

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Anna Feigenbaum, Fabian Frenzel and Patrick McCurdy**, *Protest Camps*, London: Zed Books, 2013. ISBN: 9781780323565 (cloth); ISBN: 9781780323558 (paper); ISBN: 9781780323589 (ebook)

In recent years, especially since 2011 and the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo and emergence of the Occupy movement worldwide, the protest camp has gained a huge amount of public visibility, much of which has been misinformed or of dubious analytical value. Most famously, the clamour for 2011 to be a watershed year for the spreading of liberal democracy found itself being played out in the pages of *Time* magazine, which named ‘the protester’ as its [person of the year](#). Of course, in response to the popular media’s attempts to understand the contingent and dynamic nature of protest, numerous academic commentators have since tried to apply more a nuanced and detailed understanding of these events (see, for example, Hughes 2011; Pickerill and Krinsky 2012; Ramadan 2013). Anna Feigenbaum, Fabian Frenzel and Patrick McCurdy’s book, *Protest Camps*, is a useful addition to these academic studies, most clearly as one of the first extensive pieces of work that treats seriously, in a sustained and historicised way, the idea of the protest camp as a distinct political space. The three authors are members of the [Protest Camps Research Network](#) and they draw on their long and varied engagements with various protest camps throughout the book. However, the book is of interest to a non-academic audience also, dealing as it does with wider ideas about radical political activity and the idea of camping as a form of protest more generally.

In attempting to understand the nature of the protest camp, the book sets itself the difficult task of trying to draw a line around the key characteristics that make it a distinct political space. Given the huge variations in contexts, goals and outcomes of specific protest camps, the danger is that books like this, in attempting to characterise the nature of the many political movements that ‘camp’ in some way, become little more than a set of typologies that list events and do not adequately address the differences and vagaries of each protest camp. Thankfully, Feigenbaum et al. avoid this, instead walking a tight line between empirical richness and detail on the one side and conceptual and theoretical nuance on the other. They

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manage this by utilising what they call an ‘infrastructural analysis’ of protest camps, which, in their words, “establishes a set of material criteria and general modes of operation shared between all camps” (p.27). Feigenbaum et al. propose that a range of infrastructures form crucial components of the relations that occur within camps. As a result, the structure of the book follows some of these infrastructures created within camps to both manage relations within them, but also to deal with the protest camp’s relations to the ‘outside’ world. The core chapters of the book focus on: [i] media and communications infrastructures, both in managing mainstream media, but also in the production of alternative media; [ii] protest action infrastructures, or how protest camps manifest their protests; [iii] governance infrastructures, or how life is (more or less) ordered and organised within the camp; and [iv] re-creation infrastructures, or how social reproduction, in the form of care and protection for protest campers, is maintained.

Running throughout each of these substantive chapters are five individual camps discussed in depth, from Resurrection City in Washington DC in 1968 through to Occupy the London Stock Exchange (Occupy LSX) in 2011. Tahrir Square is the only substantive example from the ‘global South’ of the five; however, this is balanced by numerous other examples which are drawn on throughout the book (such as the Red Shirts’ protests in Thailand, or the Native American occupation of Alcatraz Island in the US) but not in the same sustained way as the five ‘core’ camps. This structure, and the diverse yet selective nature of it, allows the authors to focus in some depth on the sheer variety of activities within each of the infrastructures that take place at protest camps. Thus, the five example camps are not intended as exemplars of particular types of camps, but are chosen to illustrate the contingent, experimental, and, above all, lived experience of being a part of a protest camp.

As a result of this structuring, the book serves as a core ‘primer’ for those wishing to study protest camps, and indeed contemporary protest more widely. Key concepts about social movement organising and the politics of antagonism are deployed to help make sense of what is distinctive about protest camping. The book therefore provides a framework for future studies of protest camping, but also draws upon existing research productively to make

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a number of interventions in studies of protest and resistance more generally. Rather than attempt to summarise the scope and variety of examples and contexts which this book draws upon (these are much better read directly), in this review I want to focus on some of the themes running through the book which are potentially of use to geographers (and, of course, other social scientists), which deserve to be mentioned in more detail.

