



Looking Forward by Looking Back: May Day Protests in London and the Strategic Significance of the Urban

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This paper deals with the question of how oppositional movements can adapt their protest strategies to meet recent socio-spatial transformations. The work of Lefebvre provides several clues as to how an alternative discourse and appropriation of space could be incorporated in such protest strategies. One of the central themes in Lefebvre's work is that the appearances, forms and functions of urban space are constitutive elements of contemporary capitalism and thus that an alternative narrative of urban space can challenge or undermine dominant modes of thinking. What exactly constitutes the "right" kind of alternative discourse or narrative is a matter of both theoretical and practical consideration. The paper analyses one case: the May Day protests in London in 2001, in which a protest group, the Wombles, managed to integrate theoretical insights into their discourse and practice in a highly innovative manner. Since cities, and global cities in particular, play an ever more important role in maintaining the consumption as well as production practices of global capitalism; they potentially constitute *local* sites where *global* processes can be identified and criticised. It is shown that the Wombles effectively made use of these possibilities and appropriated the symbolic resources concentrated in London to exercise a "lived critique" of global capitalism. Since the Wombles capitalised on trends that have not yet ended, their strategies show a way forward for future anti-capitalist protests.

Introduction

This paper deals with the relationship between transformations of the urban sphere and the changing modalities and political potentialities of street protest. Around the key idea that urban transformations simultaneously provide oppositional movements with new challenges and new opportunities, a cumulative argument will be developed that crystallises into some basic assumptions about the potentialities of cities as sites of protest under present conditions. In order to take stock of these conditions and the opportunities they offer for oppositional movements, I will first revisit some of the theorisations of Lefebvre concerning the relationship between spatial processes and alienation. Secondly, I will argue that Lefebvre's insights can inform oppositional movements because his work suggests how protest strategies can be strategically shaped to meet recent socio-spatial transformations. Thirdly, the theoretical insights are employed to probe the protests that took place in London on May Day 2001. These

protests, I argue, are highly innovative because the organisers appropriated (symbolic) assets at the local level to address global issues. Since the opportunities for local direct action that were seized by the organisers of the protests have become available as a result of global trends that continue unabated, their strategies might inspire future anti-capitalist protests.

Oppositional Strategies: Revisiting Lefebvre

In *The Survival of Capitalism* (1976) and *The Production of Space* (1991b), Lefebvre connects his concern for everyday life with his interest in the reproduction of social relations through an analysis of the production of space. According to Lefebvre, the reproduction of social relations, and therewith the survival of capitalism, is predicated upon the occupation and production of space. Only in space can capitalism's internal contradictions be attenuated or resolved, principally by the simultaneous unification of space through commodification and fragmentation through specialisation. As spaces are transformed to perform a specific function, they are "programmed" and, through the use of state authority and commodification, everyday life is being "colonised" (Gregory 1994:403). Once everyday life has become alienated, experiences in lived spaces no longer reveal the processes that structure and shape them. Lefebvre argues that "... things, acts and situations are forever replaced by representations" (1991b:311, quoted in Stewart 1995:614). In line with this statement, Lefebvre warns that space is not transparent, hiding the workings of power: "We see but cannot understand, look but cannot comprehend" (Lefebvre 1991b:27–29; Shields 1999:78).

Although Lefebvre does not focus on the spectacularisation of everyday life and urban space as the crucial moment in the reproduction of social relations, his critique of (the colonisation and programming of) "lived spaces" has many parallels with the Situationist critique of "the spectacle" that has been laid down most powerfully in Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1994a). In some sense, Debord's work represents a radical elaboration of one theme that is also present in the work of Lefebvre, namely the programming of space. It is no surprise, therefore, that many contemporary activists draw inspiration from Debord in their attempts to criticise power relations through attempts to de-programme space, to hack or subvert the functioning of spaces. One instance of a movement that adopts such protest strategies is Reclaim the Streets, which protests against car traffic and boredom by their raves on motorways. Recent literature cites many other examples of how performing certain types of behaviour that conflict with the use assigned to it by authorities simultaneously exposes power relations that are embedded in the

(built and social) environment and suggests other ways of appropriating space (Cresswell 1996; Graeber 2002; Swyngedouw 2002).

I argue that this last type of protest, which is at the same time an individual alternative appropriation of space and a public criticism of dominant spatial practices, could be strengthened by taking aboard some of Lefebvre's insights (see also Merrifield 2002). I elaborate below that Lefebvre's work could inform the strategies of oppositional movements who face the challenge of contextualising their local struggles in relation to supra-local processes, who want to "jump scales" (see Smith 1993). It does so by suggesting ways of *centring* critique, of giving oppositional tactics an object and therewith a real purpose. For Debord, at least in his later work, the spectacle is not geographically specified; it may be epitomised by certain commodities (such as the television set or the private car), but it is truly everywhere, durably moulding the minds of generations, leaving only a small group of individuals with great intuitive or intellectual capacities out of the reach of a threat that emerges from all sides (see especially Debord 1994b). For Lefebvre, in contrast, consciousness can always partly escape the environment in relation to which it is developed, which leaves open the option that changing environmental stimuli will effectively trigger an intellectual response on the part of the individual. Lefebvre's work suggests that, through an analysis of the processes operating on multiple scales that underpin the conditioning of lived environments, the workings of power can be identified and therefore criticised. However, Lefebvre's analysis is naturally not tailored to the current circumstances. Moreover, he did not share Debord's interest in tactics. I now embark on some of Lefebvre's notions of space in order to distil elements that could help to decide what sorts of street protest—"lived critiques"—could have the most strategical significance under the current urban conditions.

