

Underpass: An Examination of the Use of Anarchist Geography Discourse to Explore
the Appropriation of the Public Space Under the A12 on the River Lea Navigation in
Hackney Wick, East London

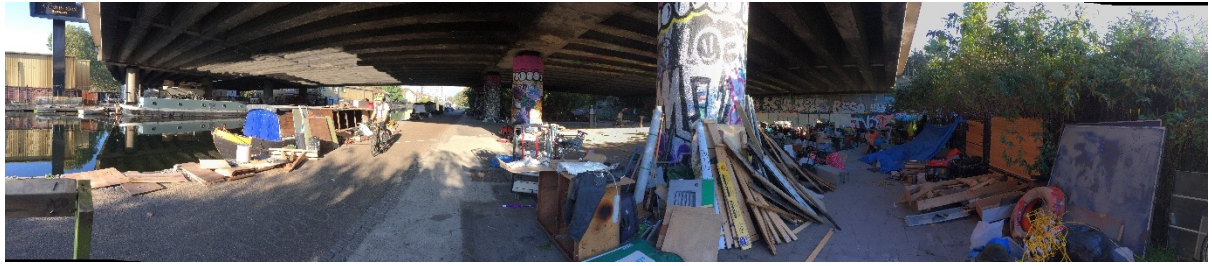
For itinerant boat dwellers in London, the space beneath roads that pass over the waterways are usefully sheltered from the elements and perfect for carrying out boat work. For a time these spaces can be transformed from dingy, dangerous spots into industrious hubs where boats are gutted, renovated and painted. Where the A12 passes over the River Lea Navigation in Hackney Wick, East London there was a large concreted space so ideal for boaters and artists alike that it became a heavily used, functioning workshop and gallery space. To the North is Wick Woodland- 20.93 acres of thick trees leading to marshes and to the South is HereEast- where creatives can rent studio space and the public can eat and shop in the canal-facing buildings originally erected for the 2012 Olympics (Woodland Trust, 2018).

The underpass began its transformation about two years ago, and as of a few weeks ago, was set up with trestle tables, boat projects, sculptures in progress, armchairs and tea stations against the backdrop of whirring generators and the feel of renovation and creativity.

However ,on 30th October 2018 the authorities responsible for the site (the Canal and River Trust (CRT), Transport for London (TfL) and Hackney Council) stated that they had been called to address a fly tipping problem and cleared the area. Mooring has been suspended for five months and a large CRT working barge has taken the place of boat projects.

What are the benefits and limitations of looking at claims to this particular public space through an anarchist geography lens?


Images of the underpass 28th October 2018 (before the site was cleared)







Images of the notice and the site 31st October 2018, after the site was cleared and a CRT working barge displacing boat projects.



Mooring suspension

Notice No.	14096	Date of issue:	17 October 2018
Waterway:	Lee Navigation		
Start date:	30 October 2018	End date:	31 March 2019
Location:	A12 Flyover		
Type of restriction:	Mooring suspension		
Duration:	5 months		

The Canal & River Trust is working with Hackney Council and Transport for London to address fly-tipping and unauthorised uses under the A12 East Cross Route where it crosses the Lee Navigation.

Details and reasons for stoppage:

To enable site clearance works and long-term site improvements to be undertaken, moorings will be suspended under the East Cross Route Bridge until 31 March 2019.

You can view this notice and its map online here:
<https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/notice/14096/a12-east-cross-route-lee-navigation>

You can find all notices at the url below:
<https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/notices>

Up to date information regarding this notice may be obtained from:

Telephone: 0303 040 4040
Email: london.southeast@canalrivertrust.org.uk



It is important to underscore that anarchist geography (as with most discourses) has within it many anarchist geographies and it does not commit itself to a singular ontological mode (Springer, 2016). Despite this, there are key thinkers and discussions particularly around power and domination to which various alternative optics may lend their arguments in order to remain open to wide ontological and epistemological assemblages useful to this issue.

Proudhon- a seminal anarchist geographer- sees property as a coercive, hierarchical juridico-institutional means for exploitation of the people and a threat to the commons (Springer, 2013). The commons being land available to communities and individuals who share what they collect, cultivate and create as means to autonomy and freedom from wage labour. This exchange of common interest and shared benefit was coined as 'mutual aid' by Kropotkin in the late 1800's (Springer, 2013). In direct contrast, anarchists see private property as a means to withhold common land and push people into wage labour, denying them the ability to be self-sufficient. They call for 'direct action' whereby people claim back the commons (Borum and Tilby, 2015).

These ideas can be neatly transposed onto the underpass; where artists and boaters instigate direct action by communally using and claiming public space. However, we must be attentive to geographies that complicate, influence and criticise anarchist geography such as Marxist, post-structural, creative public and post-colonial work which allow a deeper reading of the underpass. In addition, attention should be paid to the historical and socio-political place and space based foundations on claims to the waterways and the underpass as a creative, working space. In order to discuss what is at stake when using an anarchist geographical lens to look at the underpass, questions of positionality, scale and a priori assumptions of egalitarianism and power must be interrogated. In order to do this I have organised this discussion into two parts; 1) the place, and; 2) the people.

