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## **Moving towards criminalisation and then what?**

### **Examining discourses around squatting in England.**

#### **Introduction**

On March 31, 2011, an Early Day Motion was proposed in the House of Commons by Mike Weatherley, Conservative Member of Parliament for Hove. The motion read ‘This house believes that squatting should be criminalised’. This was the latest step in a series of events instigated by Conservative Party outrage at gypsy and New Age traveller land occupations in the run up to the 2009 General Election. It is expected to result in a revision of the trespass laws which will make squatting illegal. In this article I would like to document and analyse the recent discourses around squatting which have been both created and exploited by politicians and journalists.

I will outline and explain several dominant discourses, concentrating on media stories from national and local newspapers in Brighton and London. These discourses exist in the media but (as will be seen) both shape and are shaped by the attitudes of the general public, in a reflexive loop. The stories fluctuate in emphasis and effect, although recently most stories have tended more to the negative perception of squatting and its protagonists. With the onset of proposals to criminalise squatting there seems to have been a noticeable shift in tone, which is due to a multiplicity of factors and cannot be said to be accidental.

Before moving forward, I would like to make two quick procedural notes:

Firstly, a comment on the use of the word ‘England’. It might be thought simpler to speak of squatting in the United Kingdom, but the UK consists of England, Wales and Scotland. In the latter, the law is different and there is no legal basis for squatting (and it seldom happens). It also seems unfair to include Wales when discussing only English newspapers and therefore I speak only of England, in particular Brighton and London. There are squats throughout the UK both in the countryside and the urban environment, but these two cities are often mentioned in the media, so I concentrated upon them.

Secondly, regarding sources, I have been tracking squatting stories in the media for the last two years. For this piece I refer to the most pertinent articles, and tend to focus on four newspapers (all dailies). These are the Daily Mail (a right-wing tabloid), the Guardian (a left-wing broadsheet), the Daily Telegraph (a right-wing broadsheet) and the Brighton Argus (a right-wing local newspaper).

#### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Following the work of Norman Fairclough, I will take an approach to discourse analysis grounded in linguistics and applied to social theory. Discourse is taken to be spoken or written language use, which can be examined as a form of social practice (1993: 138). Discourse analysis explores the frequently opaque relations between discursive practices and wider social and cultural structures. Such practices “arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power” (1993: 135). The relations can be described as opaque since they may not necessarily be comprehensible to those participants producing the actual discourse.

Drawing a demarcation between ‘critical’ and ‘descriptive’ analysis, Fairclough investigates the ‘ideological-discursive formations’ which exist within an institution (1985: 739). He claims that it is usually a simple matter to identify one ideological-discursive formation which is clearly dominant and others which are dominated. When one ideological-discursive formation becomes dominant and remains unchallenged, then the norms which represent the background knowledge will slowly become naturalized and therefore become the norms of the institution itself. They will also become completely opaque to the language users (1985: 751).

The institution is taken to be a “pivot” between the higher level social formation and the lower level social event, “an apparatus of verbal interaction” (1985: 749). I will argue later that the views represented by mainstream media discourses on squatting can be broken quite simply into several ideological-discursive formations, with one clearly dominating.

The important point to recognise here is that Fairclough has identified a manner in which language use (itself shaped by prior knowledge and experience) comes to reinforce the ideological-discursive formation. In this way, “discourse makes people, as well as people make discourse” (1985: 750). Fairclough’s analysis is theoretically supported by the work of Foucault, who suggests that “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (1979: 93). An important corollary is that there is space for change, in that ideological-discursive formations can be altered. However, the domination of a particular framework can of course be dangerous, since then the background knowledge becomes fixed to a certain ideological perspective which can be difficult to change.

Language is recursive. It both forms and reflects opinions. With discourses on squatting, it is possible to observe how the media stories both form attitudes and manipulate them, by drawing on stereotypes. As Fairclough comments, “it is vital that critical discourse analysis explore the tension between these two sides of language use, the socially shaped and the socially constitutive” (1993:134).

