

## **The eventization of leisure and the strange death of alternative Leeds**

*Submission for CITY*

*Karl Spracklen, Anna Richter and Beverley Spracklen*

## **Introduction**

*The new urbanism is inseparable from economic and social upheavals, which are, happily, inevitable. It is reasonable to think that the revolutionary demands of an epoch are a function of the idea that epoch has of happiness. The valorization of leisure is not, then, a mere pleasantry.*

*“We remind you that this means inventing new games.”*

(Guy-Ernest Debord & Jacques Fillon, Summary 1954, Potlatch 14, 30 November 1954)

Leisure spaces in Leeds (and elsewhere) as well as their uses have changed over the last decades. This holds for the types of activities people are pursuing in their spare time as well as for the actual places in which leisure time is spent. Conversely, leisure spaces play an important role in the formation and construction of everyday life as well as alternative scenes (Healey 2002, Boudreau et al. 2009), but also (increasingly, if in different interpretations) in the image campaigns and city marketing brochures. Leisure, often reduced to shopping, (corporate) entertainment and gastronomic offers in tourist brochures and similar publications, thus is undergoing comparable transformations as the city centres to which it is increasingly confined (Bittner 2001). Steinert (2009) even speaks of the tourist citizen.

The understanding of leisure, its meaning and its manifestation in urban spaces differs decidedly between individuals and institutions to the extent that urban policies aim to displace and/or ban particular forms of leisure from city centres that are seen to ‘disturb’ the designed and planned corporate night-time economy. Gentrification and urban regeneration programmes are increasingly engineering profitable forms of leisure, venues and behaviours (Richter 2010). Leisure spaces and the activities taking place within these spaces – be they public, private, inside or out doors, multi-purpose or tailored for specific activities – are important to individuals and society as a whole: for happiness, health, belonging and participation.

This paper addresses some of the changes that have occurred in the leisure spaces and the alternative scenes of Leeds. Interested in particular in ‘alternative scenes’, i.e. milieus outside of the ubiquitous franchises and mainstream temples of leisurely consumption, the paper explores the way individuals from various alternative scenes in and around Leeds were and are spending their leisure. Our paper aims to contribute to the debates on the pages of CITY and beyond (REFERENCE) by mapping the emergence, contestation and disappearance as well as transformations of alternative scenes and the places they frequent in the light of, on the one hand, the ongoing privatization, commodification and surveillance of urban public space and, on the other, the concept of leisure in its social, cultural and political contexts. Looking at specific forms of leisure and the places where these are pursued, formed and contested illustrates the ongoing (de)politicization, commodification and surveillance of urban spaces as well as forms of leisure whilst equally throwing light onto the strategies of alternative scenes to counter such processes. The rest of our paper is divided into four sections: a review of literature on leisure, eventization, gentrification and cultural exclusion; a brief note on our methods; an analysis of the findings of our research with individuals in the alternative scenes in Leeds; and a discussion that returns to the central problem of leisure, modernity and urban spaces.

### **Leisure, Eventization, Gentrification and Cultural Exclusion**

Leisure, both in terms of spare time and identity-inducing activities, as a modern phenomenon came into existence through capitalist forms of production. Although Veblen (1970[1925]) was the first sociologist to notice changing patterns and significations of leisure consumption associated with the increasing affluence of Western elites in the first half of the twentieth century, it was only in the period following the Second World War that leisure (in the modern West) started to be associated with the construction of cultural identities. Leisure

offered means of social differentiation and tendencies of individualisation and was thus in principle exploitable for business. Some scholars observed however, that young people also used their leisure lives and spaces to create alternative, counter-culture identities (Hebdige 1979).

Stanley Parker (1972; 1976) noted the emergence of leisure consumers and leisure choices made within the flux of rapid societal change; Ken Roberts (1978) argued that increasing concern with leisure in a post-industrializing West was leading to the establishment of leisure policies and managers in the private sector. Other sociologists and philosophers started to argue that changes to working practices brought about by automation, computerisation and globalisation would result in more free time for individuals, and hence more need for leisure activities (Smigel 1963). This thesis is described by Rojek (2010) as the Leisure Society Thesis, which he strongly critiques as being naively utopian about the value of leisure as a freedom, and the meaning of free-time. He associates the thesis with positivist American leisure sciences in the second half of the twentieth century, which, he correctly argues, blithely assumed more free time, and therefore more worthwhile leisure, would be the consequence and the moral good of Western modernity. However, it is not given that changes to Western society will lead to that utopian world of free, limitless leisure. Indeed, the recession strongly echoes the connotation of leisure with worklessness and unemployment, which has been most prominent in protestant Calvinism (Weber 1992[1905]) where idleness was considered deplorable. Further, it is not clear that leisure in the Leisure Society, as it was understood by Smigel (1963), would necessarily have any political, transformative purpose. The future of leisure, seen in the third quarter of the twentieth century, was ultimately positive: people would have more leisure time, it was believed, along with the more dispensable wealth to fill that leisure time with worthwhile pursuits. Relatively new courses offered by universities, such as Events Management, Entertainment and Hospitality and

