest places? Leaving protest situations, activists are likely to resume more “normal” identities while members of the public may recount the event positively. But they also may not. Talking on uncommon ground involves a certain commitment to finding common points of contact in terms of values and ethics, and integrating our multiple selves across different times and places. It also involves courage in terms of facing up to the scale of problems. Is an abundance of food and consumer goods really worth vivisection, factory farming, economic slavery, chronic pollution or global environmental destruction? Faced with these overflows surely it is time to ask, what will it take for us to act or at least recognise the scale of injustices? Derrick Jensen (2000:4) suggests, “we don’t stop these atrocities, because we don’t talk about them. We don’t talk about them, because we don’t think about them. We don’t think about them, because they’re too horrific to comprehend”. Finding ways to talk about these abstract “social bads” begins to confront the silence and denial which hides us from how we are destroying the global environment and each other. Such topics can be very threatening as they touch the core of how people know the world. In private, during one-to-one conversations, people often reveal their fears and concerns about the world. But the trick is how we get to talk about them collectively without people shutting down and retreating back into the safer silence. If, Jensen (2000) continues, we recognised some of the patterns behind inequalities, we would have to change them. But we’ve had a long time to get used to them

and so few of us are prepared to stand up and break the silence, to literally “roll a grenade onto the dancefloor”. It’s easier to assume that the world is a very dangerous place and to wall ourselves in through fear and predictable social roles. It is easier to believe that competition underpins interactions between humans rather than mutual aid or co-operation. These assumptions and subsequent divisions were my sources of frustrations at the Nottingham demonstration. How do we translate these uncommon encounters into a common ground for dialogue and action? How can we foster coherence rather than conflict between our multiple selves? Without spaces or opportunities for further dialogue, deepening understanding or ethical or emotional contact, the answers to these questions are unclear.

### **On the Importance of Common Places**

Where do such conversations leave us? At the end of uncommon encounters we go home, retreat to our normal lives. After the tripod comes down, the lorries rumble on, the oil, the cement, the tarmac and steel are delivered, albeit belatedly, and the circulation of goods continues once more. But does normal life resume? Rebecca Solnit’s (2004) writings on hope and possibility are useful here. Key to her work is a politics which rethinks effect: that it is always too early to calculate, that “causes and effects assume history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away stone” (2004:4). In this confused landscape, says Rebecca Solnit, “the angel of Alternative History tells us that our acts count, that we are making history all the time” (2004:75). The changes that we might want—dramatic shifts in policy, a delinking of trade from profit and violence, more freedom to build our own political lives, a sense of solidarity and mutualism—are often unknowable and unrealistic aims. Desiring them wholesale often leads to frustrations. Victories come through subtle, slow changes. This is why a tense encounter or an angry conversation contains hope and has transformative power. We also have to recognise that there will be compromises and failures, but that these are not dead-ends but resources for thinking through how to enact change in a very complicated, often overwhelming, world.

Some of the most creative solutions have come from those that do not lend legitimacy to formulaic, hierarchical ways of doing politics. The ideology of change is about movement, in which the journey is more important than a hoped for utopia. What we see is an embedding of micro-political tactics (Creswell 1996; de Certeau 1988; Pile and Keith 1997; Sharp et al 2000) and a notion of the revolution, not in the future, but in the everyday (Vaneigem 1979). Potentialities

then, are emergent. Here we enter new territory with little used or seen emotional potentialities—activists giving up activism and bystanders becoming a bit more active. Recognising the emotional and affectual nature of uncommon encounters may help, as Thrift (2004) comments, to show up new political registers and intensities to brew new collectives which are potentially progressive.

Hence, common ground is not about linking up hitherto disparate groups of activists, nor recruiting more people to various activist causes. It is about problematising essentialisms such as activist and public, the committed and uncaring, and making connections wherever they emerge. It is about making strange bedfellows and creative alliances between groups who don't necessarily agree on everything. It is less about thinking where someone has come from but where you are willing to go and how much you are willing to work together. Common ground seeks opportunities for transformative dialogue and understanding the limits of people's real world situations. It is a place for mutual learning, and often conflict, where anyone is free to enter and contribute. This openness also makes it a site of manipulation, fear and insecurity. But a real civil society reminds us what it means to be free while also connected, and revels in it. It rejects what stops us from expressing our human essence, what restrains us, governs us, disciplines us, and makes us blind to each other and the natural world on which we depend. It is a resistance from which springs creativity. Problems also lie not just with abstract social evils such as corporate globalisation, but how we understand our own role in perpetuating relations of social inequality. The potentialities for such connections existed at the oil blockade and with more time and space could have flourished.

