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NO EASY WAY IN: NAVIGATING THE FRAGILE COMMUNALITY AMONGST SQUATTERS IN LONDON

ABSTRACT

This article aims to study the impact the 2012 criminalisation of residential squatting in England and Wales has had on the lived experiences and communal logics of squatters in London. Through the story of a former homeless person named Keith, this paper explores how an individual squatter with limited experience tries to navigate the complex communal logics of squatter crews and identify larger networks in order not to lose the roof over his head. Squatters' needs to frequently move between non-residential buildings and replicate existing social dynamics in new spatial settings increase the pressures on the solidarity and communal ties within crews. Although, to some extent, stratification based on the experiences, skills, networking abilities, competencies, and status of individual squatters has always existed, the context of growing uncertainty has further amplified it. This, in turn, further erodes solidarity amongst squatters, prompting Keith to turn to new methods of securing accommodation.

Keywords: squatting, community, neoliberalism, solidarity, criminalisation, housing

INTRODUCTION. KEITH'S STORY.

Whilst conducting fieldwork in the area, I first met Keith in September 2019, squatting in a former charity shop in Southeast London. He immediately stood out from the rest of the squatting crew.[1] He was older, in his mid-40s, and, whereas other more seasoned crew members had brought as few things with them as they could, his tiny corner in the makeshift living space was filled with various random items, rucksacks, and spare bicycle parts.

A month before meeting Keith, I had begun my third period of fieldwork in East and Southeast London. My previous fieldwork in 2009–2010 and 2015 had focused primarily on the communal aspects of squatting. Within the first month of fieldwork in 2019, I visited several squats, lived in two, and was evicted from one.

Squatting has a deep-rooted and rich history in the UK. London's unique combination of a long-standing squatting tradition, skyrocketing property values, and a severe housing crisis creates a distinctive environment that continues shaping squatters' experiences and adaptations. Recent legal challenges—most notably, the criminalisation of residential squatting in 2012—have intensified these pressures in London, where both communal practices and survival strategies are continuously

reshaped by the interplay of legal, economic, and social forces.

After engaging with squatters in various squats in summer 2019 and being involved in squatting processes, it quickly became clear that some of the communal dynamics had shifted in the four years since I had last been in London squats. However, it was not until I met Keith in the squat and got to know him and his recent experiences that the underlying reasons for these changes started to reveal themselves to me.

In my frequent visits to the squat to meet other informants, Keith was almost always there. After hearing about my research project, he was very keen to share his perspectives. Over time and after sharing many cups of tea, I got to know Keith better. It turned out that he had just joined this crew a few weeks before my first visit and did not have any previous experience squatting. He told me that for almost all of his adult life, he had been living with his mother in a council flat north of London. When his mother died from severe illness, he was promptly evicted from the flat. He applied for social housing, but the waiting time was several years long. He resigned to sleeping on his friends' couches for a while and did odd jobs providing him neither sufficient money nor a stable income allowing him to afford rent on his own.

In 2015, Keith ended up sleeping rough on the streets of North London, where he lived for over three years. He claimed that he had never begged for money and was proud of the fact that he developed several strategies and methods to keep his head above water navigating street life for such a long time. Still, over time, he came to understand that he had to find some way out soon, because he kept having increasing problems with his health. The previous winter had also been extremely cold, and he had witnessed and experienced a lot of physical abuse and violence.

'Three years is a lot,' he told me during an interview. '*I saw people dying from drugs, alcohol, untreated health problems. I didn't want to end up like them. (Interview with Keith, 2019)*

As a homeless person, he had acquired the know-how and skills to get by. He frequently visited a bicycle repair shop in South London that ran a charity scheme: homeless people were taught how to mend and restore donated bicycles, which they could then sell to make some money.

It was in this shop that he met some squatters who recommended he start squatting instead of living on the streets and take part in an event called Practical Squatters Night in East London. This event was regularly organised by a non-profit organisation, Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS), to help those interested in squatting to get more information about it and to meet people with similar interests.

Keith decided to go and see what the meeting was about. That decision proved successful. Already at the first Practical Squatters meeting he attended, he received information about a place with room for people to join. After a volunteer at ASS recommended him, Keith was placed into the abandoned charity shop, which is where I first met him.

When I first talked to him at length about his experience, he was truly happy that he had managed to get off the streets and become part of a community, no longer fending for himself alone.

'Yes, I felt really lucky. I finally found some people who I could trust and rely on,' he explained during an interview that took place about three weeks after he had moved into the former charity shop.

About a month after this conversation, I learned that the squatters had been evicted from the shop, and the crew had split up—some went to stay with their friends, and some

joined another crew in a building that did not have sufficient space for Keith to join as well. Because the crew fell apart and he had no other acquaintances in the squatting network, he turned to the same volunteer at ASS who had helped him become housed in the charity shop. Again, he was lucky: the information about his situation was shared in a WhatsApp group of the local squatter network and he was placed in another squat.