Retailing, to name but a few, and their popularity demonstrate the on-going commodification of leisure and recreation for which planners and managers are required. This in turn has implications for the conceptualisations of leisure, the actual uses of leisure spaces and time and not least the opportunities for alternative cultures and scenes.

The consumption of leisure and the role of leisure in identity building led to a strong feminist attack on the work of Parker and Roberts; sociologists of leisure argued that free choices and free time for leisure pursuits and identity formation were not an option for marginalised women forced into private, domestic roles (Beer 1984; 1990; Deem 1986; 1999; Aitchinson 2000; Wetterer 2002). Similar structural critiques of the liberal theory of leisure arose, making the same point the feminists made: social groups such as the working classes (Clarke & Critcher 1985; Coalter 1998) or the poor in the developing world, or minority ethnic groups in the West did not have the power or the freedom to choose and partake fully in leisure activities (Bramham 2006). More recently, it has been argued that leisure changed so much at the end of the last century, and the beginning of this one, that a simple definition eludes our inquiry (Blackshaw 2010; Rojek 2005; 2010). Spracklen (2009) argues that the meaning and purpose of leisure is in its communicative value, its use as a place and space for individual agency and unconstrained social interaction. The problem with leisure in late modernity is the way in which such communicative rationality is swamped by the instrumentality of commercialized, commodified and privatized leisure forms.



‘Wake, work, sleep’. Reality versus idealised ‘consumption, play and hedonism’ (Chatterton & Hollands 2003: 4). Graffiti tiles on a wall in Hamburg’s Schanzenviertel (Photo by author B, June 2011).

The debate about the meaning and purpose of leisure, and the possibility of having any authentic leisure experience predicated on free will and free choice, is paralleled in urban studies and cultural geographies – specifically, in discussions about the politics of space and the adoption of neo-liberal cultural policies that limit the use of that space. Western cities develop cultural policies for city centres that instrumentalize the use of spaces in those centres: allowing private companies to take over the ownership or management of city squares and shopping malls (reference); designing out alternative use of spaces (for example through the use of bolts built into steps to frustrate skaters and free cyclists, or the imposition

of television screens screening loud coverage of sports events); and limiting the usage and the users of the physical spaces through twenty-four security and surveillance. Every modern city in the West (and beyond) is subject to the globalization of cultural policy, with each city across the West competing with every other city to offer trans-national corporations opportunities to make money out of the city's cultural scene (reference). In this globalized market there is some attempt to brand cities as unique destinations, using local and national cultures to sell difference (reference) – but this localness is defined within the limits of a wider homogeneity and gentrification of city cultures and city spaces (reference). Cultural policies are shaped by the wider political consensus of neo-liberalism. All mainstream political parties at the local and national level in the West write policies and manifestoes that promise greater economic choice, more liberalism in markets, more 'partnership' with the 'dynamic' private sector, alongside tougher actions against criminals and others viewed as 'poor consumers' (Bauman, 2000). This is a consensus that serves the interests of global capitalism and the few who have the capital or job security to enjoy the private shopping malls and their homogenized international food stalls.

Even before the global recession, such policies served to exclude and marginalize a great number of the citizens who voted for them. In urban spaces, the hegemony of global capitalism in late modernity has seen the increasing gentrification of city centres, increasing exclusion of independent retailers, the economic shifting of the poor and the marginalized – the unemployed, the working class, minority ethnic communities, alternative subcultures and counter-cultures - away from the spaces that politicians identify as being part of their 'outward-facing' branding strategies. On 9 January 2012, the incumbent British Prime Minister David Cameron turned his spin machine to the matter of the Olympics. With the British economy stalling, unemployment figures rising and cuts to public services affecting

millions of marginalized people up and down the country, naturally Cameron wanted to find some positive message for the New Year. London 2012, he said:

is a lasting legacy and also an enormous advert for Britain and we're going to use the time to best effect by having huge investment conferences every day of the Olympics which we hope can bring in billions of pounds to Britain... I want the message to go out loud and clear, from tourism to business, sport to investment, we are determined to maximise the benefits of 2012 for the whole country.

