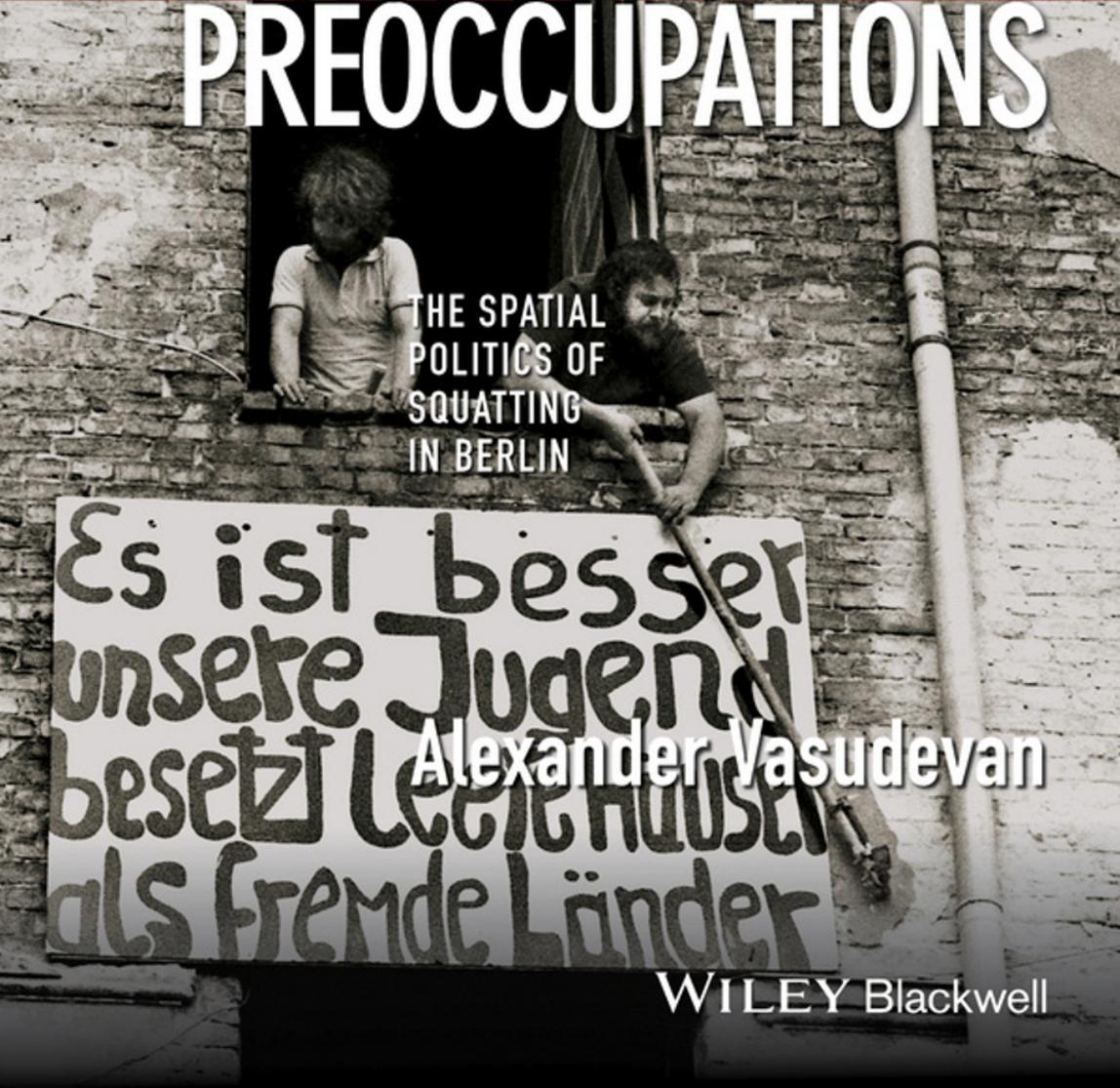


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# METROPOLITAN PREOCCUPATIONS



THE SPATIAL  
POLITICS OF  
SQUATTING  
IN BERLIN

Es ist besser  
unsere Jugend  
besetzt Leere Häuser  
als fremde Länder

Alexander Vasudevan

WILEY Blackwell



# Metropolitan Preoccupations

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# **Metropolitan Preoccupations**

*The Spatial Politics of  
Squatting in Berlin*

Alexander Vasudevan

**WILEY** Blackwell

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*For Megan*



# Contents

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|   |      |
|---|------|
| <i>Series Editors' Preface</i>                | viii |
| <i>List of Figures</i>                        | ix   |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i>                       | xi   |
| 1 Introduction: Making Radical Urban Politics | 1    |
| 2 Crisis and Critique                         | 27   |
| 3 Resistance and Autonomy                     | 53   |
| 4 Antagonism and Repair                       | 86   |
| 5 Separation and Renewal                      | 133  |
| 6 Capture and Experimentation                 | 164  |
| 7 Conclusion: "Der Kampf geht weiter"         | 196  |
| <i>References</i>                             | 209  |
| <i>Index</i>                                  | 231  |