Representations of Space and Centralisation Tendencies

Lefebvre saw separation between lived space and "spatial practice" as a strategic nexus for social analysis. This problematic—the separation between lived space and spatial practice—is dealt with most thoroughly in *The Production of Space* (1991b), where Lefebvre distinguishes between three different kinds of space: spatial practice (the "perceived"), representations of space (the "conceived") and representational space (the "lived"). By introducing "representations of space" as a second kind of space into his analytical framework, Lefebvre explicitly draws attention to the role of language, codes and discourse in the production of space. Representations of space refer to the instruments (calculations, jargon, etc) that are used to guide the transformation of an existing space into an "ideal" space—that is,

a static space that is programmed in such a way that it allows only specific functions to be performed at the expense of others.

For some reason Lefebvre only described representations of space from the viewpoint of state authorities and capital. Thereby he implicitly suggested that there was a fundamental contradiction between, on the one hand, the programming of space into sterilised functional territorial units and, on the other hand, the organic and spontaneous resistance of the people who inhabit and use those spaces for their own diverse purposes. Resistance is then conceptualised as the opposition to colonisation of the life world by the state and capital which use representations of space as their intellectual means. As lived spaces are (potentially) shaped by dominant spatial practices, there is an implicit critique in each single lived space of the forces that shaped it or, alternatively, an example of how the alternatives to those dominant processes might be given form. This is, of course, why so much attention is paid to “spaces on the margin”, “spaces of resistance” or “thirdspaces” (respectively Shields 1991; Soja 1996; Staeheli 1994). Such alternative spaces bear a promise—they are in some crucial aspects authentic, representing a critique of the present because their history has not yet been annihilated and their functions not monolithically programmed for the purposes of today’s capitalism.

However, there are good reasons for oppositional movements to pay close attention to Lefebvre’s first and second kind of space. For while dominant forces usually co-ordinate and control “spatial practice” and “representations of space”, their domination is neither permanent nor complete. In the case of revolt, confrontation or revolution, social space can be temporarily shaped and appropriated by oppositional movements (Lefebvre 1976:88). During such events, it is possible, as I will illustrate below, for oppositional movements to create competing representations of space that can serve both to guide spatial practices (actual street protests) and to reveal the spatial practices that structure everyday experiences. Rephrasing and reinterpreting the connections between people’s everyday experience and the (global) capitalist system is arguably central to such a project:

The everyday can ... be defined as a set of functions which connect and join together systems that might appear to be distinct. Thus defined, the everyday is a product, the most general of products in an era where production engenders consumption, and where consumption is manipulated by producers ... The everyday is therefore the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden ... The proposition here is to decode the modern world, that bloody riddle, according to the everyday. (Lefebvre 1986:9)

From this general proposition follow two questions that will be answered below. First, how have recent transformations reshaped the connections between everyday experiences and dominant spatial practices? Second, what opportunities and resources are available to oppositional movements at a local scale to connect everyday experiences to global practices, and how can these resources be efficiently utilised? Before these two questions can be answered, it is first necessary to pay close attention to the ways in which the urban functions as a mediator of everyday spaces and global processes and to make some general remarks about its potential as a site of contentious politics. How is this to be done?

A possible direction for enquiry—by no means the only, but one that is pursued here because it is of particular importance for street protest and direct action—would be to search for the “weak spots” of contemporary capitalism. Lefebvre acknowledged that Marx, and many Marxists after him, had underestimated the obstinacy of capitalism. Through its multiple transformations, capitalism has found itself able to attenuate its contradictions during prolonged periods of time. Since the reproduction of capitalism is dependent upon the management and production of space, Soja concludes that

class struggle (yes, it still remains class struggle) must encompass and focus upon the vulnerable point: the production of space, the territorial structure of exploitation and domination, the spatially controlled reproduction of the system as a whole. (Soja 1988:92)

However, some points in space are obviously more vulnerable than others (Graham forthcoming). From a Lefebvrian perspective one might argue that the signs and appearances that seem to be most important under the current round of capital accumulation—skyscrapers that symbolise the power of financial conglomerates, advertisements that set the standards for Western ways of living and so on—should be considered as the points of concentration of the power that is imbued in (global) networks and flows. Lefebvre, in keeping with his critique of appearances in everyday life, emphasised that these symbols, static as they may seem, represent the culmination of processes of alienation (compare Merrifield 1993)—places where power is concentrated, ranging from churches to shopping malls, convey an immense power yet hide the workings of the processes that gave rise to such power in the first place (cf Lefebvre 1991a: chapter 5).