To give an example of such an analysis, Fairclough examines the script of a television series which involves the questioning of a woman (who is the victim of rape) by two policemen and discovers implicit propositions suggesting that the policemen hold sexist attitudes as part of their background knowledge, which then shapes their behaviour in the context of the dominant ideological-discursive formation (1985: 741).

In another example, Fairclough studies extracts from Lancaster University’s undergraduate prospectuses for the years 1967-8, 1986-7 and 1993. In the light of the increasing marketization of higher education structures generally in the UK, he discovers how the discursive practices themselves have become marketized through textual analysis and also in terms of social practice. As he comments, “the 1967-8 entry gives information about what is provided on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. In the 1993 prospectus, by contrast, the promotional function is primary; it is designed to sell the university and its courses to the potential applicant” (1993: 156).

In both cases then, by close attention to the text Fairclough can extrapolate conclusions. The suppositions here are that communication through language is a type of social interaction, which is structured, and further that this inherent structure can be affected by language itself. These seem perfectly reasonable assumptions to make since language clearly does affect the domains of discourse which are constructed. As Giddens observes, “there can be no theoretical defence for supposing that the personal encounters of day-to-day life can be conceptually separated from the long-term institutional development of society” (1981:173).

### **How an ideological-discursive formation is constituted regarding squatting**

There is an interesting discrepancy between public views of squatters in the Netherlands and England. The modern wave of squatting began at the same time (the late 1960s and early 1970s) in both countries, spurred by the need to provide housing in a time when many buildings stood empty. Even though as Paul Chatterton observes there is a “long history of the dispossessed building their own housing and infrastructure through the emergence of self-managed squatter settlements”, recent discourses around squatting have diverged considerably in the two countries (2010: 240).

In the Netherlands, the squatter is known as a ‘kraker’, after the verb ‘kraken’ (‘to crack’) which came to be used colloquially as meaning ‘to squat’. Krakers are known as responsible, trustworthy people who occupy buildings to protest at speculation, provide housing for those in need, set up social projects, preserve monuments and take advantage of emptiness to sidestep queues for housing, on Pruijt’s fivefold typology (2004a). Drug-users and thieves who may use squatting as a

pretext for stealing copper pipes from a building are lumped together under the term ‘junkie’ rather than ‘kraker’. The dominant ideological-discursive formation is clearly one that is favourable to squatters and one in which squatters (particularly those in Amsterdam) have been recognised as actors participating in city planning (Pruijt, 2004b). However, as Owens notes, this recognition was only won through hard work since “squatting’s political nature is not given. Activists had to battle over the meaning and purpose of squatting in order to make it their own” (2008:47). Dutch squatters are expected to have researched the history of the building (for example finding out who the owner is and whether there are any planning permissions granted), behave non-violently unless provoked and to have cordial relations with the police.

All of this is very different in England, where the stereotypical view of squatters is more along the lines of drug-addicted criminals who shit in buckets, trash buildings and generally cause disturbance, as represented fictionally in Doris Lessing’s novel ‘The Good Terrorist’ (1985) and various media stories. In illustration, I can point to reports in the Brighton Argus.

One entitled ‘Websites give guidance for how to squat in Brighton’ reports upon the existence of squatter advice networks. Regarding a recently evicted squat, it accuses the squatters of causing £20,000 of damage and leaving faeces in every room of the building (May 10, 2009). That year, May 1 had just seen a successful anti-arms trade protest by a group called SmashEDO and the article features a photograph of a mournful owner looking through a broken window with SmashEDO scrawled on a wall. Leaving aside the question of how damage amounting to £20,000 can be done to an empty property without a wrecking crew, it seems there is a political subtext to this story.

Another article has clear political overtones, which mask the fact of an illegal eviction. ‘Inside the home of amateur anarchists’ reports on a police raid on a squat as part of the security drive (termed Operation Otter) in the run up to the Labour Party Conference which was taking place in Brighton in 2004 (September 24, 2004). Three people were arrested on suspicion of burglary before being released the next day, by which the house had no doubt been re-secured by the owner. There appears to have been no real security threat, with rooms being described as “typical of those occupied by many students, littered with books, videos and clothes”.

