Squatting in History: Queer Pasts and the Cultural Turn

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Wilde histories

For the third annual LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) history month in 2009 I gave a talk for the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association on Brixton’s gay squatting community in the 1970s and early 1980s. I drew on a new archive at the British Library of Political and Economic Science of leaflets, fliers, photographs, letters, diaries and over 90 hours of oral history testimony – material amassed by former squatters seeking to capture what for many of them had been a pivotal and life changing period in their lives. The sheer volume of material was overwhelming and I struggled to navigate a path through it for this 30-minute talk. I was anxious too about speaking to an audience that I knew would include former squatters I’d interviewed, others I hadn’t and also a new generation of queer activists. Before getting to my account of the community itself, I thus spoke first about the shadow histories that always accompany those that get told; about my wider project on queer domesticities in the twentieth century that partially explained my interest in the squats; and about my worries in addressing an audience that was also my subject: I was straying outside my Victorian and early-twentieth century comfort zone. After the talk the audience offered up more memories and stories, signposting areas I had missed or skated over – the drugs and the laughter especially, said one. Whilst I had carefully tried to identify continuities with earlier periods in the men’s lives and with family and community histories, some felt I had underemphasised their sense of rupture. Someone also challenged the formal set-up of the room: why was I speaking from a raised platform with chairs arranged in rows? (‘not my decision’, I defensively replied). It was a great discussion: warm, funny, generous and engaging; this was
a history that mattered to the audience directly. And it was in this con-
text that I began thinking about this chapter on the cultural turn – and
so too about the role and efficacy of history in identity and community
formation, about the ‘evidence of experience’ (Scott, 1991), and about
my partiality, perspective and ability to ‘do justice’ to the squatters’
pasts. After all, I hadn’t even started school when they were address-
ing practically and politically many of the issues I was thinking about
in the library now.

Much gay and lesbian history making in Britain in the 1970s and
1980s was part of, and generated by, community politics and organis-
ing, and was only peripherally associated with the academy. The Brixton
squatters, for example, were themselves responsible for the first two
rounds of oral history interviews about the community (in 1983 and
1997). This grassroots work has continued, often fostered by a growing
network of groups for older gay men and lesbians. Sometimes in tan-
dem, though more often in parallel, has been a growth in research and
teaching on gay, lesbian, queer and sexuality histories in universities.
This has built upon, but – in the light of the cultural turn – also been
critical of this earlier genre of lesbian and gay history making. There
has, for example, been concern about the use of individual past experi-
ence as a source base; about the seizure of gay men and women in the
past as ‘our own’; and latterly about the anachronism of LGBT history
month (Duggan, 1995; Mills, 2006; Scott, 1991). There is clearly a chal-
lenge in squaring our queered academic perspectives after the cultural
turn with a broader appetite for lesbian and gay history. But if we are
serious about the reinterpretation of society and culture in the past then
we also need a debate about the social and cultural role of that past in
the present (Bravmann, 1997), and about how LGBT and queer histo-
ries can function across an academic/popular history divide that has in
some ways become more entrenched as the discipline has become more
self-conscious about its theoretical engagement.

This divide between ‘popular’ and ‘academic’ renditions of the
(homo)sexual past was (and is) not only externalised for me. As a 21-
year-old, recently ‘out’ and moved to London, I felt attached to my ‘gay’
forebears; those men – like Edward Carpenter, Oscar Wilde, Noel Cow-
ard, Joe Orton and Derek Jarman – who gave me a sense of belonging
in a new city and city subculture. This gay lineage was one I claimed
and identified with; it was a way of affiliating to a wider network and
community even though I also knew it didn’t necessarily represent
an historic ‘truth’. If I was beginning to be drawn to more complex
accounts of past subjectivities through the work of Michel Foucault,