

**EXPECTING RESISTANCE IN KAUNAS: ATTEMPTS OF  
DIRECT ACTION VERSUS STRUCTURAL  
DISEMPOWERMENT IN A POST-SOCIALIST  
PERIPHERAL CITY**

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## ABSTRACT

Western theories of resistance and immanence emphasize the vitalist potential of social formations. They highlight the importance of human agency, point to the contingencies and promise to open the new spaces for alternative possibilities. However, there is a huge discrepancy between these promises and urban reality of the city in a post-socialist periphery. That discrepancy is the focus of this research. One month long ethnographic study of a group of young activists and their actions in public spaces of Kaunas reveals the surrounding apathy and structural disempowerment. This study analyzes their life histories and describes the attempts of direct action. Spatial interventions are a way to modify and engage the place they live, albeit often only on the imaginary plane.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

*In 2008, May 1<sup>st</sup>, in Kaunas, Lithuanian trade union ‘Sandrauga’ held an official march in the main shopping street Laisves Aleja, leading to the demonstration in main public square, near town hall. Around 100 people had gathered there, most of them seemingly only to show up in public, as they were highly positioned members in their unions. The proclamations have been made about poor conditions of trade-unionism in our country, about precarious work and the unwelcome luck of Leftist politics. The need to involve youth was stated: “Just look to Western countries, like France, there students are celebrating 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of May revolution! We need to attract young people, since they are the precarious workers of the future!” The atmosphere was cheerful; people had national flags and posters with labour slogans.*

*We, the decentred collective of autonomous anarchists and space hijackers (sic) were also planning to celebrate May 1<sup>st</sup>, International Workers’ Day in Kaunas, Lithuania. We planned to distribute pamphlets against work, stage a music show with live band and DJ’s and have lots of fun, since Mayday should be a happy occasion, without boring talks on economy. At the end of the day, resistance to capitalism is through the revolution of everyday life, isn’t it?*

*Our location was different than the one of trade-unions for basic reasons – we needed electricity to plug in the amplifiers for music. The only available free resource was in the other end of Laisves Aleja, near the huge Soviet modernism style architectural building – ‘central univermag’ (universal shop) ‘Merkurijus’ (at that time destined to be demolished). After the union meeting finished two hours later, several participants passed through our site, carrying the flag of trade union and some banners with Mayday slogans. I approached the older man in unionist paraphernalia, and asked if we could borrow some Mayday banners for our event of solidarity with workers. The reply was a totally unexpected one to me: “No, you can’t! Who are you?” However, I carried on: “But we are the youth, the students, we want to show that we care...” The older man said: “...ech, youth, what do you know...” The group of these unionists didn’t even stop for talking or showed any interest. The gap between the rhetoric and practice was staring at me.*

Ethnographic diary, 2008 05 01

In April 2008 I did a short ethnographic study, which focused on action research with a group of young people that were interested in practices of direct action and the creative use of space. More precisely, the intention was to co-organize a series of public events in Kaunas, Lithuania, and observe public reaction, intra-group dynamics on the event and narratives of the participants. I have been an “insider” in this group for several years, and had company with most of the people there. This was a strategic research site to ethnographically explore what was going on in informal networks of urban activists in Lithuanian context. The main

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<sup>1</sup> “Expect Resistance” is a title of a book, subtitled “a field manual” for direct action, published in US in 2008 by the decentralized anarchist collective *CrimehInc. CrimethInc* advocates direct action and anarchist worldviews. It is well known among the participants of the research in Kaunas.

research question was how social contentious action was influenced by the properties of concrete place.

My experience in the field started with a rather high level of expectation and a positive proposition towards ‘the change’. Imaginary future promised possible alternative pathways that I and my fellow ‘researchers’ would initiate. However, increasingly I felt that expectations were turned down as the time passed, and not many things seemed to change. To the end of writing, basically, this research project has a rather negative definition of its research question. It inquires into the relation of spatiality and contentious action, and uncovers the moment where mobilizations do not happen; where intention for organizing fails; where the production of alternative spaces are doomed to stay on the level of speech acts. As Foucault (1972) has indicated, power is most effective when its effects remain unseen. In brief, it is a response to invitation by Tarrow and Adams (2001) to seek analysis of successful hegemonies and failures of resistance.

The opening episode can be seen as an encounter between two different threads of this study. One of them talks about autonomy, connections, networking and immanent resistance. The other presents same old materialist story about the disenchantment, lack of trust and structural power in a post-socialist space. Therefore, the discrepancy between Western theories of immanence and micro sociology and the grimness of urban reality in Kaunas is a starting point for my main argument.

Kaunas is the second largest city of Lithuania, an industrial city of a massive work emigration. Since the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990 the population has shrunk by 20%<sup>2</sup>. Citizens of this place have voted with their feet, and left for work in the prosperous Western countries, instead of voicing their concerns to local or national politicians. The disillusionment resulted from the high expectations of ‘better life’ that struggles for

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<sup>2</sup> <http://kaunastsv.stat.gov.lt>

independence had promised to realize. As a consequence, shrinking public space and the absence of visible public participation is often mentioned in the debates on ‘the lack of civil society’ in Lithuania. Hypermarkets are becoming emblematic urban public spaces, increasingly regarded by middle class as ultimate leisure-time destinations for a feast of consumption.

Although many complaints can be heard about “lack of civil society” in Lithuania, and cumulative effort is directed towards researching the topic - see, for example, Tereskinas (2002); Zdanevicius (2007) - the realms of informal activism are not explored yet. So far the research on civil society concentrated on formal institutional aspects, like NGO’s and other public actors. This research contributes to the field by raising particular inquiry into informal activism in Kaunas, Lithuania, and does it from perspective of ‘third’ space (Soja 1996) and resistance in everyday life.

In order to give an anthropological account about informal activism in Kaunas, I contextualize the activities taking place in certain spaces, created by informal networks of individuals, and investigate their everyday practices. For example, Pickerill and Chatterton (2006) approach the issue of activism with concept of ‘autonomous geographies’ – “spaces where there is a desire to constitute non-capitalist, collective forms of politics, identity and citizenship. These are created through a combination of resistance and creation, and through questioning and challenging of dominant laws and social norms”(p. 730). Activism as a form of social action is explicitly defined through the conceptual framework of power and space in this text. The research by Lacey (2005) on physical spaces of social activist networks in Britain reveals the importance to grasp the circulation of plans, ideas and contacts in everyday interaction, in common physical and emotional spaces. The author argues that it is trendy to trace activist networks via internet, but no less important is to see online/offline modes of activity as continuous practices.

In the theoretical part, I proceed with the discussion of theories of relational power, social action and resistance in everyday life. In the historical chapter, I present economic development of Kaunas and Lithuania. Then I highlight moments of public contention. The chapter on people I worked together connects their life stories to the more general context of Kaunas, and the chapter on actions in public reveals some concrete obstacles and dilemmas for organizing contentious actions. Fear of violence as uniting property of Kaunas public space is discussed at the end.

## 2. WESTERN THEORIES OF RESISTANCE AND IMMANENCE

In this chapter, I present the theories on micro-power, spatial immanence and resistance, social action as “multitude”<sup>3</sup>. The theoretical approaches emphasizing resistance and agency are reviewed, for the purpose to take relevant insights to empirical analysis. I lay the ground for ethnography on resistance and powerlessness in everyday life, remaining sensitive to the limits of postmodern theorizing, discontinuities in conceptual formations, gap between language and practice of everyday life. In order to link micro level paradigms to broader levels of analysis I discuss the notion of “multitude”.

The theoretical part of the text as organically integrated with my practical fieldwork, as directions for action, in some sense legitimating efforts to experiment on everyday life plane with social/political ways of being and acting. However, the question arises - if Western theories discussed below are applicable to the context of post-socialist provincial town. Are they useful for an anthropologist working ‘at home’ in post-socialist space?

