

Euro trash in Loïsada

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In most cases, squatter migrants move from a poor place to a rich place. The opposite is possible too, and this is a mini case study of Europeans squatting as migrants on the Lower East Side of New York in the late 1980s. At the time, this was still a relatively poor neighborhood. The main source of information is an in-depth interview with Anna¹, a Dutch woman who, after arriving as an art student in New York in 1988, tried to join local squatters and then formed a group to open up their own building. In the Netherlands, she had lived in a large squat, but her first encounters with the Lower East Side squatter scene were alienating:

“When I came to New York in 1988 there were maybe five or six big squats. I did not have a home and visited all these squats to try to get a room. This did not work at all. One building said: ‘we already have enough women’. The other squat said ‘we already have enough Europeans’. Yet another group said ‘we already have enough white people’. Thus as a white, female European, they did not want me.”

Therefore she searched for an empty building that she could squat herself, found one and recruited some fellow students to join in the squatting action. This worked out well. However, Anna found out that the Americans in her own group found it difficult to justify the presence of white American and European squatters in the neighbourhood. This became apparent when she started discussing the ideal size of the group. Her opinion was that:

“it would not be a good idea to get the building full of people, because as soon as the group becomes larger than fifteen of so, it becomes very difficult to organize. Then, someone has to take control. Who will check on what everyone is doing, and whether everybody is paying the monthly dues? I did not want that someone would be the leader, I wanted to keep it democratic, that the group, during the house assembly, decides what will be done.”

The Americans in the group did not agree:

¹ Name has been changed for anonymity.

“They had what I call ‘white American guilt’, they felt guilty because black and Porto Rican people were homeless, and that we as a group – we had one black guy and a Spanish guy – were mainly white. They were upset about this, and wanted more people of color. I said, I don’t care if someone is Black, or Hispanic, or white, I think that it is interesting that we are all artists, to create an artist’s squat. Well, they found this very elitist. They did not understand it at all.”

Reactions in the neighbourhood were hostile:

“During the first week the Porto Ricans in the neighbourhood – it is a Porto Rican neighbourhood – discovered that we were in there. They did not like it at all. Then they threatened us with violence. [...] In the beginning, those Porto Ricans yelled at us, and threw things at us.”

However, the hostility did not seem to be caused by discrimination. When the squatters explained to the neighbours that it was a shame that the house had been standing empty while so many people needed a home, and that they were not junkies, and were fixing up the building, and moreover backed this up by constantly bringing in building materials, “their anger turned into interest”.

Nevertheless, there were political attempts to discriminate the squatters on the Lower East Side as "Euro trash" (Van Kleunen, 1994: 306). Porto Rican politician Antonio Pagán campaigned against the squatters in a conflict over a proposal to raze squats for new housing (see Pruijt, 2003). He put up posters that suggested that the presence of European squatters caused American homeless people to camp out in empty lots:

“SQUAT YUPS GET FREE RENT, SPACE, ELECTRIC, GAS, WATER.

WHAT GET YOU?

EURO TRASH IN THE SQUATS.

AMERICANS IN THE LOTS.” (Van Kleunen, 1994: 306)

Frank Morales, longtime squatter on the Lower East Side, commented that this was:

“in fact a way of attempting to denigrate our efforts, as though we weren't indigenous to the neighborhood, but simply invading "eurotrash" - which we actually in some cases took on as a badge of pride, cognizant of the squatter movement throughout Europe!”
(e-mail communication)

Because this is only one case, and largely based on the experience of one person, the conclusion can only be tentative. Anna’s story highlights a very natural strategy: identifying a

shared identity and networking on the basis of this. It also shows an extreme case in which local squatters were troubled by self-accusations and accusations of being privileged, and that therefore it was inappropriate for them to squat. Their solution was to apply bureaucratic quota, which hampered shared identity-based networking.

Finally, Anna's story showcases another relevant strategy: taking the initiative to start an autonomous squatting action, using skills and experience gathered in her home country. This can be seen as the royal way to join the local movement.

References

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Bio

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