

Road Rave



**A Very Brief discussion of
Reclaim the Streets,
Extinction Rebellion and Beyond**

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Road Rage Becomes Road Rave

“A street part is in full swing. 1000s of people have reclaimed a major road and declared it a ‘street now open’. Music laughter and song have replaced the roar of engines. Road rage becomes road rave, as tarmac grey is smothered by the living colour of a festival...”

Single issue? Just against the car? For all of the mainstream media’s attempt to define it as such, for those involved it expresses much more... A festival of resistance!’ (Reclaim The Streets leaflet 1998)

The current Extinction Rebellion protests around the planetary climate change crisis have galvanised huge numbers, as well as sparking vital discussions about tactics, participation and decision-making.

How it reminds some of us of our own youth... specifically the previous great wave of eco-action from the 1990s. Of course the ‘historical’ anti-roads movements, Reclaim the Streets etc are not separate from today’s movement – there are continuous threads through Earth First!, Climate Camp, Rising Tide and so on that have carried on through the intervening years. But in many ways Reclaim the Streets represented the last high profile mass environmental movement before XR. Some examination of RTS, its development, actions and significance, could be interesting when compared to XR, and discussion of its successes and failures could contribute to today’s debate and decisions...

This is as much a personal account as a history, and may well miss out much others would have covered. I’ve nicked/quoted other people’s work where it made sense... If it’s a bit rambling it’s because I have rushed to write it, but maybe we’ll update and tidy it and hope to include it in a longer piece about J18 and other things...

From the start it should be said that it is written from the perspective of someone who did have some involvement (for a while only) in Reclaim the Streets in London (other experiences elsewhere are not really

covered here) but (partly for reasons of time, work, family and other pressures) is not significantly involved in Extinction Rebellion, though I have been on some of their actions. Critiques of them here may well be influenced by lack of full knowledge; just as critiques of RTS may be coloured by way too much hindsight...

NB: This post has been slightly edited after some discussions and critiques from from ex-RTS folk who read the first published version... But its very much a personal take.

There are some links at the end to further reading - this is a far from conclusive list, just some pointers...

It was 25 years ago today...

On 14 May 1995, two old cars deliberately crashed into each other, in the five-way intersection in Camden High Street, the heart of one of north London's busiest trendy shopping areas. Both drivers, in a seeming paroxysm of road rage, jumped out and started to abuse each other. This was much to the annoyance and disbelief of onlooking drivers, now in a traffic jam because of the altercation. The two drivers got so irate they proceeded to smash up each other's cars with sledge hammers. The street was blocked: usually rammed with cars, the high street was suddenly-traffic free. A crowd poured into the street, sound systems powered by electricity generated by the constant pedalling of bicycles began to pound out dance music, and the road becomes a party venue. There were about 300 people present (though some onlookers joined in)...

"Every car entering the intersection was gridlocked. Shoppers and market goers joined the party, which lasted five hours. The smashed cars became the focus for all to vent car-anger on; they were attacked throughout the party. The police merely directed traffic. What else could they do?"

The cars were second-hand bangers bought to be trashed and used as barricades; the brainchild of Reclaim the Streets. The Camden street party launched RTS's classic period of huge street parties, taking over larger and higher profile spaces, and inspiring similar groups which sprang up all around the world.

As someone wrote at the time:

"Thus arises the modus operandi of occupying urban zones with spontaneous and illegal celebrations that appropriate the public space for a number of hours. Food is given away, toys are brought along for children and banners are arranged which proclaim the changes that have been brought about in the space: 'BREATHE', 'CAR FREE', 'RECLAIM THE STREETS!' Camden Town, an area of London largely dedicated to the commercialization of 'alternative' culture, is turned into a place of free leisure. This piece of the urban landscape temporarily changes its function in a carnivalesque inversion of social order. The absence of authority, the system where everything is free: the street becomes a place to play, eat, drink and dance – without money and without permission. If the car has become a symbol and celebration is a medium, this 'form' is more utopian than the conventional rally because it refers to other possible forms of organization. The interruption of motorized traffic represents an act of collective civil



disobedience against the city's traffic norms. On top of the aim of anti-road movement to prevent the construction of new motorways, RTS proposes a temporary blockade of those that already exist, trying to sketch out the vision of a city without cars."

The Origins of RTS

Reclaim the Streets (RTS) had originally been founded in 1991, and as a small collective carried out small-scale ecologist actions: painting cycle lanes on the roads during the night and picketing an automobile industry fair. It declared itself: *'FOR walking, cycling and cheap, or free, public transport, and AGAINST cars, roads and the system that pushes them.'* On a spring day in 1992 the group brought traffic in part of London to a halt with a small illegal party in the street. The police evicted them, but warned: *'Protest is gonna get bigger: the car culture is growing constantly! This is just the first stage.'* A few months after this event, the group disbanded.

RTS was then reborn, three years later, in the heat of a large anti-roads movement which had been evolving and increasing in profile and activity across the UK in the early 1990s; but RTS also absorbed huge wedges of ideas and spirit from the diverse movement that came together to oppose the 1994 Criminal Justice Bill; behind that, lay a mass of rave culture, squatting, traveller scenes, party crews, sound systems and various eco-protest groups.

Two huge protests in particular had raised the profile of the anti-roads movement - the Twyford Down camp and direct action against the construction of the M3 motorway link, the "No M11 Link" campaign occurred in North East London's suburbs of Leytonstone and Wanstead. Twyford focussed on protecting rural beauty spots and saw alliances between travellers and self-styled 'tribes' like the Dongas. The M11 in contrast was urban, in defence both of thousands of trees being torn down for the M11 link road, as well as the loss of hundreds of homes. Resistance to the M11 involved constant direct-action resistance for 18 months, culminating in the eviction in December 1994 of the squatted street at Claremont Road.