Processes of concentration inevitably lead to the formation of centres. Lefebvre emphasised that each mode of production produces its own specific kinds of centrality: “the consolidation needs centres; it needs to fix them, to monumentalise them (socially) and specialise them (mentally)” (Lefebvre 1976:86). Although he is not entirely

clear and consistent about this, it seems that Lefebvre feels that such tendencies towards centralisation represent a strategic opportunity for oppositional movements: “Power suffers, as in Shakespearian tragedy: the more it consolidates, the more afraid it is ... The places where power makes itself accessible and visible—police stations, barracks, administrative buildings—ooze with anxiety” (Lefebvre 1976:85–86). However, Lefebvre, despite his tendency to think through and calculate even the most spontaneous of actions but in accord with his reluctance to provide ready-made solutions (see especially Lefebvre 1969), does not seem too anxious to go much deeper into the significance of such centres as possible sites of opposition. Somewhat in contradiction to his axiom that space cannot be unproblematically read as a text, he feels that centres are, of themselves, *visible*. And somewhat in contradiction with practical sense, he states that such centres are *accessible*. Moreover, according to Lefebvre, sites of confrontation and negation do not seem to be arranged according to any specific spatial pattern as they are said to spring up “abruptly here or there, in a thousand forms” (Lefebvre 1976:85).

Building on the above remarks on Lefebvre’s work, this paper will, however, argue that the identification of centrality can be part of a strategic intellectual effort to pinpoint weak spots of today’s capitalism. For in these places the processes of reification and alienation that Lefebvre identified as obstacles to emancipated struggles against the powers that be find their most concrete expression. While these processes do certainly not have a local character, their expressions do. My argument is that *dis-alienating* and *de-reifying* the most explicit (local) expressions of power can be considered a crucial means for challenging the (global) processes that gave rise to them by making them visible and possibly even accessible. Urban settings, where expressions of power are typically concentrated, may indeed be privileged sites of protest and contestation (cf Nicholls and Beaumont 2003). However, their potential strategic importance depends on the ability of oppositional movements to render centres for the exercise of power (temporarily and partially) accessible and visible, or at least to let them “ooze with anxiety”.

This ability, in turn, is determined by the extent to which oppositional movements can devise strategies regarding urban space. If we follow the line of argumentation above, such strategies can be formulated partly on the basis of an analysis of processes of concentration and centralisation, since such an analysis would allow oppositional movements to pinpoint the “weak spots” of today’s capitalism and it would suggest some alternative representations of space that can help to exploit such weakness. In this context, academic theorisations of socio-spatial processes can be considered as *latent* representations of space; they help to understand ongoing processes and events, yet they

do (understandably and fortunately) not provide ready-made solutions with respect to the transformation of existing spatial structures. Drawing on Lefebvre's notions presented above, it appears that what needs to be done, is *identifying some of the most salient and important transformations and their points of centralisation in order to use the latter to criticise the processes they embody and epitomise*. This is exactly what the Wombles did. To understand the significance of their protest strategies, I will now consider two socio-spatial transformations and highlight some aspects that could be incorporated into alternative representations of space. To do so, I will emphasise the ways in which these transformations are predicated upon the processes of reification, alienation and domination that Lefebvre sought to criticise.

A first transformation is "globalisation". Even though it is seldom clear what exactly this term refers to, it is obvious that it plays an important role in the public imagination. "Globalisation" is still considered by the general public as well as many politicians as an autonomous force. Globalisation thus appears to be an object in and of itself, an external reality that confronts governments of all kinds and compels them to comply to the rules of global neoliberalism. Fairclough (2001) shows that such a vision permits New Labour leaders to portray themselves as heroic figures who courageously confront an outside threat. In contrast to popular imagination that sees globalisation as an external force, recent theorising has emphasised the complex spatial patterns of international economic activity. In line with Lefebvre's key argument that capitalism's reproduction is dependent upon its ability to continuously restructure and re-fragment space into functional territorial units, many authors have commented upon the new geographies of production that underpin the current round of capital accumulation. In this context, the strategic importance of global cities has been emphasised by many scholars and has even become one of the most important research issues for contemporary urban sociology (Sassen 2000). As "the globalization process is causing the urban scale to be intertwined ever more directly with multiple supraurban political-economic processes" (Brenner 2000:374), such cities can be increasingly considered as "nodes" in global networks (Amin and Thrift 1992).

Theories that view globalisation as a complex spatial patterning of social relations could prove an antidote to the political nihilism or economic protectionism that arises when it is viewed as an external, universalising force. Fairclough (2000; 2001) shows that alternative, critical accounts—both of "globalisation" itself and New Labour's response to it—emphasise that processes of economic internationalisation and liberalisation are the result of decisions by individual leaders and the activities of individual firms. Much in contrast to the discourse of New Labour, such a perspective makes it possible to

deconstruct the seemingly uniform process of globalisation as the result of the actions of individual actors that, unlike an external and autonomous process, can be held *accountable*. Many of these actors are actually located in global cities. And even if they are not located in London or another global city, they are linked to these places by the economic, social and political networks that have their points of nodality in cities like London. Thus the day-to-day practices of the global economic and political elites may be largely beyond the reach of grassroots organisations, but the localisation of some core functions can provide the latter with a possible (local) point of contact where the (global) actions of the former can be addressed and criticised. Whereas the meetings of the World Trade Organisation can be considered as temporal localisations of global networks (Uitermark 2002:761), global cities represent a permanent local expression of similar and overlapping networks, potentially providing (*local*) oppositional movements with an opportunity to address *global* issues by confronting a spatially fixed set of local institutions (cf Harvey 1982).

