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# The Paradox of Parkour: Conformity, Resistance and Spatial Exclusion

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**Keywords:** Parkour; Deviant Leisure; Consumerism; Urban Space; Prosumption; Resistance

## Introduction

The study of parkour and its legitimacy within urban space follows the 'spatial turn' in criminology which has developed a renewed interest in issues of urban transgression, hyper-regulated cities, and spatial exclusion (Atkinson, 2015; Campbell, 2013; Ferrell, 2001; 2006; Hayward, 2004; 2012; Kindynis, 2016; Raymen, 2016; Winlow and Hall, 2013). For the most part, the study of parkour, along with other 'transgressive' practices of spatial contestation such as skateboarding, urban exploration and graffiti, has positioned its practice as a politicised form of symbolic and performative resistance to the striated nature of late-capitalist cities (Atkinson, 2009; Bornaz, 2008; Chiu, 2009; Daskalaki et al, 2008; Ferrell, 1996; 2001; 2006; Garrett, 2013; Lamb, 2014; Ugolotti, 2014).

However, after two years of ethnographic immersion within a parkour community in the North East of England, this article argues that this theoretical approach obscures the acknowledgment of a simple but fundamental *paradox* that exists at the heart of the burgeoning lifestyle sport of parkour and freerunning. This is the paradox that, in more ways than not, parkour's contemporary practice is *hyper-conformist* to the underlying values of neoliberal consumer capitalism, whilst continuing to be aggressively excluded (albeit inconsistently) from the hyper-regulated environs of the late-capitalist city. The spectacle of parkour has been incorporated into mainstream consumer capitalism through advertising and appearances in feature films, its formal 'sportification'<sup>1</sup>, and the creation of clothing lines, 'parkour fashion' and style accessories (Angel, 2011; Stapleton and Terrio, 2010; Wheaton, 2013). Overwhelmingly (though not universally) traceurs and freerunners have actively solicited and embraced parkour's drift into the mainstream; evidenced by the ever-proliferating array of parkour brands, 'teams' and fee-paying gyms led by parkour communities<sup>2</sup>. The participants of my own ethnographic study were no exception, as they started professional coaching companies, indoor fee-paying gyms and clothing lines. They employed their physical skills to

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<sup>1</sup> On 11<sup>th</sup> January 2017, parkour was formally recognised as a sport within the UK, making its governing body, ParkourUK, eligible for funding from Sport England and other funding bodies. Sport England's most recent 'Active Lives' survey found that approximately 96,700 people regularly participate in parkour in England (Sport England, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Parkour Generations; Storrer; Storm; Tempest Freerunning; 3Run; Take Flight; Airborn Academy; Apeuro; Verang; Lachette; Etre-Fort are just a few examples of the parkour teams and brands throughout the parkour community. Talented traceurs have featured in TV shows such as *Ninja Warrior UK*, along with other reality TV shows and feature films.

become stunt-work athletes and used their large social media followings to make money as 'prosumers' by guerrilla advertising related products and commodities on behalf of global corporations. Contrasted against the indignity of precarious zero-hour contract work in a shrinking labour market (Lloyd, 2012), parkour's commodification provided the alluring prospect of a source of income whilst preserving a flexible, culturally relevant and youthful lifestyle of adventure and passion; part of the broader disintegration of the line between work and leisure (Berardi, 2009; Cederstrom and Fleming, 2012; Stebbins, 1995).

Nevertheless, parkour continues to be aggressively excluded from central urban spaces of consumption and domesticity. This article argues that this paradox of parkour is in fact a *self-inflicted contradiction* of global capitalism's own making, emerging out of Western liberal capitalism's deindustrialisation and the shift from production to consumption. Quite simply, this shift had the dual effect of intensifying consumer capitalism's reliance upon the cultivation of 'cool transgressive' identities such as parkour at the very moment at which local post-industrial urban economies developed a reliance upon 'regenerated', hyper-regulated and sanitised urban non-spaces of consumption (Augé, 1995; Hayward, 2004; Minton, 2012; Mould, 2015; Raymen, 2016; Smith, 1996; Zukin, 1995). These developments have cast parkour into a curious and ever-shifting position at the nexus between illegitimate 'deviance' and legitimate leisure (Smith and Raymen, 2016), whereby parkour conforms and contributes to the consumer capitalist project, whilst simultaneously transgressing the often arbitrary and situation-specific rules of pseudo-public urban space. Moreover, the paradox of parkour does not constitute a problem to be resolved for contemporary consumer capitalism. Rather, *it is this precise tension that constitutes a central aspect of parkour's attraction as a form of 'safe transgression'*. In consumerism's era of 'cool individualism', in which there is a demand to 'fit in' while 'sticking out', to transgress and cultivate 'deviant' identities is steadfastly conformist (Barber, 2007; Hall et al, 2008; Hall and Winlow, 2007; Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014; Heath and Potter, 2006 Miles, 2015).

The present article is based upon two years of ethnographic fieldwork among traceurs and security guards in the North East of England, and draws upon the emerging deviant leisure perspective (Smith and Raymen, 2016), ultra-realist criminological theory (Hall and Winlow, 2015), and theoretical discussions of spatial exclusion in late-capitalist cities. During this time, I immersed myself within the local parkour community, training with the traceurs out in the city, travelling with them to train abroad, and attended and helped out with their self-started fee-paying gym and coaching sessions<sup>3</sup>. This

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<sup>3</sup> The reader should not that at one stage of the research I was also living with some of the traceurs (see Ancrum, 2012 on living in the field). While other ethnographic research into parkour appears to focus exclusively on the parkour jam and the embodied spatial practice of parkour itself, I wanted to contextualise the role that parkour played within the wider orbits of these young men's lives as they attempted to make the difficult transition into adulthood under late-capitalism; and how this shaped their entrepreneurial efforts to move into the proliferating markets of commodified lifestyle sports. This involved being more deeply involved in the lives of my participants outside of the parkour jams, training sessions and exhibitions in order to

facilitated insights into the role of parkour in the wider orbits of their lives, its embodied practice, how they navigated the spatial dynamics of the city and how they dealt with issues of spatial exclusion.

