

OWENS, LYNN. *Cracking under Pressure. Narrating the Decline of the Amsterdam Squatters' Movement. [Solidarity and Identity.]* Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2009. 290 pp. Ill. € 34.50; doi:10.1017/S0020859010000155

On the morning of Monday 3 March 1980 tanks rolled through the streets of Amsterdam. Their objective: to remove the barricades from Vondelstraat, a street in the centre of the city. The previous Friday, activists had occupied an empty property there and once the hastily deployed riot police had been beaten back and forced to retreat – an unprecedented event – the activists erected barricades along both sides of the street. The mayor, concerned about the potential loss of life in the event of a new police assault, at first decided not to intervene. The activists proclaimed the “Vondel Free State” and invited Amsterdammers to come and take a look at their world. For a whole weekend, they were lords and masters in their free state until, under pressure from central government, Mayor Wim Polak ordered the tanks in to restore control of the streets.

According to one survey, there were more than 5,000 individuals squatting in over 150 properties in Amsterdam in 1980. The struggle for control of Vondelstraat was a turning point in the history of the squatters' movement, for until that incident the squatters had resorted only to passive resistance when they were being evicted from their squats. Now, however, the squatters showed that they were prepared to use force to defend their squats and their way of life. They were successful too. The building in Vondelstraat was not cleared, and ended up being purchased by the local council. The squatters' movement grew to become the most impressive and militant social movement in postwar Europe – with sister movements in Zurich, Hamburg, Berlin, and Copenhagen.

The history of the Amsterdam squatters' movement has already been extensively documented. But although a number of international studies have already appeared,<sup>1</sup> so far most of the literature has been written for a Dutch-speaking audience. The Dutch historian Eric Duivenvoorden, in particular, has been highly influential in shaping the historical picture of the movement, in his standard work *Een voet tussen de deur* [A foot in the door] and through his collaboration on the impressive film *De stad was van ons* [The city was ours].<sup>2</sup> In addition, recollections by former activists have been published, and those give a good picture of the internal life of the movement.<sup>3</sup> The US sociologist Lynn Owens is the first researcher to make that material accessible to a broader international audience, in his detailed study of how the self-image and self-perception of squatters changed during the 1980s. In doing so, Owens has focused not on the movement's heyday, but on the period following, when it was in decline.

In his study, Owens presumes a familiarity with the details of the history of the Amsterdam squatters' movement. Historical events are discussed chiefly to illustrate

1. See especially H. Bodenschatz, V. Heise, and J. Korfmacher, *Schluß mit der Zerstörung? Stadterneuerung und städtische Opposition in West-Berlin, Amsterdam und London* (Berlin, 1983); J. Uitermark, “Framing Urban Injustices: The Case of the Amsterdam Squatter Movement”, *Space and Polity*, 8 (2004), pp. 227–244; H. Pruijt, “Is the Institutionalization of Urban Movements Inevitable? A Comparison of the Opportunities for Sustained Squatting in New York City and Amsterdam”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27 (2003), pp. 133–157.

2. E. Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur. Geschiedenis van de kraakbeweging 1964–1999* (Amsterdam, 2005); *idem*, *De stad was van ons* (Amsterdam, 1996).

3. V. Luchteling, *Axie! Herinneringen uit de Amsterdam kraakbeweging* (Amsterdam, 1997); I. Poppe and S. Rottenberg, *De kraakgeneratie. 18 portretten van krakers uit de lichtung 1955–1965* (Amsterdam, 2000). Only one of those has been translated: ADILKNO, *Cracking the Movement: Squatting beyond the Media* (New York, 1994).

another story he wants to tell: that of how the squatters experienced, interpreted, and then endeavoured to counter the process of decline in their movement in the 1980s.

The concept of *narratives* is, Owens argues, an essential tool for that. Owens claims – and in this he follows the sociologist, Francesca Poletta – that people understand the world not so much based on facts, but through *narratives*. Narratives give events a chronology, a cause, and a consequence. In doing so, they give events a significance too; they give meaning to human actions and so make sense of the world. That applies equally, if not more strongly, to social movements. Through narratives, these conglomerations of individuals, groups, and organizations acquire cohesion and a shared purpose. That was also true of the Amsterdam squatters' movement. In his study, Owens aims to explain how different *narratives of decline* emerged within the squatters' movement, how those narratives conflicted with one another, and how ultimately they proved irreconcilable. That irreconcilability coincided with a definitive split in the movement.