A second transformation that shaped the context in which the May Day protests took place, is the expansion and intensification of attempts to manipulate peoples' predispositions and attitudes through the structuring of everyday experiences in commercialised spaces—in a word, the commodification of everyday life. The emergence of shopping spaces where the behaviour of potential consumers is integrally conditioned represents one of most glaring examples of alienation in contemporary capitalism. However, in line with Lefebvre's principle belief that power is never complete (Shields 1999:70), consumers in shopping spaces do not have to be regarded as passive dupes as they always find a variety of ways to oppose and circumvent the strategies of shopping managers (De Certeau 1984; Goss 1993). Whilst Shields (1989) therefore rightly concludes that such micro-strategies can be considered as real and important forms of opposition, shopping spaces might also be utilised by more ambitious, intentional, general and collective oppositional strategies.

As commodity fetishism is itself predicated upon the disengagement of lived spaces from spatial practice, the images that are employed to mediate relationships between different localities—eg the images of “super brands”—are at the same time one of the *actual* means by which capitalism finds itself able to reproduce its constitutive relationships and the *potential* means to lay bare the coveted practices that link the everyday experiences of labourers and consumers in different locales. Indeed, many commentators identify the contrast between spectacular consumption experiences and the lamentable labour conditions under which most products for the Western market are fabricated as one of the hallmarks of contemporary capitalism

(cf Klein 1999). “Ad busting” has provided some embryonic yet highly suggestive examples of how instruments of alienation can be subverted to expose the fallaciousness of marketing messages or even the (global) relationships that support consumption practices in the Western countries. If a politics of space would take into account the uneven distribution of symbolical and functional meaning across urban space, “main” shopping streets—where the process of alienation is epitomised—would surely be among the sites where the sorely spatial practices that underwrite contemporary capitalism could be laid bare most dramatically.

My argument, that the May Day protests could in a sense be regarded as an operationalisation of Lefebvre’s notions about the role of space in the (re)production of social relations, is primarily based on the fact that the organisers of the protests, in an intricate and original manner, aimed exactly at these two elements—London as a node in global networks and the shopping environment as a mediator of inter-territorial relationships. Challenging and utilising the transformations discussed above has taken on a concrete scalar dimension, since connecting scales (the local to the global) and places (a locality to other places) by providing an alternative narrative of space has now become an important part of emancipatory politics (see also Adams 1996; Miller 2000).

Re-representing Space: The Wombles’ May Day Monopoly¹

In this paper I focus on the protest strategies of the Wombles (White Overall Movement Building Libertarian Effective Struggles), not because they in any way are representative of the myriad of oppositional movements that organised protests during May Day 2001 or because they constituted a numerical minority of any significance. Indeed, Scotland Yard identified no more than nine persons as the “masterminds” behind the protests (*The Times*, 1 May 2001). That a small group could play such a significant role is largely a result of the creative ways in which the Wombles strategically employed notions of space as a guide to their actual protests. In what follows, I first give a brief background on the Wombles. Then I discuss their discourse on the city of London and the representations of space that are integral to that discourse. After that, the response of the authorities is briefly discussed. Finally, some of the more important aspects of the actual confrontation in the streets of London are discussed.

New Oppositional Movements and Protest Strategies

It is useful to briefly outline the historical background of the Wombles, as their movement is to some extent representative of a new type of direct action movement that has proliferated in tandem with the

mounting protests against globalisation. The immediate source of inspiration for the Wombles are the Italian Tute Bianche. This movement has in recent years proved an important counter-force to the right wing, authoritarian government of Berlusconi (see Klein 2001). The protest tactics of the Tute Bianche have been designed to convey a radical political message with a minimum amount of violence. Taking their inspiration from the Zapatistas, “They’re attempting to”, Graeber (2002:66) explains, “invent what many call a “new language” of civil disobedience” that transcends the dichotomy violent versus non-violent. The protesters, wearing suits padded with foam and rubber tyres, typically enter police lines in a closed formation. At some point, police are likely to use (often excessive) force to push back the protesters, thereby de-legitimising their own actions. People dressed in white overalls not only connect diverse groups of protesters, they also wilfully throw themselves in the name of a global cause into the micro-geographies of state repression. Their confrontation with the police thus forms a goal in itself, in the sense that it serves to localise, symbolise and visualise global social struggles (see also, from a Lefebvrian angle, Merrifield 2002:133). The Wombles thus adopt the tactics of the Tute Bianche but not their tendency to denounce alternative/violent tactics (The Wombles on-line b). Instead, the Wombles are radically open to all types of anti-capitalist movements and, in addition to their innovative discourse on space, they creatively made use the symbolism of the monopoly play board in order to accommodate diversity with respect to both ends and means.