Connections between activists and their "others" are often an anathema to those who occupy marginal or radical fringes with the aim of maintaining a purity of purpose without being recuperated. However, there is no "outside" from which to launch actual or symbolic attacks on the system. Hence, alliances can become radical propositions as they unpick the system from within through building connections and creating workable alternatives to capitalism in the here and now. Other notions of civil society and civility can emerge in such instances not based upon state-based reformism nor stability and order but disorder, questioning and civil disobedience (Sennett 2000). This is not civil society embedded in consensual liberal democracy and bourgeoisie individualism, but a radical democracy based on what Mouffe (1994) called antagonistic pluralism, a reclaimed notion of global civil society, collective action and a questioning of state and corporate power. There are numerous examples here, most short-lived and problem-laden, including more statist movements towards

radical democracy such as those in Venezuela, which for all their compromises and problems have meant gains at the grassroots.<sup>1</sup>

Protests and social confrontations on uncommon ground are entry points for critical engagement. But they are ephemeral, ridden with tensions, assumptions and assumed social identities. They are contact points and border crossings between different ethics and values, but, limited within protest movements they become contained, transient and heavily policed moments. Hence, they are far from ideal. The problem remains the lack of physical spaces where uncommon encounters can be extended, where activism and non-activism can blur, where commonality can develop and mature, where experiences and critique can be shared, outside the pressures of policing and assumed social roles. Finding and extending places for translating the uncommon into the common is one of the most significant challenges of our neoliberal times. Oldenburg (1999) talked of the “great good places” which bring people together where we can dwell and discuss, and similarly Routledge (1996) has introduced the idea of “third space for critical engagement” which seeks space beyond the dualism of activists and their others. Elsewhere, I have suggested that temporary autonomous spaces have an important role to play here (Chatterton 2002b; Chatterton and Hollands 2003), not just as a statement and intervention against landscapes of speculation and profit, but also as practical interventions to create not-for-profit spaces for encounter and difference. Many contemporary social centres, both rented and squatted, show a commitment not just to providing free or cheap services such as reading rooms, cafes, crèches, arts spaces, but also to reinventing political process and identity through non-hierarchical and consensus-based decision making.<sup>2</sup> Such spaces allow us to connect and, however problematically, bring us together. That is why such spaces are seen as dangerous, and that is why they are usually policed and legislated to the margins.

### **Finding the Good Life**

But what of the ethical and moral basis of such connections? Normative dialogues discuss what forms of social organization are good and bad. While definitions of good and bad raise controversies and are spatially and temporally specific, some attempt at definition has to be made to overcome ethical relativism and provide some critical judgement on what to accept and reject. Smith (1997) offers some starting points for a universal sense of social justice based upon the following: recognising human sameness in terms of meeting certain basic needs to be able to live a human life; that all people have the same moral worth and hence are entitled to equal respect; and the arbitrary character of the distribution of privileges. Good may also be

defined as recognising the interests of others and offering something positive to wider humanity, while protecting what is important to us. It also concerns more than just a recognition of our effects on distant others. It would involve recognising that we all deserve equal dignity, following a process of fair judgement, and that an “us and them” approach to identity overlooks how our social geographies are hybrid, overlapping and interdependent (Sayer and Storper 1997:13). Pybus (1991) suggests that human goodness is not about rational judgements or emotional feelings, but both.

What is bad, on the other hand, is likely to be identified by virtue of its inability to be widely defended in public, or incorporate the vast majority of the population (Pritchard 1991; Smith 1997). Yi-Fu Tuan (1999) suggests a number of evils that still make up human nature: destructiveness, cruelty, dominance and compartmentalisation (or disconnection). Cloke (2002) adds a further layer here by discussing the difference between “ordinary evil”, the sum of small thoughtless acts which trespass on the lives of others and can add up to disastrous acts on certain people and places, and “ordered evil”, which involves those who seek to gain a foothold in larger power structures and use it to accrue wealth and power. While such notions are based on a rather problematic and static notion of an “evil” which is somehow counterposed by a “good”, it is at least useful in allowing us to understand the double bind of struggling against larger external injustices and our own responsibility for the many ways in which our consumerist lives impose upon distant others.

There are a multitude of alternative propositions of the good life, many of which are proposed to counter “social bads”. These include tools for direct democracy such as local ordinances, citizen initiatives and referendums, town meetings best exemplified in New England, USA, spokes councils and consensus decision-making, convergence/counter-summits as well as social forums, alternative and independent media, social centres, Albert’s (2000) participatory economy, decentralised and off-the-grid technologies, self-managed workplaces, consumer/worker/housing co-operatives, community supported agriculture, credit unions and micro-credit, people-centred development, and local control over planning and finance (Begg 2000; Chatterton 2002a; Douthwaite 1996; Giradet 1996, Mander and Goldsmith 1996; Mitchell 1999; Pickerill 2003; Satterthwaite 1999; Sen et al 2004). Present experiments in the Chiapas state of Mexico by the Zapatista communities or the piqueteros in poor neighbourhoods of Argentina show this explosive combination of community co-operation and collective struggle. It is about having faith in “taking back control” in one’s own communities, homes and workplaces (see Gordon and Chatterton 2004).