In both these stories, squatting appears to be the superficial topic through which other political points can be made.

Steve Platt tracked media perceptions of squatting from the 1960s to the 1990s and notes that whilst squatters often had media coverage to thank for successes, the relationship was a stormy one. During the 1970s:

Coverage could at times be almost unrelievedly hostile. It was one thing when squatting involved ‘respectable’, self-evidently ‘deserving’ cases of homeless families occupying empty council properties, often as part of a well-disciplined campaign led by people who were not themselves homeless. It was quite another when the squatters were perceived to be less respectable and deserving – single people, ‘outsiders’, ‘hippies’, ‘dossers’ or drug-takers, people without the same steady eye for how their image might play in the media – particularly if they turned their attentions towards empty privately-owned properties or were seen to have some sort of wider political agenda (1999).

I shall return to the discussion of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ squatters later on, here I would simply note that Platt’s analysis is still valid today. I shall now examine reports about squatting in the English mainstream media, primarily newspaper articles written at the national and local level and websites from various groups. I will first analyse media stories about squatters characterised as ‘millionaire’ squatters (since they are occupying properties worth £1 million or more). Next, I will analyse the division between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ squatters. This is followed by a discussion of how such discourses were affected by the proposed criminalisation of squatting.

## **'Millionaire' squatters**

Beginning in the late 2000s and continuing up to the present day, the mainstream media (by which I mean the daily national newspapers and their internet news sites, local newspapers in London and Brighton and in addition the BBC news website), have regularly featured news stories concerning large, expensive houses which have been squatted. These stories tend to relate who the mansion belongs to and what the squatters think about their new, temporary utopia. A couple of times a month, the discourse of the 'millionaire' squatters reliably reappears.

Until quite recently, when other factors appear to disrupt the tone, there tends to be some sympathy for the squatters which could be explained by the framing of the squatters as slightly mythologised 'Robin Hood' figures, taking back for the people what has been stolen from them by the ultrarich. Whilst private property is sacrosanct under capitalism, it appears that there is a boundary beyond which there is a certain public sympathy for those who squat houses worth millions which are standing derelict. The need to protect private property is coming into conflict with a basic belief which frames emptiness as itself criminal when people have a need for housing.

This tension is also apparent in France. According to Thomas Aguilera, writing about Parisian squats, "the private property right is fundamental and constitutional. It means that the juridical institutions cannot tolerate an illegal occupation if an owner complains. On the other hand, the right to housing is also fundamental (even if it is less than the property right in the norms hierarchy)" (2011:1).

For example, in Brighton, a £1.75 million property called Fife House which was once owned by Edward VIII was occupied in December 2008. In the Daily Mail, a journalist surmises that neighbours "fear it is only a matter of time before the invaders start throwing wild parties" but allows the squatters to retort that they are caring for the property (December 11, 2008).

Groups squatting large expensive properties in London have included the Really Free School, the VHS Video Basement, the Da! Collective and the Oubliette. The Really Free School occupied properties at 5 Bloomsbury Square, 34-35 Fitzroy Square, 6 Rathbone Place and 48 Whitcomb Street, and I shall examine them in more detail later on.

The VHS Basement take the stance of non-cooperation with mainstream media, with a public message on their blog entitled 'Dear Guardian Wankers' in answer to an enquiry from a journalist:

We are not interested in any sort of coverage from the mainstream media. Aside from the fact that they are usually factually incorrect, and make everyone come across as complete wankers, we see any news articles or similar as detrimental to the squatting movement. It is articles like this that have, and will lead to the laws being changed, making it much harder for squatting to exist at all (December 21, 2009).

Such a response suggests that these squatters are aware of the negative discourses around squatting and have decided to follow a policy of non-cooperation with the media. Presumably the thinking is to not make matters any worse by aiding the creation of such narratives. However, the question must be asked how possible it is to step outside of the narrative. For all its attractions, non-cooperation leaves no room to create alternative narratives (hard as that may itself seem to be).