When I visited him in this new place, the positive outlook I has previously witnessed had disappeared. He was disillusioned because he understood that the crews, like squats, do not last forever and the feeling of community in a squat can be deceitful.

> *I don't know what's going to happen next or who is going to be here next week. Everyone is only looking after themselves and they [other squatters in the building] might not take me with them if there is a better opportunity elsewhere and there is no space for people like me.*

Keith's perception of the fragility of solidarity was not unique amongst squatters. During my fieldwork, time and again I heard the argument that crews that previously lasted for years are becoming increasingly rare because it takes too much effort to hold them together.

'*You cannot open flats anymore. So, you don't have all those nice things like running water and a toilet and a kitchen and (…). Each time you move to a new building you have to find space for everyone and put a lot of work in to make it habitable,' explained* Italian squatter Luca, who had squatted with Keith in the charity shop. '*It's just so exhausting.*'

In this article, I have chosen to focus on Keith's story in order to explore how the criminalisation of squatting has reshaped not only the structural conditions but also the lived experiences of those directly involved in these practices. By choosing him as the focal point of this article, I gained access to unique perspectives from a newcomer to the scene, allowing me to uncover the choices, survival strategies, and communal logics amongst squatters.

ON METHODS AND POSITIONING

This article is mostly based on fieldnotes and unstructured and semi-structured interviews I conducted during fieldwork in various squats in London in 2015 and 2019–2020. During the latter period, I also briefly volunteered at the non-profit organisation Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS), which helped me to better understand the local context after being away from London for several years.

The interviews were mostly conducted in the squats in which the informants were living. On the one hand, this was helpful, because I could spend more time with the informants. In addition to conducting an interview, I could also observe their everyday environment. On the other hand, squats quite often lack privacy and sometimes it was difficult to create a quiet environment in which to conduct an interview, without anyone interrupting or eavesdropping, knowingly or not. Therefore, some interviews took place in neutral settings like cafes or, when the weather permitted, outside in a park for example.

During my fieldwork, I informed all of my informants and the gatekeepers, as well as the volunteer staff at ASS, of my position as an anthropologist and the broader aims and purposes of my research. To protect my informants, I gave them the opportunity to remain anonymous if they wanted to since many

of their activities fell on boundary between legal and illegal, with some viewed as criminal offences.

Fieldwork presented me with several methodological and ethical challenges. During my fieldwork, which included observation, participant observation, and extensive unstructured interviews, I faced numerous challenges together with Keith and other squatters. These ranged from dealing with violent intruders at the squat to transporting food supplies from various locations to trying to sell a bicycle. As a result, at times it was difficult to define the relationship between myself and my informants in the traditional anthropological framework.

Because this article primarily revolves around the experiences of a former homeless person—Keith—I include a single life history as a research technique. Analysing his narrative helps to better understand the ways in which he attempts to navigate the squatting scene.

The decision to focus on Keith's story stems from a comprehensive analysis of all the interviews I conducted with squatters during my 2019–2020 fieldwork period. Across these interviews, recurring themes began to emerge, highlighting shared challenges and dynamics amongst squatters. Keith's experiences and narrative stood out because they captured these themes in a unique depth and detail, whilst the broader set of interviews offered complementary perspectives helping to contextualise his experiences with common struggles faced by squatters more broadly.

Single life stories have long been used as a method in anthropology, providing insights into how individuals experience and interpret their cultural context (Radin 1983; Lewis 1961). As Hammersley argued, the boundaries between ethnography, life history work, and discourse analysis are often fuzzy (Hammersley 2006: 3). My approach, therefore, relied on combining a 'factual life-focused approach' and a 'subjectivist life-focused approach' as described by Peacock and Holland (1993). I view Keith's narration to a certain extent both as 'a window on the objective facts of historical and ethnographic events (…) and the experience of the narrator' (Peacock and Holland 1993: 369–370).

When using life stories as a technique, I aimed to maintain the authenticity of the narrative whilst respecting Keith's privacy and autonomy, balancing authenticity with respect. However, I could not independently verify some of Keith's claims, which is why I hesitate to describe my approach as purely 'factual life focused'.

There is also the methodological concern with objectivity and the non-biasing of the subject, which can at least to some extent be alleviated through the perspective provided by Peacock and Holland (1993). They claim that researchers must remember that life stories have an existence and meaning in and of themselves beyond the interview context. The researcher, no matter what s/he does, cannot but fail to elicit a story that conforms not to the scientist's account of the truth, but to cultural and social conventions of the genre itself (Peacock and Holland 1993: 376).

HOW RESIDENTIAL SPACE WAS LOST

According to geographer Alexander Vasuvedan, London is a city that has been continuously made and remade through struggles over space, whether as buildings, commons, or communities.

'Squatters have occupied an important if overlooked place within these conflicts, especially as squatters' rights have, until recently, encouraged Londoners to house themselves' (Vasuvedan 2017: 42).