Firstly, one of the key aspects of protest camps is their spatial nature, marking out distinct, antagonistic territories for the promotion of alternatives. This thread runs throughout the book, dealing with the practices by which such alternatives are made real (more on these practices below). However, it comes out most strongly in the chapters on governance and recreation, where distinct strategies of claiming and defending space are discussed in the most depth. This builds on work by geographers like Sam Halvorsen (2012), whose work on Occupy LSX has been exemplary, developing insights into the geographies of social movements more generally by thinking through how these territorialities are assembled and produced through the relations between humans and non-humans within and beyond the camp itself. This helps to position the book in relation to work within geography on the spatiality of social movements, but moves beyond the binary distinction between networks and territories that has dominated debates in the sub-discipline for much of the past decade (see Nicholls et al. 2013). A detailed engagement with this theoretical literature is beyond the scope of Feigenbaum et al.'s book, focussed as it is on providing an account for a wider, not necessarily geographical nor academic, audience. However, these issues of spatiality emerge throughout the book, explicitly and implicitly, and there are questions that the book asks that are clearly geographical, such as the production of place-based identities, divisions of space within camps, and how borders between the camp and its 'outside' are managed. The authors use these geographical ideas carefully, so, for example, their interrogation of the 'borders' of a camp draws on political geography and argues for an embedded, socio-material understanding of the practices of inclusion and exclusion that occur at the border. Overall then there is much of interest here to political geographers, although radical scholars of the intersections of protest movements and spatiality will find the book to be of great relevance.

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The second theme of the book, and one of its outstanding strengths, is the considered and thoughtful understanding of how strategies, techniques and tactics of life in the camp have both emerged through particular places and been adopted/adapted over time. The lineages of protest camp activity (and indeed protest more generally) come through strongly throughout. For example, the discussion of the practice of Horizontal Decision Making (HDM) does an excellent job of charting its diffusion from its beginnings in particular camps to the near ubiquity amongst protesters that it has today. Throughout, the book is sensitive to the negotiated and relational spread of this practice from camp to camp; for example, one activist who had learnt HDM through their activism in the US discusses their arrival at Greenham Common and finding that HDM is inappropriate for the protesters at that camp. The lineages of protest that are constructed, then, are complex and fragmented, but tell useful and important stories about how alternative knowledges are learnt and practised differentially across space and time. In this sense, it would have been interesting to extend these lineages further back in time to explore the origins of protest camps and their strategies. Again, this is largely beyond the scope of this book; however, future work could usefully explore how groups like the Diggers or activities in the Paris Commune (to name only two examples) could relate to these various instances of claiming territory in antagonistic ways. Overall, this focus on the extended lineages of protest activity is incredibly useful in stressing the learned and entangled nature of protest, especially as one of the key issues for the representation of the 2011 protests, both by mainstream media and by some activists (particularly amongst the Occupy movements), was a stress on the perceived ‘newness’ and originality of these protests, and a rejection of previous struggles as irrelevant and unrelated. What this book does is place contemporary movements in a longer arc of resistance, stressing that, whilst grounded in different places and contexts, shared knowledges and practices are a key part of creating effective infrastructures of resistance.

Finally, the experimental and lived experience of protest camping is central to the book, and as a result there is an emphasis on practice running through most of the examples. In line with a turn towards practice-based approaches across the social sciences, this approach

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gives clear insights into the ways in which camp life is socio-materially assembled. The debt to Actor-Network Theory, and work on assemblage (which is currently *en vogue* in geography), is clear. However, more than just a shallow emphasis on practice, the authors show clearly how the *political* is central to these practices, something that is often under-emphasised in scholarship that privileges the non-human without thinking about the political (this is especially the case in geographical work on assemblage which often evacuates the sense of the political that lay at the heart of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the term). Thus, the building of barricades, the creation of camp newspapers/pamphlets, or gendered approaches to learning climbing techniques all form key points of departure for discussion. It is the hard work of assembling and maintaining these relations that is important here, and there is much to be admired throughout the book in dealing with these issues. In particular, the affective politics of camp life are drawn out in some depth in various sections, and this is important as the precariousness of protest camp life brings with it the potential for a range of positive and negative experiences. The ways in which individuals on camp sites experience and embody these tensions is clearly key to understanding both the potential of, but also the limits to, life that are experienced by protesters at camps. One aspect here that could have been introduced and dealt with more effectively is solidarity. This is, perhaps, implicit in much of the discussion of how links are built across and between difference, but I think it could have been deployed more effectively to deal not only with how relations are built within camps, but also with how connections to those 'outside' the camp, or even those who learnt and lived in different camps, are forged and maintained. Given the centrality of solidarity to the practice of radical politics throughout history (see Featherstone 2012), the relative lack of explicit engagement with the concept throughout the book could be something that future work on protest camps could engage with (see also Brown and Yaffe 2013).

Overall, *Protest Camps* provides the best introduction to the subject for both academic and non-academic audiences yet available. However, more than introducing and applying some much needed conceptual clarity to protest camps, the book sets the agenda for future

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research, and also makes a number of valuable interventions into work on protest and resistance more generally. It is incredibly rich in its discussion of the various camps and practices it uncovers, and yet it makes a number of more theoretical points about how we might study and engage with radical politics. The book should be required reading for those seeking to understand contemporary protests, crucially as part of longer, historical processes and developments. It should be read by all those who have an interest in the messy interconnections between protests and space.

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*June 2014*