(Sky News interview with David Cameron, 9 January 2012, posted on-line at <http://news.sky.com/home/london-olympics/article/16145012>, accessed 17 January 2012)

His words reflect a crisis of thinking at the centre of global politics. The blind obedience to the IOC and the wishful thinking that the legacy will be a positive one leads to cynicism from a public struggling to pay bills and pay for food at a time when billions of pounds of public money have been spent on providing the Olympics. The satirical magazine *Private Eye*, for example, runs regular stories on the inequitable nature of the funding for the Games, and the structures that support them – pointing out in the issue of 13-26 January 2012, for example, that the cost to the taxpayer of the opening and closing ceremonies (£40m) approximated the annual cuts (£50m) to local government services (including sports, libraries and youth services) in the Olympic borough of Newham (*Private Eye*, 2012, p. 14). If the Olympics represents a particularly egregious example of the privatization and commodification of culture, and the eventization of urban spaces, it is nonetheless typical of the kind of instrumentalized leisure that transforms cities from spaces of belonging into spaces of exclusion.

Politicians, policy-makers and their partners in global capitalism are keen to transform city spaces into commodified, eventized spaces because of the threat to their hegemonic



power from counter-hegemonic movements. Debord (19xx) suggests that in such a situation of increasing commodification and centralization of power, there is an imperative and an opportunity to express opposition to such instrumentality through subversion and through spectacle. Le Fevre (19xx) demonstrates the importance of the everyday rituals and routines of individual lives – and the importance of (communicative) leisure and leisure spaces in allowing transformative, counter-hegemonic agency. Oppositionality is the way in which individuals, subcultures, counter-cultures and other counter-hegemonic movements reject the restrictions of instrumentality and express their refusal to conform as passive consumers. Such oppositionality has been explored in previous research in urban studies and cultural geographies, from the co-option of privatized spaces by young musicians (reference) to the Debordian carnival of the Occupy movement (reference). Clearly, there are negotiations and reactions and resistance to every attempt to sanitize, gentrify and privatize urban leisure spaces. Some individuals and groups are able to marshal their resources to fight back, to poke fun at, and to successfully resist crudely imposed policies of exclusion, privatization and eventization. However, we are interested in the limits of oppositionality and the relationship between oppositionality, action and resistance. While it is clear that some people, *pace* Bourdieu, have the right cultural, social and economic capital to be successful oppositionalists (cf. REF), the liberty to be able to act and to oppose is constrained by the enormous cultural, political and social powers of the instrumental structures ranged against freedom of expression and movement. In this paper, we explore the ways in which individuals and groups within a city's alternative scene have negotiated their way through the eventization of the city's centre, and whether they are able to use their alternative politics and/or lifestyles to continue to express oppositionality – or whether their oppositionality has been co-opted or marginalized by the commodification of leisure spaces.

## Methodology

The paper is based on research undertaken in Leeds between January and June 2011 to understand the changing meanings and uses of leisure in the equally changing central and peripheral urban spaces. This paper is one of two to use the same research data – this current paper explores scenes, memories, politics and spaces; another paper by the authors explores eventization as a cultural phenomenon and the salience of cultural policy in its formation<sup>1</sup>. Because we are concerned with the disappearance of many alternative forms of *alternative* leisure from Leeds our interest lies in those forms of leisure that are distinct from mainstream by their own definition and become increasingly stigmatised, criminalised and evicted from central Leeds. We are particularly interested in these processes and their evolution over the years from the perspective of those who are and were involved in the making or remaking of alternative spaces for leisure. We are also asking how identity formation changes (with) the leisure spaces.