The criminalisation of residential squatting,[2] which Vasuvedan hints at, was introduced in 2012 and made it a criminal offence to squat in residential properties in England and Wales. Previously, squatting was a civil matter, whereby squatters had to be evicted through the courts. The new law made it easier for property owners to evict squatters, but it also criminalised a practice that had been used for decades as a means of providing temporary accommodation to homeless people.

Because non-residential buildings lack privacy, proper utilities, and basic infrastructure like plumbing, squatters are forced to adapt to challenging conditions. When squatters form crews who move together between buildings, their communal relationships are put under constant strain. Each new space, with its unique layout and limitations, requires renegotiation of social dynamics—decisions about who lives where, how spaces are used, and how to manage shared responsibilities.

By contrast, when modern squatting emerged after World War II in England, it was viewed as a justified means of temporarily housing people made homeless by the enemy, displaced people, and war veterans returning home.

Historian Don Watson has described how soldiers who returned home decided to take direct action to house themselves and other people who found themselves in a similar situation. As large numbers of families began to occupy empty military camps, the government supported the idea of temporary occupation, urging local authorities to install more people in them (Watson 2016).

But, as the camps began to fill, squatters turned to other empty buildings in various cities: hotels, shops, mansions, disused schools, and, in the same year, a series of hotels and luxury flats were occupied, which were requisitioned for wartime use and were left empty (Ward 2002: 160).

In the decades that followed, squatting became an essential part of London's housing ecosystem, providing a vital source of shelter for the city's most vulnerable. In the 1960s and 1970s, squatting also became increasingly political as many squatters viewed themselves as part of a wider movement for political and social change (Wates 1980). Factions ranged from Marxists and anarchists to liberals, organising various campaigns and protests, and often clashing with one another. Friction also existed with more politically passive squatters, who disliked attempts by the overtly political few to harness the entire movement for their political agenda (Milligan 2016: 13).

The logics of social housing, squatting, and the political environment around them began to change in the early 1980s. In the last four decades, various neoliberal[3] initiatives and policies have helped create an ongoing housing crisis in London and, simultaneously, ideologically marginalised squatting as a direct solution to this crisis. This included the aforementioned criminalisation of residential squatting introduced by the British Conservative prime minister David Cameron.

The privatisation of the housing market and ideology favouring owner-occupied dwellings received a major boost in 1980 when Margaret Thatcher introduced the new Housing Act of 1980, better known as the 'Right to Buy'. This allowed the sale of council housing to tenants who had rented for at least three years, with a discount of up to 50% (Boughton 2019). The purchase of council houses by sitting tenants was not actually a new policy—but the cross-party expectation before the introduction of the Housing Act of 1980 had been to achieve the best price, with the income from council house sales reinvested into the programme for new

council house construction, which continues apace (Boughton 2019: 170).

After the new act was introduced, the powers and resources that local authorities previously had to build and manage social housing faced new restrictions. By 1983, the level of building had halved in just three years (Shelter 2024). According to Hirayama and Forrest (2009: 1002–3), in the 1980s, around one-third of households were living in the state housing sector; but, by 2000, municipal rental housing had shrunk to 12%. This meant that effectively a large portion of the low-income population dependent on social housing with below-market rents had been forced to move to the private rental market if they were unable or ineligible to benefit from the Right-to-Buy scheme.

Because the public discourse was shaped by the rhetoric and policies promoting the idea of the home as a privately owned property, other forms of housing lost their validity within the same discourse. Whereas previously squatters could take the moral high ground the state leaving houses empty, they now risked acting against the traditions and legal protections of ownership entitlement and sovereignty in the UK, forced to make claims against private ownership (Burgum 2019: 230).

Geographer Mel Nowicki (2020) has argued that the criminalisation of residential squatting in 2012 is actually an outcome of the strategic politicisation of language regarding the home. Specifically, since the so-called 'neoliberal turn' of the 1980s, the home has been re-engineered as a function of the market and an emblem of individual economic success (Nowicki 2020).

Because viewing housing as primarily a financial product over and above a home became normalised, homeownership became understood as not only intrinsically tied to notions of personal—and by proxy, national—success, but also as the primary focus of legal protection regarding the home (Nowicki 2020: 843). Consequently, during and after the neoliberal turn, squatting in residential spaces, which for decades was legally viewed as a civil matter, fell under greater pressure to be criminalised.

As early as July 1991, Simon Burns, then member of parliament from Chelmsford, discussed in Parliament the case for reviewing the law on squatting and its effect on privately owned second homes. He argued that, although many people associate second homes simply with the wealthy who own a weekend cottage or a country home they visit on Friday nights, returning to London or wherever on Sundays, many people have a second home. This results simply from mortgage interest rates in recent years, whereby they have been unable to sell their existing home, but decided to move to their new home, thereby not losing their purchase (Hansard 1991).

His speech highlighted how understanding of the home had shifted in the public discourse in the aftermath of Right to Buy, adding another layer of justifications for why a long empty residential space should be protected by criminal law. It was no longer just about protecting people's homes; it was also about protecting their financial investments.