Two problems are worth highlighting here. First, while much of the above may seem familiar, agreeable and desirable to people with exposure to campaigning, activism or community politics, for people with little exposure they often seem alien, difficult and unpractical. Second, we face the tensions of balancing statist/reformist versions of the good life emerging from institutionalised socialist groups with more radical, autonomous versions from anarchist/libertarian groups. It is not as simple as one is better than the other. The hope is that there will be an ethical duty not to simply repeat the excesses of large-scale, dehumanising state-based solutions, but instead promote local autonomy and direct participation which is based upon good judgement and respects diversity. There is also a duty not to impose our vision of change, but to invite others to experiment.

In reality, we face rhetorical challenges between different ways of organising human life. Wendy Brown (2002) suggests that instead of saying “you should live in this way”, we need to discuss alternatives by asking, do these alternatives attract you, incite you, make what you’ve got appear absurd? She goes on to say: “You have to incite an interest that has been pounded out of us, an interest in shaping our own lives and the larger orders we live in, you have to incite interest in ... freedom” (Brown 2002:220). Rather than offering a future blueprint based on what people “ought” to be doing, then, examples of post-capitalist ways of living are already part of the present (Gibson-Graham 1996). The trick as Cleaver (1993) points out is to “discover tendencies in the present which provide alternative paths out of the current crisis”. Some of these will disappear, others will survive, but the challenge remains to find them, encourage people to articulate, expand and connect them. What remains up for grabs are the particular values which become common currency. Common ground, then, is caught between definitional issues of what is good and bad, what works and doesn’t, what is acceptable and what is not. Ultimately, versions of the good life that are most feasible, recognisable and hence imaginable are likely to emerge. There are no easy answers here—it depends on wide participation.

At the Nottingham demonstration, there were instances of human goodness and badness on both sides, and both were relational and contingent. Activists framed the drivers as lacking self-awareness, generosity and courage to tackle wider concerns, while drivers framed the activists as self-interested and lacking generosity towards their specific needs, especially those relating to family income and their working time. There was insufficient time and effort to discuss our respective concerns, insecurities and visions of the good and bad life. Building common ground clearly implies a lot of hard work. Much cognitive legwork is needed so that many people can even start to talk together, especially on complex issues such as climate change and

war. Drawing on work in moral psychology, such as Gilligan (1982), Pritchard (1991) suggests the importance of moral competence in the process of becoming responsible. Key to such moral competencies is the idea of autonomy. As Pritchard (1991:192) notes, “moral autonomy is related to moral competency, which itself involves a blend of rationality and concern for others”. Here, we arrive at the source of some of the frustrations and fractions at the Nottingham demonstration. While both activists and bystanders showed self-awareness, many lacked a concern for others. Egocentricism overshadowed collectivism. Compassion also broke down at the demonstration because people’s individual self regard, status or dignity was broken down by the invasive nature of the demonstration. Without feeling both freedom and connection it is difficult to engage in dialogue. Rebuilding dialogue means respecting the ability of autonomous individuals to make everyday moral judgements, in their own time.

What kind of emotional, ethical and moral frames emerge on common ground? Proctor and Smith (1999:8) note that “ethics becomes a practice of consistent moral reflection” which questions why certain ideas or acts are accepted as right and wrong. Speaking our moral truths to each other is a starting point for understanding each others’ realities and for developing a wider consciousness. Learning to walk together on common ground is about negotiating the tricky line between universalism (what is best done for distant others) and particularism (how can we best improve our patch). Some level of wider judgement and cognitive reasoning is needed to stop the rule of the mob and a lapse into particularism and relativism. “The sameness of humankind, within a range of important characteristics, is part of such common ground” (Smith 1997:32). But maybe no choice has to be made. Particularist desires can be embedded in recognising universal basic needs, and sometimes the interests of places or groups are best served by being selectively open, sometimes selectively closed (Chatterton 2005). It is about responsibility based upon critical judgement. That, for example, some localities or groups, are the source of wrongs, while others are worth defending (Massey 2004).