### 2.1.Simmel: relational power

What is the source of power for everyday life? As Frisby (2002:62) indicates, the starting point of all complex social formations – norms, institutions – is a more basic level of interactions between individuals, patterned through time. There is no separate dimension of some transcendent, omni-present power. Rather, we can grasp that in forms of sociation it is constantly recreated, enacted, contested, imposed and refused. It is in constant flux and motion. Even in slave’s relation to its master is not total (if it does not result death from physical violence). Power in Simmel’s sociology therefore is *relational*, as its two central concepts – *interaction* and *sociation* – are. For example, Simmel introduces triad as model of

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<sup>3</sup> Utopian as it might sound, nevertheless an attractive and promising option to a young sociologist.

more sophisticated social form than dyad. It has already some tensions in potential alliances 2+1. Interaction and agency is dynamic, not frozen.

Agency as resistance to 'objective' culture in Simmel's approach is possible for his de-totalizing view on 'social' structures. Frisby (2002:79) comments on theory of social differentiation, and points out that Simmel moves in opposite direction to Durkheim. In time, moving from primitive to complex collectivities, Simmel sees individual gaining more freedom and less social control, and each individual increasingly specializes (job market.). However, as collectivities are increasingly differentiated, the need arises for individual to integrate himself as a holistic person; the moment of resistance (non-conformity) is seen as contradiction between "specialization and self development". (ibid.) Well, here we are again in humanistic quest for sociology to integrate 'human' in fragmented world of modernity.

Talking about 'neo-tribalism' as the property of current social arrangement, Maffesoli (1996) directly borrows from Simmel 'social forms' and theorizes social power splitting it in two levels – objective 'structural' power, and 'puissance', which is immanent, and difficult to grasp analytically. Maffesoli refers to Simmel's secrecy as social form where *puissance* resides; it empowers associations to act in their own framework. Simmel comes as a theorist of secrecy as 'autonomy', therefore, 'anarchy'; that means that transcendental power of the State is decentralized, and shared between micro-groups (neo-tribes in this case). *Simmel's Secrecy allows for agency of various groups which inhabits urban spaces* (p.95). This insight directly applies to the design of my research on informal urban activists.

Talking about difficulties to grasp power and resistance in formal sociology, Weinstein (1993:15) quotes Tenbruck on impossibility of formal sociology to theorize change in society: "Formal sociology is incompetent to deal with the problem of change of society itself, a change of the whole system (...) for it refuses to regard society, as conceived of as such a system, as its proper object". This critique applies to broader notion of pragmatic

sociology, too. However, immediately the reply would be that “Interactionist resistance is a (post)modernist political-intellectual commitment (...) sharing an affirmation of detotalized forms, (...) privileging the spontaneity of sociality [and] resistance through play-forms”(p.20). For my project on action research it is useful to keep in mind Simmel’s desubjectivized individual, which allows “*nontragic* state of play”. Weinsteins conclude that combating dominating and objectifying power is possible by “making oneself available for interaction” (ibid.). Does such an idea not reflect Habermasian insight on ‘communicative action’?

Simmel offers two valuable insights towards the conception of agency – 1) power is relational, never pre-determined, and 2) detotalized view of society, as ‘objective’ culture – it leaves space for action and considerable freedom. However, empirically we have to investigate – whose agency, whose domination, whose freedom.

## **2.2. Tarde: beheaded Leviathan**

Theory of Tarde currently is regarded as a century-old overlooked insight, adding to new ways for approaching social theory after all the ‘post’ theories. It is still possible to conceptualize macro-structures, but not providing them immediately with transcendental features, not being positivist and totalizing; and leaving space for agency; contrary to this, ‘macro is a slight extension of micro’ (Latour 2002) How is it possible?

We examine Gabriel Tarde’s theory as anti-sociologism in microsociology (it means that there is no transcendental power ‘outside’ social relations) According to Latour, it is approach of pragmatic sociology in general. (2002) Society as association is a beheaded Leviathan, (Callon 1981) constantly recreated through processes of innovation and imitation. It connects to ‘The Leviathan’ by Thomas Hobbes and two possible ways of reading– 1) Leviathan as transcendental power, above people (social organism with particular functions)

and 2) leviathan as constitutive, immanent power, reproduced in process of interaction, aggregation of social forms (to use concept of Simmel)

Scott Lash in article “Information is Alive” (Gane 2004:91-107) relates Tarde to Simmel through Bergsonian philosophy of vitalism (as opposed to mechanism), and in opposition to Durkheim. In general, vitalist sociology follows flows and fluxes representing heterogeneous ways social enacts itself in islands of order (Tarde’s ‘monads’, Simmel’s ‘sociation’) amidst the oceans of chaos. (p. 105) Empirical sociology of ‘resistance in everyday life’ needs to ask - how are the ‘islands of order’ created, enacted, performed, changed?

In the framework of pragmatic sociology, one should define actants and their relations in particular cases (i.e. networks), contextualize them in order to have some basis for giving an objective account on what is going on. Therefore, background is never given and needs to be made by active mind. In Tarde’s thought it resonates to the sociology of crowds, as discussed by Borch (2005). Imitation is a main social mechanism for crowds to gain their expressions in urban spaces. Crowd obtains kind of hypersociality and is potentially the agents of change, for they are unstable. Borch, following Lefebvre, proposes Tardean rhythm analysis of sociality to create “powerful interventions in space” (Borch 2005:94) Therefore, this can be directly applied into militant investigations of activist collectivities and performances in urban space.

If his approach is in anyway close and compatible to that of pragmatic sociology, then the political moment of social action and power would be as described by Bénatouïl (1999:304) – to provide discursive arms for excluded from political debate and to enlarge plurality in political space. Such notion of ‘discursive power’ operates here and now, and relates to my research project of activist research (as indicated to indicate in the paper-writing regulations for this paper)

As the topic of agencies is complex in itself, there are multitudes of approaches for theorizing it. It explored what unites Tarde and Simmel, and what can be taken from their theories for theorizing 'social' as immanent, associative, everyday life realm, which allows space for human agency and does not present reductionist 'sociologisms', which would be totalizing and imposing transcendental categories on human being-in-the-world. Legacy of Simmel and Tarde in this sense allows for embracing contradictions, inequalities, irregularities and cracks in systematic knowledge, where the focus of 'sociology of knowledge' resides.

### **2.3. Collective action as multitude**

The default take from critical social theory of Hardt and Negri's concepts of *Multitude* and *Empire* would depict them as emic, political terms, not suitable to analytical approach towards particular micro events. They have been extensively criticized – too naïve, too philosophical, too idealistic. Their emphasis on "bioproduction" of multitude is relevant (not as a "precise concept", but rather as a "rich metaphor") Therefore, my take on "multitude" as a "rhizome" means that precisely the properties that are critiqued from more material positions – vagueness, pre-analytical approach – may be suitable for the plane on everyday life. Following De Certeau (1984), I approach the everydayness as a plane of possibilities, field of contestation, where all theoretical/ideological concepts are reworked, negotiated and recreated in meaningful ways. In *Empire* (2000) they stress the immanence of power and new possibilities of resistance, although, not defining it. "Civil society is absorbed into state, but the consequence of this is an explosion of the elements that were previously coordinated and mediated in civil society." (Hardt , Negri 2000) They argue that the local struggles connect to global level due to the nature of global capital; and struggles are at the same time political, economical, cultural (although it is nothing new) –and "hence they are biopolitical struggles,

struggles over form of life”. Stress over impossibility of communication between struggles (despite being hypermeditized); the need of translation and identification of common enemy.