Interviews with individuals aged 30 and older illustrate the transformations of and conflicts over spaces and their uses. Informants have been recruited from three alternative scenes: goths, punks/anarchists and left-wing activists. These scenes were selected as they represent a reasonably typical set of mature alternative scenes in a modern Western city, with roots in the Thatcherite/New Right era of the 1970s and 1980s, with (as we will show) considerable overlapping of membership. We have interviewed a dozen people who consider themselves members or ex-members of these scenes following an open and little structured interview schedule focussing on the participants' biography, their relationship to Leeds and Leeds scene(s), usage of leisure spaces then and now, and the conflicts and transformations they have witnessed over the last decades. Although most of the people we interviewed were happy to have their identities published (and indeed for those familiar with Leeds' alternative

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<sup>1</sup> Richter, Spracklen and Spracklen at the BSA. (REF)

scene the respondents may well be easily identifiable because of their role as key insiders/gatekeepers/activists), for this paper we have used pseudonyms and attempted to provide an indirect, critical narrative rather than a concatenation of direct quotes. With all these interviews we were guided by the responses of the individuals and our desire to allow them to explore their own personal histories and their reflections on their scene's political, cultural and social evolution in the changing urban spaces of Leeds. As such, our interviews allowed us to understand some of the histories of action, resistance and oppositionality over the last thirty years. In our analysis, we have identified nine themes, through which the next section is constructed: nostalgia; music as a vehicle for resistance; the politics of leisure spaces; Them against Us; venues and spaces; political action and oppositionality; commodification of scenes; commodification of spaces; and 'still fighting today'.

## **Analysis**

### *Nostalgia.*

All our respondents expressed beliefs about the alternative scene that represented the past in a nostalgic light. For the goths, there was a realization that their music scene had declined since the 1980s and 1990s. They recognised that this was a tendency of reconstruction and (re)imagining, and all four were careful to state that things in the past might not have been as great as was believed in the alternative scene. The Leeds goth scene had been vibrant in the early 1980s, when The Sisters of Mercy band emerged out of Leeds University<sup>2</sup>. For some of our respondents, this 1980s scene represented a high-point for goths, a time when nightclubs such as the Phono were thriving as centres of Leeds' alternative scene. For other respondents, the imagined peak moment of gothic Leeds was the early 1990s, when the scene was influenced by nightclubs playing EBM and industrial metal, and many students were

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<sup>2</sup> The Sisters of Mercy are one of the most influential goth bands from the 1980s, though their singer Andrew Eldritch has since distanced himself from the goth scene.

alternative. But this nostalgia was tempered by a recognition that the goth scene had always played a marginal role in the city centre's leisure spaces, and goths constantly argued among themselves over the meaning of goth – whether goth was a political act of oppositionality or merely something to do on a weekend night. All the goths, then, were aware of the constructed nature of nostalgia, and offered counter-narratives that suggested things weren't as good as they had otherwise described.

The punks were less susceptible to nostalgia, but again all of them felt moments of nostalgic valorization of the punk and anarchist scenes. Blue wondered whether it was at all possible now for younger people to find their way into the protest movement in a sustained way, given the way the city centre's spaces had been sanitized and securitized. Kito suggested the punk/squat scene he was involved in was as vibrant as it had ever been but even he remembered squats, free gigs and direct actions from his own past with a sense that such action had been limited by the privatization of many parts of the city centre, and the gentrification of many of the old city-centre office and factory buildings that had housed such squats. Our left-wing activists, politicized in the struggles against racism, sexism and the New Right politics of Margaret Thatcher, also expressed nostalgic sentiment for their youth and the city of their early political activism. This was an era of sympathetic local councillors and council officers encouraging activists to use city-centre spaces, when one of our respondents found himself involved in the production of an influential left-wing local news weekly, when there was a number of independent retailers and cafes where left-wing activists could meet up and share information.

#### *Music as a vehicle for resistance*

It is perhaps a truism to note that our punks believed in the value of music as a vehicle for resistance. One of them is still playing live, and has been heavily involved in releasing politically charged songs through the DIY route. However, the idea that music is a vehicle for

resistance and oppositionality was shared by our other alternative scenes. For the goths the appreciation of goth music is fundamental to being alternative. Our respondents from the goth scene who ran club nights in Leeds (past and present) believed they had to balance the demands of their audiences to hear dance-friendly songs alongside the need of their disc jockeys (or themselves) to display ‘true’, authentic, alternative taste: this provided a creative tension, because goths wanted to demonstrate they were opposed to and resisting the world of pop music through the sounds of the songs they played, but the most-loved goth music borrowed extensively from the commercialized themes and sounds of pop, dance and rock music. What made goth music alternative and oppositional were the dark, disturbing themes of the lyrics and some of the musical forms. For some of the goths, there was also an explicitly political edge to goth, which in its formative years in Leeds borrowed from punk and post-punk their left-wing ideology. Our left-wing activists also recognised the role of music as source of resistance – in their personal histories, they had all been involved to a greater or lesser extent in supporting festivals, gigs and community projects that attacked the commodification of the city and the dominance of right-wing ideology, and which promoted local alternative outlets and spaces for more inclusive politics.