The aim of this article is to outline and explain the paradox of parkour, situated within an analysis and critique of post-industrial consumer capitalism. This requires an abandonment of discourses of 'resistance' surrounding the practice of parkour. The remainder of this article is initially dedicated to a critique of the concept of 'resistance' as it has been used within criminological theory (see Hall and Winlow, 2007; Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014 for more), returning to economic, political and cultural shifts in the mid-late twentieth century to show how individualised forms of stylised 'politics' and 'deviant' identities continue to provide the driving energy through which consumer capitalism reproduces itself. The article will then progress on to discuss parkour as a form of 'prosumption', and how its presence on social media and the traceurs' entrepreneurial efforts perfectly serve updated modes of capital accumulation which have collapsed production and consumption into the same act. Lastly, and bringing the paradox of parkour full circle, the article will turn to the transformation and governance of late-capitalist urban space. This section returns to some of themes around global economic shifts and changes in leisure and consumer markets, situated within a spatial context of capital's 'return to the centre' (Smith, 1996). It re-evaluates the nature and function of the *entirety* of space for post-industrial consumer economies in order to present the notion of *systemic spatial violence*. Far from engaging in a spatial cleansing that was emotively driven by a disdain or 'moral panic' surrounding youth (Atkinson and Young, 2008; Ugolotti, 2014), the security guards interviewed as part of this study were acutely aware of the conformist and harmless nature of parkour's practice, simply enforcing the spatio-behavioural controls that are necessary for sanitised and exclusive spaces of pseudo-public urban consumption (Hayward, 2012). Therefore, this section brings the central argument of this article full-circle. It details the complex double-bind that post-industrial capitalism has created for itself in which it simultaneously cultivates the energy and desire for lifestyle identities such as parkour whilst also having to harness and re-direct them, at times prohibitively, into particular spatial contexts in accordance with consumer capitalism's renewed reliance upon sanitised and intensely regulated asocial urban spaces.

### **Rethinking Parkour as Resistance**

"Whereas genuine political resistance co-ordinates 'otherness' into a political 'sameness' *against* the system, cultural micro-resistance is an atomized, sublimated and eminently domesticable form that works *with* the system, and becomes the

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understand the role and meaning parkour occupied within the wider struggles, challenges and anxieties of these youth transitions and how they shaped their underlying motivations and attraction to parkour and freerunning.

inevitable road to tighter incorporation; which is why, with a bit of cautious monitoring, it is allowed to flourish” (Hall and Winlow, 2007: 84; original emphasis).

To theorise transgressive youth ‘subcultures’ such as parkour as a form of rebellion or anti-capitalist ‘resistance’ has been extremely popular within academia and popular culture. Endless examples can be found within the criminological, cultural and youth studies literature in which everything from busking, punk fashion, street gangs, rioting, looting, binge drinking and even watching television soap operas have been described as ‘resistance’ (Brotherton, 2004; Brown, 1994; Hebdige, 1979; Millington, 2011; Nicholls, 2016; Young, 2011).

The internet-sensation ‘cultural lifestyle sport’ of parkour and freerunning is no exception. As a practice in which one uses only their body to re-appropriate the physical environment and move through urban space efficiently and aesthetically, parkour has been depicted as a rich form of spatial politics and a performative display of resistance against the hyper-regulation of consumer-capitalist urban space (Bavington, 2007; Bornaz, 2008; Mould, 2016; Lamb, 2014). There are innumerable quotes, passages and examples of this perspective, with Atkinson (2009) and Daskalaki et al (2008) providing perhaps the most explicit examples. They argue that “parkour is a tactic the disempowered employ in order to misappropriate and corrupt these consumerist and dehumanising spaces” (Daskalaki et al, 2008: 58), and that “*traceurs* despise suffocatingly organized...and consumer-based cultural experiences and spaces” (Atkinson, 2009: 179). Similarly, Oli Mould (2015: 128) has argued that those “who infiltrate a building site or go into a sewer are eschewing the capitalistic functionality of those objects and realising an alternative function”

The concept of resistance, particularly as it pertains to the urban spatial realm, has been a central concept within cultural criminological theory with its early symbolic interactionist underpinnings<sup>4</sup> (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995). Viewed through this lens, the *traceurs* are exercising their ‘right to the city’ through the practice of parkour (see Iveson, 2013; Lamb, 2014). For these scholars one can enact the right to the city simply by temporarily re-appropriating urban spaces through cultural and micro-spatial practices such as parkour, graffiti or ‘guerilla benching’. However this concept of ‘the right to the city’, originally coined by Lefebvre (1991), has turned into an intellectual

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted here that cultural criminological analyses have made significant theoretical advances in recent years; with the likes of Linnemann (2016); Wakeman (2014; 2016); and Smith and Raymen (2016) drawing upon cutting-edge criminological theory and continental philosophy to develop more sophisticated and materialist accounts of deviance within its cultural and political-economic context. While the criminological critique of ‘resistance’ as a concept was once the exclusive domain of ultra-realist criminological thinkers (Hall and Winlow, 2007), cultural criminologists such as Keith Hayward (2015) have made calls for criminologists to be more circumspect in their use of the term resistance. Hayward has called for scholars to develop greater conceptual clarity around the term resistance and acknowledge that genuine political resistance occurs very rarely; or risk “being swept away if it continues to rely on tales of crypto-Marxist resistance, long-past-their-sell-by-date criminological concepts like moral panic theory, or tautological psycho-political aphorisms like ‘masculinity causes male crime’” (Hayward, 2015: 310).

and political buzzword which has ritualistically used, re-used and distorted to the extent that it rarely resembles its original meaning (for critiques, see Harvey, 2008; 2012; Marcuse, 2009; Raymen, 2016). The right to the city, as certain scholars recall, is not merely a right to access services or individualistic interests. It is a much broader concept which involves the right to change ourselves and our society by changing the *larger urbanisation process itself*. As David Harvey (2012) remarks, the right to the city is an 'empty signifier'. It is defined by who controls the urban, how it is designed and governed at a political, economic and cultural level, and thus, who gets to fill this 'empty signifier' with meaning. As Marcuse (2009: 193) writes:

"The homeless person in Los Angeles has not won the right to the city when he is allowed to sleep on a park bench in the centre. Much more is involved, and the concept is as to a collectivity of rights, not individualistic rights."

