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**Note on Contributor:**

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**Title:** City of Purposes: free life and libertarian activism in London.

**Abstract:**

This essay looks at the ideas and practice of right-libertarian activists in London. It focuses on the value placed on purposefulness, and on the city as the terrain for a free life. Their activism is explored through an engagement with the centrality of ‘freedom’ in the emergent anthropology of ethics, and by reference to alternative theories of power or action. In particular, attention falls on the challenge of representing subjects who seem to embody and profess overly familiar theories of individual freedom and responsibility. The essay is meant as a contribution to political and urban anthropology, and the ethnography of Britain.

## **City of Purposes: free life and libertarian activism in London.**

### *Introduction:*

Mike buzzed me up. When I reached his floor, the door was ajar so I stepped inside. Still wet and dripping in his bathrobe, Mike stood before me, grounded on a tired Persian rug. Without his trademark spectacles, he squinted in my general direction and voiced a greeting. Mike invited me to take a seat while he left to change. Somewhat unnerved by this encounter with a sodden, fleshy Mike, I turned to comply with his exiting suggestion. Sitting down, however, proved a harder task than I had anticipated. The small untidy living room had a range of stacking chairs, a couple of armchairs and even a sofa, but no available seating space. Instead the furniture played host to a mass of books, magazines and right-libertarian activist publications. The stacking chairs, for instance, supported long wooden racks displaying political pamphlets bannered with a movement's colophon and the name and image of individual authors (some of which I recognised as old photographs of Mike). Most pamphlet titles were idiosyncratic and provocative, typified by headings such as *The Failure of Politics And The Pull of Freedom; The Menace of the Apocalyptic Individual; Citizenship: The State's Way of Saying It Owns You; Why I Do Not Fear Immigration; Against Charity*. Among the bookcases and shelving that ran along the faded walls, I picked out classic titles by Popper, Rand, Hayek, Bastiat and Nozick, economic, social and educational treatises, and the odd edition of *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack*. Adjoining doors were left open revealing views of a similarly cramped, book lined and dusty bedroom, and a small kitchen. Here the cooking facilities clearly played second fiddle to the storage of classical music compact discs and the use of a

desktop computer. It soon became clear that this was the extent of Mike's rooms. The flat seemed organised to communicate to visitors that here was a life given over to politics and to the mobilisation of political ideas.

Indeed, as I already knew, Mike had for well over a decade been a central figure in the right-libertarian activist scene. In the 1980s he had helped run a libertarian bookshop in Central London, and from there had organised political meetings and talks, edited and sent out tracts or pamphlets and a magazine to those subscribed to the mailing list. When the bookshop closed, these activities continued without offices. This included, with the arrival of the Internet, the foundation of a website and mailing list forum. However, when I first met him in 2002, Mike, like several other London libertarians I knew, was focused on a different and entirely new online development in political activism: weblogging. More specifically, he had started reading and contributing to libertarian-oriented 'pundit blogs', a form of weblog focused on self-editorialising or news punditry.<sup>1</sup> Although opening new and exciting horizons for the perceived reception of right-libertarian ideas, this development essentially continued the tradition of a political activism situated on the margins of British politics and squarely centred on acts of reading and writing/typing (for a comparative example of leftist bookish activism in London see Alleyne 2002). For Mike and his activist colleagues, protest and campaigning is almost exclusively a textual matter (revealed through the composition of pamphlets, letter-writing to newspaper editors and, latterly, weblog posts); they do not, generally speaking, initiate or attend public demonstrations or take part in radical interventions. Instead, their activism is about circulating and debating political ideas, offering critique and speaking one's mind; it is also about the ambition of being or getting heard, pushing the right-libertarian perspective into mainstream media.

As subjects first and foremost committed to ‘work for a free society’, Mike and his fellow libertarian activists set themselves up as possessing expertise in the philosophic and quotidian dimensions of freedoms and liberties. Indeed, for them these categories are essential, the primary life concern. They have an acute sense, for instance, of where liberties lie, of what differentiates the free from the unfree act, the free mind from the unfree mind. This includes remarkable sensitivity to the spatialization of freedoms. Part of what interests me about them is precisely their role as technicians of freedom, as subjects who claim to know when liberty is at stake and how it evinces itself. In some ways, the emphasis segues nicely with the emergent interest in freedom as an aspect of human conduct in anthropology; in particular with its framing within what is coming to be known as the anthropology of ethics. Largely influenced by the late work of Foucault, this field typically locates freedom as a practice within ethical self-fashioning (see Laidlaw 2002, Robbins 2007, Faubion 2011). Here, the free act is an effect but also an active exercise of the choices open to subjects in particular historical-cultural ethical projects. As Laidlaw (2002: 324) states, ‘the freedom of the ethical subject, for Foucault, consists in the possibility of choosing the kind of self one wishes to be’. For the libertarian activists I knew freedom could operate in an ethical register. Most would agree with the statement of one London pundit blogger that libertarianism is ‘basically about thinking that if people have freedom they will do something good with it ’ (although activists debate and waver between such consequentialist arguments and more natural rights approaches to individual liberty). Furthermore, I think the desire for a free life drew from subjects certain techniques of self. However, this does not mean that they figured ethics or evaluative action as the only medium through which liberty played out or that an ethical life was their principal care (for an ethnographic study of

political activism that does figure itself as a form of ‘ethical practice’ see Dave 2012). Contra Foucault, individuals were just as likely or more likely to connect freedom with rationality. These libertarian activists generally remained fixed on freedom for its own sake, as a conscious practice for everything.

