Spatial Agency: Tactics of Self-Organisation


Introduction

This paper sets out to introduce the notion of self-organisation in spatial, social and political terms, as a form of spatial agency in response to issues of subjectivity and the politics of urban space.

Self-organisation - a complex notion, with multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings and implications - has gained increased relevance in contemporary political and urban discourses. In this sense, self-organisation can be understood as 'a collective process of taking on political functions and addressing tasks that have been excluded from the field of real politics or pushed out of public space'.¹ This reading is representative of the view taken here, particularly in its (perhaps unintentional) conflation of the political and the spatial. Indeed, the political functions that it speaks of are also, for this paper, spatial functions; and the field of politics, is also the field of architecture and urban planning.

Self-organisation also appears in other various (related and unrelated) disciplines as for example in the natural and physical sciences where the term is used to describe the ontology of living systems, and the structure and functioning of complex and adaptive systems respectively. This latter concept, developed in the realm of systems theory, has been adopted by, or translated into, other fields, including sociology, art and urban planning, where social groups or cities are analysed as complex, self-organising systems.

Contemporary urban space is, more than ever, determined by capitalist controlling logics of the market and of individualism. Under such logics, at the moments at which social and spatial conditions meet, there exist sites of both contestation and opportunity. It is increasingly necessary to critically observe and interpret some of the shifting, self-organised dynamics of urban conditions, and specifically to explore the relationship of individual and collective subjectivities to the politics of space. Subjectivity is posited as an important key to understanding the nature of the contemporary urban condition, and that it is, firstly, employed within a strategy of control and manipulation by the hegemonic system, and that yet, secondly, it can be harnessed as an opportunity with which to resist such control.
Stories of Self-Organisation

The following cases highlight three approaches to social and spatial organisation which work in the production of subjectivities, human relationships and new territories and environments. Through the cases a working definition of self-organisation is established in spatial and political terms - a definition that is shifting and dynamic. The cases are in one sense micro practices, but often with a much wider cultural significance.

The examples are not ‘Architecture’ in the professional sense, they do not have an architect, nor do they result in a single fixed object. They include alternative radio, free parties and cross-border immigration. However, they are posited as examples of self-organised urban activity, and, through their specific organisation, relationships, and dynamics, operate as a certain tactical form of practicing or acting spatially, socially and politically.

Free Radio

Across Italy in the 1970’s, what were to become known as Free Radio stations began to emerge as autonomous experiments in broadcasting. Distinct from ideas of ‘community’ or ‘political’ radio, where defined positions and opinions were put forward to locals or to the ‘masses’ respectively, Free Radio did not work with such specialisms: ‘In contrast… serious political discussions were likely to be interrupted by violently contradictory, humorous and poetico-delirious interventions and this was central to its unique micro-politics’. The approach of the free radio stations focused on creating ‘self-referential feedback loops’ between the producers and the receivers, breaking down distinctions between them. Certain organisational devices were employed: utilising telephones for direct listener intervention; literally and figuratively ‘open’ studio doors through which anyone might venture; interviews in the street; and the production of programmes by listeners on cassette tape. Such methods allowed the stations to establish a space of open speech, where typically restricting issues such as a lack of professional or academic expertise, the ability to read/write, or existing involvement in active political or community groups, did not exist so much as obstacles to involvement (as they often do in participative processes, resulting in the most confident, educated or active individuals ‘representing’ a far wider set of people).

Furthermore, the working patterns of the studios themselves were supported by a wider collection of other communication devices, creating an ‘ecology’ or network of communication: ‘We realise... that radio constitutes but one central element of a whole range of communication means, from informal encounters in the Piazza Maggiore, to the daily newspaper – via billboards, mural paintings, posters, leaflets, meetings, community activities, festivals etc’. It was through processes of autogestion (self-management) of the organisation of the system as a whole that the potential for collective enunciation became realised. This expression points, beyond, to a potentiality of direct action. It is this activating dimension of the assemblages of the Free Radio stations that distinguishes them from the pacifying
effects of hegemonic mass media.

**Rave culture**

Music and dancing, in the 1990's in the UK, became representatives of deviant behaviour in the words and images of the media and government. The Criminal Justice Bill of 1994 introduced measures to criminalise gatherings of people and the playing of music with ‘repetitive beats’, which, while describing almost all forms of rhythmical music, referred specifically to the electronic music that formed the expressive core of the events. A counter-cultural phenomenon emerged of organising free parties occupying appropriated land and in which generalised and imposed subjectivities were challenged. Parties were self-organised, autonomous events.