The ambiguous reduction of this broader political concept to the level of micro individualistic resistance is emblematic of what Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) observe as the remarkable paucity of consensus on the parameters of what constitutes 'resistance'. As they argue, there is little conceptual basis for how we discern what is genuine resistance and what is not, nor is there much rigour or clarity to the term as an analytical concept—particularly concerning considering its frequent use. As Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) and others have argued, what is more common is that a somewhat controversial or unusual subject matter (ironically usually noticed through popular culture) is described ethnographically with great richness, coated with a dense sheen of resistance and simply upheld as an edgy form of cultural politics. Winlow (2012) suggests that this scanning of the post-political landscape for anything that appears to be a potential form of authentic resistance actually functions as a form of Žižekian *fetishistic disavowal*. This is a psychosocial process in which our conscious knowledge that society has succumbed to the pernicious influence of consumerism is systematically made unconscious: *I know but I don't want to know, therefore I don't know* (Žižek, 2008). Moreover, Winlow argues that we must not underestimate the remarkable alacrity of capitalism to incorporate self-critique into its own reproduction:

"Contemporary capitalism's self-critique has a soporific effect and functions to prevent genuine political opposition. There is no need to make the personal sacrifices necessary to drive social renewal: Look! The system is being held to account, and is subject to constant gradualist democratic rehabilitation. The problem is of course that the system is being held to account by its own institutions and cultures, and that this image of constant political critique and dialogue exists in order to ensure that the current order continues" (Winlow, 2012: 30)

Academic perspectives which maintain parkour as a form of politicised resistance fail to acknowledge how the shift to this form of stylised identity 'politics' actually emerged

from shifts in the global economy and their attendant social, cultural and political impact. Perhaps it is no surprise that the development of these academic perspectives emerged parallel to historical, political and economic shifts which moved the Left away from politics and identities rooted in more stable forms of collectivism and towards a new 'cultural left' of individualised and fragmented stylised politics (Echolls, 1994; Epstein, 1991). While Fordist social structures relied upon stable forms of collective identities such as family, class, community and politics (Willis, 1977); the offshoring of industry and flexibilisation of labour structurally and systematically eviscerated these forms of collective identity. As Western capitalism's real economy became increasingly predicated around consumption, the polysemic 'promise' of the leisure and consumer industries moved into the void left by these obsolete structures of modernity as the primary basis around which the subject could construct a coherent sense of self. Postmodernist scepticism abounded towards old forms of collectivism, which were viewed as archaic and oppressive to the pluralistic worlds of identity (Winlow and Hall, 2012). More stable and enduring identities were a burden upon the subject's unique individuality and the myriad of exciting opportunities offered by leisure markets and consumer culture that appeared to give the subject an autonomous freedom to construct and reconstruct their identities as they wished (Miles, 2015; Riley et al, 2013). Life became a creative project in which there was a new cultural command to know oneself, enjoy oneself and construct a free and unique identity rooted in individualism by staying detached from the oppressive and homogenising social structures of modernity. As society fragmented, with the emphasis being upon differentiation rather than commonality, the underlying energies of leisure and consumerism briefly discussed earlier were harnessed by the neoliberal ethic of individualism. Leisure and consumption became key arenas in which the individual can distinguish themselves from 'the herd'.

Numerous scholars of politics and the emergence of the 1960s counter-culture of 'do-it-yourself' cultural politics have argued that these political developments reflected a hangover of the failure to overthrow the capitalist state and actively worked *with* rather than against capitalism's reconfigured global consumer economy (Epstein, 1991; Heath and Potter, 2006; McKay, 1998). The counter-culture became an era which reduced 'politics' to the level of the individual in which 'being political' was about self-expression and identity in everyday life through music, leisure habits, consumer habits and style (Hebdige, 1979). As Echolls (1994) notes, politics was no longer about the sacrificing of oneself to larger political causes, ideas and social change. Instead, the 'political lifestyle' became a vaguely dissenting and individualised way of forming a 'cool', unique and self-fulfilling identity. To appear, through one's image and lifestyle, to be resistant to the 'establishment' became not a means to larger change, but an accomplished end in itself. As Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014: 32) explain: "In sum, what really took place in the counter culture was a change in culture and lifestyle rather than a revolution in politics. The changes that took place occurred through pleasure rather than power". In reality, of course, in an era in which there is a premium upon individualised identities—

particularly 'new', 'cool' and 'rebellious' identities at the socio-cultural margin—the notion that there can be 'resistance at the point of consumption' simply provides the socio-cultural energy and new niche consumer markets of identity that consumer capitalism requires to drive itself forward. This apparent 'tension' between rebellion and conformity in the commodification of parkour is *not a tension at all*, but rather a *vital* and *deliberate* component of consumerism's cultural-economic apparatus (Hall et al, 2008).