“The virtual centre of Empire can be attacked from any point” (Hardt, Negri 2000) That means, it may be relevant to talk about ‘multitude’ in specific site of my research – as potentially rhizomous, non-hierarchical network consisted of immaterial labour and producing social relations; as a potential metaphor where various contextualized loci of resistance (locus - the set of all points or lines that satisfy or are determined by specific conditions) act in common. This point is difficult to falsify conceptually – it remains to see whether it can be tested by the case in Kaunas.

Hardt and Negri flow somewhere high above the ground, and fail to get down to earth after having made self-acclaimed necessary leap to metaphysics of empowered, bio-productive multitudes. As Kalb (personal communication) indicates, they discover nothing new; merely repeat the utopian claims of 1968. Still, their work vibrates with inspiring vitalist pulsation, which could be patterned and traced to certain arrangements through time and space – but, of course, this is the work that needs to be done by someone else, like anthropologist or historicist.

## **2.4. Structural Power and Spaces for Resistance**

When we talk about resistance, we must talk about power. And to open up the debate we can ask - “Does the everyday provide the training ground for conformity, or is it rather the place where conformity is evaded?” (Highmore, 2002) For this we need review some anthropological uses of power. After post-modern playful critique and consequent “everything goes” attitude, enterprise of theorizing in anthropological inquiry shifted towards postcolonial and feminist theories. Notions of “power”, “resistance”, “discourse”, “hegemony” attracted considerable attention. These concepts added for increased sensitivity

toward the limits and politics of discipline, class issues, global perspective in connecting global and local (Kalb 2005b), somewhat cultural materialistic orientation of seeing social realities. Recent shift on critique of notions of “culture” (Abu-Lughod, 1991) can be seen as warning message – Culture has become a new Race. (Kuper 1999)

Good example in anthropology to approach power would be Eric Wolf’s (2001), suggesting to use four levels of power (structural, tactical, interpersonal, individual). On the plane of everyday life these dimensions of power are not pre-given; they are enacted, contested and appropriated. Although in current socio-economic arrangement, as Kalb indicates, Wolf’s 3<sup>rd</sup> level of power – tactical, institutional power- evaporates (“tends to be hollowed out”) into structural power of capitalist, neoliberal logic. That means the ‘enemy’ to protests against is very difficult to identify. Institutional capacities are delegitimized; it is hard to come up with a new design of struggles. Neoliberal logic implies – do whatever you want. Relational (dyadic) level of power is directly exposed to structural influences.

On the other hand, in some sense, a lot of space for resistance is being created. De Certeau analyses everyday world as a contested from various positions and never totally defined field of possibilities, therefore, is useful for understanding how practices of resistance are performed in trivial environments. (De Certeau 1984) Body becomes important site of resistance – protest is embodied. (Thrift 1996) Body is a locus of tension with hegemony. For example, in corporeal perspective national economies are regulated regimes of time to work and rest, and can (utopically or not) be contested and subverted by refusing to comply with regime. (Kalb 2005a) Analytically it is useful not to seek the ultimate ‘truth’ on what resistance is, but to reveal “moments of resistance in networks of activists which make claims” (Kalb, personal communication).

Left wing historian and anthropologist Alf Ludtke (1995) provides a quite similar account on micro-histories of (non) resistance everyday life, and pose concrete questions -

what are the boundaries between personal/political, public/private etc. *Alltaggeschichte* researches daily experiences, mundane activities, and at the time invites to question the production of meaning, by locating particular sites and times where “small people” can be seen as creatively engaging in everyday relations. By placing attention to contingencies, historical specificities, it can trace patterned flows of relations over time and space, and thus connect micro-histories to some ‘transcendental’ structures. That might be the cross-cutting connection one discovers (or not) *in situ*. History teaches us the importance of contingencies that sociology with its structural concerns left out.

Well, cultural relational materialism (simply, the idea that things can be never escaped) resonates with Kalb’s (2005) invitation to look for critical junctures – historical processes of contingent, embedded patterns, specific modes of being, acting and knowing in local sites, (dis)continuities, cracks and oppositions in narratives on oneself and others. Such an approach can serve a complimentary analytic regime for empirical data from the ethnography of spatially situated power relations.

## **2.5. Thirdspace as praxis**

Space can conceptually serve as an indicator or a clue of the way power operates (Foucault 1972). As the literature on power/resistance delineates (see, for example, Abu Lughod 1991), resistance is not negative power, but also can be seen as creative space for alternative meanings. The configurations of power inscribe themselves through rules, material landscapes and concrete perpetual practices. Patterned social relations through time becomes institutionalized and transmitted as rules and traditions; there are sanctions for breaching these rules. State as sovereign power (Agamben 1998), is hegemonically omnipresent in its territory discursively, as representation; but it leaks and cracks and fails and strives to be, is redefined and negotiated in everyday life (Ward 2000). Symbolic (Bourdieu 1984) and physical

(Taussig 1984) violence is what bases these operations of power, and this is apparent in the times of resistance and contestation. It is for empirical research to determine rather contingent and not pre-determined micro-spatial configurations which allow and forbid certain modes of being in the space. Therefore, the intent to contest the legitimate use of space calls for the analysis of spatial routines and normalized behaviors.

Prominent social critic Edward Soja (1996), basing his argument on the works of Lefebvre's 'social production of space' and Foucault's 'heterotopology', analyses intersectionality of space, time and the 'social'. He claims that traditionally spatiality has been conceived in a two-fold way: Firstspace, as material, quantitative space, and Secondspace, as imagined and representational space. Soja introduces the notion of *Thirdspace*, where 'real' and 'imagined' merges in some specific mode, and gives way for possibility group formation and of radical critique (usually from the marginal spaces) of not only "on gender, race and class, but also on sexuality, age, nation, region, nature, empire and colony" (Soja 1996:12) By acknowledging spatial awareness in the studies of marginalities, borders and resistance, the notion of making social inquiry changes accordingly; such implication supports the intention behind my MA project. As Soja indicates, if "Firstspace is explored through readable texts and contexts, and Secondspace through its prevailing representational discourses, then the exploration of Thirdspace must be additionally guided by some form of emancipatory *praxis*, the translation of knowledge into action in a conscious – and consciously spatial – effort to improve the world in some significant way". (Soja 1996:22) Therefore, studying of moments of resistance is not contradictory with seeking and creating opportunities for resistance to occur.

As conclusion of the theoretical chapter I would like to add few more things. As Latour (2002) proudly proclaims 'the end of social' in Tarde's approach, and praises him for being intellectual grandfather of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Lash (in Gane 2004) sees

both Simmel and Tarde as the precursors of his ‘vitalist’ sociology of ‘forms of life’. The idea of ‘immanent life energy’ entered philosophy through French writer Henri Bergson, and sociological reflections of it, according to Lash, was first felt in Garbriel Tarde, then Simmel; modern theorists include Deleuze, Negri, Maffesoli (Lash 2005) The theories of all the authors fail to acknowledge (macro) structural constraints. In addition, they seem unable to account in details for the specific historical contingencies and particularities, like the phenomena in post-socialist space. In this case we need to refer to micro-histories (Ludtke 1995) and look for the ‘critical junctures’ (Kalb 1998), remaining down to earth as much as possible, and looking for some emergent material patterns.

## **2.6. Activist research strategy**

In order to collect the data for this small-scale exploratory research, I had spent one month in Kaunas, Lithuania in April 2008. I was working with young activist people for organizing several public protest events, and gathered the empirical material through the method of participant observation and informal interviews.

Recently the focus of anthropology shifted from interpretation of “culture” towards the analysis of power, agency and counter-hegemonic practices (Burawoy, 1991; 2000). The need for active researcher being involved in the activities of the researched group no longer needs to be legitimated on some extraordinary basis. There is a growing consensus that this is what critical social science should do (Burawoy, 1991; 2000).