The parties were non-profit making, and organisers adopted a nomadic approach, using different sites for subsequent parties in order to evade the authorities. The organisational approaches varied in scale and purpose: news of the party spread largely by word of mouth, and this was supported by low cost, self-printed flyers, often including a map to the site. Such information was released only on the day of the party. The spatial arrangement of the site was determined by the specific location, warehouse or field etc., and became a temporary autonomous zone, spatially defined by tents, electronic equipment (speakers, cables, turntables, lights), sounds, bodies and interaction. This localised organisation emerges as a temporary intensification of a wider cultural network of music production, record pressing and distribution, dj’s, mix-tapes and self-published fanzines.

**Border Transgression**

The adjacent urban locales of San Diego and Tijuana create together a complex political condition that straddles the US/Mexico border and which sees the highest flow of cross-border mobility in the world. The architect Teddy Cruz locates his work in this condition and, though research-led practice, provides a further example of self-organised spatial and political organisation.

San Diego provides a context of segregation and control based on principles of land ownership and privatization, which in turn produce a climate of social exclusion and separation. At the core of the politico-spatial logic are rigid and non-negotiable borders. Such conditions have generated what Cruz calls an ‘urbanism of transgression’ in the movement from south to north of migrants in response to the social and economic inequalities that define their original location. In their appropriation of U.S. space, migrants transpose themselves to a new place, but also their organisational and cultural tendencies, and their attitudes to the collective use of space. Through their actions, those involved break from certain restrictive codes and develop, at a micro-level, their own programs of use, and begin to take charge of their own micro-economies.

A sophisticated organisational assemblage creates unique spatial conditions where both territorial and physical (built) arrangements reveal the processes that lie behind them. The approach is, fundamentally,
a collective one. The goal is to appropriate, and make their own, viable space in which to live. The spaces themselves are those on the margins of the city, vacant, derelict or under-valued with respect to the market. The process of transforming space involves improvisational techniques, in terms of building (materials and construction), distribution of goods and of limited services. It constitutes an effective ‘recycling’ of the obsolescence of San Diego’s urban fabric:

‘Garage doors are used to make walls; rubber tires are cut and dismantled into folded loops, clipped in a figure eight, and interlocked, creating a system that threads a stable retaining wall; wooden crates make the armature for other imported surfaces, such as recycled refrigerator doors, etc.’.

After months of organising and building, services are requested from the city, ‘in other words, inhabitation happens first and infrastructure follows’. Water, then electricity, is provided minimally, some water tanks at specific locations and a single line of electricity. Improvisation occurs again at this level, with illegal connections to the power source ‘borrowing’ electricity where it is needed: ‘These sites are comprised of the stitching of these multiple situations, internal and external, simultaneously. The interiors of these dwellings become their exteriors, expressive of the history of their pragmatic evolution’.

**Politics of Space and Subjectivity**

Discourses of spatial policy generate distinct practices that are experienced directly in the city. A familiar example from urban planning is the functionalist zoning of the city into discrete and identifiable zones relating to specific, usually economically determined, functional uses: commercial, industrial, residential etc. The attempt to control action and behaviour is a demonstration of discourses of knowledge (in this case the knowledge of the planning disciplines as it exists in State (planning department) or commercial (master plans designed by private design companies for developers) forms, translated into the social and spatial realm. This realm however, is that of the everyday life of the various populations of the city; permanent residents and more transient inhabitants such as visitors (be it for ‘work’ or ‘leisure’), immigrants and the homeless. The controls on the Mexico/US border are another example of controlling spatial politics. The resulting contradictions and conflicts, between everyday life and top-down strategies and practices (which work with what Frederic Jameson calls ‘hegemonic spatial logic’, but it is also the logic of the market), begin to conflate issues of social and spatial politics with those of individual and collective subjectivity.