It is useful to see how these ideas can be expressly found in the words of Franny and Ty, who discuss the attraction to parkour as a form of 'safe transgression', excitement and identity:

*"Nobody would ever admit it, but you do feel really fucking cool and a bit of a bad lad when you're up doing a roof mission or whatever. The feeling is good in and of itself. Even if it was completely allowed, I'd still do it. But the image and that, especially the roof missions, it does make it even better. You're up there, it's dark, you see the street lights below, you hear the sounds of the city and that. The graffiti is everywhere. You've gotta stop, wait and look to see if anyone is coming. Hoods up, all that [Laughs]. That's definitely part of it. I'd never tell anyone else that though" (Franny, 22 years old)*

*"Ty: Ah mate, it [the renegade image] is definitely part of it. We're little white boys climbing round buildings, but when we do roof missions we wear balaclavas to cover our faces like we're fucking bandits or something? Why would we do that? Nobody cares that much about us. Because even if we get caught, we can talk our way out of it [...]. I just mean we're all white, young kids. We're all pretty smart, we can speak respectful to coppers or security. As soon as we open our mouths they know we aren't trouble. So you know you're never gonna get into 'owt serious." (Ty, 19 years old)*

It might be tempting to limit this analysis to the immediate and affective-corporeal<sup>5</sup> 'sneaky thrills' of transgression (Ferrell, 1998; Katz, 1988). While this emotional foreground is important, it is vital to build beyond this to understand how these embodied experiences of transgression are almost pre-emptively situated within the symbolic logic and language of consumer culture. Franny and Ty's words are particularly instructive here. As they attempt to make coherent sense of their pre-discursive, incoherent and affective-embodied experience; they associate it with the existing symbolism of urban renegades and the popular cultural iconography of the

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<sup>5</sup> This article does not underestimate the centrality of embodied experience to the enjoyment of parkour. To reduce the traceurs motivations for practicing parkour as a practice in external and aesthetic identity formation would be unfair and inaccurate, as the embodied and experiential practice of parkour informs this identity as well. Much like other transgressive urban and spatial practices, the corporeal sensations, affective experiences and intimately embodied connection with space and place is undeniably at the heart of traceurs motivations. This tension between internalised embodied sensations and the externalised and instrumental use of parkour as identity, spectacle and career can be conceived of as a *tension* running through parkour, reflective of the wider tension within the deviant-leisure nexus it occupies.



transgressive urban sphere (Ilan, 2012). The traceurs go through a constant and almost instantaneous cycle of affective embodied experience and symbolic processing and translation; registering the non-representational experience of the 'urban' in their bodies and then as, Ty and Franny describe, within the realm of the symbolic through the wearing of balaclavas and hoods like they're bandits or outlaws. In this regard, while the embodied experience of parkour is indeed enjoyable, they also revel in the symbolically processed self-image of 'cool renegades'.

Furthermore, it is important to contextualise parkour's transgressive identity within a consideration of the broader competitive-individualistic relations of consumer society. As Hall (2012a) has argued, these are social relations that are based upon differentiation and an elevation of the self through the comparative denigration of others. 'Huse, a 20 year old traceur who discussed his initiation into parkour and freerunning:

*"I suppose what I like about parkour is that it feels like you're doing summat. You hang out with your mates like everybody else does and it's all fun and that. But they're [other young people] wasting their money. Boozing, drugs, whatever. It's just pissing it away. Being a freerunner, you're not a tosser like everybody else. You look at them and they could be anybody. Whereas we're freerunners. My mate got me started and he was showing me videos on YouTube of these lads doing parkour. Balaclavas on, always at the edge of things. Like they're on a rooftop and the lights are down there and that's where the action is, where everybody should want to be. But they're up there doing their own thing, at the edges of it all, free from all the other bullshit. It was just me and something none of the other tossers were doing."*

The transgressive iconography of parkour to which 'Huse refers has been effectively capitalised upon by advertising or television executives attempting to utilise parkour or other transgressive practices such as urban exploration (Kindynis, 2016). Documentaries such as *Jump Britain* (2005) have drawn upon this usual narrative depicting the traceurs as the loveable 'bandit outlaws' critiquing capitalist hegemony over contemporary city spaces with their subversive movement. The documentaries drew on subcultural theorists to add an intellectual and 'critical' flavour, despite the flaws of subcultural theory in assuming that the value-system of the traceurs is distinct and different to the rest of mainstream consumer society. The spectacular footage of athletes effortlessly traversing the cityscape, combined with the underlying narrative of transgressive urban subversion, captivated British audiences, being just 'transgressive enough to be cool' (Fenwick and Hayward, 2000). All of my participants mentioned *Jump London* and *Jump Britain* as either propelling them into parkour, or confirming their commitment to its practice. Indeed, even Angel (2011) mentions *Jump London* and its veneer of transgressive politicised spatial practice as piquing her filmmaking and academic interests. Franny (22 years old), mirroring Miles (1998) observation that

there is a contemporary demand on consumers to 'fit in' while 'sticking out', described it perfectly:

*"When Jump Britain hit, it just had everything I was looking for at that time. I was a teenager, trying to kind of find my place. Just kind of being something...having a crowd you know? The worst thing that could happen to you at school is when nobody knows what you're about. That's worse than being a fucking geek. It was just something so cool, so different, but at the same time it's not different in a bad way like the nerdy kids at school who are into Star Wars and that. It was something different which tapped into all the same cool stuff. The image, the moves...the music that went with it. Guys were just doing something that nobody else was doing, but they were doing it to Jay-Z music. It was awesome and I was like I've gotta get on this."*

Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) provide more rigour to resistance as a political concept and process. They argue that, by necessity, effective political resistance must transcend or transform the existing *doxa*—those common sense beliefs, ideas, politics and ideals which have ceased to appear political or ideological. Therefore, while much of 'resistance' is conceived of in negative terms as merely opposing or defying, Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) argue that resistance should be conceived of as a three-stage process. Stage one of this process are inventive cultural forms of anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist and rebellious sentiment. Stage 2 is *imitation*, in which these cultural forms and sentiments become more ubiquitous and form the default position in liberal post-modern society. Stage three is the *transformative* phase which acts as a positive force for real change in political-economy, urbanisation, finance and ecological policy through organised political action rather than fragmented and atomised interest-group expressions of disillusionment. Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) argue that genuine resistance is quite rare, as much resistance is 'hijacked' prior to the third stage. The fragmented and identity-based nature of cultural politics is co-opted through Hollywood movies, profiteering music stars such as Bono or, at a smaller scale, through the commodification of practices such as parkour.