ALARM U.K. (Alliance Against Road Building) recounted in its newsletter, “The government was taken aback that a protest against the M11, a motorway being built in an unfashionable part of East London, resulted in the longest campaign of direct action against a road in British history. Pictures were flashed around the world of masses of people old and young, conventional and alternative, taking on bulldozers in an awe-inspiring defense of homes, urban spaces and communities.”

Here a working-class community, in alliance with an influx of activists, many young but already seasoned in the anti-roads/anti-CJB scenes, not defending green spaces, homes and community.

The campaign against the M11 kicked off when the Old Chestnut Tree of George Green, Wanstead,

to the community’s surprise, was to be removed. The residents, angered by being misled by the government, found themselves pushing down fences built to keep them from defending the tree. During the next year, houses were squatted and work constantly disrupted. But it became



obvious in the summer of 1994 that Claremont Road, a strip of houses in the path of the motorway, was to be the main focus of the campaign. A community formed around these houses that included local residents, squatters and activists from around the country. The campaign strategy was to “dig in” and make it as difficult as possible for the authorities to remove protesters. It took four days in November 1994 to evict everyone.

The street was painted and filled with psychedelic sculptures, and barricades. Above them the nets, tree houses, aerial walkways and towers went up; inside the houses bunkers and lock-ons and tunnels were hidden in tons of rubble.

After Claremont Road was lost, much of its energy and cheeky spirit went into Reclaim the Streets (RTS), which had already existed, but was revived to step up the campaigning from specific roads to opposition to roads in general and “car culture”. RTS aimed to move the debate beyond anti-road protest, to highlight the social and environmental costs of the car and the political and economic forces behind it and to demonstrate the possibilities of what can be done when people re-occupy their streets and turn them to alternative uses.

RTS’ advocated *“direct action, but not just as a tactic. [We advocate] a society in which people take responsibility for their own actions, and don’t just leave it to the politicians.”* This wasn’t just about pressuring an existing establishment into action – it was about everyone taking action in our own collective interests.

Reclaim the Streets’ events were organised very much along the lines of how raves had been planned and attracted participants over the past 6 or 7 years: people were invited to gather at an underground station and, once there, a small group lead them to the final destination, which had been kept secret. The RTS parties explicitly politicised the rave, although the oppositional culture of raves had been bothering the authorities for a while. Parties were based around sound systems, rhythms of techno and acid house, although the older free festival scene that had evolved from the 1970s also had something of an

influence. But the RTS parties also wanted to “create situations that are fitting for a better world”.

How street parties were seen by RTS was later summed up thus
“A street part is in full swing. 1000s of people have reclaimed a major road and declared it a ‘street now open’. Music laughter and song have replaced the roar of engines. Road rage becomes road rave, as tarmac grey is smothered by the living colour of a festival...”

Single issue? Just against the car? For all of the mainstream media’s attempt to define it as such, for those involved it expresses much more. The Street party, itself reclaimed from the inanities of royal jubilees and state ‘celebrations’, is just one recent initiative in a vibrant history of struggle, both to defend and to take back collective space. From the Peasants’ Revolt to the resistance to the enclosures, from the land occupations of the Diggers to the post-war squatters, on to the recent free festivals, peace camps, land squats and anti-roads movement. Everywhere, extra-ordinary people have continually asserted not only the need to liberate the commons but the ability to think and organise for themselves.

For the city, the streets are the commons, but in the hands of industry and power brokers the streets have become mere conduits for commerce and consumption – the economic hero of which is, of course, the car. A symbol and a symptom of the social and ecological nightmare that state and capitalism create, the car which promises individual freedom ends up guaranteeing noise, destruction and pollution for all. For Reclaim the Streets, the car is a focus – the insanity of its system clearly visible – that leads to questioning both the myth of ‘the market’ and its corporate and institutional enforcers.

With a metal river on one side and endless windows of consumerism on the other, the streets’ true purpose: social interaction, becomes an uneconomic diversion. In its place the corporate-controlled one way media of newspapers, radio and television become ‘the community’. Their interpretation out reality. In this sense the streets are the alternative and subversive form of the mass media. Where authentic communication, immediate and reciprocal, takes place.

To ‘reclaim the streets’ is to act in defence of and for common ground.

To tear down the fence of enclosure that profit-making demands. And the Street Party – far from being just anti-car – is an explosion of our suppressed potential, a celebration of our diversity and a chorus of voices in solidarity.

A festival of resistance!’ {RTS leaflet 1998.}

On the side of the Angel

After the Camden party had hit the news with a bang, the second Reclaim the Streets party was held on Sunday, July 23, at the Angel intersection in Islington, North London. It was a huge success, with over 2,000-3000 demonstrators participating. Crowds met a mile or

so away, and were then led to the party location, while other activists blocked the road with tripods constructed from scaffolding, placed in the middle of the road: tripods that could be dismantled only if the person who is at the top of them comes down. Two tons of sand were piled in the road to make a children’s play area, (reversing the famous slogan of Paris in May 1968, ‘*underneath the paving stones, the beach*’). On this occasion, the beach spreads out on top of the asphalt)... banners went up to stop more traffic, stalls were erected and a huge tank rolled in with a sound system pumping. The party had begun before



the police arrived. The Highbury Islington street party coincided with a week of hot weather and a smog alert. In only two months, the number of people who took part in the first street event increased tenfold.

John Jordan, one of the co-founders of RTS, talked of how the street celebration seeks to prefigure an *'imagined world... a vision in which the streets of the city could be a system that prioritised people above profit and ecology above the economy'... the 'perfect propaganda for the possible'*. (In Upper Street Louis Armstrong's song What a Wonderful World sounded out through the loudspeakers.)



The experience of being during the party is different from life away from it: ordinary norms disappear and people express themselves by dancing, playing music or making artistic interventions on any available surface. The economic system of the celebration is abundance and generosity. It is about thinking of the emergence of a world where things are free and where there is a celebrating community, a world of shared goods and freed space. Earth First magazine Do or Die suggested that 'inherent within its praxis – its mix of desire, spontaneity and organisation – lie some of the foundations on which to build a participatory politics for a liberated, ecological society.'