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# List of Figures

---

- 1.1 Arrest of the journalist Ulrike Meinhof at a protest occupation in the Märkisches Viertel in West Berlin, 1 May 1970 (Klaus Mehner, BerlinPressServices). 3
- 1.2 Map of squatted spaces in West Berlin up to the end of 1981. Map produced by Elaine Watts, University of Nottingham. 5
- 1.3 Map of the second wave of squatting in the former East of Berlin, 1989–1990. Map produced by Elaine Watts, University of Nottingham. 6
- 2.1 Berlin’s ‘shanty town’. Image in *Die Gartenlaube* by Ludwig Löffler (1819–1876), p. 459. 29
- 2.2 The creative destruction of the Berlin tenement. Kreuzberg in the early 1980s. Skalitzer Straße between Kottbusser Tor and Görlitzer Bahnhof (Manfred Kraft/Umbruch Archiv). 47
- 3.1 The Georg von Rauch-Haus (photo by author). 78
- 3.2 “The stones that hit your head are from the house you pulled down.” Cover of *Sponti* magazine, *Wir wollen alles* (Nr. 13/14, 1974) documenting the Frankfurter *Häuserkampf* (personal collection, author). 80
- 4.1 Cover of TUNIX conference flyer, December 1977/January 1978 (personal collection, author). 87
- 4.2 The TUNIX conference in West Berlin, January 1978 (Klaus Mehner, BerlinPressServices). 89
- 4.3 Programme for TUNIX conference, *InfoBUG*, December 1977/January 1978 (personal collection, author). 95
- 4.4 The Fire Station on Reichenberger Straße in Kreuzberg, occupied in Spring 1977, cover of brochure produced in December 1977 (Papiertiger Archiv Berlin). 101

|      |  |     |
|------|--|-----|
| 4.5  | Bürgerinitiative SO36 Flyer announcing the occupation of two squatted apartment blocks in Kreuzberg, reproduced in the <i>Südosst Express</i> , February 1979 (Papiertiger Archiv Berlin). | 102 |
| 4.6  | American soldiers conducting urban military exercises in Kreuzberg, <i>Südosst Express</i> , December 1979 (Papiertiger Archiv Berlin).  | 104 |
| 4.7  | Protests in the wake of the eviction of squatters from a house on Fränkelufer 48, Kreuzberg, 12 December 1980 (Michael Kipp/Umbruch Archiv).   | 106 |
| 4.8  | DIY instructions in the <i>Instand-Besetzer-Post</i> , 17.3.1981, p. 10 (Papiertiger Archiv Berlin).   | 112 |
| 4.9  | The makeshift city: Rehabilitating occupied spaces in Kreuzberg (Umbruch Archiv).  | 113 |
| 4.10 | The Regenbogenfabrik social centre in Kreuzberg (photo by author).   | 116 |
| 4.11 | Intimacy and utopia: The Frauencafé in Moabit, <i>Instand-Besetzer-Post</i> , 12.6.81, p. 23 (Papiertiger Archiv Berlin).  | 118 |
| 4.12 | “The city as festival”: Street performance in Charlottenburg on 21 September 1981 (Wolfgang Sünderhauf/Umbruch Archiv).  | 121 |
| 4.13 | Map produced for TUWAT ‘spectacle’ in Kreuzberg, August 1981, <i>Instand-Besetzer-Post</i> (Papiertiger Archiv).   | 124 |
| 4.14 | Second map produced for TUWAT ‘spectacle’ in Kreuzberg, August 1981, <i>Instand-Besetzer-Post</i> (Papiertiger Archiv).  | 126 |
| 5.1  | The eviction of squatters from Mainzer Straße in Friedrichshain, November 1990 (Umbruch Archiv).   | 134 |
| 5.2  | <i>Umweltblätter</i> , cover of dissident underground Samisdat publication of the Kirche von Unten, East Berlin, 1988 (Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft).                                      | 137 |
| 5.3  | The occupation of abandoned apartments in Mainzer Straße by squatters in 1990 (Umbruch Archiv).  | 147 |
| 5.4  | During the Mainzer Straße evictions in Friedrichshain, November 1990 (Umbruch Archiv).   | 150 |
| 6.1  | Performing architecture? Squatters occupying Kastanienallee 77, Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg on 20 June 1992 (pamphlet produced by K77).   | 169 |
| 6.2  | The ‘art’ of squatting (pamphlet produced by K77).   | 171 |
| 6.3  | Kastanienallee 77 in 2009 (photo by author).   | 172 |
| 6.4  | The ‘remains’ of the Brunnenstraße 183 squat after its eviction in 2009 (photo by author).   | 185 |
| 6.5  | The Kotti & Co ‘gecekondü’ in Kreuzberg (photo by author).   | 189 |
| 7.1  | Montage of the West Berlin Squatter Scene in the <i>Instand-Besetzer-Post</i> , 30.4.1981, n.p. (Papiertiger Archiv Berlin).   | 200 |