The Oubliette ('dungeon' in French) are an arts collective which has squatted properties such as an old language school in Waterloo, a Mayfair mansion left empty for twelve years and two former embassies near Green Park. Their spokesperson, Dan Simon, claims that the group is not squatting but rather using each temporary space to run an arts project which needs no funding from either the public or private sectors. He states that in each place the group has attempted to make contact with the owner, proposing that they run the arts project until whatever time the owner requires the use of the building again and offering to maintain the building, with the twin benefits being that neighbourhood property values do not fall as a result of dereliction and the need for paid private security is removed (Guardian, December 21, 2009). In this sense, it seems that the collective are

attempting to import the notion of a brokered anti-squat deal from the Netherlands, where it has often worked successfully. They are also working to change the ideological-discursive framework around squatting at root, with a redefinition of their actions.

So it seems that squatters might battle the dominant ideological-discursive framework, which is negative towards them, by either refusing to participate (VHS Basement) or by redefining what is meant by the term 'squatter' (Oubliette). Both reactions are in some way challenging the legitimacy of the current dominant framework.

It is not surprising that the Oubliette squatters would want to present themselves as something different to the standard definition of the term. This is an attempt to codify a new subjectivity. Foucault suggests this tactic as a form of resistance to the state, perhaps the most effective tool at our disposal. He states this most clearly in his 'Afterword – The Subject and Power' in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (edited by Dreyfus and Rabinow):

The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state, and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries (1982: 216).

An action which also attempted to engage with the ideological-discursive framework around squatting, in this case aided by a broadly sympathetic media, was the occupation of the London home of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of the Libyan dictator Colonel Gaddafi. A group called Topple the Tyrants took possession of the house in Hampstead Garden Suburb in March 2011. It is estimated to be worth £10 million. Within the context of the popular Libyan uprising, this action was almost universally praised. In one article, the squatters were referred to as "protesters" throughout and provided with ample space to make their political point in their own words (namely that the occupation had taken place "in solidarity with the people of Libya") (Guardian, March 9, 2011). Note also the use of the word 'occupation', rather than 'squatting'. By talking about a squatting action without using the term 'squat' itself, the usual connotations attached to the term are avoided and the action can be judged on different grounds, namely that the son of a tyrant's empty property has been seized in solidarity with the people who are being oppressed by Gaddafi. The only dissenting voice was that of Mike Freer, the local Conservative Member of Parliament, who condemned the action and advised the squatters that "they need to let the UK Government deal with the situation" (Hendon and Finchley Times, March 16, 2011).

The case of Mark Guard is instructive. Described by the Daily Mail as a "serial squatter" and also "crusader for the homeless and the underdog", Guard was spokesperson for a group which squatted a string of properties in 2009, many of which belonged to high profile celebrity figures (December 10, 2009). Thus, there are news stories documenting the occupation of homes belonging to former Home Secretary David Blunkett, the ex-wife of billionaire Roman Abramovich and TV cook Nigella Lawson. These residences cost their owners £4 million, £15 million and £33 million, respectively (Daily Mail, December 10, 2009; October 19, 2009; November 24, 2009).

Squatting predominantly in Belgravia in West London, the group also occupied the 80 room former Sudanese embassy and a £12 million house on the same street as the residence of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Daily Mail, October 19, 2009).

In all the articles mentioned in the above paragraph, the occupiers are consistently described as 'squatters', with the only descriptive modifier being 'serial'. This highlights the neutral tone of the reports, for which the focus is not the act of squatting or even the related politics, but rather the shocking emptiness of these properties.

In an interview with Guard which concentrates on "the scandal of London's empty mansions", he

claims that the Belgravia group is composed of “good squatters” as opposed to “bad, anti-capitalist squatters” (Evening Standard, October 26, 2009). Whether he is presenting this view as a tactic or it is actually a belief he holds is unclear and perhaps this fuzziness is useful for him.

Guard certainly comes across as a modern Robin Hood. Indeed, this impression is helped by the fact that he was unsuccessfully prosecuted for stealing electricity. He was apparently filming a group of people squatting an abandoned building in Camden, north London, on August 1, 2009 when they entered through an open window and set off the burglar alarm. The squatters fled, but Guard, a qualified electrician, stayed behind in order to turn off the alarm.