A week later, RTS saw a prime opportunity for another action, visiting Greenwich, SE London, where parents and children with asthma are going to the High Court to force the Greenwich Council to close its main through road at times of high pollution. (At this time if I recall

right, central Greenwich was calculated to be suffering the worst traffic pollution in London, possibly the UK). On Friday, August 4, RTS closed Greenwich down, blocking the major arterial in morning peak-hour traffic for two hours with scaffolding tripods. Pedestrians joined in and the local coffee shop delivered free coffee, tea and biscuits to the demonstrators. Even many of the drivers held up in the traffic jam that day came out in favour of the action.

There Ain't Nothing Like a Dame

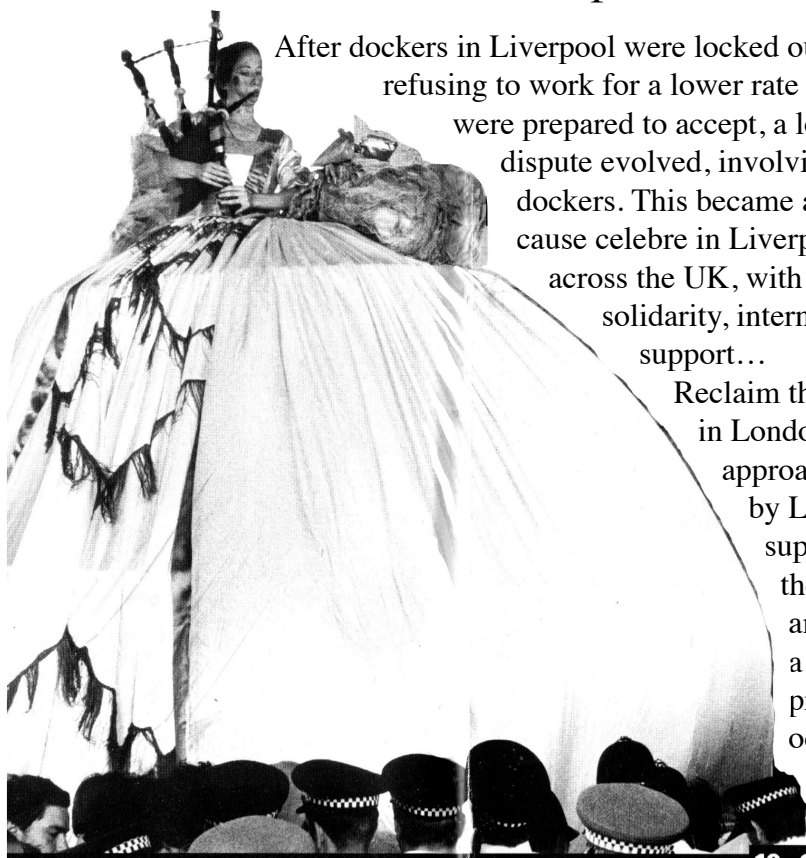
The following year RTS returned with a bang. 1996 was proclaimed (by the car industry) “Year of the Car”. RTS made that into the Year We Squatted a Motorway

July that year saw RTS mount what was probably their most ambitious and gloriously subversive action - squatting a stretch of motorway. The short M41 link in Shepherd's Bush - the shortest motorway in England - was turned into a party zone for an afternoon and evening. The sight of thousands of people running onto an empty motorway shut off by large tripods is an image that stays with you... Thirty foot ‘pantomime dames’ glided through the party throwing confetti. Food



stalls gave away free stew and sandwiches; graffiti artists added colour to the tarmac; poets ranted from the railings; acoustic bands played and strolling players performed. Some 7,000 turned up... At the height of the festivities, beneath the tall panto dame figures dressed in huge farthingale Marie Antoinette skirts, people were at work with jackhammers, hacking in time to the techno, to mask the sound to the officers standing inches away, digging up the surface of the road until large craters littered the fast lane... to plant seedlings from the gardens smashed by the bulldozers at Claremont Road.

Liverpool Dockers 96-97



After dockers in Liverpool were locked out after refusing to work for a lower rate than they were prepared to accept, a long-running dispute evolved, involving 500 dockers. This became a major cause celebre in Liverpool and across the UK, with mass solidarity, international support...

Reclaim the Streets in London were approached by London supporters of the dockers, and launched a 3-day protest/party/occupation in September 1996 to mark the

first anniversary of the dispute. Hundreds of activists attended and joined dockers on the picket line, and occupied a dock office block,

as well as cutting the fence around Seaforth Dock and invading the facility...

As one ex-RTS activist put it: *“Linking the ecological direct action movement to workers in struggle was simply a necessary step towards transition, as it still is...”*

April 12th 1997

Following the Liverpool actions, RTS and the Dockers collaborated on a demo/action/party in April 1997 to coincide with the run-up to the general election - variously known at the March for Social Justice, Reclaim the Future, the ‘Festival of Resistance’ and Never Mind The Ballots...

On 12th April 1997, some 20,000 people took part in the March for Social Justice, called by the 500 sacked Liverpool Dockers and their families, jointly with the Hillingdon Hospital and Magnet strikers. The gathering at Trafalgar Square was big but most of the Dockers, other strikers and their families left soon after the rally (mainly because of their long journeys home). The numbers were beginning to drop when a van containing the sound system managed to enter the square - the music and the huge street party then began. The dancing went on for hours, but by late afternoon, the cordon had successfully reduced the numbers in the square and riot police - some on horseback - stormed in to clear the area battering us out of the Square and over the bridges, with lots of extreme prejudice.

IN November 1997 RTS squatted an empty petrol station in Islington

By 1998 RTS had evolved into something not just about cars and roads, but about taking back everything:

“We are basically about taking back public space from the enclosed private arena. At its simplest it is an attack on cars as a principle agent of enclosure. It’s about reclaiming the streets as public inclusive space from the private exclusive use of the car. But we believe in this as a

broader principle, taking back those things which have been enclosed within capitalist circulation and returning them to collective use as a commons.” (RTS leaflet 1998)

In May 1998 RTS held a party in Birmingham, then hosting a G8 summit.