Indeed, Mike and the other libertarian activists I knew would strongly resist the notion that historical-cultural projects of any kind, ethical self-fashioning or otherwise,<sup>2</sup> determine or shape the form of freedoms and liberties. For them, these always emerge from the deliberate activities and choices of individuals or aggregations of individuals, and not from agencies or conditions external to that intentional self. They remain deeply suspicious of any claims that ‘society’ might want or desire anything; as one pundit blogger told me, ‘the minute you try and look closely at society you just see individuals’. Encapsulated in their practice of liberty then is a critique or resistance to the classic anthropological move to understand categories such as individual freedom by first denaturalizing them as the products of society or culture (see Robbins 2007, Laidlaw 2014). For them, freedom is not the artefact of historical consciousness or ‘the social’; nor is it the outcome of relational elicitation. They may admire the works of Smith, Mill and Hayek but activists generally deny the agency or role these authors wish to assign to socially driven interaction, for instance in matters of economics or wealth distribution. Instead, freedom is what flows from the uninhibited expression of individual will and action. (While there is no conformity about favoured libertarian texts or straightforward equation between individual works and the views of individual activists, in this regard the emphasis appears closer to the ideas of figures such as Nozick, Rand and Rothbard). The insistence of these claims presents an interesting ethnographic challenge, a problem of both analysis and description. On what basis does one take

seriously subjects who so explicitly reject our conventional terms of interpretation? Unless one adopts a position of formal critique, rejecting their claims as straightforwardly ideological or reading back structuring agencies in their self-definition that they do not recognise (both, I would hold, uncomfortable strategies for anthropological description), this remains an open question. It is of course possible to render an ethnographic perspective on these libertarian understandings of freedom, based on the outlook or lives of others living in London (or elsewhere in Britain) who, for instance, may view such opinions as an exemplification of privilege or broader class position.<sup>3</sup> However, this is not an idiom of explanation deployed by the activists themselves; it does not help me communicate what they believe they are about.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the problem here is of course that these particular ethnographic subjects, in their privileging of what appear overly familiar theories about individual freedom, agency and responsibility, sound remarkably like the kinds of rhetorical Western subjects commonly deployed in ethnographic essays as a counterpoint to the description of actual lives and practices elsewhere (see Mahmood 2003, 2005, & Laidlaw 2014). To a certain extent, they already exist as part of the unexamined ground upon which anthropological arguments about alternative freedoms and liberties are so often built. But I wish to clear a space for the exploration of the kinds of free will, choice and liberty that they themselves profess, to unearth the singularity of ideas and practice within their apparently familiar expression of freedom.

The essay also, if one takes the arguments of Rapport (2003) on board, may provide an entry point into reflections on alternative theories of action and power. For him, anthropology suffers precisely from the consistent failure to acknowledge the true source of creativity and agency in the world: the existential power of individuals (2003: 13). He invites the reader to conceive a discipline founded on the notion that

subjects are self-directed rather than socially driven (2003: 31). Drawing on lessons he reads from Nietzsche, Rapport suggests that freedom resides in our capacity to ‘imagine and shape our own individual destinies’ (2003: 53). This includes the power to resist or overcome the cherishing of common values, beliefs and conventions (2003: 49). In many ways, the libertarian activists I worked with promoted an equivalent outlook; indeed, in reading Rapport I often heard resonances from fieldwork conversations, prompting, at least for me, an imagined dialogue. For example, they too saw themselves as iconoclasts of taken-for-granted standards and ideals. This includes the convention of talking about ‘right’ and ‘left’ in politics; at times, I have used the commonly recognised shorthand ‘right-libertarianism’ to aid the reader in positioning the views of these activists and while they on occasions do deploy the language to differentiate themselves from libertarian socialism, the preference is to avoid it. Mike told me that libertarians ‘deliberately place themselves off to the edge of respectable opinion.’ In a historically conflicted relationship with the outlook and policies of British Conservatives, they often depict themselves as slippery critics exploding ideology and misinformation and operating against establishment party politics (there is no libertarian political party in the UK; Mike and his activist colleagues instead bill themselves as an alliance or informal non-party discussion group). Like Rapport, they also believe that self-direction crucially defines a free life. And yet, I am not sure that their vision of liberty shares the same trajectory as the vision of ‘awesome freedom’ (2003: 53) offered by Rapport. In part, this essay aims to explore the difference.

*City of purposes:*

Early on in our conversations, Mike makes it clear that he loves London. The affection, he explains, is quite ‘irrational’, a romance of sorts but also a form of celebration. For London’s quality is crucially tied to his political vision. ‘I mean to me,’ Mike muses, ‘London is a city of purposes, private and individual purposes, it is not a city of collectivism.’ As he points out, this reality is reflected in the relative lack of overarching urban administration; the recent introduction of a Mayor of London and a London Assembly does not for him distract from the fact that historically metropolitan development and growth, when compared to other cities in Europe and North America, is remarkably unplanned or without central direction (see Porter 1994)<sup>5</sup>. As a city driven by private purposes, London then is defined individually, or in eight million different ways. Indeed, part of what Mike celebrates or loves about his metropolis is precisely what others, he is aware, may find disturbing: the general sense of indifference and absence of community or fellow feeling. As he elaborates, ‘you know the London attitude is, well you’re here for your reasons, I’m here for my reasons, as long as we don’t smack into each other in the street what’s the problem.’ Instead of ascribing an encompassing personality to the city and its population (see Reed 2002, 2008),<sup>6</sup> Mike revels in an urban existence that for him embodies the principle, practice and consequences of wilful self-interested being.<sup>7</sup>

This London is the natural terrain of the libertarian activist. It hosts a free life, allows Mike and other residents to exercise their individual, self-directed existences. It also allows them to see the effects of those existences registered in the changing fabric or physical environment of their city, which is itself the artefact of historical accumulations of diverse and individually-led life-courses. For him, London is not just the centre of a tradition of political liberty; it is, quite literally, its materialization. Principally though, Mike loves London because it gives him the freedom to pursue his



own 'private purpose'. When he steps outside the front door of his block of flats in Pimlico, he does so on his own terms, for his own reasons; just as he is aware that the men and women passing him in the street are journeying forth for their reasons. Although the city does not exactly contain his personal biography or historical existence as self-directed individual (Mike, for instance, grew up in the Surrey commuter belt, where he went to private school and then up to university at Cambridge and the Colchester campus of Essex University before moving permanently to the capital), it does provide the space and time in which it is conventionally lived and narrated. This purposeful life has, since he first moved to London, been devoted to political activism and the dissemination of libertarian ideas. In the past, such an existence centred on the libertarian bookshop in Covent Garden, where he worked, and in travelling back and forth to various political events, talks and party manifesto or policy document launches. The latter still continues, but is supplemented with other activities, including amateur digital photography and documentation of the city, the writing of specialist weblogs on culture and education, and libertarian-inspired life/career coaching (the last-mentioned generates some earnings, but in general Mike's purposeful life appears largely subsidized by private income). Once again, the point is that here is a life evolving through its own volition or free choice, self-guided and with intentional design.

