

Liberatory Urbanism versus Control of Public Space
by Benjamin Shepard

Review of Jeff Ferrell, *TEARING DOWN THE STREETS: ADVENTURES IN URBAN ANARCHY*. Palgrave/St. Martin's Press, **2001**.

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The final weeks of Rudy Giuliani's term as mayor of New York City revealed as much about urban life under Giuliani-ism as any month in the previous eight years. In early December 2001, the City began arresting homeless people for sleeping on the steps of the Presbyterian Church at Fifth Avenue and 55th Street. Vice-President Dick Cheney and Israeli President Ariel Sharon slept in hotels nearby as the police beat those sleeping outside and sent them to New York's de facto shelter system: jail. The Church sued the City on behalf of the homeless, but was rebuffed, **stifled by** the new regulatory infrastructure (Goodman, 1998) taking hold of the public spaces of American cities.

The Charas/El Bohio community services center in the East Village lost its request for a stay of eviction on December 18. In response, its supporters began a 24-hour vigil. Charas had been sold, without competitive bidding, to a Giuliani campaign contributor back in 1998. **By 2001**, *The Village Voice*, in its "Best of New York" issue, dubbed Charas/El Bohio "the Best Place to Rally Around and/or Resuscitate." Noting that rehearsal space at Charas cost from \$11 to \$14 an hour, the *Voice* explained, "CHARAS serves the Lower East Side community, not the Big Apple Tour Bus, and that is why, partially, it is in jeopardy" (Sottile, 2001). Charas and Lower East Side Activism had a long history. Civil disobedience training for countless community struggles had been held at the former school. That made Charas a target. "Man of the year, get out of here!" protesters, squatters, garden activists, and requisite East Village vagabonds screamed (referring to the mayor's recent award as *Time's* Person of the Year), as they watched the NYPD shut down access to this space where much of the do-it-yourself spirit of their organizing and neighborhood

had thrived. Both Charas and the steps of 5th Avenue Presbyterian had served as meeting spaces for marginalized groups. While the Mayor had for years battled communities of difference who fought his agenda of privatizing New York's public spaces, September 11 neutralized much of the official opposition to his plan to evict the neighborhood community center where the enemies of neo liberalism converged.

The problem, as Jeff Ferrell **contends** in his new book, *Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy*, **is that** even before 9/11, Giuliani-ism, as a mode of urban governance favoring suburban blandification of public space, replete with elaborate security functions, racial profiling, and “stop and frisk” policing, had become a model many cities hoped to emulate. The subtext of this model frames the **work. Ferrell's point** is that as American cities slowly become homogenized and administratively segregated, an anarchist opposition to the process becomes more pronounced. If Disneyfication—the use of entertainment **as** ideology—is the future of the American physical and psychological landscape, Ferrell suggests that the spirit of anarchism offers the best possibility of a detour off the one-way suburban superhighway toward the mallification of the American imagination.

To make his point, Ferrell **places himself within the narrative** from the get go. “I live as much of my life as possible on the streets, wrapped in the everyday rhythms of the city's public spaces. Hanging out there,” Ferrell explains, the American streets have changed in front of his eyes. Through his field work, listening to music, talking with the inhabitants of the public spaces of city - the punks, hobos, base jumpers, bicyclists - a sense emerges that something has gone vastly wrong; the feel of urban life altered; spontaneous flow restricted. “Somethings happening here in the streets of America and beyond, and while what it is may not be exactly clear, it is clear that it involves contested practices of public life and community”.

What unfolds is a debate about social justice, the meanings of social decay, inequality, racial profiling, economic development, redevelopment, and public space, taking

place in the streets of countless American cities. The question is to what degree urban redevelopment has reduced—or reproduced—systems of spatial inequality during one the longest periods of economic expansion in US history.

Building on newspaper stories, field notes, historic and sociological texts, Ferrell traces the growth of an elaborate series of legal mechanisms designed to regulate public spaces within the urban sphere. Ferrell's reading closely concurs with Michaels Hardt's (2000) contention that western cultures have moved beyond a disciplinary era towards an era of social control. Yet his point is far more grounded in details of the transformation and control of physical spaces. Ferrell outlines the almost methodical steps used to target "communities of difference" as urban centers have been redesigned, excluding groups on the basis of race, class, gender, and political opposition to the new suburban vision of urban life. Tools utilized include anti-vagrancy, zoning, nuisance-abatement, and quality of life statutes, all organized together to cordon off public spaces utilized by prostitutes, the homeless, gang members, American Indians, green gardeners, anarchists, and countless other groups that deviate from normative notions of citizenship and political participation. The assumption is that city spaces should function like for-profit entertainment parks. In order for these entertainment zones to thrive the state must regulate their use. Ferrell explains, "The caretakers of these newly segregated spaces—politicians, business leaders, community associations—contend that such closed spaces are essential to the economic vitality, interpersonal safety, and emerging identity of the city. And because of this, they readily bring down the full weight of the law and commerce on those who, by choice or chance, trespass on them."

At its core, the new regulation of public spaces has to do with questions about difference. There is the old adage, we're comfortable talking about diversity until we meet someone truly different. "Liberty unrestrained is an invitation to anarchy..." Ferrell quotes a California Supreme Court Justice explaining as justification for one of the legal civil injunctions. Part of why people are so adamantly opposed to these new injunctions is that

they attack presumably protected freedoms with the flimsiest of legal arguments. One would assume, as a US citizen, that those who look, think, walk or appear different would be allowed a place in the public sphere. Many of these new regulatory functions—such as Chicago’s political/racial profiling ordinance aimed at restricting the activities of gang members—never withstand court fights over their constitutionality. **The point, of course, is of little consolation** to many of the thousands arrested and put through the system for “loitering in any public place ... with no apparent purpose...” **The message remains that to use public space is to take a chance. Those arrested** never get back the time they spent in the system. Others, such as New York’s XXX Zoning Law, which meandered its way through the legal system for over three years, was one of **only** two or three out of some thirty First Amendment cases the ACLU lost to the Giuliani administration. They are created to severely curtail First Amendment protected speech. Members of the anarchist collective Food Not Bombs were arrested, after all, for giving away food without a permit, to the homeless.