It took over 20 years from Burns's speech until squatting in residential properties in England and Wales was indeed criminalised. The change of law, led by conservatives, but also supported by the Labour party, was introduced after a long media campaign, which Dadusc and Dee (2014) described as a moral panic constructed around the practice of squatting and the squatter population. This, in turn, created indignation and fear of the squatter as the 'transgressive other' (Dadusc and Dee 2014: 110).

Through criminalising squatting, the values mobilised to create the moral panic included the right to private property, violating the rules of so-called 'common decency' and 'normal conduct', and respect for police authority. The appeal to these values has been allied with the belief that criminalisation would put a stop to squatting, thereby protecting and re-establishing the moral and social order (Dadusc and Dee 2014: 119).

Because residential squatting has now been a criminal offence for more than a decade, squatters have primarily focused on commercial buildings in order to avoid criminal charges. Residential properties are still squatted from time to time, but most of the squatters I have met during my fieldwork have not wanted to risk it, viewing it as a last resort. Nowadays, squatting is not as prevalent in the news and public discourse as it was during the media campaign at the beginning of 2010s, which resulted in the change in law. Still, there have been occasions when squatters have occupied residential buildings to raise awareness on political topics, such as when Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska's empty £50 million mansion was squatted in 2022 to protest Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Taylor 2022).

SKILLS AND COMMUNAL SOLIDARITY

In the scholarly literature, urban squatting in Europe and the USA has been predominantly viewed as a movement (Lowe 1986; Hirsch and Wood 1988; Martinez Lopez 2007, 2012; Owens 2008; Pruijt 2013; Priemus 2015) or as a subculture (Kadir 2016; Golova 2016; Aceros et al. 2019).

Anthropologist Steph Grohmann (2020) argues against the latter viewpoint, claiming that squatters are a discrete group of people, perhaps even a 'community', not a 'culture' or 'tribe' emerging from some quasi-natural process of cultural differentiation. As a group, they are constituted and reproduced not from within, but through larger social, political, and economic processes causing them to experience a common set of problems and develop communal practices to resolve these problems (Grohmann 2020: 18).

Various studies highlight the communal and solidaristic elements of squatting. Lynn Owens (2013), who studied squatting in Amsterdam, proposed using the sociological concept of the *Bund* to analyse the squatter communities.

Originally, the *Bund* was introduced by German philosopher Herman Schmalenbach (1977) as a third concept to enrich the *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* dualism of Ferdinand Tönnies (2001 [1887]). In Tönnies's concept of *Gemeinschaft*, personal relationships are shaped and governed by traditional social norms. Individuals engage in simple, direct, face-to-face interactions guided by natural, spontaneously arising emotions and expressions of sentiment. By contrast, *Gesellschaft* is formed through rational will, characterised by modern, cosmopolitan societies with government bureaucracies and large industrial organisations (Tönnies 2001 [1887]).

Hetherington (1994: 21) developed Schmalenbach's concept of the *Bund* further, attempting to show its significance as a fundamental sociological category. "As well as being small scale, based on face-to-face interaction, the *Bund* is an elective, unstable, affectual form of sociation. *Bünde* are maintained symbolically through the active, reflexive monitoring of group solidarity by those involved (…). It is self-enclosed and produces a code of practices and symbols that serve as the basis for identification" (Hetherington 1994: 16).

Leaning on MacDonald's (2006) inter-

pretation of the *Bund*, Owens (2013: 188–189) argues that, unlike conventional forms of community, the *Bund* is intense, impermanent, and mobile, tying in well with squatting.

Solidarity amongst squatters often manifests through practices that demonstrate agency in uncertain circumstances, with active participation highly esteemed. In my previous work, I have highlighted time-tricking as a method that squatters use to manage the many uncertainties they face (Aasmäe 2024). Sengupta and Sharma (2012: 221), who studied urban development in Kathmandu, claimed that interpersonal relationships and shared identities and values as social capital play important roles for urban squatters when improving their housing conditions via 'self-help'. Similarly, Martinez Lopez (2012: 882) tied solidarity to the collective practices of self-management, empowerment, and social cooperation.

Many researchers highlight the importance of collective practices and skills-sharing in the development of squatting communities. Ballesteros-Quilez et al. (2022) claim that the squatters' collective learning and knowledge-building processes have had a transformative impact in many of the contexts in which they have developed, both at the neighbourhood and at the city level. Based on their research in Sweden, Polanska and Weldon (2020: 1368) highlighted the non- (or less) hierarchical social organisation, consensus-based community-level meetings, rotating responsibilities, and the adoption of clear 'guidelines' for individual and community practices as focal points for building a squatter community.

According to their research, the mixing of formal and informal governance structures was perceived by squatters as resulting in an 'equalising' of many immaterial aspects of their lives, such as skills and knowledge throughout the group, strengthening both the individuals and community (Polanska and Weldon 2020). A similar view was expressed by Bouillon (2009), who claimed that squatting communities enable the development of commonly shared skills which are transferable to other territories.