# Acknowledgements

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The origins of this book can be traced to a bus tour of West Berlin that I was taken on by my mum in the summer of 1987 as a young child. While the tour took in all the expected sites, it also wound its way through the streets of Kreuzberg, a neighbourhood still reeling from the violent clashes between police and protesters on May Day and the subsequent police blockade which sealed off the district during the visit of American President Ronald Reagan. I was captivated, in particular, by the neighbourhood's recent history as an alternative enclave in which artists, dropouts, migrants, students, and workers all made a home. I realise now that this is a powerful imaginary with its own biases and blind spots. I was, nevertheless, struck by the graffiti and the colourful exterior of many apartment blocks in the neighbourhood. My mum explained to me that these were houses that had been occupied in the early 1980s by squatters who lived in them without paying any rent and that some had been legalised while, in the case of many other houses, the residents had been evicted.

I was immediately interested in who these 'squatters' were and why they chose to live illegally and yet, as it seemed to me at the time, in a radically different city. It would take me many years to finally formulate a project in which I was able to return to these questions. I began research on the history and geography of squatting in Berlin in 2006 and my numerous trips to Berlin were generously supported by funding at the University of Nottingham (New Researcher Fund and School of Geography Research funding) and a Small Research Grant from the British Academy (RA 1555). This is a project that has also benefited from various conference presentations and research seminars in the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and Sweden. The debts to my hosts and the various conversations that emerged out of these presentations are too numerous to do justice here and I simply want to register how immensely formative they have been.

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Chapters 4 and 6 draw in part on materials that first appeared in *Social and Cultural Geography* as "Dramaturgies of Dissent: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in Berlin, 1968 –" (Vasudevan, 2011a) and appear here with permission of Taylor & Francis. The book builds on and extends argument recently outlined in two articles in *Progress in Human Geography* ("The Autonomous City: Towards a Critical Geography of Occupation" and "The Makeshift City: Towards a Global Geography of Squatting").



# Chapter One

## Introduction: Making Radical Urban Politics

---

Considering there are houses standing empty,  
While you leave us homeless on the street,  
We've decided that we're going to move in now,  
We're tired of having nowhere dry to sleep.

Considering you will then  
Threaten us with cannons and with guns,  
We've now decided to fear  
A bad life more than death.

Bertolt Brecht (1967: 655)<sup>1</sup>

We don't need any landowners because the houses belong to us.

Ton Steine Scherben (1972)<sup>2</sup>

On the evening of 1 May 1970, a small theatre troupe began an impromptu performance in the middle of a shopping district in a newly-built satellite city on the northern outskirts of West Berlin. The troupe, Hoffmann's Comic Teater, was a radical theatre ensemble formed in 1969 by three brothers, Gert, Peter and Ralph Möbius, at the height of the countercultural 'revolution' in West Germany. Wearing colourful costumes and masks and accompanied by a live band, they soon developed a reputation for staging politically daring events that took place in the streets of West Berlin and in the city's many youth homes (Brown, 2013:

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Alexander Vasudevan.

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172; see Sichtermann, Johler, Stahl, 2000; Seidel, 2006). The performances focused, in particular, on the everyday conflicts that shaped the lives of Berlin's working-class residents. Audience participation was actively encouraged by the troupe who developed an engaged agitprop style in which "the predominant cultural and political consciousness of the audience member" became the "starting point for the planning and realisation of the play" (quoted in Brown, 2013: 173). Scenes were improvised while spectators were invited onto the 'stage' to act out scenes from their own lives.