Among all the London libertarians I met, there is a strong sense that individuals should be consciously wilful, aware of themselves as the authors of their own lives. They need to come armed with purpose. This requires them to demonstrate that choices have been made, free will exercised. It also tends to result in a certain preference for forceful behaviour and assertive, even aggressive, expression of opinion. In the past this manifest itself in a pugnacious style of verbal debate and

exchange (still present when activists meet), both among themselves and with political opponents, and to a lesser extent, in the tone of circulated tracts and pamphlets. It now also manifests itself in blog posts and a style of online punditry that revels in the targeted put-down (in the examples below hyperlinks are underlined; any cited weblogs or named individuals are given pseudonyms).

My considerable thanks to John Martin for bringing to our attention this crass bit of wealth-destroying codswallop courtesy of our enemies, the Eurocrats.

Given that Mr Harrison appears to be an acolyte of the BBC/Guardian Axis, his animus is hardly surprising. Indeed, it is welcome. We cannot honestly argue that we have even reached base camp until we are well and truly getting up the noses of people like him.

And back in England, the home grown idiotarians tie themselves into knots over capitalism.

I am going to have to find some new term to adequately describe the condition of ignorance that renders its sufferers unable to comprehend the inevitable truth that state-control means *political* control. A shining example of this tragically far-too-common form of myopia can be found in one of today's letters to the Times.

The recipient or target of such opinion should be in no doubt that they face a self-propelled subject or agent in the world. Indeed, hostility is acknowledged as one way in which that presence can be registered; as one pundit blogger told me, 'if you're not making enemies then you are not trying hard enough... conciliation is for wimps'. As

well as enacting purposefulness, this leads to the cultivation of a kind of self-intensity or self-involvement. Mike, for instance, must make sure he keeps being Mike and that those he knows remain impressed by his *Mike-ness*; his indifference to others in the city, the London attitude, is in part what allows this self-cultivation to flourish.

These requirements, which we might figure as the techniques of a purpose-bearing subject, can also be understood through idioms of power. Indeed, Rapport (2003: 7) suggests that the purposeful human subject, one capable of harnessing impulses, single-mindedly accomplishing goals and thus determining their own fate might be rendered a sort of projectile. For him, self-intensity<sup>8</sup> and the commitment to 'lead one's own life' afford that life a quality of velocity, robustness and directionality (2003: 33-34). Freedom inheres in this sense of movement, of individuals as the 'unique centres of intention and agency' (2003: 22). I think this too resonates with libertarian activists feeling for the free life. Like Rapport, they describe freedom as a kind of sovereignty, a phenomenon attached to self-expression but also to the dynamism of inner drive.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, part of the attraction of pundit blogging is precisely that it appears to materialise or make public individual purpose or single-mindedness in new and accelerated ways. Opinions, thoughts and feelings no longer require an immediate, face-to-face interlocutor or the drawn-out process of print production and circulation; instead they can be published automatically, almost as they happen. With or without pundit blogging, there is a strong sense in which Mike regards himself as a source of power and celebrates the city as a kind of force field, autonomous wills moving through it at different speeds and trajectories, overcoming obstacles. As he says, the only danger is when purposes collide and accompanying bodies start to 'smack' into each other.

For Tyler, another prominent London libertarian who regularly blogs, the risk of colliding purposes is precisely what helps define the limits of individual self-direction. If someone mugged him in the street, tried to hit him over the head with a baseball bat or break into his terraced house in Chelsea, then he would want the police to intervene or assist him. 'Freedom provides you with the space to act,' he explained, 'but inherent in that is also responsibilities.' These are laid out in law backed by the State, which for Tyler and many of the other activists I knew can legitimately exist to protect and enable individual power or liberty, but also crucially through the cultural values and norms of interaction by which individuals in the city exist together.

Alongside the purpose-bearing subject, libertarian activists acknowledge the presence of 'civil society', defined as an aggregation or network of individuals whose values and norms are agreed and evolved through free association. Indeed, they celebrate London as a site that both promotes and diversifies civil society (for the pundit bloggers among the activists, the Internet provides a further celebrated space of free association [see Jordan 2001, Chadwick 2006]). The purposeful individual in the metropolis is faced with a range of freely associating communities, and he or she has the choice to gravitate towards the one whose way of life suits him or her best. As Tyler points out, this can include localised communities defined by ethnicity or religion and inherited communities such as family, but also networks of work colleagues, neighbours and friends. Membership of these aggregations can be described as a choice because London also provides the opportunity for individuals to leave their communities or to freely associate across them. Thus Tyler, a white entrepreneur from an affluent trans-Atlantic family (as Mike told me, both his and Tyler's ancestors 'mostly had money and the trick of earning it and keeping hold of it'), can meet and date Karen, a black immigrant to the city from the Caribbean; a fact

he highlights to me and also to his weblog readers by publishing photographs of him and Karen 'snogging'. The kiss is a contract of sorts, emblematic of a coming together or overcoming of diverse values and norms and illustrative of the agency of purposeful individuals in the city to dynamically rearrange the terms of association.

As Tyler would readily concede, the existence of a network of libertarian activists in London is another instance of civil society in action. He and the other libertarians I met are first and foremost an alliance of freely associating individuals or purposeful subjects. Indeed, in some ways they view themselves as an exemplary model of free association. In the past, when the bookshop was open, members of the alliance tended to first meet and congregate there. When it closed, they interacted through their website's online forum and subscription mailing list (there are about 300 London members; unlike Mike and Tyler, most of them work in professional careers, as lawyers, teachers, journalists, accountants). Latterly, they also communicate through weblog postings. The circulation of the magazine and the continuing exchange and response to published pamphlets and blogs is further supplemented by social gatherings at Mike's flat, what became known as his 'last-Friday-of-the-month discussion evenings'. This is where Mike and Tyler first met. For Mike, these gatherings in particular are archetypes of 'free social interaction' (he told me had about sixty names on his list of regular attendees). As he explained, 'just like when you and I meet up, when someone organises a meeting all the people who want to turn up do and all the people who don't want to, don't. We meet and have a conversation because we've agreed to do it. Nobody suffers and we all get what we want.' The implied contrast is with the forced organisation and control of discussion in political parties and the formal management of party policy. Once again, the freedom of this association is best illustrated for attendees by the exaggerated emphasis on the choice

of participation; much attention falls on the performance of disagreement and the combustible exchange, with individuals regularly leaving or threatening to leave the alliance.<sup>10</sup> The ambition is to always promote or defend a free society, but without ever telling each other what to do or think.