The Place

‘to demand inclusion in a space often means forcibly occupying the space of exclusion, reinforcing the idea that public space has never been guaranteed and, by its very definition, must be contested’ (Springer, 2016; p.113).

The contestation of space in the underpass is set on a larger historical and geographical stage. In the 1980’s creative light industries took advantage of ‘low studio rents and unregulated landscape’ (Rossen, 2017) so-called *urban voids* (Fior, 2012) left vacant in the industrial units and warehouses of Hackney Wick’s manufacturing past. These spaces allowed ‘artists to experiment, engage in critical art practices and form networks of collaboration’ (Rossen, 2017). However, the years leading up to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games hosted in nearby Stratford saw huge change revolving around neo-liberal efficiency geared towards the market economy and ‘global legacy’ (Burrows, 2017). This regeneration stimulated housing developments and retail to cater for the middle classes and caused land values to rise and out-price many creatives who lived and worked in Hackney Wick (Rossen, 2017). According to the Militant City, Hackney Wick was transformed into ‘one of the most highly regulated landscapes possible’ (2012).

This reminds us of the dearth of geographical literature on the death of public space (Speer, 2017; Cloke, May, and Johnsen, (2008); Tosi, (2007); Amster, (2003); Cameron, (2007); Atkinson, (2016); Bodnar, (2015)) which revived the question, first framed by Henri Lefebvre; ‘Who has the right to the city?’ (Lefebvre, 1996).

Davis- a Marxist geographer- argues that an ‘obsession with security’ has ‘position[ed] middle class interests against the welfare of the urban poor’ with the support of the private security industry and the use of architecture which he describes as the militarisation of cities against

the poor (Davis, in Sorkin, 1992; p155). Building on these ideas, Mitchell draws on Harvey's account of the annihilation of space by time to describe how the rights of the wealthy and successful utilise 'legal fiction' to 'cleanse the streets of those left behind by globalisation' bringing about the annihilation of space by law (Mitchell, 2002; p3). Others have positioned the clamping down of conviviality as attempts to secure the city against the threat of 'the other'- be they poor, migrants, young people or terrorists (Low and Iveson, 2016; p13). These ideas would be helpful to think with when discussing the dismantling of the underpass. Here we can draw parallels between the death of public space, the enclosure of the commons and state dominance. However, as we read in the opening quote to this section, anarchist geographers go further to call for direct action that interrogates the very idea of public space. Springer (2016) argues that agonist public space is a site for radical democracy and spatial emancipation which necessitates continual contestation of the effects of capitalism and its materialisation as neoliberalism. He draws on Radical Democratic Theorists Mouffe, Laclau and Rancière to posit that violent conflict is instigated from above when imposition of order onto public space is met with resistance from below (Springer, 2016). According to Springer, public space is 'the battlefield on which the conflicting interests of the rich and poor are set' (2016, p98). In this reading the underpass is a warzone between the poor creatives and the authorities trying to dominate them. Despite the importance here of framing the underpass in the context of wider structural economic changes in Hackney Wick, we must interrogate any conflation of wealth and power/ poverty and powerlessness. Clearly, when conducting this research, in depth interviews with interested parties and participant observation would allow for closer reading of the contestation of space, but we must parallel this with wide readings on power and hierarchy to ensure the research does not transpose large scale anarchist ideas of domination a priori, without rigorous interrogation of how they fit onto the local scale. Anarchist geographers would argue that their examination of domination goes further than the economic focus of Marxists to unpack how it manifests in any social relationship on any

scale (see May, 2009). They would claim violence can be either direct and visible or indirect and spatially diffuse (Springer, 2012) allowing for an attack on 'centralization, hierarchy, privilege, and domination whether they arise in governing bodies, the workplace, the home, the school or social situations' (Breitbart 1978, p1). Seemingly, this would allow for a scaling down of overarching theory to provide a thorough reading of a local space such as the underpass. Despite these claims, anarchism often reiterates an ideological dialectic of freedom and domination which Harvey tells us is a myth that 'cannot be so easily set aside in human affairs' (Harvey, 2017; p239). Harvey charges social anarchists with 'the preparedness to jump scales and integrate local ambitions with metropolitan-wide concerns' (Harvey, 2017; p240). Here we are reminded of Sherry Ortner's call that the empty signifier of 'the people' should be replaced with the empirical study of 'real people doing real things' (Ortner, in Roseberry, 1988).

Key post-structuralist writing on power such as Bourdieu might be useful to think as we turn to discuss power and 'the people'.