On 1 May 1970, the troupe travelled to the Märkisches Viertel, a large modernist housing estate in the district of Reinickendorf whose construction was part of West Berlin's First Urban Renewal Programme initiated by then Mayor Willi Brandt in 1963. The programme was responsible for the widespread demolition of inner-city tenements and the 'decanting' of their predominantly working-class occupants – approximately 140,000 Berliners – to new tower block estates on the fringes of the city (see Pugh, 2014; Urban, 2013). The performance by Hoffmann's Comic Teater focused, unsurprisingly, on the experience of the estate's residents and their anger at the lack of social infrastructure and the unwillingness of state-operated landowner and developer GESOBAU to provide "free spaces (*Freizeiträumen*)" for local youth.<sup>3</sup> It concluded with a scene that dramatised the recent closure of an after-school club (*Schülerladen*) after which the participants and spectators were encouraged to occupy a nearby building as a symbolic protest against GESOBAU. They were prevented from doing so, however, by the police who had been following the performance and had already secured the site. A group of over one hundred activists, performers and other local residents were nevertheless able to stage an occupation in an adjoining factory. As they began discussions over the formation of an autonomous self-organised youth centre, the factory hall was stormed by riot police and the occupiers, who included the journalist Ulrike Meinhof, brutally evicted. Three protesters were seriously injured and taken to hospital (see Figure 1.1).<sup>4</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the eviction, a small group of local activists initiated a discussion about the future direction of political mobilising in the Märkisches Viertel. A strategy paper was produced and circulated by the group who criticised the new housing estate and its developers for their insufficient attention to the needs and desires of its tenants (Beck et al., 1975). One of the authors of that unpublished paper was Meinhof, who only two weeks later would take part in the breakout of Andreas Baader from the reading room of the Social Studies Institute of West Berlin's Free University (*Freie Universität*), an event which led to the formation of the Red Army Faction (*Rote Armee Faktion* or RAF) (Aust, 1985).<sup>5</sup> Hoffmann's Comic Teater continued to produce engaged performances in the wake of the occupation and also turned their attention to children's theatre (see Möbius, 1973). Members of the group were later involved in the formation of Ton Steine Scherben, one of the most important bands within the radical scene in West Berlin and whose history is largely inseparable from the



**Figure 1.1** Arrest of the journalist Ulrike Meinhof at a protest occupation in the Märkisches Viertel in West Berlin, 1 May 1970 (Klaus Mehner, BerlinPressServices).

evolution of the anti-authoritarian Left in the city (Brown, 2009). While the factory occupation in the Märkisches Viertel was itself short-lived, it was nevertheless the first squatted space in a city where the radical politics of occupation would soon assume a new and enduring significance.

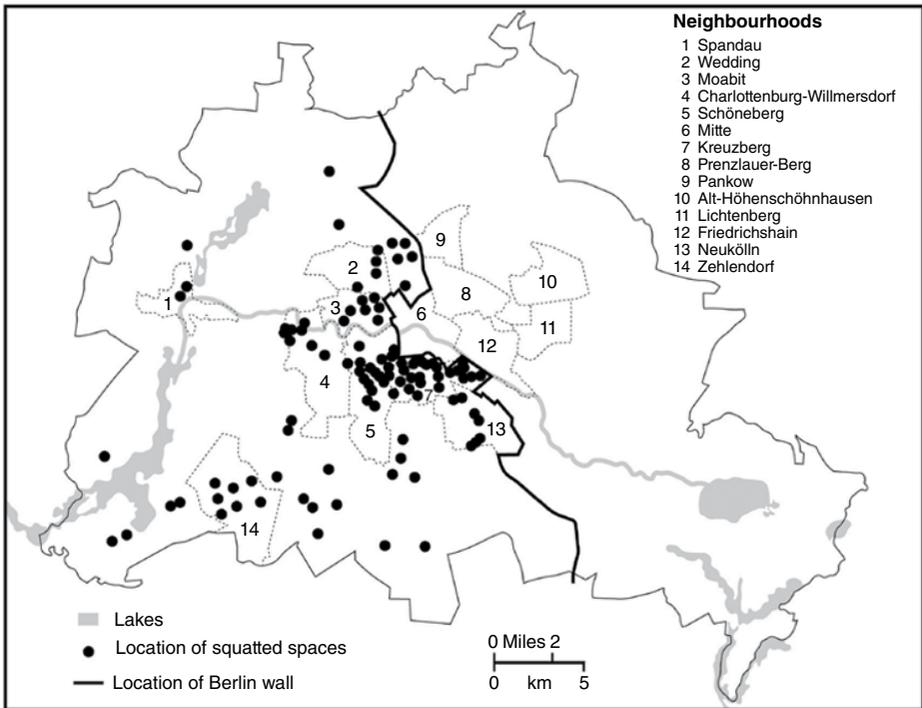
The story behind Berlin's first squat brings together a number of themes that are at the heart of this book: namely, the turn to squatting and occupation-based practices, more generally, as part of the repertoire of contentious performances adopted by activists, students, workers and other local residents across West Germany during the anti-authoritarian revolt of the 1960s and 1970s and in its wake; the relationship between the emergence of the New Left in West Germany and the transformation of Berlin into a veritable theatre of dissent, protest and resistance (see Davis, 2008); the recognition of uneven development and housing inequality as a source of political mobilisation and the concomitant privileging of concrete local struggles in Berlin for the composition of new spaces of action, self-determination and solidarity; and, finally, the widespread desire to reimagine and live the city differently and to reclaim a 'politics of habitation' and an alternative 'right to a city' shaped by new intersections and possibilities (Lefebvre, 2014, 1996; see also Simone, 2014; Vasudevan, 2011a; Vasudevan, 2014a).<sup>6</sup>