This idea, that freedom requires association to be constantly renegotiated or agreed between individuals, who must also reserve the right to end relationship or leave community, lends the libertarian activists I knew a unique perspective on social forms. It makes them acutely sceptical of any claims that society is more than the aggregated wills of the individuals that compose it and of claims that society, culture or collective phenomena shape or construct subject positions. But it also creates a problem: how to talk about society and the relationships between purposeful individuals (none of the activists I met wanted to absolutely deny the existence of society) while resolutely resisting the notion that its members are socially driven? Once again, the work of Rapport (2003) offers a useful parallel. In his attempt to speak through individual human agency and to override the primacy assigned to the social or cultural in anthropological description, Rapport accounts for the existence of society by also appealing to the idiom of aggregation (2003: 38). Socio-cultural forms and group action, he puts forward, are best considered as an ‘interlinkage of separate individual acts’ or as ‘spaces in which a vast number of behaviours jointly occur, pursued on behalf of individuals’ own and distinctive purposes and interests’. The forms themselves have to be constantly forged anew between individuals who are the only agents that can actually animate them. In fact Rapport argues that these contracted associations are successfully sustained less by agreement and more by the continued coincidence of mutual interests and the ‘expectability’ of each other’s actions (2003: 251).<sup>11</sup>

The point is significant because it leads him to suggest that society might be more accurately viewed as the ‘alignment’ of individual purposes and wills (2003: 8). ‘Besides the force to continue on one’s own path,’ Rapport muses, ‘there is also the force to remain within others’ domain or to organize joint trajectories’. Free society then is individuals operating in tandem, with equivalent purpose but with self-direction still intact. As he elaborates, ‘living in alignment with others does not translate as living through or by virtue of others’ (2003: 59); in a society of powerful individuals, the aggregation is provisional and never greater than its sum. I think Tyler, Mike and the other activists I knew would greatly appreciate this emphasis on free society as an alignment of interests and the insistence of Rapport that the power of association is indistinguishable from the power of the individuals who act together. Indeed, they seem to seek to constantly demonstrate and enact this kind of truth. In the city of purposes, interests remain private but they may also find their equivalence in the interests and self-intensity of others and hence become provisionally conjoined. For them, libertarian activism itself or an individual relationship between activists (such as Mike/Tyler) is best valued as a strategic aggregation or conjoined pathway. The same preference plays itself out in libertarian blogging, where sole-authored weblogs exist alongside group or team pundit blogs in which individuals agree to collaborate in political commentary. As Tyler, the initiator of the best-known group blog (to which Mike also contributes) highlights, this may be a collective effort but the weblog posts remain individually composed and distinctly non-uniform in message. Part of the technique of the purpose-bearing subject therefore is to locate signs of mutuality and to measure or assess the length and scope of purposeful alignments.

Such insistence on the possibility of the social as a realm built from or composed out of freely given relationships or strategically conjoined private purposes or interests appears hard for anthropologists to swallow. On the one hand, its emphasis upon the spontaneity of alignments appears too contrived. On the other hand, it sounds hopelessly antiquated, too much like old, dismissed theories of society-making and contract (libertarians may be sceptical of social contract theory, but many of them actively embrace the legal principle of contract, viewing it as the basis for economic exchange and hence interpersonal interaction); the kind of interpretation long written out of ethnographic description. Indeed, despite the currency of its common-sense use, society only sometimes figures as a thing at all in anthropology today; often it tends to be presented as a vernacular rhetorical form to persuade people of the importance of collective phenomena and of transpersonal agencies or forms of existence. Focusing on relations rather than individual subjects, for instance, can allow one to operate without the concept; and to consider individuals as incorporated within and through those ties. The insistence that the free life rests on private purpose, self-direction and inner drive, and the social aggregation or mutuality of wills, prompts immediate questions. What about kinship? How do libertarian activists account for relationships that suggest not just an alignment but also a ‘mutuality of being’ or ‘intersubjective belonging’ (see Sahlins 2013)? In my conversations with Mike and other libertarians in London, I constantly pressed them to acknowledge the intrinsic as well as extrinsic participations in each other’s lives.

Pressing the anthropological point, however, rarely had any purchase. In imagining the conjoined pathway Mike/Tyler, for instance, there was no recognition that purposeful being might exceed the singular person; only that individual interests and wills might temporarily run in partnership or along the same trajectory. Although



activists readily admitted and deployed familiar idioms of English kinship, including ideas about complementarity and inheritance (the ancestral knack, for instance, of making and keeping money),<sup>12</sup> they resolutely resisted the suggestion that these ties shaped purpose or self-direction. Being born into family did not alter the capacity to detach or the general activist principle that kin relationships should be voluntary, also based on free association. This was sometimes embodied in the idea that family too can be left. But it became a point of explicit debate and discussion only when libertarian activists reflected on the problem of children, parenting and education.

Among the members of the subscription mailing list, a number, including Mike, are heavily invested in the philosophy and practice of home schooling (a few pundit blogs focus on this topic). Some, mainly married women with young children of their own, have taken the decision to give up work and educate sons and daughters themselves. While this move is partly prompted by critiques of formal education, it is mainly centred on the perceived need to attach learning to recognition of the child as wilful, purposeful subject, equally deserving of free life. Mary, for instance, an ex teacher who lives just outside London and runs her own collaborative blog on parenting, committed to letting her three home-schooled children determine their own routine. Each one, she told me, is supplied with books, has a computer and television in their rooms and beyond that is largely left to their own devices. ‘My idea,’ she explained, ‘is that if you haven’t got freedom you cannot learn anything, you have to have freedom in order to develop ideas.’ If children do not choose to go to school, then they should be allowed to remain home; if they do not wish to do homework, they shouldn’t do it. In this scenario, parenting, like education, is concerned with not getting in the way of self-direction, allowing private purpose the space to be pursued; in Mary’s words, ‘its about supporting children as individuals rather than trying to

mould them or make them'. For other activists in the alliance, parenting is a relationship that retains 'legitimate authority' and children are the limit to the general principle that 'everybody should be free to make their own decisions'. Indeed, some support the 'freedom' of the parent to smack their children on the grounds that wilfulness is not yet ready or mature enough to be left alone. The point of the disagreement is not to contest free association or free choice, but to debate the point at which the purpose-bearing subject emerges and their autonomy needs to be acknowledged.