The Wombles were first considered as “the organisers” of the protests in February 2001, when Scotland Yard and several newspapers laid their hands on a “glossy brochure” about “May Day Monopoly”, which was also published on the Internet. It is very likely that most people based their view of the Wombles on press reports and not on the publications of the Wombles themselves. This is quite significant since the press reproduced the information contained in the publications in a specific manner. Compare—to take one rather extreme yet illustrative example—the following two quotations:

Previous anarchist protests in the capital have descended into rioting and bloodshed. The organisers of this year’s action are keen to point out that anything goes. Protesters are told: “Rules? There are no rules!” (*The Times*, 4 April 2001).

Decide on the form of action or protest you are happy doing. For example it could be a picket, demonstration, occupation or some other stunt.

Don’t forget the power of humour.

Produce a leaflet, make a banner, build some props, make costumes—the more colourful the better.

Let us know the theme, meeting point & time and your contact details and we'll publicise them.

Rules? There are no rules! (The Wombles on-line a)

The above quote from *The Times* neatly illustrates how authorities and the press could distil from the document that the organisers aimed to bring chaos, fear, violence and damage to the capital (see below). While it was this interpretation of the Wombles' plans for May Day that dominated the press reports, a casual reading of the brochure reveals that the Wombles made a sophisticated attempt to use symbolism and spatio-historical analysis to create an alternative representation of space. Three elements of the brochure will be discussed in turn: the representation of London and especially London's shopping streets as embodying the processes that constitute the global capitalist system; the politicisation of the urban landscape by representing it as the historic outcome of social struggles; and the function of the brochure as a representation of space that was functional for temporarily transforming the urban environment. A common thread that runs through the brochure is a commitment on the part of the Wombles to de-reify and dis-alienate socio-spatial processes by transgressing the parts of London's urban complex that perform crucial functions for the global capitalist system.

By invoking the image of London as a real-time monopoly gameboard, the Wombles (on-line a) not only draw attention to the commodification of living environments but also make the city into a metaphor for the capitalist system they seek to criticise:

The game of monopoly is one of accumulation, making it perfect for our times. The aim is for each player to make profits through the sale of a single commodity—land—and to expand their empire. In real life one single commodity generates all profits—our labour power. Since labour power cannot be separated from people, we are literally bought and sold in the market place. Thus we must consume as well as produce. (The Wombles on-line a)

Like the traditional Monopoly game, the brochure mentions streets as well as utilities. These places are subdivided into more than 200 "properties": sites that are, in the view of the Wombles, potential targets for direct action. Most of the properties are establishments of international chains that have been selected on the basis of a company's record on wage levels, workers' rights and environmental issues. Apart from the "usual suspects", like McDonald's, Nike and The Gap, lesser-known companies are listed as well. For example, Wellcome Trust is said to be "notorious for vivisection" and for its attempts to "stop the use of cheap generic drugs in Africa for the treatment of AIDS and other illnesses". In addition, three further

types of properties are mentioned. First, public services. The Jail, utilities, free parking and rail stations are used to criticise respectively penal institutions, the privatisation of water and electricity, the predominance of cars in public life and the privatisation plans for the London underground. Second, banks and other financial institutions, reported to have provided services to dictators, financed the production of arms or are considered “loan sharks”. For example, Goldman Sachs is identified with the IMF bailouts and Nat West is accused of involvement with dictatorships and the arms trade. Third, meeting places for business elites or controversial government agencies, such as “the (Tory) Carlton Club that Margaret Thatcher had to be made an honorary man in order to join”. In each case, a narrative about global issues is connected to local institutions.

Squeezing the Jugular Vein of Exploitation

Special emphasis is placed on shopping streets. The shops in London’s city centre are represented as end stations in a chain of exploitation. Because, in the discourse of the Wombles, locales and scales are closely connected, it becomes possible to link local struggles over lived spaces to global struggles over environmental and social issues—the mechanisms that connect materially, yet separate mentally, labourers and consumers in different parts of the world are part of the same processes that alienate people from their living environments. By pinpointing corporate and government buildings as well as shops, especially flagship stores, the workings of the global capitalist system are “brought home” and can therefore be criticised on a local level, where oppositional movements are usually at their strongest. In stark contrast to accounts that portray globalisation as an external process, the Wombles identify the actors that daily reproduce the global capitalist system; far from being a process that is “out there”, it is shown that processes and consequences of globalisation are the result of continued efforts of key governmental and business actors that can consequently be held (partly) *accountable* for effects that are typically considered as unpleasant but unavoidable by-products of a largely autonomous force. The localised character of key functions provides an opportunity to, at least discursively, challenge global practices. For example, the Wombles write about Oxford Street that it repeatedly was the stage of violent mass protests and that it is now

... the *jugular vein* of consumerism capitalism in Central London and an *epicentre* of exploitation. Burger King, for example, makes workers clock off when they are not busy, though forcing them to stay. Pizza Hut offered a Spanish woman a job without pay to “help” her English. But the biggest rip off happens in the third world. Adidas pays its workers 6p per hour in Burma, where the military keep

discipline. Gap employs children as young as 12 in its Cambodian factories. Nike pays children 20 cents per hour in China and gets them jailed when they form a trade union. (The Wombles on-line a, emphasis added)