This notion of resistance as a three-stage process is useful and certain brings more rigour, clarity and the need for a transcendence of capitalist political-economy to the foreground. However, its argument that resistance is hijacked and aggressively 'coopted' prior to the third stage fails to account for the powerful and insidious nature of ideology and how it actually shapes and co-opts these forms of inventive cultural resistance at its 'stage one' origins. Applied to parkour, Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) depict a situation in which parkour previously held some politically subversive potential that has been snatched away by the predatory corporations looking to cash in on the next popular thing. This scenario, as cultural criminologists have described (Ferrell et. al, 2008), maintains the illusion that just as consumer capitalism can co-opt culturally resistant practices, such practices can be undermined and co-opted back in an endless

back and forth tussle reflecting the ‘spirals and loops’ of cultural meaning. With regards to parkour, it would perhaps be more accurate to use Mark Fisher’s (2009) notion of *precorporation*. This suggests that, at the level of aesthetic and cultural values, parkour was pre-emptively shaped by consumer identities and logic:

“What we are dealing with now is *not* the *incorporation* of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture” (Fisher, 2009: 9; emphasis added)

Fisher uses the example of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana, who offered a despondent voice of a generation who seemed desperate to (providing another musical reference) ‘rage against the machine’, but knew that “nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV” (Fisher, 2009: 9). Arguably, the same is true of parkour. Nothing sells better in hyper-regulated capitalist cities than an alleged critique of hyper-regulated capitalist cities; an example of the ‘soporific effect’ described by Winlow (2012) earlier. However, what is important to note is that parkour’s aesthetic attraction was, prior to any commodification, pre-emptively shaped and organised around consumer capitalist values which implicitly privilege individualism and a counter-cultural *differentiation* of themselves from the ‘mainstream’. In this regard, parkour was always-already susceptible to becoming another niche market in which traceurs bring together a variety of consumption habits around technology, music, fashion and fee-paying gyms as part of its cultural lifestyle—all of which are becoming more specific and expensive. As Holt (2002) describes:

“But rather than a revolutionary vanguard, such consumers are more accurately theorised as participants in a countercultural movement that, working in concert with innovative firms, pursued market-based solutions to the contradictions of modern consumer culture. Consumers are revolutionary only insofar as they assist entrepreneurial firms to tear down the old branding paradigm and create opportunities for companies that understand emerging new principles. Revolutionary consumers helped to create the market for Volkswagen and Nike and accelerated the demise of Sears and Oldsmobile. *They never threatened the market itself*. What has been termed ‘resistance’ is actually a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself” (Holt, 2002: 89, emphasis added).

Therefore, at the heart of parkour’s practice, and indeed late-capitalism more generally, there is not a homology but a purposeful dynamic tension between values and regulatory norms, transgression and conformity. Moreover, understanding this *precorporated* rebellion-conformity dynamic that has emerged out of changes in politics, culture and global capitalism also helps explain the parkour’s general *solicitation* of this move into commodified markets. This section has outlined the first half of the paradox

of parkour, setting the stage for understanding how parkour not only works perfectly with the underlying dynamics of consumerism and identity, but also the updated modes of capital accumulation as a form of 'productive consumption'. It is to this aspect of parkour as a 'lifestyle sport', and the disintegrating line between work and leisure, that we now turn.

### **The Labour of Leisure: Parkour in a 'Prosumer' Economy**

*Parkour's my whole life mate. It's my social life, it's my livelihood. Basically it's who I am. It's on my mind 24/7. It's not like other things. I don't turn up once a week to train the way a few lads turn up once a week for a 5-a-side. If I'm not out training, then I'm setting up bookings. If I'm not doing that, I'm managing the Facebook and Instagram. I'm editing videos, thinking of new ideas, working on my body. I try to read something that's gonna make me better every week...It can be a bit knacker like, but that's what you've gotta do (Chez, 24 years old)*

As the quote above suggests, a significant number of my participants set up professional coaching companies, indoor fee-paying gyms, parkour clothing lines and fitness companies, or used their parkour skills to become stunt-work athletes. This is reflective of a few broader trends, first among which is the increasingly obsolete distinction between work and leisure. For the present-day worker-consumer, leisure and work bleed into one another through networking, social media and after-work drinks (Berardi, 2009). For the traceurs, parkour could be conceived as both a form of 'serious leisure' and 'occupational devotion' (Stebbins, 1995). They were constantly involved in activities surrounding parkour as a form of leisure, but also as part of their livelihood and efforts to scrape together a living and propel themselves into a more prominent position of status within the parkour scene.

Secondly, when parkour is contextualised within the wider orbits of the traceurs lives<sup>6</sup>, we can observe how the homogenised, fragmented and precarious nature of much available work under late-capitalism crashes against consumerism's insistence on life as a creative project of unique and culturally relevant lifestyle and identity. The young men who are the focus of this thesis entered the early stages of adulthood in an era of post-crash capitalism which, in almost all facets of social and cultural life, can be characterised by instability, anxiety and uncertainty (Lloyd, 2013). The work and employment opportunities available to these young men were few, insecure and poorly paid. Many of the traceurs worked or had previously worked zero-hour contracts in the

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<sup>6</sup> This is, I argue, a significant oversight of existing ethnographic research into parkour and other cultural lifestyle sports which have disproportionately focused on the parkour jam and its practice in the city. This is partially a product of the theoretical approach taken, with much ethnographic research exclusively focusing on the phenomenological, emotional and embodied experience of its practice (Brunner, 2010; Fuggle, 2008; Garrett, 2013; Saville, 2008); or upon the spatial dynamics of its practice (Atkinson, 2009; Daskalaki et al, 2008; Lamb, 2014). Consequently, research has paid disproportionate attention to the parkour jams instead of a more comprehensive exploration of parkour within the wider lived experience, anxieties, dreams and desires of these young people.