Subjectivity is not singularly definable, but rather in flux and unstable, both as a concept and in its forms and effects. Consistent with different understandings of subjectivity is the acknowledgement that it is constructed – made from experiences and interactions in the world, rather than representing a pre-existent or transcendent phenomena that individuals are born with. It is a social condition, ‘pre-individual and pre-political,’ but Felix Guattari emphasises that under the conditions of capitalism it has become very much a political field. Psychoanalytical and structuralist theories of the self and of subjectivity attempted to both define and explain the term - as constituting a concrete system that could be rationally understood. Individual subjectivity here is a reflection of interior truth, from within, and is
'awakened' in each of us in various ways. Michel Foucault challenges psychoanalytical understandings of an interior subjectivity, suggesting that dominant systems of social organisation construct the notion of subjectivity (through power and subordination) as an instrument of control. Here, we do not each have a fixed and stable understanding of 'self' that is then open to scientific determinism, institutional manipulation and specialist resolution (when it 'goes wrong'). Instead, discourses of truth and of knowledge implemented by dominant systems generate acceptable modes of behaviour, thereby creating conceptions of deviancy, abnormal behaviour, and 'otherness'. Foucault saw the individual both as an effect of power, and its vehicle (as capitalism encourages us to like to promotes ourselves as free individuals), which allows power to conceal itself and operate. Foucault highlights the manner in which the 'discipline societies' and discourses of knowledge work with the definition and explanation of the subject as their primary focus. The structuralist attempts to define and explain individual subjectivity described above as fixed interior systems of the mind and body have, I suggest, a relationship to the ambitions to define and regulate social activity in space through the codes and regulations of functionalist planning. Such systems are an extension of the individualistic logic, and further, continuously promote that same logic, as instruments of power.

The spaces, environments or contexts produced under capitalism can be considered as restrictive, inasmuch as the structures and frameworks that define them often bias the forms and outcomes of the everyday social negotiations and conflicts we undergo in determining our social future, or how it might develop. They can limit peoples ability to influence or affect their environment by privileging certain groups control over capital and productive labour, as well as access to governmental power, but also control over their familiarity with the 'practical and imaginative tools' and discourses through which people use space, appropriate space and imagine other ways of being, of acting, in the city. Legal frameworks (such as the Criminal Justice Bill of 1994) and building and planning codes promote or disable different subjectivities, determining the processes of creation of spaces and the roles and behaviour of different actors within them. The private ownership of land operates as a fundamentally restrictive instrument, creating discrete and limited definitions of private and, in an oversimplified opposition, 'public' space. Such a framing of the question of ownership of space does not consider collective space, neither in terms of its production, nor its use. Such distinctions create the grounds for intense conflict over the acquisition of space (not just for permanent ownership but for a range of temporalities), the politics of which are historical and complex.

The rigidly defined social roles and hierarchies that are created in this way, then, present a particular version of society, in place of the multiple, contradictory and indeterminate possibilities of social life. The potential scope for new encounters, for experimentation, and for collective imagination in collective spaces becomes significantly diminished. The potential of space as a social field of enunciation is reduced, if not lost, within a capitalistic space that is abstract and, specifically, increasingly desubjectivated. How, then, can alternative ideas of ownership of space be conceived? And how might we begin to reconsider the more radical potential of individual and collective subjectivities in the city?
Tactics of Self-Organisation

Self-organisation in spatial, social and political terms can be seen as a tactic (of minor tactics) against dominant hegemonic forms of spatial development.

The notion of tactics here follows that identified by Michel De Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In it, an important distinction is made between tactics and strategies: strategies have a certain type of power in them, 'one sustained and determined by the power to provide oneself with one's own place.' It follows that strategists have money and power, while the tactician 'must pay great attention to both circumstances and his adversaries'. It is comprised of sets of practices – ways of operating, in a professional or non-professional manner. This specifically social and political reading of self-organisation acknowledges the power relations and cultural coding of particular situations. Tactics emerge from the absence of power, they are a method for those imposed upon, looking for alternatives. The absence of power often goes with the absence of space – power and space being inextricably linked – resulting in negotiations and appropriations of space with differing temporalities. However, this absence does not become defining, nor a problem to be solved by simply acquiring space, and thereby being subsumed by the dominant system. Rather, tactics base themselves in the given conditions of place and the relationships and desires of those related with those conditions of place, where there is not a lack, but an abundance of ideas, materials, conflicts and potentials. In this sense, there is a conscious acknowledgement of 'making do' with the given conditions, materials, and energies of a place, of seeing their creative and real potential. This contrasts with the oft-cited approach within architecture of 'problem solving' which presupposes a negative situation that needs to be fixed with something 'new'.

Within self-organised arrangements, 'making' and 'using' are considered together as an event taking place in the moment. This generates an autopoietic condition (suggesting a deeper understanding of 'making') in which the continuous involvement of actors, through processes of engagement at different levels in the group or network, serves to maintain the existence of the collective activity. The term autopoiesis was coined by the Chilean biologists Manturana and Varela in the 1970's in their significant work on the nature of living organisms. Autopoietic systems are those in which the processes within the system constitute the systems own survival; a kind of self-making. They consist of 'networks of processes of production of components that are continuously and recursively generated and realized as a concrete entity (unity) in the physical space, by the interactions of the same components that are produced as such a network'.