Recent book on militant research ‘Consituent Imagination’, edited by anarchist anthropologists David Graeber and Stephen Shukaitis (2007) could serve as an example for such ‘activist’ research project. I will argue that in this particular research project the most plausible and sincere stance for researcher would not be a value-free and objective position, observing people from the distance, but an active and participatory one. This does not mean a

refusal of systematic social scientific approach or ‘everything goes’ method, but rather a theoretically grounded, empirically informed action research, implying role of author/ethnographer as an active participant and contributor in the processes that are taking place in inter-subjective social space. It also means social research as a political action itself, way of appropriating meanings from competing discourses and putting it into legitimate academic expression.

So far the most important source of information and inspiration for this project was the “Participatory Action Research Collective” at the City University of New York Graduate Center presenting itself on web<sup>4</sup> in this way: “Research collectives of young people studying the long arms of Foucault's Panopticon - the experience of surveillance, stereotyping, commodification and resistance on the streets”. There are numerous examples how such research strategy empowered groups of people involved in the project and contributed to development of community. For sure, current research design had to delimit its methodological tools due to the time and resource constraints.

The dilemmas arising from such “critical ethnography in action” approach are discussed in Ulichny (1997). He mentions the tensions and complexities arising from the intention to make collaborative research in “democratic and non-Othering manner”, and this was precisely the dilemma and an obstacle I had to overcome – how to be involved, but not leader, how to offer initiative, but not to command.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/start.htm>

### 3. CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

In this chapter, I present the historical and economic background of Kaunas and Lithuania. Later, I provide a short description of two related protest events in Kaunas, highlighting intergenerational rupture in the social memory. Recent attempts for a 'public' political struggles encounters a specific resistance, which I approach through the example of attitude of workers in a public health system.

#### 3.1. Historical background

Kaunas, with the population of 335 550 in 2008 (418 000 in 1989)<sup>5</sup> is the second largest city and the former temporary capital of Lithuania (est. pop. 3.5 million in 2008 July)<sup>6</sup>. Notable residents of Kaunas include anarchist Emma Goldman, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, fluxist George Maciunas, current president of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus. Located in the confluence of Nemunas and Neris, the two biggest rivers of Lithuania, it was a strategic location of Lithuania throughout history, first mentioned in 1361 as a part of Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then served as a major railway hub in Russian Empire, which build a massive fortification system in 1882-1915. After World War I, Lithuania achieved independence, and Kaunas became major hub of modern life, with many universities and vivid intellectual crowd. The Jewish population made up to 25% (37000) of Kaunas population, but after Kaunas Ghetto (established by Nazi Germany) only 10 % or less survived. After WWII, Kaunas was heavily industrialized, and produced a quarter of Lithuania's industrial output. (Varsackytė 2006)

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<sup>5</sup> <http://kaunastsv.stat.gov.lt>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lh.html>

### 3.2. Economic Development Since 1990

Economic development of Lithuania since the restoration of independence in 1990 was not linear. Immediately after 1990, there was a rapid decline in economy, after restructuring the industry and privatizing state companies. Such shifts increased the mobility, and many people emigrated for foreign countries. Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipeda were major economic centres, so they did not feel the impact of declining economy so much as countryside, after voucher-based land reform, where land was concentrated in the hands of well-off farmers, and entire low-income villages were left deserted by fleeing population. (Jauhianen 2002)

After 1999 Russian financial crisis, Lithuania had export its re-oriented from East to West. Since 2000 Lithuania has had a quite stable growth, attracting FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) for relatively low skilled labour costs. It was even called 'Baltic Tiger' state (with Estonia and Latvia) for having highest growth rates in all EU (European Union) (of which Lithuania became a member in 2004), 2007 marking GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth almost 8%<sup>7</sup> (not without increased flows of undocumented money sent home by emigrants).

Unemployment has shrunk in Kaunas from 17,8% in 2001 to mere 5,9% in 2006.<sup>8</sup> It is related to the intensive emigration of Lithuanian workers to UK and Ireland after joining EU and opening borders in 2004. In general, Lithuania has experienced massive emigration – in the period 1990-2006 nearly 0.5 million citizens left the country. Since 2006 the emigration rate is decreasing, as some of the emigrants are coming back.

The steep decrease in Kaunas population in fifteen year period has meant ostracism, dramatic reduction in life chances, and an inevitable shrinking of the political space for those who stayed. Those, who left, had voted with their feet instead of voicing public concerns to

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<sup>7</sup> <http://archives.tcm.ie/businesspost/2008/04/20/story32104.asp>

<sup>8</sup> <http://kaunastsv.stat.gov.lt/lt/pages/view/?id=1841>

local or national politicians. Brain drain from intellectual sector was especially felt, since Kaunas, with its ten universities, struggles to capitalize on knowledge economy and to attract foreign investment. The wave of emigration only stopped very recently, a growth in employment came after one and a half decade of destruction.

Country attracts FDI and competes for EU structural funding, but the economic development is largely capitalist and private. It is mainly investment (FDI) and consumption (remittances) related, not feeding yet into the reconstruction of a dynamic public sector. The charts and graphs report country's integration into regional markets, and increasing wages. However, what the tables and economic reports do not show are increased hidden costs, social ties that are put in strict work regime and direct pressure to allow such growth. Family networks, sending remittances from foreign countries to allow their children to go to school. Increased housing costs, which means that young people have to borrow loans from private banks for their life-time, not being sure whether they will be able to pay them back due to constantly shifting market situation. Teachers and doctors in the public sector work on incredibly low wage (although, now increasing 600 euro per month for qualified a doctor in a public hospital), while a student of marketing or management immediately after graduation could receive around 1000 euro as a starting salary.

Young people feel the strong pressure to graduate from university and enter labour market with diploma, as it would guarantee higher salary; as a consequence, the unfair competition in tertiary education is widespread and common; the devaluation of bachelor diploma (which one can buy for as low as 300 euro) means that a master's degree is the goal. The problem of devaluation of higher education is being solved by the government by reforming the system into the paid studies (Constitution of Lithuania guarantees free university education for the good students). It is another pre-articulated grievance that could be voiced through some sort of contentious action. Currently, attempts are being made to

organize students, but the obstacles encountered might be similar to the ones described in successive chapters.

### **3.3. Struggles in Vilnius for a Cinema “Lietuva”**

In Lithuanian context, it is important to mention recent struggles for cinema “Lietuva” in Vilnius. It is a Soviet modernist building in the centre of the capital, built in 1965, largest cinema in Lithuania. In the wake of regained independence, privatization of public space meant that 15 cinemas in Vilnius were closed down. “In 2002, the Vilnius Municipal authorities quietly sold the cinema Lietuva to private property developers; with a caveat that it had to operate as a cinema for a three-year period.”<sup>9</sup> At the end of the term, a group of artists and activists organized in the social/artistic centre ‘PRO-test Lab’ and squatted part of that cinema. Community tried to object the closure of this space, framing the struggle as civil society versus corporate privatization and gentrification. The civil movement “Už Lietuvą be kabučių!” (“For the sake of Lithuania without quotes”) were sued by private company “Rojaus Apartamentai” for the damage, inflicted to property. Now there are 3 court cases relating this cinema, being brought to public by both sides. The struggle for this particular public space has since its inception become a symbolic one, a representation of eroding ‘agora’ in independent Lithuania, and a landmark of community potential vs. private interests. The court processes are going on in the moment of writing, but one goal has been already achieved – it had mobilized activists and showed an example of resistance.

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<sup>9</sup> “Hacking Public Spaces in Vilnius  
Politics of a new media space inside the Lietuva (soviet) cinema”  
<http://osdir.com/ml/culture.internet.nettime/2005-06/msg00074.html>

### 3.4. Public Spaces in Kaunas

There are only few public spaces in Kaunas, for youth especially, offering something more than invitation to buy things and consume more. Lack of alternative, counter-cultural feeling is often mentioned in conversations, and Vilnius is much more highly rated to this respect.