#### *The politics of leisure spaces*

All our respondents spoke about the importance of leisure spaces as political spaces, and their scenes as spaces of alternativism. In the city, they recognised distinct leisure spaces that had different political uses. Pubs, cafes, nightclubs and music venues offered scenes safe spaces where like-minded people could congregate, but over the years these spaces had disappeared or changed (see below). Leeds’ city-centre shops and streets were becoming more homogenized and corporate, and new shopping malls had blurred the distinction between public space and private space. For alternative people in Leeds, what should have been spaces of leisure, open zones where they could meet up and socialize or be active, had

become no-go areas with security guards rushing them along. The construction of the city's Millennium Square allowed private companies to make profits from festivals and events held in the square, but the square was not a space that was attractive or welcoming to our respondents. Free use of public spaces for leisure, or politics, was restricted to marginal spaces beyond the city centre, if at all: for the punks and left-wing activists there were still abandoned buildings to turn into free spaces, and Woodhouse Moor Park for community events; but for some the goths, the decline of the Corn Exchange's alternative shops (a result of a deliberate move to clear the building and gentrify it) and the rough treatment by security guards of younger goths who stood outside it, left them with little connection to the city centre beyond music venues.

*Them v Us – the alternative Other against the mainstream; encounters with the mainstream*

Our respondents all showed a tendency to situate themselves as alternative, radicals against a commodified, commodifying 'mainstream' of modern urban life. They told stories about being marked as Others by individuals who followed mainstream trends or who represented the corporate centre of everyday life. For the goths, their choices of alternative fashion and make-up led them to face name-calling and threats of violence in the public leisure spaces of Leeds. However, the goths were proud of their differentiated status, and keen to say they were not unduly bothered by the symbolic violence. They saw their gothness defining some authentic identity and positionality of their own agency – something that was expressed by their clothing but not limited by it. They could move in the mainstream during the working day, for instance, with little to show for their goth identity – effectively hiding their alternative positionality and carnivalesque love of being an outsider in the norms of the corporations and organizations in which they earned a living. All of the left-wing activists we interviewed tried to live radical, alternative lives, but their ability to find spaces away from

the mainstream were compromised to an extent by the choices they had made around families and careers – all were current or former academics. They all worked in their local communities, in action groups or small, radical, political campaigns. One was a key activist in anti-racism, who combined his respectable social scientist role with that of community activist, critiquing the mainstream from within. Another was involved in direct actions that had led to his arrest. What the activists shared in common was an attempt to build a common ground, a public leisure (and work) space, where alternative and radical ways of being could be developed and sustained.

The punks were more alternative during the working day, choosing not to work or to be involved in community projects where they did not have to compromise their ideological status as radical outsiders. For the punks, their leisure and work spaces were interpolated, providing exclusive sites for oppositionality, play and agency. They rejected the mainstream altogether, trying to find alternative ways of living, sharing goods, making music and hanging around: one of them, for example, had been involved in establishing an unlicensed pub in an abandoned building that sold locally sourced real ales.

### *Venues and Spaces*

One of the strong themes in our research was the sustainability of the alternative scenes, despite the eventization of the city centre's leisure spaces. Everybody we interviewed insisted that there were still private and public spaces in which they could be active and in which they could pursue alternative leisure lives. However, what we found was a shifting of alternative venues, spaces and places away from the city centre into the marginal areas around – and a commodification of the sites that had formerly been used for alternative, communicative leisure activities. Two independent music retailers – Jumbo and Crash – remained in the city centre, and both catered for different alternative subcultures, but apart from these two businesses there was nothing for alternative people to buy in the shopping

malls and arcades of Leeds. The city's streets, heavily policed and securitized, offered little opportunity for alternative people to congregate, demonstrate or take part in free leisure activities. There were no alternative-friendly cafes or pubs, with the city centre becoming a globalized corporate clone filled with the shiny chrome, plate glass and yellow double arches of capitalism's New Jerusalem. Independent music venues such as the Duchess of York and Rio's had closed down – the Coliseum had become an Academy venue, part of a chain owned by a transnational corporation, sponsored by a mobile-phone company, where over-priced lager and family-friendly bands offered little room for radical leisure politics. For the goths, the closing of music venues in the city centre meant their goth nights now took place on the edge of town, in room above a pub, or outside Leeds altogether. For the punks, the city centre had never offered them a venue as a home – our respondents did not recognise any loss, but never really had a place in the city centre<sup>3</sup>. For the left-wing activists, the loss of the public leisure spaces was the hardest one – from having room to protest, to congregate and to undertake community work, the activists now found a confusing instrumentality of bye-laws and regulations designed to stop them using the spaces.