*London property:*

However, unlike Rapport, libertarian activists have another means of grounding society in the idiom of aggregation. For them, freedom is based in the expression of individual and aligned private purposes, but it is also crucially materialised in the individual possession and aggregation of property. Indeed, Mike told me it is this attitude to property rights that distinguishes libertarians from other kinds of subjects who claim to believe in freedom (to the extent that he says one might reasonably rename the libertarian activists 'propertarians'; the term emerges from a diverse strand of late twentieth century right-libertarian thinking and debate). For them, ownership is quite literally an ontological expression of self-direction; although activists might reject the identification of kinship or other relations as a basis for intersubjective or transpersonal being, they do seem to embrace a kind of mutuality of existence with their personal possessions. Here, libertarianism appears as first and foremost a radical theory and practice of material culture.<sup>13</sup> To a significant extent, it seems, the purpose-bearing subject must live through or by virtue of property.

Crucially, property ownership is also what for Mike, and others, connects freedom back to ethics. In fact he insists that ‘personal property leads directly to a much improved moral atmosphere.’ This is because an individual’s ownership of property can define his or her right to act in the world, and when property and its owners aggregate then the possibility exists to make rules together (in this respect, individual property ownership is itself the collateral to freedom). ‘For example,’ Mike reflected, ‘it makes sense for everybody in my block of flats to have the same rule about what time in the evening noises have to stop. It’s a collective decision if we’re going to decide to change it from 11 o’clock to 10 o’clock, but as property owners we are perfectly entitled to make that decision.’ Ownership is not only what allows interests to align, and hence make collective rules (and improve moral atmosphere), it is also what permits propertied individuals and aggregations of propertied individuals to exercise the freedom to discipline or disbar others.<sup>14</sup>

For instance, Mike tells me that he feels free to institute ‘pretty strong rules’ about courtesy and timekeeping in his last-Friday-of-the-month discussion evenings precisely because the event takes place in his flat (the same reasoning is used by Tyler to institute rules about posting on his group blog and to justify the decision not to provide visiting readers with a facility for leaving comments; like Mike’s flat, the blog is Tyler’s ‘private property’). ‘Its not just that property is nice stuff to have,’ Mike expands, ‘it’s that property by its nature is a solution to a social problem, in this case the problem of what happens in this room.’ Someone else, he further speculates, may wish to use that space for a different purpose, for instance to run a playgroup, and may provide a list of compelling reasons why children have a greater need for it than middle aged political activists. But ultimately, those reasons are irrelevant because the right to decide belongs to the room’s owner. In contrast, he states, ‘If I

was deciding the rules for the whole of Westminster (the local authority in which his Pimlico block of flats stands), then I'd feel very reluctant. I wouldn't feel it was right for me to tell everybody how to dress in public or how to handle their dogs or what to do about short skirts.' The power or freedom of the individual then is linked to the scale of the material (i.e. London flat, collaborative weblog) he or she owns.

This extends beyond home or personal possessions to the commercial spaces of London property. Tyler, for example, told me that he would strongly oppose the introduction and implementation of a law that made the employment of homosexuals illegal. However, if a particular employer in the city decided he didn't want to hire homosexuals because he or she disapproved of them, then that would be his or her privilege as a self-directed propertied individual who rightly controls and sets the rules for the space (i.e. factory or office) that he or she owns. 'I mean,' Tyler elaborates, 'if I choose to dress myself in bright pink clothes, with flashing lights on my shoes, and walk into a high street bank and ask for a loan, that too should be my choice.' But, as he points out, it is also the choice of the bank to refuse his request; he could not force them to do business with him. 'That's a classic example of civil society at work,' he tells me with a chuckle, 'for what the bank manager won't do is pick up his phone and say to the police, "there's a guy with a pink suit in my bank, send in a SWAT team"'. This is not, Tyler and Mike both agree, a power to beat someone else up if they disobey him or a power to send that person to prison; it is just the power to be able to ask that individual to remove himself or herself from the space of that property.

The emphasis is important to Mike, Tyler and other activists because they consistently define libertarianism not just as a belief that individuals should be free to make their own decisions, but also on the basis that no one has the right to oppress or

compel others (unless through self-defense). Indeed, for them, single mindedness, free will or self-direction can only be identified and measured in the context of resistance to external control.<sup>15</sup> As well as a focus on the cultivation of self-intensity and self-involvement, which includes attention to those moments when interests between individuals may be judged to align, the techniques of the purpose-bearing subject include a keen sensitivity to the pervasive presence of force in their lives. For Mary, the decision to home school her children is also a commitment to raise them without compulsion; part of the problem with formal education is precisely that it compels the child to conform to the wills of others: teachers and the peer pressure of pupils, just as traditional parenting coerces the child into obedience. But for libertarian activists the presence of force or coercive action upon the individual subject is most commonly embodied in the actions of State. Despite supporting its power to enforce the rule of law, Tyler describes the State as the ultimate ‘means of proxy violence’, by which one group of people impose their will on others. As another activist told me, the sanctions of government ‘are soaked in the idea of forcing people to do this, that or the other, and it is this forcing that is bad in itself, a kind of violation of people’s core being. We are too important to be forced to do things.’ Crucially, their critique of external control contains a rejection of the idea that people should be compelled to be good or help others.<sup>16</sup> The only truly appropriate sanctions and rules are those protective of the rights of property and collectively agreed by civil society, a form of free association that operates between State and individual. Part of the role or duty of the purpose-bearing subject is therefore to discriminate between the free and forced act, to assign whether the source of action derives from the individual, free aggregations of individuals or from the clear or masked wills of others.