In the pages that follow, I develop a close reading of the history of squatting in Berlin. To do so, the book charts the everyday spatial practices and political

imaginaries of squatters. It examines the assembling of alternative collective spaces in the city of Berlin and takes in developments in both former West and East Berlin. For squatters, the city of Berlin came to represent both a site of political protest and creative re-appropriation. The central aim of the study is to show how the history of squatting in Berlin formed part of a broader narrative of urban development, dispossession and resistance. It draws particular attention to the ways in which squatting and other occupation-based practices re-imagined the city as a space of refuge, gathering and subversion. This reflects the fulsome emergence of new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s in West Germany as well as the tentative development of an alternative public sphere in the final years of the German Democratic Republic (see Brown, 2013; Davis, 2008; Klimke, 2010; Moldt, 2005, 2008; Reichardt, 2014; Thomas, 2003). At the same time, it is a story that speaks to a renewed form of emancipatory urban politics and the possibility of forging new ways of thinking about and inhabiting the city that extend well beyond Berlin and, for that matter, Germany.

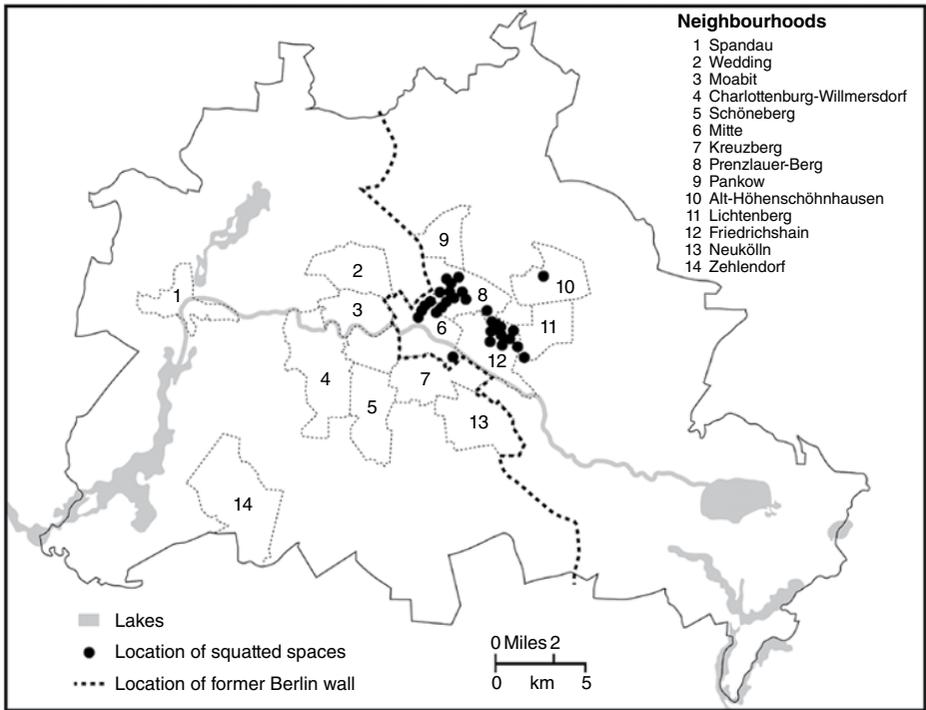
As the first book-length study of the cultural and political geographies of squatting in Berlin, this is a project that seeks to develop a rich historical account of the various struggles in the city over the *making of an alternative urban imagination* and the search for new radical solutions to a lack of housing and infrastructure. The book focuses, in particular, on what squatters actually *did*, the terms and tactics they deployed, the ideas and spaces they created. This is a history, in turn, that has had a significant impact on the transformation of Berlin's urban landscape and has shaped recent struggles over the city's identity. As I argue, squatters and the spaces they occupied were never incidental minor details in the formation and evolution of the New Left in West Germany in the 1960s and the various social movements which developed in the decades that followed. They played, if anything, a vital role in opening up new perspectives on the very form and substance that radical political action and solidarity could assume and are supported, in turn, by figures that point to an alternative milieu made up of thousands of activists and an even larger circle of sympathisers (Amantine, 2012; Azofox, 2014a, n.d; see also Reichardt, 2014 for a wider perspective).