The main public spaces in Kaunas where we organized events were Laisves Aleja ('Freedom Avenue'), Rotuses Aikste (Town hall Square), and two shopping malls, as they are becoming major points of public attraction in Kaunas.

. Rotuses Aikste in the middle of the old-town is land marked by the tall and white Town Hall building (foundations laid in 1542), and is surrounded by other historical buildings. For a long time there used to be an open fish market for a long time. Now the space is used mostly for wedding ceremonies on the weekends, during working days there are usually some tourists and passers by from nearby schools and offices.

The pedestrian street Laisves Aleja, which extends nearly 2 kilometres from the St. Michael Church to the Vilnius Street in old-town is one of the longest pedestrian streets in Eastern Europe. It is a major hub for shopping, offices and universities, located in the very centre of a city. It was started to build in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Kaunas was being rebuilt as a strategic location for tsarist Russia.<sup>10</sup> During the interwar period, when Kaunas was the provisional capital of Lithuania, the street served as a main venue for shopping and services. In the middle of Laisves Aleja, is the fountain, a common meeting point, and a usual hang-out place for the youth.

Since the opening of huge shopping mall "Akropolis" on the periphery of Laisves Aleja, it has lost the status as the main point of attraction. There were many objections from

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.kamane.lt/lt/atgarsiai/architektura/architekatgarsis118>

architects and common citizens against the immense mall with a multi-storey parking lot in the historical part of Kaunas, however, it was opened in spring 2007. Architect Audrys Karalius (2007) named this process “Nekropolis” and ‘the suburbanization of Kaunas centre’.

Another huge mall “Mega” was build in the outskirts of Kaunas in 2005, and is represented as “the heart of Lithuania”, hosting a biggest public aquarium in Eastern Europe, and is considered a cultural landmark (there are public road signs indicating this the same way as any castle or historical monument).

### **3.5. Two Events of Public Protest**

Kaunas has a history of social protest and contentious action, and is often referred to as ‘a cradle of our independence’, not without a nationalist overtone. I will mention two public events that should be related to the current social memory and contentious action; nevertheless, there is some sort of rupture between them and what people I worked with remember nowadays.

#### **3.5.1. Self-immolation of Romas Kalanta**

Kaunas at the time of early eighties was a hub of hippy culture, jeans and quasi-illegal rock music. Young people used to hang out in the main public street, Laisves Aleja, near the fountain (where we did performances, too). On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1972, 19 year old student Romas Kalanta immolated himself in the public square, leaving a note: “The political system alone is guilty of my death.”<sup>11</sup> It was described by soviet government as ‘suicide of an insane man’, as usual procedure for covering up events like this. Yet, thousands of people in Kaunas went out to the streets and made riots, erecting barricades in the centre, which were violently countered

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<sup>11</sup> Tracevskis, R. 2003. *The Secret of Kaunas*. From Transitions On Line. [http://www.tol.cz/look/TOL/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=14&NrIssue=48&NrSection=5&NrArticle=9580]

with police, and closure of city was announced. Many arrests, expulsions from school and university, new clients in mental asylums marked the life stories of those, who participated. The event since then has acquired a name “Kaunas spring”. It was the part of a broader informal resistance to Soviet occupation, relating to self immolation of Czech student Jan Palach in 1969.

The legacy of this single event may seem important, because for the public discourse in the wake of Lithuanian independence from Soviet Union it served as a point of reference on the potential of public resistance in Kaunas. There is a modern sculpture in the very place where Romas Kalanta died. One can guess that people, concerned about public space and social/political protest should regard such a place as strategic – for its ‘symbolic’ significance to social memory. Nevertheless, that is not the case. Formal commemoration is held on May 14<sup>th</sup> and is organized by political authorities, but does not attract much attention from general public.

### **3.5.2. The Defence of Radio and TV Station**

Another major event happened after the Declaration of Independence in January 1991, when crowds of citizens from Kaunas and neighbouring places gathered near Sitkunai radio and TV station, to defend the last free media bastion from approaching Soviet troops (TV headquarters in Vilnius were already occupied by Soviet Army). Both in Kaunas and Vilnius, citizens showed solidarity and possibility of peaceful resistance to armed violence. That event was a highlight in a history of nation-wide anti-communist independence movement “Sajudis”, (which marks 20-tieth anniversary in 2008). This social movement, in the beginning, was organized on the basis of environmental claims with underlying romanticized nationalistic flavour, and quickly became a strong political force, on the basis of which the first independent government was established in 1990. Since then, public discourse

constantly complains that solidarity has gone, everyone has become self-centered, and the aims of “Sajudis” were not achieved. Still, it was a time of change and promises, where many things seemed possible. The disenchantment that followed after the hopes were not achieved might help to understand general passivity and sceptical regard towards public protest events.

### **3.5.3. Rupture in Social Memory**

History of struggles for political independence does not connect very easily to current socio-political configuration. These events are not making much influence to current generation, which is inclined not to protest, it seems. As long as informal talks allowed exploring the connection of these events to their lived time, the struggles for political freedom from Soviet occupation are considered important, but not relevant. There is no reference to the events in the counter-cultural flyers or posters, zines or web sites.

The generation of parents achieved what they have wanted – liberal market economy and freedom of expression; however, young people feel the gap between these struggles and their situation. Even if their parents were supportive for these events (although not all of them actually participated), they themselves have only very vague memories, since they were pre-school age at the time of 1990. As Lukas (19) told: “My parents did not go out to the streets in 1990. As most of the people, they were sitting near the radio and chanting Lithuanian national hymn.”

The politics of my friends is not articulated in straightforward terms. I will try to approach it as narrative about the events goes. However, for now we can generalize that in their eyes, they are situated in a different position than their parents were/are. The politics without articulated object, and still resistance to ‘normal’ way of life that their parents offer (finish university, get a decent job, stay cool). Parents’ position is, as Giedre (18) explained:

“You should better go and obey the rules, than protest in the void.” .But it inspires her even more, she proudly admitted.

### **3.6. One interesting moment**

One particularly telling moment can reveal a bit of a general attitude of those who should be ‘interested’ towards the public participation and contentious action. The story happened when one young participant in our actions (Reclaim the Streets in particular) told his mother (who is a respectable doctor in a major public hospital) that he and his friends are going to protest in front of the Kaunas municipality for the sake of the doctors and the teachers –they are unable to organize and defend themselves in order to have their wage raised, so the time has come for the youth to show solidarity and voice their real grievances, indicating concrete locations, institutions and responsible persons . The reaction of his mother was unexpectedly harsh. She started nervously wring her hands and insisted that we never do the things like this. “If you start complaining about our wages, the inspections will come and see the situation; then we all will be in worse-off position”.

The rationale behind this utterance is valid in the context of Lithuanian public health system (and probably to other public systems, too). “The situation” that mother speaks about is that it is a common sense to give a “gift” to the doctor for the most of health services. The research (applying Parsonian theory of structural integration and deviance) of Lithuanian public health system showed (Leonavicius et al. 2007) that the double system of ‘payment’ established in the process of long and systematic under-funding of the public sector. The doctors are in the ambiguous structural position that the prestige of their profession requires their own adequate spending (for clothes, car, and self-subsistence). However, these goals are not realistically possible to attain from the ‘official’ wage. The system of official wages is not adequate to fulfil requirements of status position, still, formally that means that public

services are basically free of charge, and accessible to anyone under the health insurance. Beneath the surface, an informal system of bribes and gifts functions as an unspoken contract between client and service provider, and as a safety net for the doctors (and, to smaller extent, other public occupations too).