Such practices of production can reveal a hidden kind of makeshift creativity, and work autopoietically in the production of subjectivity. Within the free party networks, this creativity takes place in the development of different tactics that allow the gatherings to take place, and beyond that, to create a particular collective dialogue around ideas of music and sociability. In a particular example, that of the Exodus collective from Luton, UK, the approach developed over time to include the emergence of the Long Meadow Community Free Farm, which incorporated not only space for music events, but an organic farm, and housing.
Within the field of resistant and activist tactics are differing scales of location and influence. While self-organisation can be identified at the global scale, for example in the tactics of the alter-globalisation movement and others, I focus here on a local, or minor level. Here exists a different meaning of resistance, one rooted in the everyday lives of a local population; where tactics of resistance might begin to have relevance to those who do not typically consider themselves activists or as likely to take part in politics.

Self-organised practices can allow people to re-appropriate urban space created as the result of normalised modes of production. In the restricted and controlled spaces of capitalism, in the discourses of knowledge that produce it, this can become read as a form of deviant behaviour, as the examples above demonstrate. Ultimately, the free radio stations were closed down by the authorities. It is this friction that places them (following Foucault) as tactics against discipline, and (following Deleuze), against control. Tactics of self-organisation play with ways of using the constraining order (in that place where it is imposed) and in so doing, establish a degree of plurality and creativity, twisting or reshaping dominant forces to allow other ways of acting.

Self-organised practices open up opportunities to revise and remake our contexts, harnessing peoples desires to change and adapt their environment. This agency of people to transcend the formative context, the act of transgression as an expression of desire, Unger calls negative capability. The term reflects the fact that much of the tactics involved in challenging accepted codes of behaviour are characterised as deviant or abnormal, as determined by dominant discourses of knowledge and power. When accepted, however, this deviancy is reinterpreted as a ‘process of “collective learning”’ that can allow those involved to escape on a ‘line of flight’ from their particular hyper-controlled situation. The ‘urbanism of transgression’, or of ‘non-conformity’ to use Cruz’ terms, provide pure examples of negative capability. Free Radio and raves also demonstrate this, and while operating in distinct and contrasting social and cultural contexts, they all involve ‘...establishing a framework, or assemblage, that survives and is open to peoples re-constructive abilities, tendencies and desires’.

It is precisely these ‘ecologies’ of different tactics that establish the potential of self-organised practices operating with the production of subjectivity – a process acknowledged as a directly political and micro-political phenomenon. Set against the repressive manner in which people might ‘assume’ social subjectivity as produced by popular culture, mass media and the restrictive codes and regimes of control of the capitalist system (including the instruments of architecture and planning) there could instead, in the production of subjectivities, be a relation of expression and creation. This points towards an understanding of subjectivity that goes beyond any considered above. In Deleuze and Guattari’s work, the notion of subjectivity is opened up and reconfigured. Breaking away from established static conceptions of structure and truth, with their well known concept the rhizome Deleuze and Guattari focus not on internal, defined structures that tend towards homogeneity, but on the complex interrelationship (or assemblage) of ‘multiplicities’ that instead, engender heterogeneity. Subjectivity is exploded as a notion, replaced with a constant sense of potential and immanence, moving out of fixed definitions towards new possibilities. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this process as one of becoming.
Hence, self-organised practices work with existing subjectivities, but, furthermore, they work in and around, and **in-between** subjectivities, producing new subjectivities, autopoietically.

The production of subjectivity becomes an opportunity and a potential. In these autopoietic practices, the subject re-appropriates the various components of subjectivity, making them their own. This is a process of developing a unique mode of subjectivation, in which problems of manipulation, control and homogenisation are bypassed. The individual or group become able to construct modes of sensibility, modes of relation with the other, modes of production, modes of creativity that produce a singular subjectivity’, and Guattari calls this a process of *singularisation*.  