In Berlin, there have been at least 610 separate squats of a broadly political nature between 1970 and 2014 (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3). The majority of these actions took place in the city's old tenement blocks although they also encompassed a range of other sites from abandoned villas, factories and schools, to parks, vacant plots and even, in one case, a part of the 'death strip' that formed the border between West and East Berlin. As a form of illegal occupation, squatting typically fell under §123 of the German Criminal Code ("Trespassing") though many magistrates in Berlin as well as elsewhere in West Germany were reluctant to charge squatters as, in their eyes, a run-down apartment did not satisfy the legal test for an apartment or a "pacified estate (*befriedetes Besitztum*)" (Schön, 1982).<sup>7</sup> There were, in this context, two major waves of squatting in the city. The first wave between 1979 and 1984 involved 265 separate sites as activists



**Figure 1.2** Map of squatted spaces in West Berlin up to the end of 1981. Map produced by Elaine Watts, University of Nottingham.

and other local residents responded to a deepening housing crisis by occupying apartments, the overwhelming majority of which were located in the districts of Kreuzberg and Schöneberg. At the high point of this wave in the spring of 1981, it is estimated that there were at least 2000 active squatters in West Berlin and tens of thousands of supporters (Reichardt, 2014: 519). The second wave between 1989 and 1990 shifted the gravity of the scene to the former East as hundreds of activists exploited the political power vacuum that accompanied the fall of the Berlin Wall, squatting 183 sites both in the former East as well as the West.<sup>8</sup> Since 1991, there have been only 100 occupations across Berlin as local authorities have vigorously proscribed and neutralised attempts to squat. Of these squats, 56 were evicted by the police within four days. Overall, 200 spaces have been legalised and, in 35 cases, the squatters have themselves acquired ownership (see Azozomox, n.d.).<sup>9</sup> While these figures point to the sheer scale and intensity of squatting in Berlin, they do not take into account other forms of deprivation-based squatting carried out by homeless people nor do they include the large number of East Berliners who, from the late 1960s to the end of GDR, illegally



**Figure 1.3** Map of the second wave of squatting in the former East of Berlin, 1989–1990. Map produced by Elaine Watts, University of Nottingham.

occupied empty flats in response to basic housing needs, a process that was known as ‘*Schwarzwohnen*’ (Grashoff, 2011a, 2011b; Vasudevan, 2013).<sup>10</sup>

As these figures suggest, the history of squatting in Berlin occupied a significant place within a complex landscape of protest in the city. At the same time, the squatter ‘movement’ that emerged in Berlin was also connected to similar scenes in other West German cities in the 1970s and 1980s – most notably Frankfurt, Freiburg and Hamburg – and to a number of cities in the former East in the early 1990s (Dresden, Halle, Leipzig and Potsdam) (see Amantine, 2012; Dellwo and Baer, 2012, 2013; Grashoff, 2011b). It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that there remains little empirical work on the role of squatting – and the built form and geography more generally – in the creation and circulation of new activist imaginations and the production of collective modes of living. Why, in other words, did thousands of activists and citizens choose to break the law and occupy empty flats and other buildings across Germany and Berlin, in particular? Were these actions dictated by pure necessity or did they represent a newfound desire to imagine other ways of living together? Who were these squatters? What were the central

characteristics of urban squatting (goals, action repertoires, political influences)? And in what way did these practices promote an alternative vision of the city as a key site of “political action and revolt” (Harvey, 2012: 118–119)?

In order to answer these questions, the study develops a conceptually rigorous and empirically grounded approach to the emergence of squatting in Berlin. More specifically, it develops three interrelated perspectives on the everyday practices of squatters in the city and their relationship to recent debates about the ‘right to the city’ and the potential for composing other critical urbanisms (see Attoh, 2011; Harvey, 2008, 2012; Lefebvre, 1996; Mitchell, 2003; Nicholls, 2008; Purcell, 2003; Vasudevan, 2014a). Firstly, it signals a challenge to existing historical scholarship on the New Left in Germany by arguing that the time has come to *spatialise* the events, practices and participants that shaped the history of the anti-authoritarian revolt and to retrace the complex geographies of connection and solidarity that were at its heart. Secondly, it draws attention to squatted spaces as alternative sites of habitation, that speak to a radically different sense of ‘cityness’, i.e. a city’s capacity to continuously reorganise and structure the ways in which people, places, materials and ideas come together (Simone, 2010, 2014). Thirdly, it places particular emphasis on the material processes – experimental, makeshift and precarious – through which squatters came together as a social movement, sometimes successfully, sometimes less so. At stake here is a critical understanding and detailed examination of the conceptual resources and empirical domains through which an alternative right to the city is articulated, lived and contested (McFarlane, 2011b). A large part of this effort is, in turn, predicated on identifying concrete ways to recognise and represent the various efforts of squatters whilst acknowledging their complexity, contradictions, successes, and failures (see Simone, 2014: xi). To do so, the book ultimately argues, is to also draw wider lessons for how we, as geographers and urbanists, come to understand the city as a site of political contestation.