Think global, act local

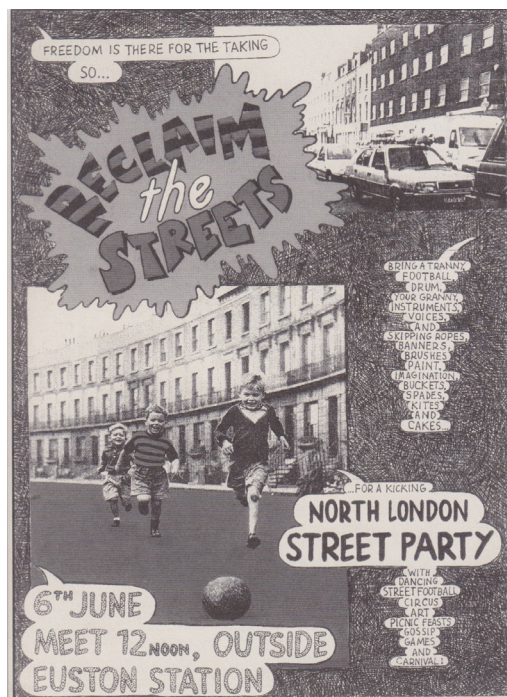
After Birmingham, 1998, RTS decided to put on simultaneous ‘local’ street parties in different areas of London; after much of the usual debate, this came down to two, one in the north. One down south, on June 6th – to coincide with hundreds of RTS parties going on around the world... The North London party met at Kings Cross and then

went on a long march to Tottenham, where the party took place. In South London, we settled on Brixton, where a majority of south London RTS folk lived anyway. Unlike at other actions, there was no plan B and instead of meeting in one place and moving to another, we double-bluffed the cops, amassing in front of the Ritzy cinema and taking over the street in front of us when our four old bangers of cars smashed into each other. This remains one of my favourite RTS parties, because it took



over the street I actually lived in, in my manor; a great feeling.

There were some problems with these two parties: notably differences between Brixton and the North London party – the former was rooted in people who lived here, the North London less so – not even opening discussions with local activist groups in that area. Also it seemed less happy in its conclusions somehow, some people involved with it got upset by accusations of anti-social behaviour from some locals and had to go back, hand out an apology leaflet and tidy up...London RTS had



several discussion over the summer of 1998 about where to go next. There were two main strands of thought. 1, that the ever larger RTS group in the capital could break up somewhat into more local groups but employ similar ideas, tactics, spirit in local actions around more local and daily targets. There was a suggestion that not only had the police begin to get the measure of large parties but that it was old news, becoming less effective, and making a ‘spectacle’ of itself, in the situationist sense – rather than addressing where capital and

eco-change could really be fought over – in people’s daily lives where they lived, worked, played. Others countered this with the idea that large parties/actions had been successful so far and what was needed was a harder bigger target, linked much more to international capitalism and finance, rather than concentrating on car use, general eco-protest... It was the second group that won the argument, in the short term at least, which was to usher in June 18th, probably the highest profile of all the RTS events; it also launched in many ways the UK arm of the ‘anti-

capitalist movement', a distinct development from both the RTS/90s eco-scene and the anarchists who had enthusiastically embraced it (not all did by any means).

J18 1999

A product of the 98 discussions, the J18 day of action in June 1999 came out of the growing merger of anarchists and RTS ideas, but also linked more and more to 'anti-capitalism' and the antiglobal summit movement. Plans for a spectacular day of action in the City of London had been under discussion since mid-98, and more and more older anarchos who remembered events like Stop the City were putting their oar in. [we hope to post some of the history of Stop the City soon on this blog]

On June 18, 1999, thousands of demonstrators converged at the Liverpool Street train station. Organisers distributed masks in four different colours and the participants broke up into four different marches in order to divide and confuse police; a spontaneous fifth



march emerged, as well as a Critical Mass composed of hundreds of bicyclists. The marches converged on the London International Financial Futures Exchange (LIFFE), where they hung banners, set off a fire hydrant to symbolise the liberation of the river beneath London's streets, adorned the walls with graffiti, disabled surveillance cameras, and set up sound systems for DJs and punk bands to perform. A raucous afternoon of dancing, exuberance, and street fighting followed, during which participants bricked up the front of the LIFFE building, broke in and trashed its ground floor, and nearly succeeded in destroying the London Stock Exchange itself. In response, police attacked the general public with tear gas and horse charges and ran over one demonstrator with a riot van, breaking her leg.

The events of June 18, 1999 set the stage for the historic demonstrations against the summit of the World Trade Organization in Seattle later that year.

(RTS and others put an event, 'N30' to coincide with Seattle)

After J18, RTS did partially fragment; many older/founder activists splintered off into other activities, other burned out for a bit. But larger numbers went into other eco-related direct action groups like UK Earth First!, into a growing network carrying out anti-genetically modified crop actions... In London, some parts of RTS remained involved in large spectacular anti-capitalist events, most notably the annual Mayday protests which ran from 2000 on, and were best attended in the early 2000s. Other faces got involved in RTS itself in London...

From RTS, Maydays, the anti-capitalist scene evolved other projects - social centres eg the London Action Resource Centre & others around the UK... the WOMBLES, Dissent and the Disobedience network against the Iraq war.

Mad hippies...? middle class wankers...?