He stated he was acting in the public interest by putting on the electricity momentarily to give himself enough light to reset the alarm. However, the police who arrived in response to the alarm arrested him and later charged him with stealing electricity. Despite Guard’s offer to pay the electricity company 1p, he had to appear in court to face the charge of stealing 0.003p of electricity. Unsurprisingly, when Guard requested trial by jury the judge threw out the case and the Crown Prosecution Service (funded by the taxpayer) ended up paying costs of £4,200 (Daily Mail, August 19, 2009). In the reporting of this story, Guard is certainly not portrayed as a criminal but rather participates in a separate discourse, namely that of the ordinary man caught up in a Kafkaesque nightmare of bureaucracy.

So it certainly is possible for squatting and squatters to be depicted in a favourable tone, but only perhaps when another discourse is involved, so that the negative discourse concerning squatting is over-ridden by a larger ideological-discursive framework such as the discourse concerning the scandal of the rich owning houses which they leave empty, or, as just seen, the discourse of state bureaucracy gone mad (a favourite theme for the Daily Mail).

### **The division of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’**

There is always a tendency to separate groups into the good and the bad. Paul Danler writes “Polarization between good and evil, between friend and foe, or to put it less linguistically, black-and-white painting is an important strategy in political discourse”. He goes on to conclude that ambiguity is not permitted since this “might allow for critical and independent reflection on the listener’s part” (52: 2005).

In the media, squatters tend to be described in one of two ways. There is a certain shorthand at work which enables ‘good’ squatters who are protesters, occupiers or an art group to be distinguished from ‘bad’ squatters who are aggressive, lifestylists, serial, unlawful and unwanted.

Steve Platt records that from the 1970s onwards, squatting has had a “viciously antagonistic” relationship with the media (1999). In terms of critical discourse analysis, it seems clear that the current dominant ideological-discursive framework surrounding squatting is that squatters are ‘bad’. If nothing else, the fact that squatters repeatedly have to emphasise that they are ‘good’ not ‘bad’ demonstrates the power of this stereotype. If squatting is considered as direct action against capitalism, both because it attacks the very notion of private property and because it allows participants the opportunity to indulge in activities of their own choosing rather than being compelled to work so as to pay their rent, it is of course clear why those in positions of power would want to characterise squatters as ‘bad’. And as is seen below when articles relating to criminalisation are examined, the media can certainly function as an organ of power.

To give some examples of the good/bad divide, I refer first to an article entitled ‘Squatters occupy £3 million house on “millionaire’s row”’. This group of three squatters were careful to self-identify themselves as ‘good’ squatters, with one being quoted as saying “I don’t mind being called a squatter, but I am a good one. We are normal people, we go to work”. He clearly wants to avoid being stereotyped by the background knowledge which forms the dominant ideological-discursive formation. (Daily Telegraph, July 15, 2009).

In the previously mentioned Daily Mail article about Fife House in Brighton, one neighbour is

quoted as saying “They look like scruffy students with combat trousers and baggy jumpers with holes in. But they’re very polite and well-spoken. They seem like your typical middle-class dropouts” (December 11, 2008).

In a chapter of his book *Black Bloc, White Riot* entitled ‘Semiotic Street Fights’ A.K. Thompson discusses the good/bad distinction with regard to anti-capitalist activism in the United States.

He argues that by defining the term ‘activist’ within criminal law, the state has “managed to limit the scope of the possible within the realm of dissent” (2010:34). He then proceeds to observe that in fact the division of ‘good’/‘bad’ permits those making the distinction to enforce their power “since the goal of designation is not so much to recognise as to regulate the designated object, and since state officials reasoned that ‘terrorists’ might embed themselves within the law-abiding crowds [...] it followed that the vigilance of law enforcement officers needed to extend to ‘good’ protesters as well” (2010: 35). In other words (and returning to the domain of squatting) all squatters are still ‘bad’ at the end of the day under the dominant ideological-discursive framework. There is ultimately no escape for the ‘good’ squatter.