Apart from countering geographical alienation by identifying links between the local and the global, the Wombles sought to de-reify the contemporary urban landscape by *politicising* it through a narrative of the social struggles that took place in the past. Many brief social histories of areas in the city are presented. In each case special emphasis is placed on social struggles and on the ways in which authorities use space to counter threats of mass uprisings. For example, a brief set of comments about the state as a constitutive element of contemporary capitalism is coupled to descriptions of various buildings around Whitehall. Reference is made to British imperialist history and it is stated that “Thatcher had large gates erected at the entrance of Downing Street” because she was “worried about increasing demonstrations”. Through their descriptions of sites, the Wombles draw attention to the social struggles that are embedded in spaces of everyday life. The Wombles seek to emphasise the contested nature of the processes that have led to a seemingly coherent and attractive outcome in the form of advertisements and façades of shopping spaces. By doing so, they clearly hope that past struggles will inspire present-day potential activists. The brochure actively tries to convince the reader not to take the urban landscape as it is for granted and to view it as the temporal outcome of processes of resistance, domination and reconciliation.

Besides a critique of many individual companies and government departments, the Wombles also provide a comprehensive representation of the city as a whole. The brochure can be considered a representation of space because it functions as a tool for the transformation of space. It contains a plan on how the city can be temporarily “retrieved” through direct action. While they thus employed representations in the literal meaning Lefebvre (1991b:38–39) ascribed to the term (they used their own type of jargon and calculations), their representations are diametrically opposed to the kind of representations that are typically conceived by authorities. One of the most interesting features of the May Day Monopoly brochure is that it is, in line with the Wombles’ stated philosophy, at the same time radical and open. They do mention targets but they leave it to other groups, organisations and individuals to make the decision what element of the system they want to criticise and what institution constitutes the most appropriate target: “Pick an institution or aspect of capitalism to do an action against (this could be based on a ‘single issue’ or on something that’s happening where you live or work) ... What your

group does is entirely up to you". Each group can make a statement on a particular element of "the system", while the simultaneity of the actions highlights the obvious connections between different elements. While groups can decide what issue they want to address and what means they want to use, the Wombles (on-line a) suggest that the "cumulative result" should be "huge"—together the actions are meant to provide a comprehensive critique of (contemporary) capitalism. The Wombles seek to give the urban landscape alternative meaning through the combination of numerous autonomous actions—the aim is to transgress the spaces of "consumer capitalism" into spaces of liberation and diversity, to "subvert the game" (The Wombles on-line a).

An Island Under Threat: Representations of London as an Isolated Entity

The Wombles gave a representation of the city as the temporal end-result of alienating yet malleable socio-spatial processes operating on a variety of interlacing scales, implying that local (direct) action in London's streets is entirely legitimate. In complete contrast, the representation of space by the authorities implied that several scales are disconnected and can only be connected through *invasion*.

The protests that took place on 1 May 2000 were initially the most important point of reference for authorities. During that event the parliamentary lawn was damaged, some clumps of grass were put on the head of the statue depicting Winston Churchill (making it seem as if it had a mohawk), the interior of a McDonald's restaurant was demolished, and there were reports of widespread property damage. These images coloured the press coverage in the run-up to May Day 2001. Newspapers and state officials continuously referred to these events and suggested that a repetition had to be avoided. The damage was considered to be enormous, since the very symbols of English pride were compromised. For example, while some of the protesters had argued that Churchill's stance on labour issues was decidedly reactionary, the press saw the mohawk as an outrageous lack of respect for the former Prime Minister's war efforts. The response to attacks on symbols of global consumer capitalism, like the McDonald's restaurant, were equally refuted by many as examples of simple looting.

When speculations about May Day 2001 first appear in the press, the Metropolitan police (Met) makes clear that it will be well prepared in order to prevent a similar (largely symbolic) attack on the city's institutions. On 13 February, Sir John of the Met says that his organisation "... will have the resources to meet, match and beat (the protestors). We cannot have the streets of London descending into

anarchy, people being physically hurt or damage done. That cannot be allowed" (quoted in *The Times*, 13 February 2001). In that same month, several newspapers estimate how many protestors and potential "trouble-makers" will attend the demonstration. On 18 February 2001, *The Times* states that the demonstrations are likely to attract members of over 300 protest groups from all over the world. Clearly, this is perceived as a *foreign* threat: "This time", *The Daily Telegraph* writes on the same date, "more than 15,000 dedicated, hardened activists from all over Europe will descend on just one target, central London". In the following two months, the estimated number of protestors goes down. The fear of being caught up in violence is considered to be one of the main reasons why people will refrain from coming to London. Scotland Yard is actively fuelling such fears, as it says that "legitimate protestors" should stay away from London to make it easier for authorities to deal with aggressive elements. In the days before the protests, politicians, including Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London, and Tony Blair, Prime Minister, repeat this request. Paradoxically, while the estimated number of demonstrators decreases to 5000–10,000, the language of the authorities (first Scotland Yard and the Met, later followed by politicians) and their proposed measures to prevent "mayhem" take on more extreme forms. Scotland Yard and the Met describe the tactics they will apply during the protests first as "comprehensive and flexible" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 23 February 2001), then as "robust" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 26 March 2001) and finally as "zero-tolerance" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 13 April 2001).