The micro-examples described above, then, begin to demonstrate how self-organised practices might act as a form of politico-spatial agency which might re-subjectivate space for its inhabitants. They create spaces of subjectivation, often in the margins, left-over spaces, or ‘terrain vague’. Terrain Vague is a term developed by the architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales and refers to spaces that become neglected or forgotten by the normalised patterns of development. Such spaces can take the form of derelict plots of land following demolition programmes, or other gaps and breaks in the urban fabric. Free Radio occupied the space of abandoned buildings, left over spaces no longer valued in the use-value of the market. It also used the collective space of the street, of the ‘exterior’, and, with its open doors, broke down the distinctions of ownership of space. But it also used the intimate space of the home, by allowing engagement through telephone and the submission of compiled tapes. This dynamic, network of spaces, created a spatial assemblage, specific to the ambitions of the broadcast itself. Raves emerged on remote fields hidden by woodland, or in derelict warehouses. Those travelling north from Tijuana to San Diego search for cracks and openings in the border ‘defences’, or go beneath, through self-constructed and managed tunnels.

Self-organised practices can be considered ‘ecological’ practices, following Guattari, concerned with an interrelated matrix of subjectivities, social relations and the local environment, that lead to opportunities for re-subjectivating space and constructing alternative modes of encounter. They can be understood as collective assemblages of ‘practices of singularisation’ that may displace, or at least de-centre, the hegemony of dominant urban forces.

2. The term urban here, following Lefebvre's approach in The Urban Revolution, is not understood as a separate and singularly identifiable entity – i.e. a city - but as a dynamic field of social relations and of social production. See Henri Lefebvre, The Urban Revolution, trans. by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).


6. Ibid. p. 21.

7. Ibid. p. 22.

8. Ibid. p. 22.

9. Ibid. p. 23.

10. The Situationists, in their conceptions of a ‘unitary urbanism’, searched for the rupturing of the constructed notions of ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, which can also be seen to act in the hegemonic construction of subjectivity. Their project sought ‘to form a unitary human milieu in which separations such as work/leisure or public/private will finally be dissolved’ (Debord, Guy. ‘Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action’ in Situationist International Anthology, trans. and ed. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets. 1981) p.23.


12. Constantin Petcou, in a discussion with Toni Negri, Anne Querrien and Doina Petrescu on biopolitical spaces, in Urban Act - a Handbook for Alternative Practice, ed. by aaa and PEPRAV (Paris: aaa / PEPRAV, 2007), p. 297. ‘For me, subjectivity, the pre-individual, is a kind of pre-political condition. To be able to act politically, one must already be somewhere, and thus we, through our action, try to greet the emergence of subjectivities, and afterwards, if possible, go further.’


14. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, False Necessity - Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 33. Roberto Unger is a Brazilian social and political theorist and law professor. His ‘grand project’, Politics – A Work in Constructive Theory, presents a theory of social organisation, one of subjectivity, and a programme for radical change based on political, economic and micro-cultural pluralism. His work is used here for its identification of a potential in the transformation from societies of fixed structures that form the experiences and subjectivities of its people, to one that is constantly re-negotiated and reshaped.

15. Ibid. p. 59.

16. For just two examples of this broad and complex area, see the work of Mike Davis (e.g. Mike Davis, City of Quartz - Excavating the Future in Los Angeles (London: Vintage, 1992), and that of the International Network for Urban Research and Action (INURA) esp. The Contested Metropolis - Six Cities at the Beginning of the 21st Century, ed. by INURA (Basel: Birkhauser, 2004).

17. Unger, p. 58.


19. Ibid. p. 42.

20. This idea of problem solving originally related to functional or technical problems, but has been problematically carried over into the social realm, where professionals enter into particular micro-social and cultural situations with a view to ‘fix’ them with transferable solutions.


25 This locating of scales of resistance follows the idea of alterotopical spaces as set out by Constantin Petcou and Doina Petrescu in the essay Acting Space, in Urban Act - a Handbook for Alternative Practice, p. 322.

26 Deleuze suggests that under capitalism, conditions have moved through the societies of discipline that Foucault described, into an era of societies of control. 'Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt'. Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control' in Rethinking Architecture - a Reader in Cultural Theory, p. 312.

27 Unger, p. 36.


29 Unger, p. 36.

30 Felix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, Molecular Revolution in Brazil, trans. by Karel Clapshow and Brian Holmes (New York: Semiotext(e), 2008). p. 46.


32 See chapter 1, Rhizome, in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Deleuze and Guattari, pp. 3-28. Deleuze and Guattari compare the rhizome to the arborescent model – that of the tree: 'the issue is never to reduce the unconscious or to interpret it or to make it signify according to a tree model. The issue is to produce the unconscious, and with it new statements, different desires: the rhizome is precisely this production of the unconscious.' pp. 19-20.

33 Felix Guattari and Suely Rolnik. Molecular Revolution in Brazil, p. 23.
