

Gavin Brown and Helen Yaffe, *Youth Activism and Solidarity: The Non-Stop Picket Against Apartheid*, New York: Routledge, 2017. ISBN: 9781138828865 (cloth); ISBN: 9781315738062 (ebook)

On 19 April 1986, the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group (known as City Group) launched a picket of the South African embassy in the centre of London to protest the apartheid regime. They pledged to maintain a constant presence until Nelson Mandela was freed from prison. The “non-stop picket” was maintained more or less without interruption for nearly four years, ending a couple of weeks after Mandela was released. By this point the group had over 1,000 members and, at its peak, around 100 would attend City Group’s weekly meetings. It was always, however, reliant on a core group of 25-30 activists, a majority of whom were in their teens or early twenties. Gavin Brown and Helen Yaffe were two of the young picketers, Brown as a teenager and Yaffe a younger child initially involved through her parents. While acknowledging the influence of their own experiences, there is little directly autobiographical about this work, which instead draws upon extensive interviews and archival research. Brown and Yaffe’s account of City Group provides a rich history from below of activism in 1980s London. It is at the same time a thoughtful reflection on the nature of solidarity, perhaps most notably how for many of the youthful picketers this political activism shaped their experiences of “growing up”.

Youth Activism and Solidarity situates the non-stop picket in the longer history of apartheid and resistance to it in South Africa and beyond, but also contextualises the campaign in terms of the contradictions of 1980s London. The city was, as it is now, a polarised place: the financialization of its economy helped produce great wealth for a minority as well as deindustrialisation, unemployment, and poverty. London’s status as a world city situated it at the heart of networks of capital, but also made it a hub “in which anti-colonial exiles from across the world converged and networked with each other” (p.12). The Kitson family, political exiles from South Africa, were crucial members of City Group. As Doreen Massey (2007) noted, London in the 1980s was both the centre of neoliberalism in

Britain and the home of many movements attempting to resist Thatcherism (see also Kelliher 2017). This work provides an important contribution to understanding that left-wing milieu at a time when the “possibilities for London’s future were still being fought out” (p.11).

Brown and Yaffe argue for greater attention to be paid to the micropolitical practices through which solidarities are enacted. As a result, the book provides a detailed account of the activity of the non-stop picket, from the comparatively large-scale or spectacular events, to the “mundane, possibly boring, aspects of political activism” (p.174). They describe the physical infrastructure and the basic practices of the picket line, with the group establishing a presence with their banner and engaging passers-by through petitions. Emphasis is also placed on City Group’s “lively, noisy culture of song and chanting” (p.25).¹ This exuberant transformation of a prominent space in central London allowed picketers to intervene in the daily rhythms of life in the city, reaching people with anti-apartheid sympathies and turning them into activists.

The spectacular and the quotidian aspects of protest were, to some extent, shaped by the temporalities of the picket. The larger events often coincided with annual commemorations of significant moments in South African history, notably the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre and the 1976 Soweto Uprising, or anniversaries of the picket itself. These large demonstrations—reportedly 1,000 people attended the second anniversary protest, for example—punctuated the daily and weekly routines of the picket. Brown and Yaffe’s account of this everyday activism gives a powerful sense of, among other things, the immense labour required to maintain a constant presence for such a long time. This depended on a high degree of organisation, discipline, and in this case a hierarchical leadership structure. In contrast to what is described as the “functional anarchism” (p.73) of comparable protests in this period, the hierarchical approach was almost certainly shaped by the prominent involvement of the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG). The authors reject

¹ It is worth listening to the recordings of some of these songs that Brown has made available at <https://soundcloud.com/gavinbrown> (last accessed 31 January 2018).

accusations that City Group was simply an RCG front, but recognise that the politics of the RCG was a significant influence.