It has to be noted that it is sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly presumed that British protestors are in general legitimate, while foreigners are associated with violence. Violent protest is expected to be carried out either by foreigners themselves or by Britons who copied their tactics from abroad. Officials thus fuel the fears of an "invasion" by suggesting that the protests are in one way or another "not British". On 1 April, Sir John, referring to events in Prague and Seattle, says that "[t]here is no doubt that this new radical organisation of anarchists [the Wombles] is importing a frightening brand of continental-style violence into British protests". Around this time, the representation of protestors in both the tabloid and "quality" press reached an extreme level of absurdity. Especially the London based *Evening Standard*, as might be expected of a local newspaper, reported almost daily on the coming protests and constantly urged a "tough" approach. Like *The Times*, it contributed to the frenzy by publishing pictures of individuals who were suspected (!) of rioting during the previous May Day protests (see *The Times*, 25 April 2001).

In sum, the city is pictured as a potential "battleground" where a largely foreign group of extremists will try to disturb the lives of the capital's inhabitants and (shopping) visitors. "Foreign", in this

particular context, generically refers to people to whom the inhabitants of London have no connection other than the potential riots that will take place in their living environment. This meaning of “foreign” was especially articulated in press reports on underground movements who allegedly organised “anarchist training camps” in both London and the United States in order to prepare its members for a violent clash (see, eg, *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 April 2001).

By picturing the protestors as foreign, it is suggested that the issues addressed during the protests and the daily routines of people and businesses in the capital have no, or only an incidental, connection to each other. “London”, as the “lived space” of the people who dwell and work there, is under threat of forces that are external to itself. For the authorities (and, it must be added, virtually all commentators in the press) the only conceivable plan is to use all force necessary to ensure that business goes on as usual and to “re-purify” the capital’s streets. Sir John of the Met makes clear what standard he has for measuring the success of the police operations: “Dozens of boarded up shops would mean the baddies have won” (quoted in *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 April 2001).

Confrontation and Tactics: Manoeuvring Versus Act 60

The competing representations of space—one based on the need to preserve public order in the face of a foreign threat, the other emphasising global–local linkages and calling for a re-appropriation of space—functioned as *a priori* legitimisations of the parties’ actions during the day itself. As conceptions of “ideal space” they not only implied conceptualisations of urban space, but also indicated how it should be utilised: transformed into spaces of protest or simply preserved. Given the fundamental conflict between these two representations, tactics would largely determine the extent to which each party could appropriate space for its own purposes.

Late in the morning of May Day it became clear what would be the main tactic of the police. When several hundreds of people reached Euston Station after a “Critical Mass” bike ride to protest against car traffic, they were surrounded by police. The police made use of “act 60”, an act that can be used when large groups of people pose a (severe) threat to public order. Protestors were penned in and only after an hour were individuals gradually allowed, after being searched, to leave the space. When a group of circa 2000 protestors against the World Bank arrived at Oxford Circus, act 60 was also enforced. From 2 pm until 9–10 pm this group was penned in on Oxford Circus, without food, water or sanitary services.

By penning in a sizeable group of protestors, the police prevented people from participating in actions and demonstrations elsewhere. Because the police aimed to minimise the mobility of protestors,

moving through the city would become a form of protest in itself (see also Jansen 2001). This is not merely an incidental feature of the protest but part of theoretically informed and politically motivated tactics. By refusing to announce where they will protest, the Wombles, like their Italian sources of inspiration, seek to avoid their protests being ritualised and trivialised. They refuse to confine their activities to sites that are traditionally associated with (mass) demonstrations, which can be said to reflect the dissociation of politics from everyday life. The brochure, for example, warns against going to Trafalgar Square:

[L]ast year, the police succeeded in stopping part of the Mayday demonstration reaching the Square, imprisoning many people in the process. Remember this is their territory, the place they want us!

Instead of confining their protests to specific sites, the Wombles seek to use the city as a whole as a (potential) site of protest in order to emphasise both that they will not be incorporated and to use the concentration of symbolism in the city to maximum effect. Nevertheless, their tactics complemented rather than frustrated the activities of other oppositional movements that had chosen to participate in formally organised activities, since protests against organisations located in the city now got more media attention and became part of a more encompassing critique of the system.

The struggle over mobility peaked during the “end rally” that was to take place in Oxford Street at 4 pm. During the day, police presence (complemented by a large number of private security personnel) had been extremely high in this street and almost every shop had been boarded up. Before 4 pm, small numbers of protestors had been coming and going. Then the Wombles came. Not hundreds of them, as forecast, but some 20. Their presence nevertheless immediately triggered a wave of excitement. Shortly after they arrived, the Wombles rolled out a large piece of plastic and formed the front row of what would soon become a highly mobile crowd. As they had announced on their web site, the Wombles would be careful not to be penned in by the police. By moving through neighbouring streets at high speed, they successfully managed to avoid a standoff for some time. While police forces were relocating to stop the crowd, the Wombles actually were able to reach Oxford Street again.