To take an explicit example of the discourse of the ‘bad’ squatter, I refer to the case of John Hamilton-Brown, whose newly bought home in Archway, London, was squatted in early 2011. In an article entitled ‘My £1 million house is ruined’ a journalist records how “cigarette butts, fruit and discarded wine bottles were strewn across every room in the house which was awaiting renovation after they spent six weeks inside”. The ‘they’ refers to squatters, who are described as “cowardly”, a “gang” and “mostly in their early 20s and European” (Daily Mail, March 7, 2011). There is a subtle hint here towards a racist discourse familiar from many other debates, when ‘the other’ is blamed for every problem under discussion. This can be seen more clearly in a Daily Telegraph report entitled ‘Eastern Europeans praise Britain’s ‘lax’ squatting law’ which details how “twenty foreign nationals, mainly eastern Europeans” had taken possession of a council-owned building and spends much more time emphasising the possible disruption to its conversion into two new classrooms for a school than assessing the reality of the situation (March 13, 2011). Despite quoting both a squatter known as Tom who said “We are good squatters. We treat the places we live in with respect. We keep the place clean and tidy – we ask visitors to take their shoes off when they enter” and Peter Walker, Merton’s cabinet member for education, who remarked “teachers from the school have told us that the only sound they have heard coming from the squat is the sound of a Hoover,” the aim of the article is clearly to fit the story to the campaign to criminalise squatting (on which more below). To emphasise this point, Mike Freer (the Conservative MP for Finchley and Golders Green who was concerned by the squatting of the Gaddafi mansion) is quoted as saying “what they are doing should be illegal”.

Steve Platt observes that the media prefers to tell an “individual story rather than providing meaningful social analysis” and thus resorts to describing “straightforward heroes and villains”. This is certainly true, but further we can identify the underlying forces affecting the stereotyping itself, as we shall see below.

## **Criminalisation**

I will now move to a brief consideration of recent media articles concerning the proposal to criminalise squatting. Certainly, there are a multiplicity of factors at work here, but nevertheless there does appear to be a concerted attempt to manipulate public opinion and police opposition. As Thompson states with regard to activism in the United States, “representing activists as criminals and security threats (a category that takes on its full significance under the society of control) allowed state actors to initiate legal courses of action designed to more effectively regulate dissent” (2010:32).

Regarding the proposed criminalisation of squatting, a rash of stories appeared in the Daily Telegraph, which began a campaign supporting Mike Weatherley’s call to change the laws concerning squatting. Since time and space do not permit me to list all the examples, I shall

reference some of stories below, examining some implicit propositions and drawing out some general themes. Any emphasis is mine.

In 'The middle class serial squatters exploiting the law' (March 6, 2011), the Telegraph focuses on the Really Free School group, which it terms "a ragtag bunch of up to 40 activists and undergraduates", who are "dressed in scavenged clothes and ripped vintage tweed jackets". The owner of one Bloomsbury property which was squatted remarks: "It was all very middle class. They were intelligent students, certainly not impoverished. I suppose if I was going to have squatters I couldn't have asked for better ones." The squatters are 'good' as opposed to 'bad' in terms of the easily formed stereotype, but the language of 'serial' and 'exploiting' (both used in the title) suggests that they are not to be praised. There appears to be a threat to the middle classes from within, from their very children rebelling against them. Describing the dress code of such actors is codifying them as a threatening rabble rather than equal participants in a debate over urban planning.

In "Squatting to be made illegal, vows Clarke" (March 18, 2011), the language used is clear. "Police will be able to force entry" and "the days of 'squatters' rights' will be over".

Kenneth Clarke, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice is reported by a conveniently anonymous source to be "sick of seeing cases of law-abiding people fighting to regain possession of their properties", with the result that "officials are now drawing up plans to make such property invasions illegal". As you will have noticed, there is nothing conditional about the Daily Telegraph's campaign to 'stop the squatters' (a campaign for which it has in fact already claimed victory), with 'will' being repeatedly used in its simple future sense. Other articles are entitled "Squatting Laws Endorse Theft", "Squatters: How the law will change" and "Coalition to make squatting a criminal offence" (February 27, 2011; March 18, 2011; March 19, 2011). It does not seem to be a question of whether squatting will be made a criminal offence, but when.