When RTS burst onto the scene there it led to a mix of opinion on the older 'class struggle' anarchist scenes (the milieu past tense emerged from and was then immersed in) and the left... Many had had some involvement in the anti-CJA campaigns, many had been squatters, ravers since the late 90s, and embraced the mad frolics with a will... Others were very po-faced and dismissed it all as hippy nonsense. Not serious and working class enough. Within much of the CJA, anti-roads scenes, there had been an extremely diverse mix of views, politically ranging from class struggle anarchism, through pacifist, Green Party, to hippy 'lifestylism' (and on the fringe, frankly to some dodgy conspiracy theory types). Lots of the class struggle anarcho wing had spent years in their youths 'growing out' of pacifism, learning that the police were prepared to kick in heads and trusting neither in the state or in politicians of any stripe. We'd seen and felt the truncheons and experienced the left in power, as well as getting tired of what we saw as drongo drop out laziness and anti-social selfishness which infected many squats and projects, and the kind of moralising politics that had pervaded pacifism, CND etc. The naivety of some of the 90s scenes (some of it down to youth but not all by any means) was frustrating, and there were some among us who said it was all middle class hippy wankers. It wasn't, though there were a number of middle class hippy wankers, and a lot of 'what are you doing to save the Earth' moralising which gets right up yer nostrils.

But some of us were really up ourselves in many ways, convinced of our politically advanced ideas, dismissive... RTS though, had such energy that it pulled us in, especially as many of the 'community-activist' projects we had built in the wake of anti-poll tax movement were in reality struggling to survive. The M41 and RTS alliance with the dockers convinced many suspicious minds that there was some real potential here (arrogant as that sounds now). There was also a sense of a kind of (funny) desperation to be where the action was... As well as a gradual disintegration of anarcho-snobbery into a respect and appreciation. (Of course lots of anarchos had also been involved

early on too) But in the end, an influx of anarchists and other types into RTS synthesised something new – for a while. This helped spark new directions – for instance discussions and memories about the story of Stop the City from some of those who had taken part in 1983-4 helped create the idea for J18 in 1999.

Others remained critical, including some on what you could call the post-situ or left communist scenes, which had a close relation in practice to anarchists while always holding up lots of issues. Some of this was acid and niggly, other points were interesting and useful.

RTS's critics from the post-situ or 'ultraleft' scenes did have some interesting points about activism, and what they saw as the difference between 'protest' and 'struggle'. The latter comes out of people's needs, own experience and desires, they reckoned; the former they saw as something disconnected, artificially set up and directed at something outside of ourselves. If struggle was suggested as effective in addressing social & economic conditions that hold us down directly, protest is shown almost as diversion, complaint, remote from ourselves, addressing 'issues' and demanding someone else do something about them. Now there's a kernel of truth here - this tension does exist, and there are a growing number of professional and academic activists institutionalising campaigning, creating niches and leadership roles for themselves. 'Activism' as a construct IS a separation of sorts, splitting off those who protest about issues from those who don't, creating a spectacular conception of yourself as a fighter, whether or not it's about what you yourself need or desire... there was a tendency to see yourself as a hero if the planet. There was also a dynamic of organisers and attendees, to some extent, a kind of vanguard that us older more anarchic types thought too elitist, leadershipy. Some of it was necessary - if 7000 people know all the details of the secret party location it's gonna get blown - but also, when RTS became a big weekly meeting with interminable wrangling and debating, breaking into small groups and reporting back, a certain amount of behind the scenes 'get it done' undemocratic sorting does become vital... else nowt happens. However; there was a tyranny of the capable, and a kind

of showing up to the party by others who wanted to consume RTS - sometimes. RTS did fight against that, and had some conceptions of his to get around it, which didn't entirely get realised... None of these problems are anything like unique to that group: but there were a lot of arguments around it, at the time (I do remember a lot of us who turn up being bemused in Liverpool in September 1996 by how we were expected to turn up somewhere without knowing what was going to happen, a bit like soldiers being given sealed orders... sparking a long and rancorous debate the night before the big action. In retrospect some of what we said was a bit naïve, but the point that it felt not self-organised...)

But it's more complex than all that, and I'm not completely convinced of the absolute difference between 'protest' and 'struggle'. The possibilities of breaking down separation are myriad...

Another common objection to RTS, and the wider eco-movements, was to do with their class composition. This was in fact linked to the previous point about protest – 'struggle' was what the working class did, and it was implied (though not strictly said) that 'protest' was a middle class construct... Again this discussion is in fact very interesting and I cannot do it justice here (hopefully we'll return to it). The implication is that RTS's ways of organising was intimately derived from the class background of those who created and ran it. Well yes, as with almost everything, and yes, this did produce contradictions and shortcomings, but analysing them at all is not simple or as one dimensional as all that...

A lot of people involved in RTS through its various incarnations were middle class, yes - though as one ex-RTSer pointed out "At least 3 of us were dissident ruling class, and we thought we put our resources to good use". Not all though by any means: "Some of us were actual proles, or really, refugee proles from nasty racist working class Lancashire or Belfast"...and it did evolve and change. A lot. Unlike a fair number on the class struggle anarchist scene most people in RTS didn't pretend to be "eh up mate" types, more working class than they were...

More importantly though, RTS's conception of capitalism was not fundamentally based on a class analysis, or, I would hazard, any kind of deep analysis at all. This did leave itself open sometimes to a certain wishy-washyness as to what the group actually saw capital AS. Analysis wasn't the strong point of RTS, and the wider scene it arose from/helped create, which had a multi-farious mishmash of definitions of capitalism, a lot of which was contradictory and sketchy. This led not only to a lot of endless arguments in meetings, especially in the periods where large numbers were coming along to the weekly meeting, but also to a reluctance or inability to agree on what, in fact, unified us. The lack of analysis was not in itself fatal to RTS's existence; but the lack of a conception of class and how capital is based on class interests carried over into some of the scenes RTS influenced and evolved into.