### *Political Action and Oppositionality*

Having the communicate agency and the public space to be politically active was obviously important for our punks, anarchists and left-wing activists. They saw leisure as an activity in which political action could be situated, an activity in which oppositionality could be maintained despite the increasing instrumentality of leisure and the eventization of leisure spaces. Political action as leisure could be evidenced a number of ways. First, for the activists, their leisure time was devoted to campaigning: leafleting, direct action, writing, working on web-sites, supporting community festivals and so on. Second, this led some of them to establish radical leisure spaces in which politics could take place: anarchist football

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<sup>3</sup> One prominent punk/hardcore venue on the edge of town, Joseph's Well, was closed down after our interviews took place, with a view to re-opening as a 'town' destination.



leagues, for example, playing modified rules; allotment co-operatives; the Common Ground café and resource centre. In other words, leisure itself became the site for the production of political agency, communicatively resisting the commodification of the public leisure spaces of the city centre. For the goths, evidence of radical politics and political action in leisure time and space was less obvious: one promoter and DJ was a member of Bradford's 1-in-12 Club, an anarchist collective, and he saw goth as having common ideological ground with the punk scene. Others expressed loosely radical politics when condemning the commodification of the scene and the commodification of the city centre (see below), but for the goths the radicalization of their scene was present only in two ways; first, in the DIY culture adopted from punk, where the scene thrived on enthusiasts forming bands and running nights for the love of the music (no one got rich from thinly-attended goth nights, and the promoters we interviewed had lost money); and second, in the radical and transgressive gender politics of the scene (see Brill, 2008; Spracklen and Spracklen, forthcoming).

#### *Commodification of scenes*

Commodification of alternative scenes is a concern across subcultures (REF): to be alternative is to demonstrate individual agency, a rejection of the mainstream and a political engagement with radical politics that line up against global capitalism (REF). For our respondents in Leeds, concerns about commodification of scenes were expressed most strongly by the punks/anarchists. All of these respondents identified with the political nature of alternativism, and its rejection of commodification - and they were deeply suspicious of the ways in which mainstream commercialization was 'spoiling' punk in Leeds and across the world. One respondent noted that the scene in Leeds had become dominated by unwanted attitudes from heavy metal and rock music, with hardcore punk musicians changing their sounds and seeking commercial arrangements (payment for gigs, agents and managers, sponsorship deals, and ultimately professional contracts). For the left-wing activists, the

scene was harder to define, and each respondent operated in different leisure spaces and subcultures – but they were all able to identify the commodification of subcultural scenes as a trend that had accelerated in Leeds, with concerns raised about the ways in which urban, multicultural or street subcultures had been co-opted into commercials, videos and even corporate culture (REF).

The goths we interviewed had differing views about the commodification of the goth scene. For some of them, there was no contradiction in being expressively alternative and spending money on festivals, clothes and other products of instrumental commerce. These goths spent money comfortably to fulfil their desires to be around other goths and to look like other goths; they also had no problem accepting that newer entrants into the goth scene needed to buy their way in by engaging with these commodifying activities. But others felt their sense of belonging in the goth scene was deeper than the fashions and the music, that their long histories in the scene in Leeds determined them outside if any commercial products. For these goths, their sustained commitment to the alternative scene was more ‘true’ than newcomers who bought their way into the scene with expensive dresses.

#### *Commodification of spaces*

Some of our older respondents were careful to critique the notion that privatization, commercialization and eventization of leisure spaces in the urban environment were something that had only recently happened. They were correct to tell us of the construction of shopping malls, the closure of venues, cafes, restaurants and pubs and the restriction of movement on public spaces that happened from the 1970s onwards. When the Conservatives were in control of the country under Margaret Thatcher, large parts of Leeds’ city-centre district had been privatized under the control of a regeneration company. This company and its supporters had done much to build new offices and encourage big businesses and organizations to come to Leeds (ref). In this process, much of the privatization of leisure

spaces was complete by the 1990s alongside the gentrification of the city; the eventization of leisure spaces followed under a Labour government seeking to make economic capital from the cultural kind (ref).