Although their behaviour was, of course, conditioned by the presence of police forces, protesters were actively engaged in re-appropriating spaces and thereby in constructing their own experiences. At some points, the protests were genuine moments of “lived difference” and *jouissance*. Rather than passively moving through space, the protestors were actively structuring and defining space by activities ranging from spraying graffiti, planting flowers, making music and

simply avoiding being penned in—they were living it rather than living *in* it. Although the protestors have in no way “beaten” the police, they did succeed in many ways. For one, they succeeded in re-appropriating space. The City of London and, in particular, Oxford Street—the “jugular vein of consumerism capitalism” according to the Monopoly brochure—were sites of contestation. The (flagship) stores of Nike, the Gap and other brands could, when boarded, no longer function as transmitters of a fresh and sportive image—instead they symbolised for some the vulnerability of the system and for others they were exposed as the end stations in a chain of exploitation and repression. Shopping, a normal element of everyday life for most people, was problematised and exposed as a political act.

Conclusion

What remains largely implicit in Lefebvre’s work is the contention that analytically linking separate spheres of social life and identifying the forces that unify subjects in separation are *of themselves* important modes of critique—this is exactly the core of their own theoretical endeavours. It is, therefore, worthwhile exploring the ways in which a theoretical critique of contemporary capitalism might be raised to the level of concreteness by coupling it to efforts to make apparent, in everyday life, these connections and modes of unification—to use them in a reverse fashion by *de-separating* subjects through an alternative narrative of the social totality. In practice, and specifically in today’s world, efforts in this direction increasingly demand the discursive linking of scales. The Wombles made a comprehensive effort to achieve this goal, even if only for one day. For this purpose, they used unconventional methods and consciously avoided calming public anxiety over possible violence: the vulnerability and importance of the target—the economic and symbolic significance of London—was ruthlessly appropriated to convey a radical message to the people who daily experience London as a lived place.

However, many people may have been bothered and distracted by the (threat of) violence.² As might have been expected, public opinion did not undergo a marked shift after the protests had taken place. But I would like to argue that the importance of the protests lays not so much in the direct impact upon public opinion, but more in the challenge they pose to dominant modes of representing and producing space. They tried to transcend the local level by attempting to “reach beyond the boundaries of place through communication media to substantiate their political claims, create openings for new ideas of scale and new scales of connection, and thereby challenge the social hierarchies in pre-existing territorial contexts” (Adams 1996:420). The ability of oppositional movements to address processes of domination can be strongly improved if they succeed in negating the apparent

naturalness and political neutrality of places such as shopping streets and global cities and to portray these places as central elements of global structures of domination. In that way, a connection is established between (global) spatial practice and everyday life, which disalienates, politicises and problematizes the day-to-day workings of power. Although these actions by themselves may not trigger revolutionary practices immediately, we should appreciate their importance as part of a more encompassing project that seeks to open discussions about the nature of the way in which people in different places are linked to each.

The opportunities for oppositional movements to promote such discussions have so far been most apparent during political summits where the economic and political elites negotiate over their future agenda. These moments offer opportunities for oppositional movements to interfere, mainly because they enable them to re-scale struggles to the local level. During meetings in Seattle, Nice, Prague, Gothenburg and Genoa, oppositional forces were provided with a (small) chance to block negotiations over the liberalisation of trade and other issues (see Smith 2000; Wainwright et al 2000). Such occasions also offer possibilities to expose the contested character of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. However, these kinds of meetings do not take place that often. Moreover, although it has to localise in one particular place eventually, the political and economic elite still has many possibilities for spatial manoeuvring—it is indicative that the World Trade Organisation and other intergovernmental organisations increasingly take refuge in islands and authoritarian states. It is thus worth contemplating the opportunities for oppositional movements to convey their messages by using other ways to localise global politics as part of a wider attempt to expand their “repertoire of contention” (Tarrow 1998) and to practise ever more creatively the “art of moral protest” (Jasper 1997). Indeed, whereas Cox (1998) shows how local actors can seek to exercise influence at higher scales to defend or change their immediate environment, the success of oppositional movements that struggle for progressive change on a global level will depend ever more crucially on their ability to do the exact opposite: to somehow use the local to affect processes operating at higher scales. With respect to protests, many promising tactics have already been used, with the direct actions and marches that take place in cities all over the world during major summits as an important example (Routledge 2000). However, these tactics have not, in my opinion, approached the level of sophistication of the May Day protests, mainly because they are still dependent upon the temporal localisation of elites. It is in this context that I hope the events in London on May Day 2001 will prove inspirational for future protests and forms of resistance.

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Endnotes

¹ In this section, I use material that was collected jointly with Sanne Kamp. Although I have in some cases gratefully made use of Sanne’s efforts and interpretations, I am exclusively responsible for the current analysis. A note on method: the analysis presented in this section is not as systematic as it could be, ie no formal method is applied to select the citations. The selection is, however, not random. I have mainly used *The Times* and *The Telegraph* because these newspapers have a wide readership and the ambition to provide high-quality coverage, and yet they also expressed some of the sentiment that was overwhelmingly present in the tabloid papers.

² During the “end rally” some missiles were thrown. After the protests, some incidents took place on Tottenham Court Road. Given the fact that authorities and the press had for months advertised the May Day demonstrations as a violent event, it is quite remarkable that only limited violence took place.

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