Ultimately, common ground works best where there is an ethics of autonomy, freedom, co-operation and mutual aid (see Berkman 2003; Blunt and Wills 2000; Bookchin 1996; Cook and Pepper 1990; Joll 1979; Kropotkin 1972; Marshall 1992; Woodcock 1977, 1986). Paradoxically, the more people become connected, the more they are able to fulfil their own individual desires. Encounters on common ground depart from moral codes enshrined in the law of states and kings and instead locates it in people. It also departs from classical liberal understandings of ethics based upon interactions between rational and self-interested individuals guided by market transactions

and a system of rights embedded in laws, towards a more premodern ethics based upon community and common goods.<sup>3</sup> Developing a structure of feeling and a moral language around these ideas is a crucial task, especially to counter the growth of right-wing moral discourses on community and politics.

Rethinking place and identity are part of the morality of common ground. We have seen that the construction of friends and foes is crucial to the political life of activism. It depends on negatively identifying outsiders, ritual participation and mobilising around pre-inscribed moral arguments and notions of right. If common ground implies a social and spatial practice, it is based upon non-essentialist and relational understandings of the self, openness and connection, hybridity, negotiation, and a global and more ecological sense of place. It is unlike many traditional activist spaces such as protest camps or squats where activists set the rules of engagement to secure and win territory.

These thoughts on hope, silence and commonality can inform our ways of doing research. Many geographers have taken the call to active engagement and emancipatory research seriously (Blomley 1994; Lees 1999; Maxey 1999) and a well established body of meaningful participatory research grows (Cloke 2002; Pain 2003; Pain and Francis 2003). Learning, acting and talking together on uncommon ground can only really be achieved through a genuine desire to be free from institutional constraints and social norms and foster solidarity, mutual aid and an ethic of care amongst disparate individuals. Such practices eschew experts and blueprints, and can help seek out collectively defined escape routes from isolation and silence. This form of ethics, based upon working and learning collectively, makes use of the uncommon ground found in everyday encounters. It is a resource for seeking out commonalities with other groups and working jointly to find solutions. This is not easy, but it can be immensely rewarding when successful. Helping a particular group meet their objective is not the point. I am suggesting rebuilding relations which go beyond particularist concerns. As we have seen, ideas of the good life, workable alternatives to capitalist relations, abound. These can be shared and developed by extending common ground based on mutual aid, solidarity and freedom. We need to do this not just within the academy, but with those that surround us who have become invisible through neglect, mistrust and despair.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Some of the most well-known examples of such alliances come from California, where ecological activists from Earth First! linked up with millworkers from lumber firms and workers from the Industrial Workers of the World in the 1990s during the “Redwood Summer” campaign against old-growth logging (Bari 1997). Examples from the UK include alliances between environmentalists and Farmers for Action in demonstrations against the effects of the corporate ownership of agriculture and retailing, the Liverpool dockers who worked with Reclaim the Streets, and local community support for anti-roads activists at protest camps in Newbury and Twyford Down. Outside the UK, examples include the strike called by cab drivers in support of the protests during the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organisation ministerial, the Confédération Paysanne in the French Larzac Plateau which brings together farmers, anti-globalisers and peace activists to protect farming and local communities, and huge movements from the global south such as The Brazilian Landless Peasants Movement (MST) the Assembly of the Poor in Thailand, and the Karnataka State Farmers Association in India (Notes from Nowhere 2003). The neighbourhood assemblies and occupied factories in Argentina have been a particularly fruitful example of such political space, where seemingly disparate groups have come together to discuss common issues (Gordon and Chatterton 2004). Such alliances have many limitations: they are often short-lived and find it difficult to move away from their original single issue focus, they are susceptible to co-optation by the more powerful partner in the equation, or by governments, and are prone to internal disagreements.

<sup>2</sup> The UK has recently seen a growth of these and a provisional but constantly changing list would include the Cowley Club and Peace Centre in Brighton, the London Action Resource Centre (LARC), the 1 in 12 Club in Bradford, the Sumac Centre in Nottingham, the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh, Mill 55 and the Basement in Manchester, the CommonPlace in Leeds, the Kebele in Bristol, and longstanding radical bookshops such as Housmans in London, Greenleaf in Bristol and Word Power in Edinburgh.

<sup>3</sup> Such ideas were graphically represented by 19th century thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin (1972) who was at pains to point out that the dominant tendency in human relations was co-operation rather than competition. He went further to find numerous examples of the collective organisation of industry, agriculture and community life which would maximise the collective good (see Kropotkin 1974). Such traditions have been kept alive to the present day through radical scholars such as Patrick Geddes, Ebenezer Howard, Lewis Mumford, Murray Bookchin and Colin Ward in their ideas for self-regulating federations of communities, while nineteenth century radicals such as Pierre Joseph Proudhon and Michel Bakunin demonstrated the need for mutual respect between autonomous individuals who freely lived and traded within a federation of communities (see Joll 1979; Marshall 1992).

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