All our respondents recognised the pernicious eventization of leisure spaces in the city centre, and the transformation of the landscape into an exclusive space. Just to walk through the city centre today, our respondents have to negotiate privatized zones, covered arcades, CCTV cameras, police patrols, licensed street-vendors, private security guards, the ‘City Loop’ through-road, chain stores, chain pubs, chain restaurants, cinema multiplexes, shoppers with bags full of expensive fashions, and ‘public’ squares on hire to ticketed events or ‘high end’ eateries. For the left-wing activists, the potential of using public space for political leisure has been diminished; for the punks and goths, there is a real sense of not having anywhere to go and not being welcome in the urban core. The last goth/punk/metal clothing and record shop closed three years ago – what used to be a hub of subcultural activity and community is now selling *faux* designer vintage. All our respondents recognised that Leeds has changed since some undefined time in their life histories, and none of them argued the change had been for the better: commodification of city-centre spaces had diminished our respondents’ sense of belonging. Once upon a time they had felt a part of some alternative movement in Leeds, bound by politics and/or music – now all of them felt a sense of loss or anger at the way in which the city centre had been gentrified.

#### *Still Fighting! Leisure and alternative scenes today*

The pessimism expressed in the section above is countered by the activism and communicative agency still at work among our respondents. Despite the strange death of alternative Leeds, our respondents are still busy defining their identities and politics in an oppositional way to the privatization and eventization of the city centre (and of the wider world). For the punks, being a punk is a full-time way of life, one where they are still fighting

against inequality, capitalism and fascism. Playing free gigs and being involved in leisure spaces built around squats and shared houses is for them proof of their uncompromising resistance: it is difficult to fight the instrumentality of capitalism and the nation-state, but they are finding ways of subverting the system and operating around it<sup>4</sup>. The goths still view their gothness as an intentional, positional statement, a Debordian protests against the dull world of the commercialized mainstream. These goths may be a part of the instrumentalized world but they can find goth nights, goth festivals and virtual spaces where they can explore the meaning of their alternativism and their rejection of the commercial world of pop and rock music: the rise of paganism and alternative religiosity among goths (evidenced by some of our respondents) is part of this rejection of instrumentality and an affirmation of being against the modern world. Finally, our left-wing activists refused to surrender – although most accepted that the city centre of Leeds was an ‘alien’, gentrified space, they continued to find ways of fighting the system, campaigning and undertaking direct action in solidarity with others<sup>5</sup>.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

In alternative spaces and subcultures we can see both political (communicative) action and instrumentality at work: such spaces over time have become commodified through a process first of privatization then latterly of cultural eventization. In this paper we have contended that there has been a decline in the agency of alternativism in Leeds, matched by - and related to – the strange death of alternative, public leisure spaces in the city centre. Successive

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<sup>4</sup> American science-fiction writer Harry Harrison wrote a series of stories about the criminal of the future, who he called ‘The Stainless Steel Rat’. The name was struck when the criminal realised he was like a rat on the margins of society – in older times, when things were made of wood, there were millions of rats; in the modern (future) universe built of stainless steel, only few of the toughest rats could survive, those who survived by their own wits. Speaking to our die-hard punks made us think of them as the same.

<sup>5</sup> On a day of industrial action, two of the authors who were on strike in Leeds joined the march through to the city centre. Thousands of left-wing activists gathered on streets and squares where we would normally have been unwelcome – we saw two of the respondents for this research alongside us!

decision-makers and planners have minimised then eliminated alternative leisure spaces from the urban landscape, leaving alternative scenes and groups on the margins of the city centre. There are no fences stopping any alternative people from entering the city centre, but there is nothing designed to entice them in – they are not of interest to the planners and the corporations looking to maximise their profits. The city centre of Leeds becomes a temple to the cult of liquid modernity, where Bauman's successful moderns come to worship corporatized fluidity and homogeneity, while political activists and those who critique the late modernity of global capitalism are forced to remain excluded up the road in Headingley or Chapeltown. Our goths, punks and anarchists are given a leisure space where they can protest in a Debordian sense against the instrumentality of the mainstream, but the spaces in which they protest are like the sacred places of late paganism in the Christian Roman Empire: in the woods, in the shadows, fading and half-forgotten though still much loved by those who remember the old gods.