The People

James Scott tells us anarchic principles can be 'active in the aspirations and political action of people who have never heard of anarchism' (Scott, 2012; xii). However, anarchist geographers must be careful not to essentialise 'the people' as egalitarian in a way that is 'too narrowly explained as an effect of material circumstances or social structure' (Boehm, et al. 1993; p245). Because some artists and boaters have appropriated a space, does not mean they are claiming space for all. Moreover, the presence of those making claims suggests the absence of those who are not; thus claiming space in itself could say something of privilege

rather than oppression. How can we explore not just 'the right to the city', but also the right to protest others right to the city?

Helpful here are the post-structuralist thinkers who critique the pitting of artificial monolithic power against natural social relations. Bourdieu posited that individuals constantly perform 'durable dispositions'- observable preferences and allegiances. Dispositions are located in fields- distinct arenas with their own sets of rules, knowledge and capital (Swartz, 1997). According to Bourdieu, there are three main types of capital; economic, cultural and social. Cultural capital signifies family background, social class, etc. which influence skills, qualifications and competencies (Bourdieu, 1986). For Bourdieu the skill and knowledge of an individual is determined by cultural capital invested in them by others. Social capital consists of collectively-owned capital utilised by members of the group. These relationships are maintained by practical, material or symbolic exchanges (Swartz, 1997). In each field individuals can use their capital to compete for hierarchy and prestige. Bourdieu's emphasis on bodily know-how explains how individuals can impose and reproduce social domination and how this becomes so entrenched that it is perceived as natural, rather than culturally constructed, which justifies social inequality (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdiesian ideas of capital add to debates on domination, power relations and claims to space. These, alongside careful observations and in depth interviews may help explain how people make claims to space and why others don't make claims. Capital might intersect along other lines, such as race and gender as well as class and economic capital.

Post-structuralism's effect on anarchism lead to 'post-anarchism' which rejects power as a monolithic, repressive force and takes the Foucauldian view that it can be 'multivalent and relational' (Newman, 2010; p343). Of particular interest for this issue is Derrida's observation of an emerging sovereignty of the weak, such as the popular sovereignty of the global anti-capitalist movement (2008) whereby the global poor embody this new form of popular

sovereignty (Newman, 2010). Despite these complications of ideas of sovereignty and domination, there are current radical anarchist geographers and anthropologists such as Graeber's who are prepared to jump scales and make a prior assumptions about creatives:

Even when there is next to no other constituency for revolutionary politics in a capitalist society, the one group most likely to be sympathetic to its project consists of artists, musicians, writers, and others involved in some form of non-alienated production. (Graeber, 2002)

He is imagining that creative's freedom to envision and agitate what he sees as revolutionary politics is bound to their imagined freedom from economic domination. It is not my focus here to contend Graeber specifically but I would suggest that post-structural thought may help to interrogate the social, cultural and economic capital of artists before drawing conclusions about their politics, vision and non-alienated production. In an interesting twist, we often see artists themselves as 'the first cog within a chain of gentrification' (Weber-Newth, 2011) which threatens to privatise, securitise and enclose space.

To look at power relations in the underpass on a more local scale, we may need a closer reading of intersection of claims to space, perhaps initially focussing on how these issues intersect with race and gender as well as class. To give two simplistic examples: firstly; wood, stone and metal working (whether on boats or as art) and boat engine maintenance and mechanics are often assumed to be masculine fields and although there are many female boat owners who do this work, there may be 'new hierarchies of belonging' along gender lines when making claims to workshop space in the underpass (Back, 2012). Secondly; CRT survey details that 77% of London boaters identify as 'White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British' (CRT, 2016) which suggests that claims to space may be mediated through discourses and practices of Whiteness (Frankenberg 1993; Wemyss,2009). These ideas demonstrate the type of issues that might be overlooked if we assume there are no

hierarchies among ‘the people’, or certain groups of people. A Bourdieusian lens may help us further examine these questions. Not only do Bourdieu’s ideas apply to this specific example, but they also help us frame this issue as a problem of geographical thought. Analysis of the silencing of minority groups such as women in the anarchist movement specifies ‘the failure of standard anarchist historiographies to take gender relations seriously’ causing feminist historians to ‘question who and what counts as history and political work’ (Clough, 2012; p343; also see Greenway, 2010). In this way, an exploration of claims to space in the underpass maintains older anarchist approaches, but can also reveal it’s limitations through new ways of understanding power (Clough, 2012; p343).

In this discussion I have illustrated how anarchist geographies might variously frame the contesting claims to space of the underpass and showed how a Marxist and post-structuralist lens might complicate or scrutinise this framing. Certainly there are bodies of literature on subaltern studies, post-colonial studies, feminism, phenomenology, non-representational theory etc. that would add to this conversation and may offer useful tools to think with. From this analysis we can see not only the limitations of vehement loyalty to a certain discourse, but also the benefits of wide reading to ensure against the crowbarring of social and spatial phenomena into ready-made theory.

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