An ex-RTSer wrote in response to the first version of this text, that *'Your portrayal of RTS as middle class is both wrong and irrelevant... the class composition of RTS members is irrelevant given that our actions were clearly directed towards transition grounded in replicable autonomy and solidarity.'*

But Class is there. it exists, it underpins everything about capitalism and how it was born and sustains itself. It may not now look like 1880s class or 1930s class or even 1970s class, but class divisions are fundamental and can't be ignored, and you can't take on a world social and economic system without understand what it is based on. Class is not the ONLY dynamic that is crucial to understand - but to ignore it has consequences. Yes we want to abolish class divisions - in the day to day now as well as ideally in some utopic future - but they just can't be wished out of existence, least of all in the movements we create in opposition... Both RTS and Extinction Rebellion, in my view, have suffered from this lack of understanding... and it impacts on their actions as much as their ideas.

Class - and money - did carry some weight in how decision-making was made in London RTS and the scenes that it evolved into. Because the parties and actions cost money (partly because gear kept getting seized by cops), cash was also needed, and the presence of people from

moneyed backgrounds meant that it was available - in a way that was slightly disconcerting for some of us who were not used to money just appearing for stuff (more accustomed of raising cash through benefits, painfully...) But the power dynamics of having people with money central to the actions and funding them does lead to unequal power relations in those active groups. of the only cause of power imbalance - but it was there.

Luckily there were/are a legion of serious thinkers on hand to tell RTS where it all fell down! ...Joke. (Partly.) In fact the eventual partial merger of parts of RTS with class struggle anarchists, autonomists and other 'proper' political tendencies created more analysis, but not that much more, and did water down the fun bits...

It was pointed out that 'middle class people mostly organised the parties but mostly working class people got arrested.' (when the police attacked them usually, near the end). True (see below), though not particularly intentionally, more in naivety and lack of forethought, or for lack of how to adequately deal with police attack and how to end the events.

People within RTS milieu did rise to become career professionals, trading on their activism to achieve entry into cultural fashionability; there was some criticism of this from some of who were very suspicious of such things as filming demos (due to being burned by police taking control of footage after events like the anti-poll tax riot and others, and journalists/film crews happily collaborating with this). This did lead to uneasy times in RTS as people didn't all get it.

Some have said that RTS was actually ineffective, in that it did not achieve its stated aims. Apart from taking over a few streets for a few days it didn't break 'car culture'... The effect of RTS was compared unfavourably to the 2000 fuel protests – as was pointed out, that movement had an infinitely huger effect, paralysing road traffic, if only for a short while. It also had lots of contradictions, class alliances and political dubiousnesses, but did produce a crisis and cleared the streets of cars... Again, though, it didn't last, and things returned to normal (though I haven't seen any discussions on longer term developments

among those that carried the blockades out...)

... and more recently, there's the French Yellow Vests – a sustained movement much more combative, taking on the state in a way RTS never managed and dwarfing XR's impact ... (Again, the politics are very mixed, but when are they not?)

No, RTS did not fundamentally alter capitalism, car use, help turn the world green... Some struggles on very limited territory can win outright, others achieve partial victories; others seem to fail of splutter out. Few know what effect they have in the end, as influences mutate, ideas mingle and merge, individuals and groups wend their ways and diverge... RTS had many limits. As do all struggles and movements.

RTS left a long legacy in the UK and wider activist scenes, with the group in London carrying on for several years, taking part in the mayday organising, as well as lots of those who passed through it setting off into many other campaigns, projects, etc, the anti-Afghan/Iraq war movements, Occupy, social centres and anti-G8 etc summit protests... you name it.

I don't know if anyone has really discussed it anywhere, but it would be interesting to talk about the development of RTS into the anti-capitalist movement and wider points about these movements, and of protest movements generally. While J18 was fun and high profile, and thousands of activists turning up to surround and attempt to disrupt summits of the G8 and other meetings of the rich and famous felt for many and looked very confrontational and challenging – it represents a specific interpretation of how capital is organised and where it exists, is controlled, can be challenged etc. Concentrating on central points, the obvious target of world leaders and economic movers. But capital is a world system – that pervades down to the very marrow of every aspect of our lives; to some extent challenging it is not about the world leaders, but in the everyday. RTS in its origins recognised this and at its best was moving towards the idea of taking over our lives from within where we live them. To me J18 and the anti-summit movements diverted away from that; this was at the heart of our discussions in

Summer 1998, and without wanting to say ‘we went the wrong way’, I do think now (and said then) that this may have been broadly a narrowing of RTS’ vision. To radically alter the world you have to organically build from the edges where you are, till the centres collapse because you have already taken over everything. J18 itself kind of did work this way, though the anti-capitalist movement obsession with summits seemed to me to want to build everyday rebellion outward from the middle by attacking what they saw as the centres of power. Does capital even have a centre?

Extinction and evolution

Extinction Rebellion have in some ways reproduced elements of RTS’ approach, but differ in other ways. The main similarities are obvious – taking over streets and public space, the initial concentration on climate change, the emphasis on people taking action. However, there are major points of departure, some positive, some worth examining critically.

RTS took space as a one-off, usually, where XR at least in the last actions in April 2019 tried to keep up the pressure by remaining in the



streets of central London for as long as they feasibly could. This is more resonant of the Occupy movements of post-2008 radical protest, and has both its strengths and its weakness implicit in it, in that it does

seem to pile on more sustained involvement by extending the action, but also begins inevitably to become separated out from those not involved, an end in itself. This is a problem with almost everything you can do where protest is concerned, and is difficult to avoid. RTS did celebrate the very fact of taking over space ourselves as very much the point, the action being the destination, as well as the road, a moment of liberation by the very nature of occupying space. XR actions, like Occupy, achieve this by default, as taking over space in defiance of the usual day to day creates its own dynamic. What comes out of such actions on the future may be radically different from what they set out to do, more subversive and challenging even. Both RTS and XR actions at their best, like all moments of struggle, produce consequences primarily in the people involved in them, whether or not the ‘campaign’ itself wins what it fights for. The difference - so far – is that RTS was/ became conscious of this. Whether XR will remains to be seen.