For sure, one will be hospitalized for free, and all the necessary minimal care will be provided, but if you want a better service and an extra attention... You just happen to know (or become illuminated) how much the services are worth. And it is a common, general knowledge to such an extent that the government benefits from the situation and does not increase the salary, because doctors would not protest very loud without expecting real or imagined repercussions in return. For sure, many highly qualified doctors have migrated to Western countries, or transferred to private clinics. But remaining ones are in position of semi 'clientalist' relation to their patients.

The outcome of the little ethnographic situation described above was the consensus of the both sides, mother and son, or a public doctor and a young activist. They agreed: doctors go on healing people, and activists go on defending human rights and protesting against global warming.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> So we did...

## 4. THE PORTRAITS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

In this paragraph I present the people I worked with. Following Don Kalb (1998), I look to their particular biographical circumstances and locally embedded struggles. Their stories speak about the conflict between the forms of personal empowerment by parents, travel/work, good schools and talent on the one hand and place-based structural disempowerment, perceived as ‘passivity’, ‘intolerance’, lack of opportunities in Kaunas, on the other. How does that suggest particular politics, and ultimately formulates into dreaming, being and performing resistance? That’s one of the substantive questions to be asked, keeping in mind the narratives presented below.

Before proceeding to narratives, I will briefly introduce the Infoshop in Kaunas. The history of an informal group of youth activists in Kaunas reaches a few years in the past, when a group of teenagers, interested in alternative music, mostly hardcore/punk, started other activities, like regular Food Not Bombs activity and workshops on DIY stuff. They rented several rooms in an old industrial building near the center of Kaunas. In this place, called “Infoshop”, regular activities could take place. They were following the examples and sharing personal experiences from Infoshop “Pavasaris” in Vilnius and similar underground cultural centers in Copenhagen (Ungdomshuset), Dijon (Les Tanneries) and Stockholm (Kulturkampjen/ Cyklops), about which they learned through internet or their own travels (mostly by hitchhiking). For several years they were organizing punk rock concerts, screening alter-globalist movies and in 2007 co-organized (with Vilnius Info shop) Lithuanian Activist Camp in the spring, and Feminist Camp in the summer.

Since autumn 2007, some people decided to quit the place called “Infoshop” due to internal conflicts, because, as they say, “it was not horizontal enough”, too closed for outsiders, and no new people came to participate. They decided to organizing separate events,

like movie screenings in the university, and in the meantime they were looking for a new house where alternative space could be established.

#### **4.1. Julius**

Julius wrote a letter to the mayor of Kaunas to ask for a youth house (no one has responded). He complained about the extremely difficult procedure for getting to talk with Kaunas mayor. He wanted to ask for an uninhabited house in Kaunas centre to be let for the promotion of alternative culture and social projects. He encountered a big bureaucracy, and it seemed impossible for him to get to talk with mayor. So, Julius wrote a letter, presenting the group as concerned about public participation in Kaunas, and was waiting for a response since.

*I was told by the secretary that mayor does not talk with clients individually. First, you have to talk with his advisers. And secretary said that in their presence I would be unable to articulate my arguments why I need the house, therefore, I should better send a general letter of inquiry.*

Julius, 21

Julius, 21 year old, lives independently (in the flat with his sister and brother) since the high school years, since his parents have left their children in Kaunas, and moved to countryside for farming, after having inherited farmhouse and land. They saw a better opportunity to gain the wage there than working full time in the office or shop. However, everything would be just fine with the cows, if the father would not like to drink. Julius has to constantly go to the farm to help parents, especially mother.

He finished high school externally, by self-education. "I could not stand symbolic oppression and authoritarian relations between pupils and teachers. I am so happy that now I can learn with joy, not fear". After successfully passing exams, he entered Kaunas University of Technology "only to get discount for public transportation". He is not enrolled in the university system, but still informally goes to the university's department of social sciences,

and especially likes classes of anthropology and politics. He dreams to establish a free university in Kaunas, with no hierarchical regulations and tight schedules.

Julius has been traveling widely by hitchhiking, and took experience from squats in France and Sweden, Peoples Global Action meeting. He has even been to prison in Copenhagen (for several days) for participation in protest for Ungdomuset (Youth House), and is considered like a hero in Kaunas. He loves anthropological books and when traveling, writes ethnographic diary. In winter 2008 he hitchhiked in Iran for a month, and shared his experiences with university students and friends back at home.

He complains of the lack of the time and people for the projects he initiates. His initiatives and willingness for making something happen in Kaunas encounters many ups and downs, since the need for self-subsistence forces him to leave aside his activism and go to the countryside for occasional work in the farm of his parents. In the summer time he goes to work in Norway, in the farm, where he earns enough for the winter. This way he does not have to work constantly and “make something happen in Kaunas”.

In the beginning of April 2008, Julius and others were very excited about finding new place; in the end of May 2008 they already had some reservations towards this project. The main reason was that summer was approaching, and no one was sure if they will afford to occupy themselves with this new task in the autumn.

#### **4.1.      4.2. Lukas**

Lukas, 19, expressed this feeling: “After all the efforts we have put to make something happen, no one from outside really seems to give a damn. And probably that means that Kaunas does not need an autonomous house. We are not the vanguard party, and people are not sheep. If they will need something, then we can do it together”. The feeling of despair was felt from his tone, and it was not surprising why. “I am fed up with the static people there and

the boring environment in Kaunas”. He stresses the aspect of consumer culture, and is very discontent with people who spend most their leisure time in shopping and leisure centers: “Every year, there is more and more of these hyper-malls, they are like sacred temples. My classmates just love to do it –go to cinema, play bowling, just hang around in the mall. They see no other way how to entertain themselves.”

Lukas shares many things in common with Julius. They played in one hardcore punk band, and with other mates established ‘infoshop’ (underground cultural center). Now he is skeptical about the quest for autonomy, leastwise on a grand scale (like occupying house). He sees almost no perspectives in the attracting or ‘mobilizing’ people for similar cause since then ‘it is all the same old political shit’. He favors small scale temporary projects, like engaging performances outside or food distribution. In his opinion, the artificially ‘squatted’ youth building would become another kind of spectator-entertainer relations.

His mother is a doctor in a private clinic, and father works a manager of company of constructions. They all live in a medium sized flat, in apartment building near Silainiai, one of the popular sleeping districts of Kaunas. Lukas works in a factory in Finland during the summer, since ‘if you work there for a month, you can live here for three’. He is in the last class of a prestigious gymnasium, ready to enter the university, which also means a need to work regularly. He wants to study abroad, maybe in Turkey, or some other distant country. And not because he expects the quality of education to be better; he hopes to meet new, interesting people, and just to leave Kaunas. His parents, hard working and quite a well-off family are doubtful of such plans, but since he is a good student, they promised to pay his tuition. Recently their son won a national Olympics of philosophy, so they are proud to tell the relatives, and allow him more space to play his ‘activist’ games.

### 4.3. Rima

“Nothing will change, anyway, so what is the purpose of doing something in public?”, asks Rima, 20. Rima works in DIY accessories store, where she makes and sells hand-made stuff. Before she worked in Ireland for a year, to earn some money for her studies in performance art, but dropped the idea of studying, because university seemed too conservative for her. She lives apart from her family, since they can not afford to support her. Her mother is a nurse in public hospital, and her father is a public prosecutor. Parents live in a small flat with the aunt, and Rima rents a flat in the Kaunas center with two flat mates. She is very neutral towards her relations with family, because they are not supportive at all for her ideas. Since early teenage years, Rima was independent and engaged in many youth organizations: scouts, AC Patria, high school student parliament.