hospitality, retail and customer service sectors which due to their fragmented workforce and precariousness offered little satisfaction, gratification, or sense of collective identity as labour once had in years past (Willis, 1979). More importantly, they were monotonous, homogeneous and *anonymous*; thoroughly incongruent with the expressive individualism of consumer capitalism and their desired and idealised lifestyles of freedom and adventure. All of these young men laboured under the unattainability of traditional ideas about the trajectory of the life course as they tried to navigate the transitions from education into adulthood (see Smith, 2014). These are the echoes of a bygone Symbolic Order of modernity which, while once holding significance in the North East, has since vanished (Lloyd, 2012). Now these narrative remnants are passed down through nostalgic story-telling and unrealistic expectations of older relatives who enjoyed a comparatively stable and comprehensible life-course (Byrne, 1989; Robinson, 2002; Winlow, 2001); a life that is heard by the traceurs as an almost a mystical world that, for them, has never existed. Simultaneously, they wrestled with a conflicting cultural obsession with youth, extended adolescence, individualistic identity and 'the cultural injunction to enjoy' (Smith, 2014; Žižek, 2002a). This demands the delay or eschewal of more adult responsibilities or stable and permanent identities which could be a burden upon their individuality and creative life project (Smith, 2014; Winlow and Hall, 2006).

Overall, the traceurs experience of the transition into early adulthood could be conceived of what Smith (2014: 106) describes as a 'psychosocial tug of war'. The demands and responsibilities of adulthood were seen as inevitable and inescapable. They would arrive eventually in the forms of bills to pay, desired or enforced independence from parents and families, and the intensified need for commitment in romantic relationships that needed to be 'going somewhere'. However the traceurs were intent on staving off cultural obsolescence and maintaining a youthful identity of style, adventure and exploration to preserve a semblance of self-assurance and an aura of 'cool'. A number of the traceurs would attempt to resolve this tension entirely and have the best of both worlds by utilising parkour as a livelihood and capitalising on the popular markets for cultural and aesthetic forms of transgression (Heath and Potter, 2006); thereby drifting across the vanishing line from amateur to professional (Stebbins, 1995).

This leads us onto the third broad trend. As a result of these developments, parkour and its followers are a prime example of the notion of the "productive consumer" or 'prosumer', which has been vital in the evolution of contemporary capital accumulation in an era of reduced labour and production costs. These trends contribute to the scarcity of work and the precariousness of late-capitalism which have intensified the need for 'cool', youthful, edgy and exciting leisure and work identities discussed above (Barber, 2007; Heath and Potter, 2006; Miles, 1998; 2015). In their polemic *Dead Man Working*, Cederström and Fleming (2012) make the argument that in our contemporary mode of late-capitalism, the most prominent area of contention and exploitation is not between capital and labour, but between capital and *life*. In order to circumvent its

periodic crises (Harvey, 2010; 2014) and maximise its potential for profit, capitalism seeks to extract value from every corner of life. Under Fordism, leisure and the weekends were relatively free from the world of work, serving as a mode of relaxation and recharging the industrial worker who was primarily exploited for the physical capacities of the body, its muscles and energy (Berardi, 2009). It mattered not if the labour force were estranged from their work, however in an economy reliant upon 'affective labour' in a wide range of fields Berardi (2009) argues that the buzz of life had to be imitated or 'mainlined' into the veins of work. Cederström and Fleming (2012) draw on a wide range of examples of this imitation of life within the office-world of work. Team-building exercises, ice-breakers, being friends with colleagues on social media, 'casual Fridays' and the general commandment to 'be yourself' in the work place are all examples.

However, as Cederström and Fleming (2012: 17) also observe: "this displacement of non-work into the office also entails the obverse, the shift of work into all pockets of life". The value-creating capacity of workers is enhanced by developing a symbiotic relationship between life and work in which our being, our very existence *becomes* the job entirely (Berardi, 2009). This can be seen in the centrality of work to identity, its prominent position on our social media profiles, and its staple feature within small talk: '*So what do you do for a living?*' The irony is not lost on this author who writes this sentence on a Saturday afternoon in his office, before returning to the 'day job' of teaching and administration during contracted hours.

When looking at parkour and other lifestyle sports as forms of work, deviance and leisure it is imperative that we situate their commodification and professionalization within present and updated modes of capital accumulation. It is undeniable that there has been a shift away from the traditional production/consumption/profit process of capital accumulation and toward a situation in which production and consumption collapse into one another to create forms of 'productive consumption' or 'prosumption', in which "the plundering of "life itself is now the most lucrative kind of capital being put to work" (Cederström and Fleming, 2012: 14). User-generated websites such as YouTube, eBay and TripAdvisor rely on this kind of energy as the consumers of the sites are also implicitly involved in producing its content. However, social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are the textbook examples of the 'productive consumer'. Users mostly engage in what Winlow and Hall (2013: 115) describe as 'low-level immaterial labour'. The photos, statuses, videos and re-tweets—the core content of the sites—are essentially free labour, made up of the everyday lives of users which is voluntarily provided. This is crucial for an understanding of how changes in global capitalism have created the conditions in which parkour can thrive as a popular cultural lifestyle sport and another form of lifestyle consumption which are vital to the economy.