At its core, the new “class cleansing” of public spaces aims to attack and marginalize unpopular ideas and those who harbor them. Long before September 11, the powers that be sought to delegitimize activists, anarchists, and the like as terrorists. On May 10, 2001, FBI director Louis Freeh testified at a Senate committee hearing: “Anarchists and extreme socialist groups—such as... Reclaim the Streets...—have an international presence and, at times, also represent a potential threat in the United States.” Ferrell unpacks the ways labeling is used to delegitimize those opposing the new spatial order—a process which became a great deal easier after 9/11. In December 2001, after all, the Attorney General claimed that those who opposed his approach to challenging terrorism “only aid terrorists.” It was part of a classic panic script used to justify encroachments into the public sphere, based on a careful schema for organizing and evaluating information. It assumes that “sex monsters,” terrorists, or some other deviant group pose such a terrible threat that we must give up our most basic rights in order to stop them. Anyone who

rejects this assumption and questions the validity of the charges is a Witch, Terrorist, Pedophile, Communist, or "sexual monster" himself (Jenkins, 1998). Ferrell assesses a great many of these ideologies of control.

Tearing Down the Streets is also the story of the emergence of public space groups, such as Reclaim the Streets and Critical Mass. In outlining their group histories, Ferrell counters: "This is the story of *resistance* to emerging spatial controls—the history of those who have long fought the regulation and closure of public space; who've time and again countered new forms of spatial exclusion with the inclusive politics of liberty, diversity, disorder, who've been able to create communities of difference and inclusion."

With the enthusiasm of an angst-ridden 13-year-old with his first guitar, Ferrell traces a genealogy of the anarchist movements opposing the attack on public spaces, covering much of the trajectory identified by Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*. From the Paris Commune of 1871 to the Wobblies, Ferrell reaches into a history with stars such as Emma Goldman and the Sex Pistols. Resonating as much as ever, Goldman explains that anarchism "stands for direct action, the open defiance of, and resistance to all laws and restrictions, economic, social, and moral..." From the Wobbly contention "Direct Action Gets the Goods" to Bakunin's insight, "The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too," to 1970's punk rock, the history of anarchism mirrors a modern-day history of cultural resistance.

My one complaint about the book is that there are times when the writing falls prey to the tiresome, white male, boomer-academic idealization of anarchists, Kerouac, and the macho aspects of all things alternative. One gets the feeling that Ferrell has not taken to heart the Dead Kennedys' "Nazi Punks Fuck Off" or "Anarchy for Sale," or attended one of the not so "democratic" Spokes Council meetings before one of the convergence actions of the global justice movement, which often replace one system of hierarchies with another. Like any good idea, anarchy can be taken too far. All too often, men (myself included) utilize anarchist organizing's tolerance for aggression as a way to mask male privilege or to

justify silencing those who speak with fewer decibels.

But none of this is to diminish the recent contributions the idea of anarchism has made to notions of direct democracy, community organizing, or cultural resistance. When every other “liberal” interest group, the unions, and countless other NGOs bowed out of participating in the protests against the World Economic Forum last February, anarchists risked arrest and organized a disciplined peaceful protest attended by well over 10,000. (And all this organizing took place within weeks of being evicted from our usual convergence center at Charas.) Recall, in the wake of 9/11 New Yorkers had been told that the new patriotism involved going shopping. It was anarchists who challenged this transparent attempt to wrap a political agenda around a crisis. And when faced with a police force which betrayed every guarantee it had made in negotiations with lawyers, anarchists maintained a joyous opposition, replete with a samba band reclaiming beats and urban possibilities. My most joyous moment of the WEF protests was when, squeezed in by a phalanx of police, the crowd began to sing, “We all live in a Military State, a Military State, a Military State,” to the tune of the Beatles anthem Yellow Submarine.

The subtext for much of the recent anarchist vogue is a link between an aesthetic appreciation for punk rock, which produced some of the most passionate music of the last quarter-century, and a rich political tradition dating back well into the 19th century. We were not taught this connection in school, but anarchism is an idea with deep roots in both the American suburbs and radical circles. Their intersections produce sympathies for both global justice activism and libertarianism. The problem is that like countless other forms of dissent, it is all too often commodified and misappropriated.

To the extent that the new regulatory infrastructure is aimed at squeezing certain groups out of public space, it involves core questions about pluralistic democracy. Through *Tearing Down the Streets*, Ferrell gives meaning to what for many of us were isolated city ordinances. He writes, “programs designed to police cultural spaces, to restore civility and community in such spaces, in fact reinforce patterns of special inequality, day-

to-day economic and ethnic apartheid, and street-level abuse.” The result is a series of questions about who has access to which conversations, who can or cannot walk in which areas, who can drive without being profiled by police, all hearkening back to an era when it was socially acceptable to profile people by race rather than by today’s class-based profiling aimed at urban vagrants. “. . .[W]ithout public spaces, any kind of talk about democracy basically goes out the window,” one of Ferrell’s interviewees contends. And the point is clear: if you can’t walk in the street, how can you be considered a citizen? (see Ribey, 1998) Building on a dynamic cultural tradition, Ferrell arms us with a rich list of citations, case studies, and vivid new terms for a class war between “corporate control of public space” and a burgeoning do-it-yourself global justice movement aimed at unleashing a new “liberatory urbanism” for a new century.

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