Indeed, another article written on the same March weekend in a different newspaper states that "Police will get new powers to evict offenders who seize unoccupied properties" (Independent, March 19, 2011). It goes on to declare "the days of anarchist collectives living rent-free in Georgian townhouses are numbered" and argues that the new law is necessary following "a series of high-profile cases where squatters have invaded properties worth millions in elegant streets in central London". Clearly, anarchist squatters have no right to be on elegant streets. A certain order has been transgressed. Whilst there is a commonsensical feeling that buildings should not be left empty, especially by those who are rich enough to own many properties, it seems for some reason (perhaps the sheer number of squatters, or the increased visibility of squats or simply as an excuse for repression) there is also now a feeling that squatting is menace which must be stopped.

Most controversially, the Housing Minister announced in April that home-owners were able to use sledgehammers to break back into properties which had been occupied (legally) by squatters, saying "it's their home and they are perfectly entitled to" (Independent, April 3, 2011). The Minister, Grant Schapps, justified this stance with the comment that "it's physical violence against property, not the person". For Schapps, the moral right appears to lie with the home-owner who can regain possession using any means possible. Whilst this may seem acceptable, it is easy to imagine borderline cases (a single mother gets one week overdue on rent payments, a jealous husband breaks into his former house) which could lead to difficulties. Also, the power of the ideological-discursive framework is sharply laid out here, since even though so-called anarchists were widely condemned in the media for targeted property destruction against symbols of inequality (the Ritz restaurant, banks, etc) during the TUC 'March for an alternative to the cuts' on March 26, 2011, Schapps is able to utilise the same distinction for very different ends. Only an ideological-discursive framework which is dominant in the extreme would be able to perform this sort of manipulative reading.

It seems the discourse on squatting changes over time, to suit various political goals. In the early 1970s there was a prior campaign to criminalise squatting and Steve Platt observes it was "as



hysterical as it was inaccurate” (1999). He records the opinions of various newspapers:

\* Daily Telegraph: “Innumerable houses up and down the country are now in illegal occupation by organised gangs of thugs, layabouts and revolutionary fanatics”.

\* The Times: “It has become increasingly clear that the act of squatting is no longer carried out by, or on behalf of, deprived and homeless people”.

\* Daily Mail: “Many thousands – in all probability the majority – of squatters are freeloaders and layabouts ... Strong laws are needed to prevent the forces which are undermining the democratic processes of our country”.

Thus we can see similar language being used to generate a demand for criminalisation which on that occasion (and subsequently in the early 1990s) was unsuccessful. More recently, there appears to be a distinct progression in the general discourse from the amused and detached tolerance of the ‘millionaire’ squat stories described earlier to a new, more aggressive stance. A ‘new’ (or repeated) discourse centred around generational and class elements is forming. The theme is one of middle-class parents having to confront the exploits of their supposedly wayward children who are ‘good’ squatters in that they are middle-class, political and intelligent but who are also ‘bad’ squatters in that they are manipulating the law to their own ends and challenging the very notion of private property. The employment of the parent/child relationship is in itself denigrating and of course not necessarily true. Squatters are from all ages and backgrounds.

Writing on about “activist milieus” in general anthropologist David Graeber observes that it is impossible to stereotype such a broad grouping (2009: 245). However he does tentatively conclude that such milieus can be “a kind of meeting place, between downwardly mobile elements of the professional classes and upwardly mobile children of the working class” and this is probably also true of squatters in England (2009: 253).

This new discourse can then be seen as an attempt to shear off some of the values of the ‘good’ squatter and add them to the dominant ideological-discursive framework of the ‘bad’ squatter. Previous attempts to criminalise squatting were thwarted in the 1970s and 1990s but this would suggest that the current attempt is more sophisticated and has learnt from previous mistakes. Certainly, as the work of Steve Platt has shown, this is a discourse which reoccurs periodically.