In the case of this study, Chez's quote above is example enough, and Wheaton's (2013) description of parkour as a 'lifestyle sport' could not be more appropriate. Parkour is

arguably the quintessential example of prosumption. As mentioned earlier, parkour is an entire way of life which is, to use the words of Ty (19 years old) 'all-consuming':

*"It's not like when you're out training you're a freerunner and when you go home you're not. It's more than that. It's like all-consuming. The shit you watch on YouTube, the accounts you follow. You'll hear music on the radio and think 'ah that'd be sick to train to or that'd make a proper good soundtrack to a video'. It's all the time."*

Arguably, it is on social media where parkour and other cultural lifestyle sports 'live' and grow. One of my participants, Andy, is a 33-year old traceur who has been involved with UK parkour since its first 'official' jam in the UK in 2003. He has observed parkour's media-savvy evolution in conjunction with the rise and prominence of social media:

*Andy: It [social media] has definitely made it more individualistic. You see guys who brag about training with this person or that person. But that visible kind of competitiveness dates back to its earliest origins over here [in the UK]. At its earliest stages with Urban Freeflow [parkour company] it was about we need to do this to be central to the parkour community and sell more t-shirts. It's not a new thing it's just become more refined. Now, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube—Web 2.0—is where parkour makes its money and keeps itself growing. The levels of media savvy has kind of...you see guys who years ago were kind of breaking through and producing amazing videos and now they own clothing brands and they have to keep producing content. They have to be very conscious of how and when they release that content. So it's all look-books, and then there's teasers for look-books, there's teasers to season launches and clothing lines and new apparel and all sorts. So these guys have learned to really harness the media stuff that they use just as those Web 2.0 sites benefit and harness people wanting to fill up their sites with stuff like parkour. I mean, it's an advertisers dream. And for people who watch it, that's why social media is great for it...[pauses]...and actually why parkour is great for social media."*

Andy's comments indicate how parkour and its relationship to social media work perfectly with these forms of late-modern capitalist accumulation. As we have explored earlier, parkour and other cultural lifestyle sports such as urban exploration are pre-emptively shaped by a wider late-modern 'will to representation' (Yar, 2012). Writing about urban exploration, Kindynis (2016: 8) argues that, "any architectural, historical or political interests or motivations are...largely subordinated to the *production and consumption of images*" (emphasis added). However, while such a culture of narcissism (Hall et al, 2008) is undeniably important, we should also consider how these social media platforms—working perfectly with prosumer modes of capitalist accumulation—are also the medium through which a traceur can deem themselves a 'proper freerunner' or traceur. Among my own participants, it is interesting to peruse their individual Facebook pages or Instagram accounts. While the vast majority of traceurs have other

'real' jobs working in cafes, restaurants, call centres and retailers; in the 'employment' section of their Facebook pages they all describe themselves as 'Professional Freerunner', despite perhaps only receiving limited and sporadic opportunities for work in the commodified field of parkour. This is perfectly clear from Walker's description of the 'labour' involved in remaining relevant within the parkour scene of Facebook, YouTube and Instagram:

*Walker Let's be honest, us freerunners generally don't have a lot of money. We're all twenty-somethings, living at home, waiting for Nike to recruit us for their next advert. You can't take up or go for anything too serious, like a proper job because it gets in the way. That means sometimes you can spend quite a while unemployed. I was unemployed for God knows how many months a while back before I got onto this 3-month temp contract. Hate it. I think I could be training. I could be doing video edits and getting my [social media] pages going'. Mam thinks I'm just a lazy bum. But I'm not, that's just what you've got to do.*

*TR: How do you mean, that's what you've got to do?*

*Walker: It's what you've gotta do. I don't want to do it as just this thing that I kind of half-arse and flit in and out of, you know? I want it to mean something, I want people to look at me and see my pages and be like, 'that's a proper freerunner right there'.*

Walker's comments display how being a 'proper freerunner' is validated not by one's training and intrinsic progression but by its recognition and formalisation on social media. As Smith (2014: 40) acknowledges, cultural identities are only 'real' and legitimate if they are acknowledged by the Big Other—Lacan's term for the social and cultural institutions, customs and signifiers into which the subject is socialised. Smith (2014) gives the example of a musician who is not a 'proper' musician until they get a recording contract or attain a certain number of followers on social media. In this case, it is the will to represent and be externally recognised through the new capitalist forms of productive consumption such as social media which constitute the Big Other. This aside, Walker's comments reflect one of the core facets of Cederström and Fleming's (2012) argument about present-day forms of work and capital accumulation. They write that "Capitalism has always destroyed the thing it needs the most" (p.9) which in the contemporary context is life itself. Thus, even within the world of parkour as a form of leisure, the 'life' of parkour—the content upon which capitalism is so reliant—is continuously sucked out of its practice as a form of autonomous leisure. Capital's relentless exploitation of life does not amount to a 'frictionless capitalism' in which life and capital no longer conflict with one another. This is precisely because of the coercive nature of this form of 'leisure-work' in which there is a systemically created 'labour' to these late-modern forms of leisure. This was far from restricted to Walker's comments but was more pervasive throughout the parkour community I studied, with traceurs often not coming out for 'just fun' training sessions because they needed to rest their



bodies for upcoming exhibitions, stunt-work jobs, or because they ‘just didn’t see the point’. This is a far cry from the origins of their interest in parkour, which many of the traceurs stated was rooted in the simplistic and ‘natural’ childish urges to climb, play and explore.