Some studies question the idea that squatter groups and communities are inherently egalitarian and non-hierarchical. For instance, anthropologist Nazima Kadir (2016), who has studied squatters in the Netherlands, coined the term 'squatter capital' to refer to their specific skills and the differential prestige that one gains by excelling in such skills. According to Kadir, squatter capital describes the unspoken value system of the internal social world of the squatter's movement. Interestingly, she found that the 'real' or 'ideal' squatter was not easily defined and was often imaginary: squatters rarely articulately illustrated who and what the authentic and ideal squatter was. Instead, by labelling someone 'not a real squatter', they easily articulated what they disliked and disrespected about others in their community (Kadir 2016: 49).

During my fieldwork in London, I have observed many instances during which Kadir's claims applied, as I will explain in the sections that follow. Despite egalitarianism being expressed as a core principle in squatter ideology, not all squatters are perceived as equals in practice. This distinction is particularly evident within groups where members have limited familiarity with one another or where the level of practical skills remains uneven. Here, stratification based on skills and know-how quickly becomes the default order.

THE STRUGGLE OF AN OUTSIDER

During my fieldwork in 2019–2020, I visited Keith in two squats. Both were previously

commercial properties: the first was a former charity shop, and the second squat had been a minicab office. Some squatters, however, claimed the second squat had actually served as a front for an underground brothel. When they opened it, they found three small, improvised rooms with massage tables and various related paraphernalia.

Keith's corner in the minicab office looked different from the one he had occupied in the charity shop. Because he was one of the last to join, he had only a small space next to the bathroom door. Thus, his setup also looked quite spartan: a large rucksack, a few smaller bags for clothes, a sleeping bag, and an air mattress. All of his other possessions which he had had in the previous squat including the bicycle parts, he had stored in a friend's shed.

> *I only have the stuff I can carry with me (…). It's not that I don't trust these people. I just feel that I have to be cautious (…). When others move, I have to be ready to follow them (…). I don't know how to break into buildings and I'm too old to start learning how to.*

Both times Keith was placed in a squat by a volunteer of ASS, he did not know anyone else in the squat. He found himself in situations where he felt that he did not fully fit the social dynamics of the crew. This left him unsure if he could rely on the connections he was attempting to build in these crews and therefore also unsure about his future plans.

Although other squatters in the squats he joined were seemingly sympathetic to his situation, his reliance on the ASS volunteer to find accommodation for him rather than making the effort to fit in and help others in their attempts to find new places was not unnoticed. Keith also felt a distance separated him from others.

During one interview, he told me that his experiences in these two squats had been quite different from his first impressions from the Practical Squatters meeting. Based on chats he had with other prospective squatters and ASS volunteers at that meeting, he had assumed that the London squatter community was more cohesive and supportive towards people who did not have much experience squatting. He also assumed that there were rules in place which must be obeyed.

> *I mean, I'm not expecting everyone to be my best friend here, but it would be nice to be included in the chats, and (…). I'm here [in the squat] a lot, but most of the time I have no clue what's going on (…). or who is invited to stay and all that. I was told that usually everybody [all the crew members] is involved, there's voting and all that, but I don't see it here (…).*

The disparity between his expectations and the reality sheds light on the complex issues associated with solidarity and communality amongst squatters compounding since the criminalisation of residential squatting. More specifically, the degree of closeness and solidarity amongst squatters hinges on the level of uncertainty they confront in their daily lives and when strategizing for the future.

Owens (2013: 190), who has studied the mobility of squatters in Western Europe, has argued that mobility, especially through repetition, creates a kind of stability and formulates an attachment—to movement, but also to place, as well as to the people and things with which one travels.

Importantly, the stabilising mobility Owens discusses does not really exist in London following the 2012 legislative change. There are multiple factors intensifying the instability

and unsustainability of squatting as a practice and the relationships amongst people who squat together.

Namely, squatting in London is defined by various temporal, social, and spatial uncertainties squatters must overcome. When a crew of squatters decides to leave a squat or is evicted from a building and moves to the next, various additional tensions arise.

During my fieldwork in London, I visited squats in empty buildings formerly built or fitted as schools, pubs, pawnbrokers, gyms, various kinds of shops, libraries, hostels, and even police and fire stations—that is, serving every imaginable non-residential purpose. Because the spatial layouts and habitability of empty commercial buildings vary widely, they also have different features or limitations which affect how squatters can use the space and interact with each other. In the new space, social relations and practices need to be reproduced, or at times reestablished, and everything must be renegotiated. This includes the allocation of private and public space, the practices of protecting and maintaining the physical space of a squat, and the everyday practices necessary to sustain the crew.

Usually, when the squatters decide to leave or are evicted from a building, they do not have many options for where to move to next. Therefore, the limitations of the new space they can find and move in to dictates the number of people that can move to it. Anthropologist Steph Grohmann (2020), who studied squatting in England before the criminalisation of residential squatting, noted previously that group size was a crucial factor in finding suitable sites for both pedestrian squatters and caravan dwellers. The number of newcomers had to be well considered, and connections and recommendations determined if an individual was invited to join (Grohmann 2020: 205).