Once again, these judgements are often played out or dramatized through life in London. Although the city of purposes is noted as a site of free association and self-directed activity, it is also the backdrop for both dramatic and quotidian regulation and control. Activists feel the potential presence of compulsion everywhere. In driving their cars, for instance, they are obliged to anticipate the workings of speed cameras and traffic congestion charges, some resent being required to slow down for speed bumps in residential streets or having to give way to bus lanes. They begrudge paying council tax. When entering a local pub, activists are immediately made aware by the absence of smoke of the enforcement of bans on cigarette smoking in public places. They feel the limits on their freedom to live where they like imposed by school zoning and the compulsion behind the State-approved curriculum when helping their child with homework. In emptying household rubbish, many dislike the sense of being under pressure of financial penalty to separate items according to local authority waste recycling rules. Individuals object to being made to submit planning applications before knocking down an interior wall or making alterations to the exterior frontage of the flat or house that is privately owned. The registration of compulsion, having one's self-direction curtailed by the imposition of the will of others, is viscerally recorded; activists often respond with outrage, a reaction that in itself prompts 'rants' on weblog posts or provides the stimulus for preparing and composing longer, more measured pamphlet tracts. In this respect, being forcibly acted upon can actually regenerate self-intensity and a sense of wilful volition. It can also highlight the ideological disagreements between libertarian activists (not everyone feels the presence of compulsion in the same places; indeed, regulation can always be read by some as the outcome of aligned purposes or

aggregated consent), which in turn remind them that purposeful existence is individually led.

Tyler, by his own account, is a ‘minarchist’ (minimal statist); he, in the neo-classical liberal mould, sometimes sees State and civil society working together in the legal defence of individual liberty (his right, for instance, not to be mugged or burgled). By contrast, John, a longstanding alliance member who works as a copyeditor and lives with his family in the outer commuter belt of North London, describes himself as an ‘anarcho-capitalist’ (i.e. someone who advocates the total abolition of the State). Other activists adopt a range of other recognised positions within right-libertarianism. While they sometimes disagree about the legitimacy of the act of enforcement, everyone celebrates the exercise of ‘choice’ in the city. Once again, these are preferences backed by the authority of property and aggregation. Activists defend and admire market capitalism precisely because, through the purchase and consumption of commodities, it seems to provide one of the best mechanisms for registering those choices and identifying the free act.

Among minarchists, the limited role for the State in the protection of liberty and property rights allows for sliding adjustments in the assessment of legitimate force. This can be scaled up or down, as actions taken in defence of the individual, civil society or even the nation. Tyler and several other activists, for instance, supported the post 9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the basis that these were necessary acts in response to an external, illiberal aggressor.<sup>17</sup> Here, there does appear to be a slippage between notions of individual wills or purposes in strategic alignment and the notion of mutual or collective will. Indeed, the nation can be figured as either an extension of civil society or as itself an individual purposeful actor; aside from London, activists express the most sentimental attachment for England or Britain.

This is the case even among those who absolutely reject a role for the State. John, for instance, told me that despite being an anarcho-capitalist he still tends to get ‘indignant’ if Britain is insulted, feels it as if the slight is directed at him personally. Likewise, he reports that he gets angry if he perceives ‘the nation is not behaving well’. Furthermore, many of the libertarian activists frequently locate freedom through acts of national or global comparison. London, for instance, is typically said to be a freer city than Paris, Britain a freer society than France. More broadly, activists regularly contrast the defence of individual freedoms in Europe and North America with what they perceive as the oppressive societies of Asia and the Middle East. The juxtaposition is made on the basis of the relative presence or absence of free aggregations, the size of civil society in relation to the State, but also through linked assessments of relative dynamism. So, France is a stasist or rigid culture in comparison with Britain, and London is a dynamist culture or society in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> If pressed, activists would justify these claims about the inherent qualities of collectivities by returning to the alignments of property and purpose from which nationhood or urban identity should be naturally built; however, as many acknowledge, the sentiment seems to exceed its retrospective rational explanation.

Another way to justify love of London, but especially love of country, is by appeal to the historical depth of free and propertied aggregations in that place. While the identified presence of external control or coercive force may undermine the contemporary fit between city or nation and civil society, adoption of a temporal comparison between past and present society can allow an explanation for the survival of that sentiment. Most commonly, this involves a historical juxtaposition with Victorian Britain (activists point out that in the United States the contrast evoked



is usually with the nineteenth century American frontier or ‘Wild West’). Although acknowledging that in some ways the conditions of life were far worse (higher rates of poverty, lack of suffrage for working class and women), activists generally revere this period as a time when purposeful subjects enjoyed many more freedoms and civil society or propertied aggregations were consequently greater in size. As Mary highlighted, ‘the ordinary British citizen then could go his whole life long never interacting with the State except for the post office and the policeman on the corner. You didn’t even need a passport and if you wanted to employ someone you just said, “hi, you’re hired.”’. As well as providing an example of free society to aspire to, the libertarian past of Britain seems to offer a space, relatively uncontaminated by the proxy violence of the State, for national feeling now.

This emphasis on what the present lacks can also be read through juxtaposition with imagined or futuristic free societies. Indeed, several of the libertarian activists I met are fans of science fiction and fantasy genres. ‘What I’d really like to see,’ one man told me, ‘is lots and lots of communities all over the solar system.’ Each one, he explained, might have different laws, offer different ‘experiments in living’ (communist, Islamic, hedonistic), with people able to freely move between them, to choose which style of life works best for them. John offered me an alternative, more earth-bound futuristic vision.

The novel that I shall never write, but which goes through my head from time to time, is the idea of some remote part of the world, somewhere completely unpromising like Antarctica that no one is too much interested in, getting taken over by entrepreneurs and turned into a libertarian paradise. Well that’s not quite the right word, paradise is a bit bland and static, but a sort of dynamic libertarian community complete with pollution and slums and so on.

As he is aware, the image of a society absolutely free from State regulation, without labour laws, immigration controls or environmental protection, but with individual property ownership intact, would horrify many. However, it might also exhilarate. ‘I mean some people measure what’s best by the length of life and literacy rates or health provision,’ John continued, ‘others by the scope for individual initiative and the degree you are released from arbitrary interference.’ His Antarctica would ‘give people the freedom to create realities for themselves,’ provide a city of purposes with the claw of external control completely eradicated. This is not utopian, a planned society or solution that everyone should like (a true libertarian, John points out, cannot compel people to admire it, just as they cannot force people to be free), but to him it is beautiful, one purposeful individual’s dream of free life.