A little more on the RCG's particular version of Marxism, and how this shaped political perspectives and organisational forms, may have been useful here (although see Brown 2017). This would be worth considering both from the perspective of the group itself, but also perhaps from other anti-apartheid activists with whom City Group had a tense relationship. One of the apparent differences between City Group and the national Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), from which City Group was expelled, was who to support. The AAM saw itself as subordinate to the African National Congress (ANC), whereas City Group decided to support all anti-apartheid tendencies in South Africa and Namibia, including but not exclusively the ANC. The notion of "deference", that solidarity requires those who are receiving support to dictate the form of that support, is central to a number of theoretical approaches to the concept (see, for example, Gould 2007; Kolers 2016). Both the AAM and City Group adhered to this principle in their own way. The issue of who exactly to defer to, however, as this history suggests, is rarely a straightforward one in practice.

The hyper-local activism of the picket was embedded in broader geographies. The embassy and the protest outside it were symbolic of the complex transnational relationships between Britain and South Africa, encompassing politics, trade, and histories of colonialism. While sustaining the picket was obviously a focus, City Group also toured the country raising awareness and support, and responded to calls from the South African mineworkers' union for "people's sanctions" with campaigns targeting tourism, sport, and South African goods in supermarkets. Brown and Yaffe explain that the picket was advertised in radical bookshops and community centres, "aspects of London's urban geography that are now seriously depleted" (p.68). This is a suggestive point, and a more developed picture of those infrastructures of solidarity, and also their decline, would be productive in understanding the construction of networks of solidarity.

Activism is frequently entangled with powerful emotions. One participant in the non-stop picket observes that they were "often struck by how many people seemed to be there for

friendship, community, even love” (p.61). Notably, the picket was a space providing what Brown and Yaffe describe as “uncommon ground”, where friendships were developed that “crossed boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, age, class, and social difference” (p.69). The notion of “comradeship” emerges here as a very particular type of politicised and deeply emotional relationship. There is an important sense of the “social solidarity” developed between those involved in such an intense campaign (p.146). One practical expression of this was how seriously the group took protecting its members from repeated attempts to criminalise their activism.

Brown and Yaffe argue for an understanding of solidarity as a bundle of related social practices, described as a dynamic relationship between materials, competences, and meanings. In this context, they show how the social practices of both solidarity and growing up “came to be entangled, sharing common elements” (p.37). This overlapping sense of solidarity and growing up allows them to extend David Featherstone’s (2012) understanding of solidarity as transformative, showing the role it can play in young activists’ transition to adulthood. Youthfulness and the process of growing up are understood here as relational, not age specific. The picket was a site of intergenerational exchange and provided a space where young people’s politics were taken seriously. They were also encouraged to take on significant responsibilities. This included what must have been the daunting task of representing the group at international conferences of South African and Namibian liberation movements.

The book is based centrally on over 100 interviews conducted between 2011 and 2014, primarily with picketers but also with supporters of the campaign and retired police officers. One of the strengths of an oral history approach is that it allows the authors to trace over an extended period of time the impact of these experiences on individual lives. Thinking about the legacies of solidarity action in terms of the kind of skills people learn is particularly useful. These included overcoming the fear of speaking in public, how to deal with the police, and the ability to put forward opinions more confidently. Of course, the picture is complex: some people burned out, cut their ties with those they had campaigned with, and were never

involved in activism again. Many found that subsequent campaigns never quite lived up to the non-stop picket, a frustration which had the potential to be “alienating and upsetting” (p.214). Learning lessons from past struggles can be difficult, as an attempt to recreate one campaign rubs up against new contexts, including different people with their own views and experiences. Nevertheless, many of the picketers went on to contribute to a range of important campaign on the British Left in the following decades, shaped by their experiences of those four years. Part of the importance of *Youth Activism and Solidarity* is that the care and detail with which the non-stop picket is recounted gives those of us who were not there a real sense of what it was like, allowing us to learn some of the lessons of that campaign and, hopefully, to more effectively and equitably organise solidarity in new contexts.

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Diarmaid Kelliher
School of Geographical and Earth Sciences
University of Glasgow
Diarmaid.Kelliher@glasgow.ac.uk

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