After the criminalisation in 2012, when squatters were denied the opportunity to move into residential properties, the group size factor has become more flexible to accommodate specific contexts.

Firstly, squatters' ability to only occupy non-residential buildings has impacted the flexibility of the size of squatting crews. Moving from one non-residential building to another means that the squatting crew may have to adjust their size and social dynamics to fit the new space. The number of people in the crew can change, depending on the size and arrangements in the previous squat. If the new space is smaller, it might not provide sufficient space for all of the people who lived in the previous space. Similarly, if it is much larger, then the squatters need more people to keep it secure. The building cannot be left empty—thus, there must be at least one person in the squat at any given moment. Otherwise, the owner can claim that the property was empty and take it back by just breaking in again without first taking the squatters to civil court.

This means that the person who is asked to join a crew is required to have certain skills, competencies, or status. Nazima Kadir (2016) described these characteristics as squatter capital, which might not always be as relevant now as it was before criminalisation, as described by Grohmann (2020). Therefore, there might be situations when newcomers are invited to join just because there is an urgent need to fill the space and secure it from immediate eviction.

Interestingly, the political activism Kadir (2016) mentioned as a way to assert one's authenticity as a squatter did not play a big role in the crews I observed or in their stratification. Squatters acknowledged the political situation, with some quite vocal in expressing their views and participating in various protests and campaigns. But because the crews consisted of

people from different backgrounds and with differing motivations who ended up together almost serendipitously, an anti-capitalist stance by default was expected, whilst active participation in related activities was not.

This does not mean that their actions were not political. Indeed, others have argued that the act of squatting itself is inherently political (Milligan 2016: 25). For most squatters, however, Keith included, it was not their primary motivation.

Keith was placed in squats by a volunteer and was viewed as someone who fills the space when needed rather than as someone who helps reestablish and maintain communal relationships solidified in previous squats. Thus, his position in the squat was much weaker than many others, who had squatted together before and who successfully performed risky activities such as scouting and opening buildings, skills highly valued amongst squatters.

Keith repeatedly brought up the lack of rules, meetings, and decision-making processes, contrasted them against the picture he had painted for himself at the ASS introductory meetings, where the logics of squatting together were briefly discussed. This meant that the formal and informal governing structures that, according to Polanska and Weldon's (2020) research, should have had an equalising effect on the squatters were not in place.

Most importantly, the affection and attachment to both spaces and one another, essential to Hetherington's (1994) and Owens' (2013) interpretations of the *Bund*, were only rarely evident in both of Keith's squats.

The one unifying factor amongst squatters in both squats was the actual need to have a roof over one's head, at least for a while—a configuration that Hans Prujit (2013) has called 'deprivation-based' squatting. Indeed, almost all of the squatters who I met were in the position where they had no other chance to be housed. They were not using the act of squatting together as an alternative housing strategy—most of them ended up in these abandoned buildings by chance.

Therefore, it is also logical that the skills needed to keep that roof over one's head—opening up and scouting squats—were valued above all else and were also the basis for hierarchical logics within squatting crews.

THE EXPIRED TOMATO SAUCE

After his first experience in the charity shop squat, Keith felt that he lacked certain skills and know-how and thus was not valued much by other squatters. As such, whenever they were evicted in future, he could not be confident that the more experienced squatters would view his joining the next squat as beneficial to them. He did, however, make an effort to contribute to the crew's communal wellbeing in the minicab squat using the skills he had acquired whilst living on the street.

There was a fridge in the communal space of the squat, brought in from another squat with the help of someone's friend who had a van. The fridge was noisy and heavy but did its work well. The squatters tried to put it to use by storing the food they collected from local supermarket rubbish bins in it. This required some know-how and physical skills, because more often than not the bins are located half-hidden on supermarket properties, typically behind a fence one might need to scale. Although the squatters who had participated in finding the food had priority access to it, the food was primarily communal, shared amongst the crew and at times with visitors. This practice was not simply ideological, but also served a practical purpose: much of the foodstuff rescued from bins has a best before date that has already passed or is about to pass, resulting in a need to consume it quickly.

Keith never participated in dumpster diving, but had another strategy for contributing to the food reserves using his experiences from the streets of West London. He explained to me that the food banks in South and Southeast London were quite spartan because both the population in the area and the local councils and organisations supporting the food banks were poorer. Thus, demand was always much higher than the quantity and quality of the supply. Therefore, you could only get canned food and staples like flour and rice there.

To access a better variety of food and healthier options, one had to journey to West London, where he knew of a food bank with fresh fruit, baked goods, and sometimes other things like soup or sauces you could take with you if you had suitable containers for transport and storage.

During my fieldwork in this squat, we went to the West London foodbank together on three separate Saturdays. The trip was always exhausting and time-consuming: we had to change buses twice, and Keith always refused to pay the fare, arguing that homeless people should not pay for transportation. At times, we waited for hours, hoping a bus driver would take pity on us and let us travel without a ticket. The return trip was always even more difficult since we had filled our rucksacks and bags with food supplies, which at times leaked and left bus drivers significantly more reluctant to allow us to travel with them.