## **Spatialising the Anti-Authoritarian Revolt**

In recent years, the historical development of the New Left in West Germany has become a growing area of scholarly activity as a new wave of studies have challenged the ways in which the West German student movement and its various afterlives have been narrated. Traditionally, the era known as ‘68 has been framed as “the moment when West Germany began to earn its place among the Western democracies” (Slobodian, 2012: 5). According to this view, 1968 and the protests and struggles that emerged in its wake were widely seen as a key watershed event in the democratisation of West Germany. This is a story in which young West Germans rebelled against the “stifling atmosphere of cultural conformity” that shaped the immediate post-war period. In so doing, they challenged the hysteria of the Cold War whilst confronting their parents about the crimes of the Nazi

past. For the historian Timothy Brown, “such demands [...] acquired a special potency in a West Germany poised precipitously on the front line of the Cold War and struggling with the legacy of a recent past marked by fascism, war and genocide” (2013: 4). The consensus view is that the actions of the ‘68ers’ helped propel West Germany into an era of liberalisation which, in turn, provided the necessary conditions for a vibrant democratic society.

As I demonstrate in this book, this is an argument that works to polish up, obscure and eviscerate other political developments and radical trajectories within the New Left that exceeded simple categorisation and containment. The reduction of the West German ‘1968’ to a single overarching narrative thus foreclosed any meaningful attempt to assess and interrogate its nature and legacy. It was, however, the very surplus of such an event, its ability to disrupt existing explanatory models, that ultimately led, as Kristin Ross (2002) has argued in a related context, to its de-historicisation and de-politicisation. Not only were the motivation and goals of the events’ myriad actors (students, workers, apprentices, artists and many other citizens), erased but the complex multilayered causes and consequences of their actions conspicuously ignored. This tendency has, if anything, been reinforced by an “overrepresentation, among historians of the events, of veterans of the student movement, whose lack of critical distance from events readily results in a mixing up of historical events and personal biographies” (Brown, 2013: 2; see Aly, 2008; Enzensberger, 2004; Koenen, 2001; Kunzelmann, 1998; Langhans, 2008). This should not, however, be seen as a simple case of historiographic revisionism but rather an act of *confiscation* through which the very richness and complexity of a mass movement is reduced to the “individual itineraries of a few so-called leaders, spokesmen, or representatives”. Collective revolt is thereby “defanged” and recast as the jurisdiction and judgement of a small group of select ‘personalities’ (Ross, 2002: 4).

The story described in the pages of this book is deliberately set against these partisan tendencies and builds on an emergent body of work that seeks to historicise the anti-authoritarian protests that took hold in West Germany in the late 1960s as political struggles against various forms of oppression. Unsurprisingly, the events of the West German ‘1968’ have, in recent years, received extensive treatment within the German literature (Fahlenbrach, 2002; Gilcher-Holtey, 1998; Klimke and Scharloth, 2007, Kraushaar, 2000; März, 2012; Reichardt and Siegfried, 2010; Scharloth, 2010; Siegfried, 2008). While the anglophone literature remains relatively small, some historians have nevertheless argued that the faultlines of a new interpretation can already be detected, one centred on the transnational and global dimensions of the uprisings that took place in West Germany (see especially Brown, 2013). My own view is that a “future consensus interpretation”, as suggested by one prominent historian, runs the risk of substituting one historical orthodoxy for another (Brown, 2013: 3). Recent perspectives suggest, in contrast, a number of interconnecting themes that point to the sheer scale and diversity of opposition that grew out of the student protests in 1968. There has, in this context, been an attempt to pluralise the actors that were

involved in the anti-authoritarian revolt and to argue that the New Left depended on the negotiation of gendered, classed and racialised moments of encounter and was, in fact, a product of participants from widely different backgrounds, orientations and experiences (Featherstone, 2012: 6; see Davis et al., 2010; Slobodian, 2012). Others have placed particular emphasis on re-thinking the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s as a ‘global phenomenon’ that was a consequence of diverse translocal trajectories and connections (Höhn, 2008, Klimke, 2010; Slobodian, 2013a, 2013b, Tompkins, n.d.; see also Slobodian, 2012). Taken together, these approaches have shown that the construction of new movements and solidarities in West Germany was both an intensely local affair and one shaped by networks and relations that operated at a number of scales and which, in many cases, actively reshaped the terrain of political action.