## **Conclusion**

When I began writing this article it was to explore an interest in the differences between the mainstream attitudes to squatting in the Netherlands and England, two countries where I have squatted and researched squatting. The best way to do this seemed to be to track media stories as they happened. Whilst writing, the Conservative Party’s plans to criminalise squatting emerged and started to colour the media discourse, so I was well placed to track the changes. This article is only the beginning of that project, which I hope to extend into a larger work.

Using the terms of critical discourse analysis, it seems clear that in England the dominant ideological-discursive framework around squatting is being shaped to facilitate this criminalisation. The mainstream background knowledge around squatting is already negative overall, despite frameworks around ‘good’ squatters still existing. Discourses around ‘millionaire’ squatters, ‘bad’ squatters and ‘middle class’ squatters are manipulated by those in power using the media. There are a multiplicity of factors at work here, but as seen above some tactics used are race, class, age and education. It must be noted that arguments based on gender have not really featured, possibly because the term squatter is itself gender-neutral.

Squatting appears to be a node where various values intersect regarding morality and legality. Whilst those in power may wish to protect private property at all costs, there is a persistent view held by the public at large and reflected in the mainstream media that leaving properties empty is inexcusable and occupation can be justified under certain conditions.

In terms of engaging with the prevalent media discourses, various squatting groups attempt to shape

the parameters of the discourses, with the aim of creating a discourse more favourable to squatting by sidestepping the usual associations of the term 'squatter' and redefining it. It is debatable how successful this tactic has been, but this chiefly serves to indicate the strength of the dominant ideological-discursive framework. One way in which to encourage the process of redefinition would be for squatter groups to engage with local communities on projects which would serve to amplify widely held feeling that squatting is legitimated by housing need or lack of governmental provision of essential services. This will no doubt happen in a time of economic downturn (and has an inspiring precedent in the actions of Jeudi Noir in France).

What else does this mean for the future? It seems likely that there will soon be an attempt to criminalise squatting, but precise details on how exactly this will be done are for the moment scarce. Nevertheless, a war for public support will be fought in the mainstream media and whilst individual groups such as the VHS Basement may choose to refuse engagement with the media, it seems important to battle the dominant ideological-discursive framework and to work to change the background knowledge concerning squatting since even if the law is passed, contestations over the meanings of squatting will continue in different fields.

Further, the making of law is one thing and its enforcement is quite another; in Spain the phenomenon of squatting actually increased following criminalisation (Martinez, 2011). There is of course no coherent single voice of the English squatting community although various groups such as North East London Squatters, Squatters Network of Brighton and SQUASH (Squatters' Action for Secure Homes) do exist. But no one voice is required or necessary. If various different groups and individuals all commit to local and national battles over the meaning of the term 'squatting', then this may well eventually have a positive impact in terms of preserving the value of squatting as anti-capitalist direct action.

One factor which must be recognised is the threat of deliberate misrecognition, as identified by Thompson. Within his domain of discourse this refers to "the threat that takes as its premise the interchangeability of activist and terrorist – in order to tighten the screws of regulation" but it is an easy stretch to imagine state actors first criminalising squatters and then referring to them as terrorists (2010: 33). In fact, the recent events which occurred in May 2011 in the Stokes Croft area of Bristol show how easily squatters can be characterised as terrorists. In the context of ongoing non-violent protests against the opening of a supermarket, a police raid on a local squat allegedly in search of molotov cocktails was perceived as an illegal eviction and this led to two nights of sustained rioting. It is of course worth mentioning that no molotovs were recovered and the squat's four inhabitants vehemently denied any connection to the anti-supermarket campaign.

Examining the situation in Berlin, Holm and Kuhn assert that "the dynamics of squatter movements are closely connected to changing strategies associated with urban renewal, and that in each case they emerge from the crisis of the previous urban-renewal regime" (2010: 1).

According to the Empty Homes Agency, there are more than 80,000 empty homes in London and almost 740,000 across the country, and it is likely that in the current economic downturn more, not less, will become empty.

And therefore squattable.

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