Their Morals and Ours

XR’s call for people was primarily to occupy the streets in order to



get themselves arrested to put pressure on government to act, although this has now come under fierce discussion. RTS neither saw putting pressure on politicians to act on our behalf or mass arrests as the aim. Although there were often arrests at RTS parties, often in the earlier days near the end of the event as the organisers made an attempt to wrap events up (this was a point that was initially criticised by those of us experienced in legal defence work from poll tax days and the Legal Defence & Monitoring Group, that RTS at first took little account of this side of the day. This did evolve positively over the group's lifetime). Arrests in themselves though as an aim is a debatable tactic, which has been used for many years, most notably in the peace movement – a kind of shaming and publicity-seeking tactic, where the sheer numbers arrested and speeches in court etc become the point of the action. (eg early Committee of 100 anti-nuclear actions)

Clearly people carefully considering things with experience of arrest, police, and courts have made something of this approach – the Ploughshares anti-missile saboteurs who break into bases, do millions of quid's worth of damage to planes and weaponry then give themselves up, for instance. Personally I would say its better for people to remain out of prisons and be able to carry on their activities, and concealing your identity and escaping to fight another day is better than handing yourself in – but its their choice. However, some in Extinction Rebellion are leaning on people to get themselves arrested, and concentrating lots of their propaganda on young folk, kids, teens, some of whom are not yet ready for what arrest and conviction can mean. The kind of moral pressure to 'get nicked for the planet', does depend on XR's insistence that the police are basically OK and will be nice, and can be won over to the side of the 'people' by being nice to them. It does reflect the wilful ignorance of the social role of the police and their function in relation to protest - to control and if necessary repress, with violence when required. Dancing to a sound system in Marble Arch by some officers, or more recently some ex-cops even getting involved in XR actions, does not negate the institutional violence of the boys and girls in blue, as many of us have learned painfully from an early age.

RTS may in its beginnings have been naïve about legal defence and

arrests – XR have been much more irresponsible. In many ways some of the main organisers have inherited the worst aspects of the wider green/eco movements – moral blackmail, class blindness to the realities of the social order, a concentration on one issue without managing to observe how it is vitally and necessarily linked to the whole social and economic structure, and naivety towards the enforcers and controllers of those structures. They have now thankfully withdrawn their terrible advice to people being arrested as to how to survive prison, after a massive outcry from those who have experienced pokey that it was dangerously downplaying the pressure of going down and encouraging illusions in the friendliness of screws. But liberal illusions in the police, prison, the authorities and the social system remain.

Morals, individual blame are no basis for any movement. There's too much of this in pro-environmental politics, and a hierarchy of greener-than-thou-ness and finger-pointing at people for not doing enough. When this emphasis on the responsibility of the individual goes along with calls for the state to take action, it's just bizarre. The closeness of 'it's your fault' to 'let's all take it on ourselves to change it' involves leaving moralising behind to move towards something else – a sense of common interests. Now not all people in social movements have the same interests, when it comes down to class, background, race, and any number of levels of power relations. Lots of people are saying that XR are all middle class white privileged folk and the movement's attitude to colour, migration etc has been shoddy at best. Some anarchists and others also said very much the same about RTS in the early days, and like many protest movements (those that don't initially come from BME origins) it remained pretty white, though class was much more nuanced. Another interesting point a woman involved in RTS from the start made at a discussion recently was how in the early days RTS London had a near equal male-female balance, but noted this changed over the years as actions became more confrontational and overtly 'anti-capitalist', becoming more boysy and macho...

Neither morality or hyper-activist ego rankings or dominance by the white moderately well-to-do is anything like unique to either XR or

RTS, though. Anarchist scenes, the left, for instance, remain ultimately run on visible or invisible hierarchies and overwhelmingly white. It was funny in hindsight that so many anarchists dissing RTS for not being class struggle enough were being slightly truth-economical about how prole their background was. Either way, there was also a snideness about how working class is seen, and how struggle is hard and serious. In the midst of parties you could also hear people complaining that some people were just partying and not either fighting the police on the edges or seriously talking politics. I know, I was sometimes one of them. The arrogance of youth.

All of these issues within XR are of course being furiously debated and is evolving, and only a daft haporth would expect the movement to be either homogenous in its ideas or to stick to some of these shibboleths: XR and the people involved will change and adapt in response to reality and experience.

Illusions in the bourgeois state's potential to reverse climate change without the dismantling of capitalism as a world-exploiting system are, of course, nothing new, and XR are far from unique in that. But it remains true, that the wider ecological movement is divided by those who think you can have some nice democratic non-ecocidal market economy, and those who recognise the reality: reversal of the climate cataclysm can only mean overthrowing the classes that profit from it and organising our lives worldwide for the needs of all – people and planet - not for the profit of a smaller and smaller minority and the consumer comfort of a slightly larger group. It's the exploitation of the earth, its resources, its animals and if the vast majority of US that is destroying the climate, and that has to be fundamentally altered. Green capitalism and green politicians are just pot plants on the deck of the titanic.

XR's potential is obvious but whether it will fizzle out, outgrow the liberal illusions of some its leading voices, is yet to be seen - and fought for from within, I guess. Some people will learn re the police, as people tend to do when faced with the blunt end of a truncheon: this discussion is already being had. (Some won't learn, class background,

white privilege and the blindness of ideology being what they are.) Although it's also hard to know where such movements GO when they don't quickly achieve their aim, many involved go off and take their spirit and experience into a myriad of other activities – as the thousands who passed through RTS groups and parties did.

One point relevant to both RTS and XR – in common with activists the world over – is the separation of the high points of parties, actions, occupations, from a daily life that is other, or rather the actions are the other. Some of us within RTS at one point argued for a dissolving of the group as such, but trying to employ the tactics, sense of fun and occupation, to our daily lives, to break down how 'activism' and 'activists' become separate from 'our daily lives', work, raising kids, etc, and from 'ordinary people' (ie non-activists). This in itself was naïve, like a lot of activists who develop a critique of activism, we really meant moving on to another kind of activism, an artificial change, if well-intentioned. Looking back (as someone who used to be a full-time activist but now isn't an activist, really) this was groping towards what I still think is a useful path – breaking down walls between different parts of your own self and between people involved in politics and those who aren't, in order to radically alter the whole separation and alienation of people from their own desires and needs. It's questionable I suppose whether that can be done in isolation or as an ideological shift. And perhaps you can't 'abolish activism to create communism' in that way anyway, or not as a small group. It's the kind of shift that might happen in the context of massive upheavals and struggles. Ironically, climate-chaos inspired social breakdown might provide an opportunity for that, though to make an ideology of that possibility as some eco-activists do is repulsive and anti-human.