*I tried to participate in every possible project for students, it was really interesting, and since parents did not give extra money for me, it was the only way to travel.*

Rima, 20

She has experience in many local youth NGO's, and is critical on the goals they are setting. “First of all, the material motivation for the leaders of NGO is most important cause. They would always find some participants for ‘international’ projects, spending as much as possible on paying money for housing in some posh location (usually from the tenant friend), and spending least for the direct expenses of participants.

She traveled to Germany, France, and hosted other people who came to Kaunas through projects. Things that she experienced in foreign countries, like street theatre and gay parades, are difficult to organize in Kaunas, but she is optimistic. Rima finished high-status 'Ausros' gymnasium in Kaunas, and has had many plans for the future, related to project-based work and creativity, but is realistic of the situation – first there is money to earn.

She supports the idea to make something happen in the streets of Kaunas, but rationale for this is not political. “Actually, I don’t give a damn about politics”. Rima wants to have fun and create some alternative space in the town. “Kaunas is the new Vilnius”, says she, meaning that there is hope to revive the space. She is really sensitive for what is going on in Kaunas, because “it is her place, and it is changing”. Eventually, she could make use of it for her business, as she is planning to do in the summer – go to the music festivals and sell the hand-made accessories.

#### **4.4. Ugnius**

Ugnius, 20, is a first-year student of social work, and is coming from a small provincial town Kacergine. Growing up in a community environment he saw many social problems like alcoholism, family violence, and massive worker migration to foreign countries. It encouraged him to go on studying something meaningful, like social work. He stays in Kaunas with his grandparents, because it is less expensive this way. His mother (divorced) works in Kacergine as a teacher in secondary school, and she is happy that their son comes back home weekly to take care of his younger brother, because she does not have much time to spent with him. His family does not really know about his activities in Kaunas, they just want him to be well. When he has time after lectures, on a weekly basis he meets several other girls and organizes “Food Not Bombs”, and plays in a rock band as well. Since coming to study in Kaunas he experienced both excitement and passivity of a bigger city.

*In the spring time somehow there appear more young aggressive guys, who pop in trolleybuses and public squares. I should wear my cap most of the time, because otherwise my long hair attracts undesirable attention. I am constantly prepared to defend myself, and, first of all, try not to get in trouble. Vilnius (the capital) used to be more tolerant than Kaunas, however, the things there are also getting worse.*

Ugnius, 20

Ugnius is optimistic, and believes that Kaunas can be slowly changing, as more people comes in the public, and wants to make own contribution. He admits that the action 'Food Not Bombs' is symbolic, but nevertheless important, as it shows possibility of direct action, and breaks the barriers between rich and poor, those who have, and those, who have not. However, the biggest obstacles to organize free food distributions are material, and since there is no formal organization behind these actions, organizers spend their own money to buy food supplies. In the moment he is planning to get a casual summer job in a foreign country, maybe UK. There is no certainty if he will be able to continue this activity after the summer, unless more people join in.

#### **4.5. Solveiga**

Solveiga (22), a girl with long dark dreadlocks and a lot of piercing on her face, is a girlfriend of Lukas. They started friendship while they both hitchhiked in Sweden, visiting social centers there. In Kaunas, she participates in various alternative actions because it is a way to spend time with friends, and encourage general public to be more active. She is particularly engaged in gender issues, creates street artwork and writes "zines" (booklets) about feminism and women-power.

She has an interesting life story. She and her parents had spent a part of her childhood in Denmark, in the period 1992-1999, where her father played handball in a professional team, and earned a good living for his family. Her mother, certificated dentist, was a housewife at the time. The family then returned to Lithuania, in order to start a new life. Realizing their dream, they bought a semi-detached house in a higher-middle class neighborhood, situated in the pine forest, on the outskirts of Kaunas. Unfortunately, her parents did not get well together, and live separately now. "My father is a brainless sportsman, does not understand me at all, but helps me when I am in need. My mother has an artistic soul, but we do not communicate

effectively”. For now she lives with her father, and has recently quit a “very boring” job in the shoes shop in Akropolis (Shopping mall where we organized anti-consumerist performance). Her mother was working in Spain for a year, and for money earned there now she has a private cabinet opened in Kaunas.

After returning from Denmark, Solveiga had to study in Lithuanian school. It was a big shock for Solveiga to encounter Lithuanian school system after Denmark’s liberal approach to children. She had a lot of difficulties to learn written Lithuanian (“they force kids in Lithuania to write as automatons, all the same style. In Denmark we could draw letters with pencil until high-school”). As a teenager, she had to change schools in Kaunas for skipping too much lessons, although her grades were good.

She remembers Denmark with nostalgia (and Scandinavia in general, where she likes to hitchhike from time to time with friends). There are more alternative spaces and people are more tolerant in generally, especially on the gender issues. She also proudly mentions that the young people in Scandinavia do not have to work immediately after finishing school, in that case they still get support from state, and even for a very casual job they receive a decent pay.

It is a big disappointment for her that in Kaunas she encounters a lot of bullying “People are very intolerant and even aggressive here”. However, in Kaunas now she has a network of friends, and tries to support the alternative ways of living (she, as most of others, presents herself vegan and eco-conscious) and does not plan to return to Denmark. “Everywhere in Europe it is the same stuff –people work a lot and then rest in front of TV. I do not want to live this way”.

She has a BA in art and crafts, and hopes to have her own studio – she does not want to work in a factory, which produces pottery in conveyer, and she could afford not working there for now. Her parents put a pressure for her to continue studies, or get a job, and she plans to go to some foreign country for an art school, maybe to Spain. “Kaunas is a modest

city, where many changes are possible; however, I do not want to spend my life here struggling for nothing”.

#### **4.6. Justas**

Justas, 23, does not believe in formal politics. “I do not see a purpose of political spectacle going on in the offices. I really do not care about it, because no one there really cares about us”. Still, he is not out of underground political life when it comes to issues in Kaunas. “I really like Kaunas and do not see the reason why it is bad. People are the same everywhere; it is just bastards like us who like to stress the difference between ‘alternative us’ and ‘boring them’”. He is involved in Kaunas alternative cultural scene, plays bass guitar in locally well-known street hardcore/punk band “KANG” (which is considered to be the first Lithuanian anti-fa<sup>13</sup> band) and participates in street performances. With the band they made two month-long concert tours in Eastern Europe (Poland, Serbia, Bulgaria), promoting their music and networking with other bands. “Everywhere young people feel the same problems, and Kaunas is not an exception. Only that people are more organized elsewhere”.

Last year Justas and several of his friends organized an anti-KFC campaign (which opened the first branch in the Baltic states, and it was in Kaunas, Akropolis), and had to be a representative for this event when the media came to film. “I did not know what to say them, actually. I am not used to this kind of stuff”.

After graduating from high-class Kaunas Jesuit gymnasium with remarkably good grades, he was accepted to Kaunas University of Technology, program of Computer Science, but dropped the studies after the first semester. “It was too boring”. Then next year he entered program of sociology, where, due to high grades, he received a scholarship. But he did not attend the classes much – at the time he was intensively playing in a band - and had to pay for

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<sup>13</sup> Anti-Fascist

studies next semester. Then he decided to drop the studies again, and traveled with his band-mates to UK, Isle of Man, where he found a job in a pub, and stayed there for two years. “It was really crazy time. There were lots of Lithuanians, lots of Poles. We formed a rock band there and toured in the island. I really miss the place”. However, he and his friends earned some money and returned back to Lithuania. He is not sure about the prospects in continuing studies, and for now works in local pub, but wants to quit it too. “I really do not know what to do with my life. I just want to have good time”.