Keith hoped that this contribution would help him create more lasting connections with the other members of the squat crew, all to no avail. Most of the food was indeed consumed, but a lot of it went to waste as well. At one point, large bags of tomato sauce he had carried from North London to the squat expired and began to smell in the fridge. This caused someone to make a nasty remark. Keith became rather angry, feeling that the others were ungrateful to him, and he never carried stuff from the foodbank to the squat again.

By attempting to apply the skills, techniques, and knowledge he had gained from his time as a homeless person, Keith believed that the cultural norms amongst squatters would encourage using these abilities for the collective benefit of the group. However, he was deeply disappointed when he realised that this was not the case. The sense of community and the shared moral behaviour he had anticipated simply did not exist in the ways he had imagined.

Keith's experiences reflect the tension between the ideal of the *Bund*—a supportive, affectual community—and the harsh reality of fragmented, needs-driven relationships. Keith's initial optimism about finding solidarity within the squatting network was challenged by a dynamic whereby communal bonds were often conditional, formed out of necessity rather than elective affinity. This shift underscores the difficulty of maintaining the *Bund* within a crew shaped by survival pressure.

When analysing the viewpoints expressed in Keith's interviews, it is interesting to see the friction between his own narrative and moral norms and those of other squatters.

Explaining the challenges of a single life story method, Linde (1993) has noted that speakers aim to establish coherence, not just with their previous personal narratives, but also with the cultural expectations regarding identity and moral behaviour. Because evaluation is an inherent feature of narratives, life stories naturally provide the speaker with an opportunity to reflect on whether their actions and sense of self align with what is considered good and proper (Linde 1993).

This friction of norms and behaviours arose during an interview with Tom, who was one of the squatters who had opened the place. He had been squatting since 2011, when, after taking part in the Occupy London movement,

he joined Bank of Ideas, a former bank building turned into a squatted social centre.

> *I mean, I have nothing against him, but we don't have to pretend that we have a home here or a crew here that's going to last for years. It's [the squat] just a shelter for today and maybe tomorrow or for the next two weeks. Obviously, everyone is welcome, but (…) it's difficult to do it [open a new squat] and I'd rather rely on people who know what to do and can help out more than just staying in the squat the whole day. (Interview with Tom, 2019)*

Tom's rational, if not borderline uncharitable attitude, was something that I had not experienced in squats where crew members have known each other longer and who have together gone through all the trouble that opening a new squat and moving from an old one entails. As Tom explained, the role of just being present in the squat is not viewed as a sign of competency or status, because it is impersonal and does not require any skills. Although Keith had been trying to establish some kind of solidarity by participating in putting food on the table for the entire crew, future-oriented activities, such as looking for and opening up a new squat, were more highly valued by the more experienced squatters.

This resonates with the findings of Nazima Kadir (2016). Specifically, the everyday practices, as difficult as they are, are not viewed as important or considered squatter-capital worthy, reflecting practices that demonstrate the skills, competence, and status of the person (Kadir 2016).

Keith, who only a few months ago was happy to escape the dangers of street life, found himself in another precarious situation. Because he lacked the skills and competencies valued, his membership in the charity shop crew was unclear. He was needed to hold that specific place. He did not, however, have sufficient social capital in the crew nor personal connections which would guarantee him access to the squats the more experienced squatters in the crew might open in the future.

VIRTUAL HOPE

At some point, Keith decided to diversify his methods of networking. The volunteer at ASS granted Keith access to a WhatsApp-based messaging network, where a lot of information is shared. Information included news of evictions, parties and other events, people needing new places to stay, people needed to fix something, and warnings about transport police seen in various Tube locations amongst other bits of news.

In the last decade, squatters have begun using WhatsApp and its various alternatives such as Signal and Telegram for instant and group messaging. Such communications became increasingly important because, around the same time residential squatting was criminalised in 2012, new developments in technology gained popularity, enabling anyone with a smartphone to send and receive end-to-end encrypted instant messages via mobile or wireless internet connections. Because much of the interaction between squatters of different crews has become virtual, information regarding squatting opportunities has also become more accessible to more people. Squatters who are well-connected and who maintain a good reputation find it easy to find a new place to live whenever evictions occur. At the same time, there are also more opportunities for others who are not that well-connected. The shift in technology helps to create connections similar to something Mark Granovetter (1973) described as weak

ties—that is, allowing distant clusters of people to access novel information that can lead to new opportunities for the broader social network.

During my interviews, seasoned squatters described their views of messaging platforms as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, sharing information and contacting people has never been easier; on the other hand, it was also perceived as eroding the communality amongst squatters, since it eliminated the need to establish and carefully maintain personal relationships within the scene.

As a long-time squatter, Paolo explained to me in an interview in 2019 that all of this progress in communication and social interaction has its dangers. Previously, people had to vouch for someone to establish trust, whereas now, because of the virtual connectivity, it has become much easier to find people and to gain access to a lot of information that was difficult to obtain in the past.