Following Duivenvoorden, with whom he has worked closely, Owens summarizes the history of the Amsterdam squatters' movement in terms of three dramatic turning points. The first came in 1980, when the squatters emerged as a major movement with real power. The threat of evictions triggered large-scale riots, and ultimately the authorities felt compelled to purchase not only the property in Vondelstraat but around 200 other squatted premises as well. Within the squatters' movement such a notable success led to the adoption of a strategy of escalation: the squatters attempted to maximize the threat of violence as a strategy to wring concessions from the authorities. The second turning point followed evictions from a property in Jan Luijkenstraat in 1982. Despite major riots, the building was cleared and the movement lapsed into crisis. A small but influential group wanted to pursue the strategy of escalation to its utmost, while the majority gradually began to distance themselves from it. The final turning point, the most dramatic of the three, came in 1988 when radicals within the movement attempted to seize power by force and were ultimately, and quite literally, thrown out by the majority. Owens implicitly asks himself how things could have deteriorated to such an extent.

By 1982 the squatters' movement had already passed its peak, but with the clearance of Jan Luijkenstraat the squatters became convinced that their movement was truly in crisis. The radicals argued that to restore the movement to its former position of power it had to return to its roots, and that meant intensifying the threat of violence even further. Escalation had always worked; it had simply not been employed consistently enough. Owens claims that in arguing this, the radicals drew on the history of the squatters' movement, as constructed by the squatters themselves. In their version, the events surrounding Vondelstraat and other properties were fused, to form a consistent narrative in which the squatters had used force to defeat their enemies. That *narrative* had given the movement a history with its own morality. Determination and the willingness to confront the enemy were the keys to success.

However, the majority within the movement began to question the tactics of escalation. Escalation had led to activists leaving, to a loss of popular support, and it prompted the question of how far squatters should be prepared to go in resisting the authorities to defend their squats. The radicals envisaged an almost military organization, but the majority believed that this would compromise a second core value of the movement: its rejection of hierarchy.

According to Owens, the discussion concerning tactics developed into one about the very *raison d'être* of the squatters' movement. Was it primarily a violent movement – the ultimate consequence of which necessitated the acceptance of leaders and a command structure – or a libertarian movement – with, as a consequence, no organization effective enough to prevent evictions? As opinions increasingly diverged on the point, two new and contrasting narratives emerged concerning the origins of the movement. One narrative emphasized the importance of well-coordinated protest actions, the other extolled

the value of spontaneity. The past became the stake in debates concerning the present. And that is precisely what interests Owens.

In 1988, when the two groups became involved in a violent confrontation, the radicals had concluded that their command structure must be imposed on the rest of the movement, if necessary by force. It was the extreme consequence of their interpretation of the history of the squatters' movement. However, most squatters began to regard the radicals as a *Fremdkörper*, an alien body within the movement. They interpreted the confrontations of 1980–1982 as exceptional moments in the history of a movement which, above all, was rooted in libertarian values and alternative culture. The divergence of opinions was total.

Owens is interested in the historical narratives that took root within the squatters' movement. His most important proposition is that movements construct their own history and that contemporary points of conflict have a major influence on how that history is perceived. But although that thesis is extremely interesting, it leads to a number of practical difficulties. First, it is difficult accurately to reconstruct the narratives of the 1980s because they tended to be communicated orally. And though Owens's study draws on discussion papers from the period, his chief sources tend to be interviews and recollections that appeared only later. Furthermore, it was mostly the radicals who devoted a great deal of energy to constructing a consistent history. The majority made few attempts to construct a detailed "counter-narrative", and when they did it was generally in response to the radicals. Characteristically then, it was not until the mid-1990s that they committed their recollections to paper. Owens could perhaps have explained why the construction of a consistent narrative was more important to the radicals than to the moderate majority.

Further, Owens's study shows how difficult it is to define the squatters' movement accurately: was it chiefly a housing movement, a political movement, a cultural movement, or was it a combination of all three at the same time? Owens consistently refers to the small group of radicals as "politicos" and the majority as "culturellas". For Owens, the "decline" of the political faction marks the point at which the squatters' movement changed from being a movement concerned largely with radical politics to one that was predominantly culturally orientated. But those terms are misleading. It was precisely in the period when the radicals were expelled from the movement that *Bluf!* – the organ of the majority – published a series of articles on "solidarity and resistance" in support of the creation of a radical anti-imperialist movement. It also wrote sympathetically about militant anti-apartheid campaigns, such as that pursued by RaRa (Revolutionary Anti-Racist Action), which carried out a series of arson attacks on companies collaborating with the apartheid regime. The group Owens refers to as the "culturellas" was by no means apolitical; they had a different view of political activity, as something to be carried out by an anti-authoritarian movement. That, essentially, was how they differed from the radicals, who tended to have a Maoist background.

Owens has written an interesting study, providing a sound survey of the state of the art in this field. His book is well written and includes an extensive list of sources. In introducing the concept of "narratives of decline", he contributes something new to the field. Scholars researching the history of the squatters' movement will find his study essential reading.

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