*Conclusion:*

According to Laidlaw (2014: 9-10), the success or efficacy of anthropology’s ethical turn in part rests on our capacity to make ‘freedom’ an operational category of anthropological language. This requires, he observes, an active resistance to the commonplace tendency to reduce ‘freedom’ to the status of discourse or ideology; the enactment of will, responsibility or individual choice cannot be simply redescribed or read-off as an effect of something else. In some ways, this essay puts that call to the test; when faced with the libertarian activist celebration or dream of the free life in London, the anthropological instinct, including my own, is precisely to see their freedom as a discursive/ideological object, to reach for critique. How can subjects seriously believe that ‘the social’, if it exists, is nothing more than the free alignment or aggregation of self-directed interests and purposes? What can we make of people who insist that property provides the only true collateral for individual freedom, that

rules and moral atmosphere only legitimately rest on private ownership? The provocation seems ridiculous, too hard to take.

And yet, that must remain my task. In this essay I have attempted to resist the temptation to identify agencies or relations that explain or contextualise the purpose-bearing subject. To some, the effort may produce a description that risks naivety; but I hope it might equally open reflections on the expectations around interpretation and critique that this kind of material tends to draw from the anthropological reader. I have also sought to pullback from moves that might throw the self-direction of Mike, Tyler, Mary or John into doubt. It is in this regard that I have found the work of Rapport (2003), his insistence on the existential power or awesome freedom of the individual, a useful, companionable kind of text. Although obviously divergent in important ways (Rapport would have no truck with the idea of a purpose-bearing subject who lives through or by virtue of personal property), his project offers some equivalent provocations. Indeed, in many ways they share a declamatory style (in Rapport's case, a sometimes trenchant delivery matched by a sometimes equally vigorous response from anthropological audiences). Just like the pamphlets and weblog posts of the libertarian activists I encountered, Rapport's writing wants readers to acknowledge the wilful velocity or non-socially driven purposefulness of the author. In bringing them together, I have tried to do both.

While the question of the free and purpose-bearing status of children and the collective sentiment drawn out by love of country appear to throw a wobble into libertarian activist claims about the 'core being' of the individual subject, their demands that self-direction is the basis of freedom and true society remains unshaken. I consistently failed to persuade them otherwise (my attempts to do so being in part drawn out by their invitation to participate in argumentation). However, one nagging

doubt does remain. At times, activists express anxiety over whether individuals own their libertarian ideas or whether the ideas own them. They do not believe that the truth of libertarianism is contingent upon individual belief or enactment; it is rather a rationally coherent philosophy. The question therefore exists whether this fact threatens the notion of the purpose-bearing subject and hence the free life to which they are committed. Is it the ideas, rather than their advocates, which are the true source of intensity, wilfulness and force? Are activists like Mike and Tyler actually possessed by these ideas, the property of libertarianism? If so, what is left of the purposefulness or self-control of the human subject? For the most part, such worries about the power of libertarian ideas linger in the background, but they constitute perhaps the most consistent acknowledgement of an agency without the individual subject that might determine or shape it (libertarian ideas as the best analogy to 'the social' or culture). Any success for libertarian activism is assigned to the idea of individual freedom and the inner drive of individual activists in equal measure; it is said to be the outcome of activist alliance or free association in the city of purposes. Indeed, perhaps it is that location, more than the philosophy of libertarianism or the individuals propelled by it, which ultimately provides purpose-bearing subjects with the reassurance that freedom is present. Mike and his ideas must in the end flow through the polis.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> At this point, just three types of early-uptake bloggers dominated the blogging world in London and elsewhere: the writers of pundit blogs; ‘tech blogs’, providing commentary on technical developments of the Internet and web design; and ‘journal blogs’, which focused on diary-like, personal entries (See Reed 2005).

<sup>2</sup> The libertarian activists I knew would also, for instance, strongly reject an analysis that presented liberty and free choice as an outcome of the ways values operate in conflict in particular cultures (see Robbins 2007: 297).

<sup>3</sup> Current ethnographies do exist that may be helpful in imagining what a class-based critique of right-libertarian activism and its concepts of freedom might look like for other Londoners (most notably, Evans 2006). Indeed, there is an extensive anthropological literature on class in Britain (cf. Skeggs 1997 & 2014, Edwards, Evans & Smith 2012, Smith 2012, Tyler 2012) that might be used to draw out such an approach or solution to the problem of analysis and description that I present. For me, the test would lie in how this approach navigates the relationship between the kinds of

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implicit or explicit critiques of such understandings of freedom (as, for instance, embodying a ‘middle class’ perspective) found in the ethnographies and the kinds of critiques or explanations that operate in the realm of a formal theoretical analysis of class.

<sup>4</sup> The conceptual/methodological challenge is in some ways analogous to that highlighted by Harding (1991) for what was then the emergent anthropological study of Christian ‘fundamentalism’. As she points out, the tendency has existed to render fundamentalists as ‘a category of persons whose behavior defies reasonable expectations and therefore needs to be-and can be-explained’ (1991: 374). Scholars, she tells us, have instinctively reached for historical, social and politico-economic contextualization to understand or resituate the ‘truth-value’ of Christian fundamentalism, producing descriptions that often ‘blot out fundamentalist realities’. Right-libertarians clearly do not present the same kind of ‘aberrant’ form of the modern subject (in fact the problem of description *may* lie in what appears their exemplification of certain Western cultural values such as individual liberty), but, I want to argue, they can appear as a sort of repugnant other to an anthropological audience.

<sup>5</sup> Porter (1994: 186), like many other historians of London, makes the point that much urban growth across the city appears higgledy-piggledy, going in diverse, sprawling and inconsistent ways. Over the centuries, there has been little deployment of any plan for London and, outside the City of London, little central governance. Instead development has been led by decisions at the local level, through market forces and by those controlling the many autonomous districts or authorities that compose the city.