> *I remember the days when you had to go through several people to get someone's phone number. You had to be trustworthy. It was so much more difficult. Those people might not have been using these phone numbers anymore, because a lot of squatters changed their pre-paid SIM cards regularly for safety reasons. Also, you never knew whether a person was going to pick up the phone or text you back. (Interview with Paolo, 2019)*

He believed that without face-to-face interaction, there was no real responsibility.

> *Anyone can text me and say, 'Hey, do you have a squat where I can stay, I want to be a squatter.' But this is not the real world. I want to see this person defending the squat at 4 o'clock in the morning against an illegal eviction by bailiffs. This is what counts.*

A similar logic was previously highlighted by Owens (2013), who claimed that technology, which makes mobility possible, can also render it redundant, by delinking communication from proximity. But closeness does not replace the need or desire for 'real contact'—it actually intensifies it (Owens 2013: 190).

Thus, although digital networks offer squatters a lifeline, they complicate the concept of the *Bund*. Whilst squatters use platforms like WhatsApp to form necessary connections, these connections lack the intimacy and spontaneity of face-to-face relationships. The shift from physical to digital or hybrid bonds reflects a transformed *Bund*, where communal ties are functional, albeit more fragile and subject to the immediate pressures of survival.

Keith viewed it from another angle. He viewed the impersonality of the virtual networks as a virtue. That is, the functionality of these networks did not depend on individual people or relationships between certain people.

After being disappointed in the two squatting crews he had joined, Keith placed his bets on the larger squatter community. He consciously decided to make an effort to establish connections within the wider networks. By the end of my fieldwork, he had managed to access several other WhatsApp groups of local squatting networks, where a lot of information about empty properties, evictions, people in need of housing, protests, and practical questions amongst other information was shared.

He did not rely on the virtual connections alone: he also frequently visited the office of ASS and monthly pub nights in a legal squat in East London to meet people face to face.

> *I have to look after myself. Noone else will (…). I don't want to end up on the streets again. (Interview with Keith, 2020).*

CONCLUSIONS

This article examines the impact of this legal shift on the communal dynamics and lived experiences of squatters in London by focusing on the story of Keith, a middle-aged man who turned to squatting after living on the streets of West London for three years. Whilst Keith's personal experiences are central to this study, they are contextualised within broader sociopolitical frameworks that have amplified precarity in London's housing crisis.

The criminalisation of residential squatting has forced crews to frequently relocate between non-residential buildings, each presenting new and unpredictable challenges. This constant state of flux undermines the stability of communal ties, given that squatters are required to continually adapt to changing conditions and reevaluate their strategies with each new squat.

Keith's narrative highlights a significant weakening of communal solidarity within squatting networks. Since squatting is primarily deprivation based, squatters are less driven by shared visions of social change and more by their immediate need for shelter.

This article, therefore, challenges the conceptualisation of Owens (2013), who, in building upon Hetherington's (1994) work, views squatting communities as *Bünde*—small-scale, elective, and affectual forms of sociation based on face-to-face interactions. In this context, the framework does not entirely hold, because the relationships amongst crew members are increasingly shaped by necessity and survival, rather than elective, emotionally driven sociation. In addition, currently, there is a frequent need to relocate coupled with a growing reliance on digital networks rather than on in-person connections.

In an attempt to navigate these challenges, Keith sought to build connections within the squatting scene through digital means, including WhatsApp groups. This underscores the potential for further research, particularly on how digital technologies are reshaping communal practices and complicating traditional understandings of solidarity and mobility within squatting networks.

Nevertheless, the notion of the *Bund* remains a useful framework for understanding squatting communities, even as it evolves under new pressures. Whilst traditional Bünde are defined by stable, elective, and emotionally driven bonds, contemporary squatters in London navigate relationships that are increasingly conditional and survival oriented. The need for frequent relocation, coupled with a reliance on digital communication, seems to reshape the *Bund* into a more transient and necessity-driven form. Yet, as illustrated through Keith's story, the underlying desire for solidarity and trust persists, reflecting squatters' continued pursuit of community even amidst precarity.

NOTES

1 In this article, I use the terms 'squatting crews' and 'squatting groups' interchangeably. Whilst 'crew' is more commonly used amongst squatters, both terms denote a collective of individuals cohabitating in a squatted building. These groups or crews may vary in longevity, with some existing for only one building, whilst others persist across multiple buildings for years.

2 Residential buildings in this context are flats and houses, whereas a non-residential property is any building or land that is not designed to be lived in. Squatting in non-residential properties is not in itself a crime, but it is a crime to damage the property (Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 2024).

3 In this article, I define neoliberalism as a political paradigm that advocates reducing state intervention, including in public housing, whilst emphasising the efficiency of private enterprise and free markets. It also promotes individual responsibility and self-reliance, often framing

social and economic issues as matters of personal choice and market-based solutions (Ferguson 1990; Harvey 2005; Ong 2006).

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