Want More Info

Only scratching the surface here:

There's a partial archive of links and pix on RTS parties (not by any means complete) here: <http://rts.gn.apc.org/archive.htm>

Watch Reclaim the Streets the movie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2snn3XDbLg>

An account of the eviction of Wanstonia:

<https://pasttenseblog.wordpress.com/2016/02/16/today-in-londons-rebel-history-wanstonia-evicted-to-make-way-for-the-m11-1994/>

Claremont Road:

An RTS leaflet on the Liverpool dockers's struggle:

<http://rts.gn.apc.org/prop17.htm>

And an interview with Chris Knight, who linked up the RTS with the dockers:

http://www.chrisknight.co.uk/reclaim-the-streets_liverpool-dockers/

1997 Islington petrol staton squat:

<http://rts.gn.apc.org/strikoil.htm>

Report on May 1998 RTS street party in Birmingham against the G8 summit:

<http://www.urban75.com/Action/reclaim10.html>

And some Video footage: <http://www.urban75.com/Action/reclaim10.html>

Neil Transpontine's account of the June 1998 Brixton party:

<https://pasttenseblog.wordpress.com/2017/06/06/today-in-london-festive-history-brixton-streets-reclaimed-for-wicked-street-party-1998/>

A report on the June 1998 North London party:

<http://www.urban75.com/Action/reclaim8.html>

here's some film of this North London street party:

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-north-london-street-party-reclaim-the-streets-1998-online>

Some reflections of June 18th 1999, published after the event:

<https://libcom.org/library/reflections-june-18-1999>

Accounts of the Seattle counter-summit:

<https://crimethinc.com/2006/11/30/seattle-seven-years-later>

Links to reports on early 2000s Mayday actions in London:

<http://www.urban75.org/mayday/>

You Make Plans we make History, a critique of RTS and anti-summit movement/anti-capitalism:

<http://dialectical-delinquents.com/articles/war-politics/you-make-plans-we-make-history/>

Comments on the 2000 fuel protests:

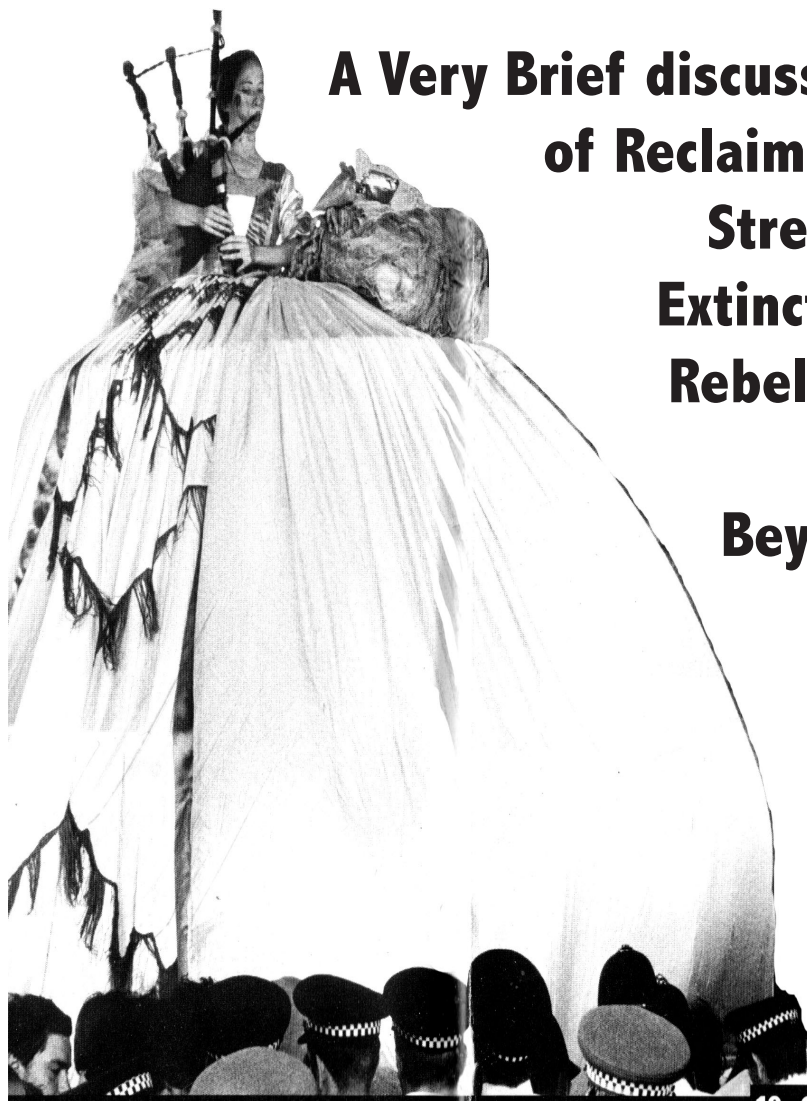
<http://www.revoltagainstplenty.com/index.php/archive-local/63-fuel-convoy.html>

Where is the Festival: Notes on summits and counter-summits; a partial critique of the anti-capitalist movement's focus on attacking summits:

<http://teias.org/tal/en/s/sr/some-roveretan-anarchists-notes-on-summits-and-counter-summits.html>

Road Rave

**A Very Brief discussion
of Reclaim the
Streets,
Extinction
Rebellion
and
Beyond**



past tense