Tony Blackshaw's book *Leisure* (2010) is an attempt to develop Bauman's concept of the liquid modern, applying it to understanding leisure in the twenty-first century. Blackshaw uses Bauman's liquid modern to declare the world has changed sufficiently for leisure to be stripped of its structural bounds and for leisure to be again the site of individual meaning and agency. As Blackshaw explains, 'the true terrain of leisure is the human imagination, that special way of feeling and seeing, an outlook turned on the world rather than reflecting it, which provides us with our own unique window on the world' (ibid., p. 124). For him, this is something that has always been the domain of leisure, but in liquid modernity this central purpose for leisure is more necessary, as the meaning attached to other parts of life such as work disappear altogether. It could be argued that the increase in hobbies and the transience of such activities in contemporary society – all the people who take up jogging or knitting or poetry for a couple of months – is evidence of this importance of leisure in liquid modernity

and the chimerical nature of liquid leisure. Leisure becomes the only thing that keeps people sane but people struggle to find a leisure activity that gives them a strong sense of fulfilment.

Further on, Blackshaw attempts to explain this in greater detail (ibid., p. 141):

[In liquid modernity, liquid] leisure ceased to be defined through the distinction between its good and bad aspects – work against leisure, serious leisure against casual leisure, leisure as freedom against leisure as constraint; instead, it acquired more and more meaning. In liquid modernity, then, it is hermeneutics that deepens the meaning of leisure, rather than good and bad taste or judgment. It is meaning, the appeal to the *unknown known* that places *my* leisure interest at the top of the modern hierarchy of culture. It is placed high by me because it has the potential to serve for infinite interpretability – as well as giving me pleasure and happiness – again and again. In liquid modernity, leisure performs a key function, then: the function of rendering meaning.

For Blackshaw, all leisure has this emancipatory potential, the ability to give us a feeling of satisfaction, a feeling that we have the power to actively make meaning in our lives, as long as we become aware of our own meaning-making abilities. This potential gives liquid leisure its importance to individuals. In a world made uncertain by the ambivalent tide of liquidity, liquid leisure provides solace and meaning and the ability to find moments of happiness. Liquid leisure offers the potential to feel something beyond the material, mundane ruts of the daily routine. Blackshaw accepts that much of what we think of as leisure in the twenty-first century does not have the same potential for such individual fulfilment (he is aware of the commodification of leisure and the commercialization of popular culture, which are two symptoms of the shift to liquid modernity) but he argues that these changes to the surface details of such activities do not block the transformative possibilities of leisure. As he

concludes, ‘the greatest virtue of leisure is that it allows us to suspend for the time being the weight of the world, to be irresponsible and delight in it’ (ibid., p. 148).

Liquidity is a useful metaphor and a useful way of thinking about the distinctive features of some late modern societies, transformed by global links, but there is no additional explanatory value in making the argument that liquid modernity is a complete break with the past. All modern societies exist in a number of transitional stages: like postmodernity, liquid modernity is an interesting and useful hermeneutic device but it cannot be said to have overtaken modernity completely. Also, there is no necessary reason to argue that liquid leisure is anything different from the leisure that has always existed in the lives of humans from before history (see Spracklen, 2011). There has always been a transformative potential to leisure, a communicative space in which individuals have used leisure to make new meaning, to create new discourses and shape new social networks: what we have at the end of the analysis is the idea that there is a form of leisure that is important to us, that we have the power to make new meaning out of our leisure practices, and there are some leisure forms that do not allow this meaning-making to occur.

Perhaps at first glance contrary to Amin’s (2008: 5) scepticism regarding the intricate relationship ‘between urban public space, civic culture and political formation’, this paper contests that particular places and particular leisure spaces were and are central to the construction and experience of specific scenes. We share Amin’s (2008: 6) concern, however, that the canonical reading of ‘public space’ often has myopic or mythic implications when it comes to public encounters: whilst drawing on a growing catalogue of passers-by, planners’ and architects’ impressions of building works in progress displace members of scenes such as those that inform this study from their visualisations of urban space. The larger part of the literature on civic participation, urban regeneration and the potential of culture to empower communities similarly implicitly presupposes that – if well designed and managed (Carr et al.

1993; also see, critically, Amin 2008) – urban space enables an engaged, tolerant and empowered citizenry to mingle freely. Whilst agreeing with Amin (2008: 7) that it is ‘too heroic a leap to assume that making a city’s public spaces more vibrant and inclusive will improve urban democracy’, we yet insist on the importance of particular spaces for the formation of alternative scenes (Iveson 2010). These spaces may not be public, in fact more often than not they are private venues, pubs and clubs or buildings owned and/or run by societies and unions or part of the virtual world of social networking sites. The leisure spaces that emerge as important places in the formation, history and development of particular alternative scenes are furthermore often characterised by their exclusions as well as inclusions.



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