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<sup>6</sup> Mike's love for London is in marked contrast to the affections and interests of other enthusiasts of the city I worked with, such as journal bloggers and self-employed walking tour guides (Reed 2002, 2008). Both these sets of subjects saw themselves in relationship with a personified city, which exhibited certain coherent characteristics as an actor or being in the world. Their task was, albeit in very different ways, to uncover, narrate or detect that presence in their lives. For Mike, by contrast, London's quality resides precisely in the fact that it resists singular coherence and instead constantly reveals itself an artefact of multitudinous and singularly led lives.

<sup>7</sup> The most obvious contrast here is to the common trope of the 'nostalgic city'; as Amin & Thrift (2002: 32) highlight, the idea of the modern metropolis as a place essentially defined by loss, and in particular by the loss of face-to-face interaction or durable community contact (often embodied in the idea of an original and now long-gone ancient Greek 'polis', or in the opposition to the rural), continues to inform popular, artistic and philosophic accounts of city living.

<sup>8</sup> Rapport (2003: 234) defines self-intensity in this context as a concentrated 'attention to oneself and interest in oneself, a coming to know oneself, and a belief that this is a proper activity for an individual'. For him, the self-intense subject achieves freedom through an active self-involvement or determination to lead the life one chooses, regardless of the judgements or interventions of others.

<sup>9</sup> The libertarians I knew would not knowingly cite Arendt as a positive influence; however, to me there appear some interesting parallels. Although activists very much invest in the classic liberal notion of freedom as sovereignty and conceive of the free life as a willful existence, at times they also seem to endorse a version of her counter notion of freedom as a kind of beginning (1977: 170). In particular, Arendt's ideas that freedom can only manifest itself in individual action (it is not simply a right or

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gift to be possessed [1977: 153) and that a subject's distinct uniqueness rests in continually bringing forth something new into the world (1958: 178) strike me as apposite. In my reading, Mike and other libertarian activists are very much concerned to present themselves as beginners rather than simply pre-existing subjects. For them, self-direction is bound up with an ability to impose or insert themselves on others and on events. In this sense, like Arendt, they acknowledge that freedom is a matter of interaction and appearance (1977: 149). However, the activists would strongly resist her claim that this compromises the status of the free agent as author or self-directed being.

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting counterpoint, it is worth looking at the principles and practice of leftist-activist association developed by the Occupy movement. Corsin Jiménez & Estalella (2014), for instance, describe the emergent form of the 'assembly' in Madrid, self-consciously developed as a method for recuperating urban public space and reinvigorating 'neighborliness'. In contrast to the gatherings of libertarians, these meetings aim to overcome the difference between strangers and, through the embrace of bureaucratic forms, to reach for 'consensus' (2014: 155).

<sup>11</sup> Rapport (2003: 250-251) acknowledges the influence of the work of Anthony Wallace in developing the idea of expectability and drawing out 'equivalence structures' of behaviour between individuals.

<sup>12</sup> As Strathern (1992: 67) points out, in English kinship parents are taken to shape the identity of their children much more than those children shape the identity of their parents (& see Edwards & Strathern 2000). But the assigned location of autonomy in the parent and child relationship is also complex and reversible. On the one hand, the child in English kinship is presented as the subject most obviously shaped or determined by relationship, and thus contrasted to the more individuated character

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and nature of a mother and father (Strathern 1992: 15). On the other hand, the child is also presented as more independent than its parents, a developing subject increasingly growing away from or escaping parental influence.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth comparing, I think, the libertarian activist theory and practice of property ownership with the influential anthropological theory of material culture put forward by Miller (1987). While Miller focuses on ownership, or more specifically acts of commodity consumption, as a process of objectification by which subjects come into being, extend self-awareness and develop (1987: 28), the emphasis among Mike and the other activists I knew is squarely upon possessions as the materialisation of freedom and the basis for self-direction. Property ownership is what enables purposeful action to flow in the world.

<sup>14</sup> Strathern (2011) provides an intriguing alternative illustration of the way ‘property’ can be deployed in relation to rule-making and belonging. In the experimental school Summerhill in Suffolk, famously run as a ‘children’s democracy’ centred on the principle of freedom and release from ‘outside compulsion’, she reports that staff and students turned to regimes of ownership in response to a perceived problem: the lack of care shown towards school equipment. It was determined that ‘pupils should take responsibility by making things-and spaces-their own’ (2011: 26); that is, by assigning individual pupils ownership over individual tools in the school. What is perhaps interesting for our purposes is that this ‘training in the practices of private property’ operated, in contrast to the libertarian activists I knew, through an already existent sense of collective membership (i.e. the ‘democratic community’ of the school); it did not itself constitute the terms of belonging but rather appeared to come after the school community, from which rights

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and permissions, including the rights of property, flowed. In this example, ownership or possession is ‘being organized round relations of belonging’ and not vice versa.

<sup>15</sup> Rapport (2003: 5) also highlights the key issue of ‘control’ in developing his theory of alternative power; the question of ‘who or what determines the lives individuals lead’. This includes his desire to critique the control assigned to social-structural agencies in anthropological writing, as well as the broader issue of institutional power. His emphasis on existential power further leads him to put forward individual willfulness as a form of ‘self-control’ (3).

<sup>16</sup> In this regard, libertarian activists are far closer to the concerns of Kant than Durkheim. Like Kant, they passionately believe that moral acts must be freely exercised to be moral and hence that political agencies should not try and compel individuals or societies to act ethically (see Laidlaw 2002: 314). For them, the moral is never simply an aspect of social control or an effect of social integration; it cannot be engineered or managed.

<sup>17</sup> As many highlight (see Wall 2005, Tremayne 2006), 9/11 was a huge stimulus to pundit blogging, with many libertarian bloggers, especially in North America, beginning their weblogs in response to these events and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that followed. In fact, early on the term pundit blog was used interchangeably with the term ‘war blog’. At that time and throughout the period I conducted research (2002-2004), scrutiny of ‘Islam’ and the Muslim world generally was presented as a major task of libertarian pundit blogging.

<sup>18</sup> As libertarian activists are well aware, the notion of dynamist and stasist cultures belongs to Postrel; the terms she uses to contrast the qualities of change-focused, entrepreneurial low-regulated societies with the qualities of centrally-directed, high-

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regulated and thus more rigid societies. Postrel herself is one of the early North American libertarian pundit bloggers, her site Dynamist Blog first posted in 2000.