### **‘Sorry Lads’ (But I’ve got to move you on): Parkour’s Spatial Exclusion in the Late-Capitalist City**

*Authors Fieldnotes*

*Dee, standing atop a wall preparing to do a run around our little training spot on the university campus, looks up and points toward a white van as it approaches. I turn around and see a tall, balding man get out, wearing a high-vis jacket and a radio on his hip as he slowly strides over to us. Tony quietly announces that the ‘fun’s over’, and we all start to grab our bags and pack up before the security guard even gets over to us. He has a weathered but kind face, and he moves with a plodding rhythm like a metronome, as if it’s all a bit too much effort today. He certainly doesn’t seem like the aggressive type who’s going to want any aggro or tells us we’re stupid. He actually has a look of inevitability on his face, as if he knows that we know what he’s about to say, and that he feels bad for even doing it. He cocks his head to one side, offers an apologetic smile and a shrug of the shoulders with his hands turned towards the sky. ‘Ziplock’ looks at the time on his phone and says “Yeah fair enough, it’s about that time”. The security guard comes over and says ‘Sorry lads’. Words we all knew translated to the security guards’ often-repeated refrain of ‘I’ve got to move you on’. Despite being 22 and a grown adult, Ziplock quickly feels the need to defend our group with a somewhat childish deference and make sure the security guard knows we’re ‘alright’.*

*The guard quickly interrupts him with a reassuring hand gesture and says that he knows all that. He says ‘I know who ‘youse all are’, and that the only reason he’s come along is because he ‘has to move us on’. No explanation is forthcoming, and we don’t ask. He explains that he’s seen us here before, saying that he always tries to give us a bit of time, waiting until the foot traffic gets busier or until someone asks him before moving us on. We gather up our bags and cameras while he chats with Ziplock. He thanks us all and plods off again, back to his van.*

**September, 2014**

During this two-year ethnography with the NEPK community, similar interactions with spatial authorities such as police, security guards, or property owners were far from uncommon. Of course, the traceurs would encounter a more hostile reception with threats of arrest and derisive comments that their practice was ‘stupid’, ‘reckless’, and even individuals who exclaimed that they hoped the traceurs would one day seriously injure themselves and see the reckless misguidedness of their risk-taking practice.

However, they would also establish positive relationships with security guards or owners of property which were contingent upon the spatial and temporal and 'flows' of the city (see Lefebvre, 1991; 2013). I frequently observed several security guards and police officers who would move the traceurs on with a similar apologetic reluctance or confused exasperation displayed by the security guard in the fieldnotes above.

As I conducted several depth 'walking interviews' (O'Neill and Hubbard, 2010) with 12 security guards from different areas of the city, some dominant narratives emerged when discussing the moving-on of groups such as the traceurs. These narratives were characterised by confusion, reluctance and an awareness of the cultural contradictions involved in the moving-on of the traceurs. Above all there was a depressive acceptance of the 'rules' of urban space, irrespective of the social 'right' or 'wrong' associated with the traceurs' practice. As the interviews progressed and the guards' narratives developed, it became apparent that the act of forcing the traceurs to move on was experienced as an *unveiling* of the exclusionary nature of urban space. It was an unveiling that the arbitrary rationale to the 'rules' of urban space were not rooted in notions of 'public good', spatial inclusiveness or a vindictive and 'revanchist' social hatred of particular demographics (Smith, 1996). Rather, the arbitrary exclusion of the traceurs from pseudo-public consumer spaces was less emotive and based more upon mundane and calculative agendas of property protection and spatial sanitisation for efficient consumption and profit; what is termed in this chapter as the *systemic spatial violence* of contemporary cities. The 'rules' of the increasingly privatised city which the security guards were tasked to enact brought to the foreground a harsh reality of the 'unfreedom' of contemporary urban spaces (see de Jong and Schuilenberg, 2006; Hayward, 2012) and, to extrapolate the argument more broadly, the 'unfreedom' of leisure (Rojek, 2010; Smith and Raymen, 2016).

Moreover, such realisations speak to some of the contradictions which have already discussed in this thesis surrounding parkour, late-capitalism, and the urban realm. By now, we have firmly established the conformist nature of parkour to the values of consumer capitalism, how it is pre-emptively shaped by the language and logic of consumer culture (Fisher, 2009), and how it works perfectly in an age of precarious labour markets, extended adolescence (Hayward, 2012) and effectively serves contemporary modes of capital accumulation (see chapter 6). However, what remains to be explored is how central urban spaces have been transformed by the shift in the 'real economy' of Western capitalism toward a 'symbolic economy' of consumption (Zukin, 1995); and how this affects parkour's policing and inconsistent status of spatial (il)legitimacy. The ostentatious display of wealth through the consumption of domestic security and exclusivity (Davis, 1990; Hayward, 2004), the fragile 'future capital' of rent, land value and liquid assets of real estate (Smith, 1984; Harvey, 2012), in addition to central city space being increasingly reliant upon public consumption has meant that it has become vital in this new post-industrial urban reality to 'keep space to its specificity' (de Jong and Schuilenberg, 2006). Thus, late-capitalism has caught itself in a complex

double-bind in which it must simultaneously promote and prohibit the cool spatial practices of parkour which conform to cultural values but transgress the rules of neoliberal space.

## Conclusion

This paradox of parkour has, for the most part, remained entirely unidentified by the existing academic literature on parkour. Arguably, this is due to the continued positioning of parkour as a politicised form of symbolic and performative resistance to the hyper-regulation and striation of the late-capitalist city (Atkinson, 2009; Bornaz, 2008; Daskalaki et al, 2008; Lamb, 2014). This fetishistic disavowal (Žižek, 2008) of parkour's underlying conformity to consumerism's values and logic, and its 'precorporated' readiness to be expeditiously subsumed into commodified markets, renders any identification of such a paradox impossible. Explanations of parkour's exclusion, on the other hand, have progressed along familiar lines; chalked up to yet another unfair moral panic that inaccurately demonises young people (Atkinson and Young, 2008; Ugolotti, 2014; Wheaton, 2013). Firstly, such explanations misleadingly imply that there is any discernible 'panic' surrounding parkour; and secondly imply that such a panic exists because parkour is constructed and framed as threatening and deviating from social norms and values. In the face of such ostensibly obvious explanations, any consideration of global capitalism, consumer culture or the acknowledgement of a paradox surrounding parkour has been relatively obscured from view. Nevertheless, as parkour becomes increasingly professionalised, commercialised, and wades deeper into the waters of mainstream commodified lifestyle sports, parkour's paradoxical position at the nexus between deviance and leisure is increasingly difficult to ignore.

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