Transnational histories of West German activists in the 1960s and 1970s have tended, as Quinn Slobodian has argued, to gravitate westwards and highlight the role of the United States in the development of the New Left in West Germany by retracing the exchange of protest repertoires and the movement of individuals across the Atlantic (2012: 6; see Klimke, 2010; Juchler, 1996; Höhn, 2008). While this work has yielded important insights into the entanglements between German and American oppositional cultures, it has also tended to obscure other alternative alliances and connections and downplay the impact of foreign students in drawing their West German counterparts into wider anti-imperialist struggles and, in the eyes of some commentators, into increasingly militant actions. To be sure, the emergence of a New Left internationalism in West Germany was often driven by abstractions and projections that reinforced, even instrumentalised, a mode of engagement “based on a West German Self and a Third World Other” (Slobodian, 2012: 11). And yet, it also promoted new collaborations with Third World actors which restored their agency and place within a radical history that was resolutely translocal and, as such, marked by deeply uneven geographies.

Attempts to capture the ‘globality of 1968’ have also encouraged greater sensitivity to questions of *periodisation*. There has developed, on the one hand, a new tendency in the historiography to adopt an approach that identifies the students protests of ‘1968’ as the culmination of the ‘long sixties’ and “the climax of various developments that had been set in motion due to the immense speed of the social and economic transformations after the Second World War” (Klimke, 2010: 2; see Marwick, 1998). Other scholars, on the other hand, have returned to earlier trajectories that linked the protests in West Germany in the late 1960s to the radicalisation of many students and other activists and the subsequent turn by a portion of the anti-authoritarian movement to revolutionary violence in the 1970s (Hanshaw, 2012; Weinhauer, Requate and Haupt, 2006). If the events of the German Autumn in 1977 – the kidnapping and murder of the industrialist Hanns-Martin Schleyer, the unsuccessful hijacking of a Lufthansa jet and the mass suicide of Red Army Faction (RAF) inmates in the Stannheim prison – are often seen as marking the end of the New Left, a new body of work has also returned to the 1970s with a view to recovering other histories of activism, dissent

and self-organisation that emerged in counterpoint to groups such as the RAF for whom violence was becoming the exclusive means of struggle (Arps, 2011; Baumann, Gehrig and Büchse 2011; März, 2012; Slobodian, 2013). This work has been characterised, in no small part, by a new commitment to showing how extra-parliamentary groups were able to forge oppositional geographies and alternative lifeworlds that eschewed the “leaden solidarity” that seemingly defined the ways in which such groups were compelled to either declare solidarity or distance themselves from the actions of their violent comrades (Negt, 1995: 289; Slobodian, 2013: 224).

New attempts have, therefore, been made to examine the protest landscape that emerged in the 1970s in the wake of the student movement and to document the underground histories that were responsible for the appearance of various Marxist-Leninist and/or Maoist cadre parties, the so-called *K-Gruppen*, as well as the emergence of ‘rank and file groups’ (*Basisgruppen*) that turned to local neighbourhoods and other institutions (school, factories, etc) as a source of new initiatives and solidarities (see Arps, 2011; Kuhn, 2005). A small group of studies have also begun to explore the emergence of migrant activism in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s and the ways in which foreigners remained active participants in a range of social movements (Bojadžijev, 2008; Karakayali, 2000, 2009; Seibert, 2008; Slobodian, 2013). Recent books by Tim Brown (2013) and Sven Reichardt (2014) have, in contrast, adopted a broader plenary approach that sets out to map the vast growth of alternative practices, projects and infrastructure in the 1970s and 1980s. Reichardt’s thousand page account, in particular, retraces the emergence of an alternative milieu in West Germany in all its forms (agricultural communes, alternative bookshops, pubs and other businesses, social centres, experimental schools, neighbourhood workshops, etc.) and is one of few works that draws attention to the multiple spaces that were brought into being by activists across the country. Indeed, both Brown and Reichardt are at pains to acknowledge the significant role that squatting and other occupation-based practices played in the history of the anti-authoritarian revolt, though their accounts ultimately rely on an understanding of geography that is largely descriptive (see also MacDougall, 2011a, 2011b).

It is against this backdrop that I argue that the recent historicisation of the New Left in West Germany would also benefit from a critical framework that examines its complex *spatialisation*. By placing the everyday practices of squatters at the heart of this book, I seek to develop a geographical reading of the West German New Left and the activities and solidarities which emerged in the decades that followed. As I have already suggested, the history of squatting remains, in many respects, a blind spot within the wider historiography. The small number of studies that have been published in German are largely the work of activist-historians and have tended to place particular emphasis on specific aspects of the squatting scene at the expense of detailed historical coverage or wider theoretical reflection (Dellwo and Baer, 2012; Kölling, 2008; Laurisch, 1981; for an