Justas still lives with his parents, grandparents in one flat, located in Kaunas Old Town. “It is good place to live; all the action takes place here”. In the student times, both parents were hippies, played guitar and traveled to the mountains. His father works as a technical director in a municipality of small neighboring town Jonava, and sometimes overdoses alcohol. His mother works in two jobs, selling photo equipment and helping in the office as a secretary. She plans to buy her own car, and Justas would use it as well. Justas is almost totally financially dependable upon his family, and does not want to move out from the parents place. “Maybe one day I will rent a flat with other friends”. Now he has hot meal and a place to sleep for free. His mother understands that son’s quest for purpose in life in nothing exceptional, and is really supportive of him. However, she would like him to continue studies, and find a decent work. He does not have much to say about the relations to his father. “He is always occupied”.

#### **4.7. Aleksas**

Aleksas, 19, lives in Vilnius, but comes to Kaunas on a weekly basis to meet with friends and participate in some events, like concerts. In Vilnius he lives with his parents and grandmother. His mother is a philologist Hebrew and Russian, and teaches in Vilnius University. His father is a Jewish historian and works as a guide in Vilnius. Aleksas goes to

Israel from time to time and visits other relatives there. “I can barely speak Hebrew, but when I stay in Tel Aviv for a longer time, I start to understand the language.” Recently he graduated from high school, and entered University of Fine Arts. After the first semester of studying he dropped out of it. “I could not stand the pressure and spirit of the competition. I am an artist, not a machine”. Now the biggest issue for him is where to find money. “I do not want to work long hours; I need time for other activities”. His family is really supportive for his searches, and encourages him to seek his own way of life. “If not my family, I really would not know what to do”.

He is an amateur circus artist, and makes public performances – he usually spins fire or juggles. Also he and his friends organize Food Not Bombs near the cinema ‘Lietuva’ in Vilnius, where quite a lot of homeless people come to eat. In addition, he makes an event called “Living Library”, where passers by can in person approach stereotyped man (“gay”, “Jewish”, “punk”) and talk to him. After the 2008 March 11 (Lithuanian Day of Independence) public neo-Nazi parade in Vilnius he noticed an increased attention to this activity. “The police is protecting us, but Nazis come to the tent and just take our pictures”. As a “recognizable Jewish” (according to his expression), he does not feel very safe in Vilnius. Kaunas for him associates with different spirit, a space for experimentation. “I have never heard a racist remark from strangers in Kaunas”, tells he. His friends from Kaunas consider this to be a mistaken conclusion. “You just do not live here long enough”, replies him Lukas.

#### **4.8. Giedrė**

Giedrė, 18, is finishing high school in 2008. She is a volunteer in NGO AC Partia (Actio Catholica), and likes participating in various social and cultural activities. She is singing and dancing in folklore club, leading small workshops of hand crafts for younger pupils, and organizes Food Not Bombs event with Ugnius. After graduation she plans to go to

Vilnius to study graphic design in the University of Fine Arts. “I am really depressed here, because it is so difficult to break the general passivity and pessimism around”. Nevertheless, she is always first to help with organizing some event with her friends. “It is so much fun to spend time actually doing something than blogging online and complaining”. She encounters bullying and unwelcoming attitude almost on a daily basis: “Today I went on public bus, and some older boys started aggressively punching smaller passenger. I started to shout, but none of other passengers reacted. It was so sad.”

She has a short dark hair and some piercing on her face, so it is not difficult to notice her. “It is so much easier in foreign countries, like Germany or France. When I went to Paris, no one seemed to care how I look like”. It is in some sense a typical evaluation of intolerance to ‘otherness’ in Kaunas; all the people described above have uttered similar sentence in some occasion.

She lives with her parents and a younger sister in a neighborhood close to Kaunas, in a private house. Her parents are happy for her being so active, and hope that she will find her way in Vilnius. “Maybe I will leave to study in foreign university as an exchange student, which should be so much fun”. In summer time she plans to go to Norway to look for a summer job in the farmhouse, as many of her friends do.

#### **4.9. Analysis**

These were class structured collective biographies, which are expressed in embodied terms. Several patterns emerge in the life histories of these people:

**1. Resources.** Those who have resources, like time and money, to spend on participation, can afford to be performative and immanent. But serious doubts start to surface when the ‘materiality’ of self subsistence approaches. Simply, it comes to much more difficult when time and money are so limited; and the activity of ‘public protest’ and social activism

does not offer immediate returns and it is difficult to capitalize on that. (Although in Julius case there is some sort of activist ‘career’).

**2. Work:** Patterns of seasonal work migration<sup>14</sup>, fitting well with general trends of migration Kaunas and Lithuania. Precarious and flexible work, meaning they are unsure about life projects, and have to depend on their families. No meaningful work; prospects -service for capitalism in order to survive.

**3. Family.** We see the importance of family structures. There is a strong dependence on the support from their parents. It allows for some temporary excursions to social/cultural activism. On the other hand, they at the same time exert pressure on setting “correct” the goals of life.

**4. Education.** Local institutional life emphasizes hierarchy, competition, and discipline rather than personal wishes and expression. Much of their stories are, about clashing not just with local public life, but also with local institutions, educational ones in particular. They express a desire for leaving for the studies in another city or another country as a way to escape the grimness of urban reality. It is a way for those who have sufficient cultural and material capital; it is one way to balance their imaginary futures.

**5. Future.** There is a contradictory relation with their imaginary life projects and the ‘real’ prospects. They want to sustain themselves as creative and autonomous persons, and at the same time feeling the need to earn their living and build some sort of career. In Kaunas they feel the overwhelming passivity and complain ‘that nothing really happens there’. Nevertheless, they spend their time and material resources for making change happen; individual struggles indicate the existence of some sort of structural basis. Power relations,

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<sup>14</sup> About migration: In unofficial data, there is a biggest relative proportion of Lithuanians in Ireland and UK. The Poles still make absolute majority, but Lithuanians with the general population of 3.5 million (July 2008 estimated by CIA) feed the cheap and skilled labor positions in British Isles; they are well regarded for their laboriousness and inclination to work 70 hours per week. (According to the website of National Broadcaster LTV, in 2006 there were above 100 000 Lithuanians in Ireland alone.)

playing through and with their lives, are quite obscure – individual is responsible for himself, at the end of the day.

**6. Generation gap in the social memory.** The gap between parents and children in the way how they see their lives at the moment. (Basically it is the same story as with labor unionist and young activists). There is no immediate connection between struggles for Lithuanian independence from Soviet Union, and current youth attitude towards politics.

**7. An Embrace of Direct Action** (and refusal of formal organization). The politics of these people does not have any concrete object. They are struggling to expand their social life and make something happen in public space, not on internet forum. Direct action in the situation is rather easily accessible form of doing something; their biographical position does not allow for organizing a more structured group of people, devoted for concrete goals (case of Julius attempts)- they are uncertain where they will be and do next year. Informal initiatives suffer from general feeling of surrounding fear and passivity, and stays on symbolic level, without hope of achieving concrete. (Almost as a ‘self-help’ group therapy against neo-liberal political arrangement).

The stories of these people shows that they are structurally disempowered in place, but they are personally empowered (one can refer to theory of personal power of Simmel and Tarde) by 1) tolerant and well off parents 2) possibility to travel and work abroad, 3) cultural capital - good schools and their own talents. All three coming together form a ground for potential resistance, and it is partly dependent on their origins and families they are coming from, the symbolic capital of their parents.

For sure, there are much more young people in similar social positions regarding life chances and unsure future, nevertheless, an embrace of direct action is not widespread, almost minuscule on a local scale (nor is widespread the youth’s involvement in mainstream politics of Kaunas). It is a small segment of a relatively ‘privileged’ young middle class people,

coming from families that provide them with resources - economic or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) to operate in a 'connectionist' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005) regime.

## 5. ACTIONS

In this chapter I describe the actions in public that we organized in several places of Kaunas. Immediate questions are - How the activities are constrained by the structural properties of place? On the other hand, how space is engaged and transformed on the provisional basis by intentional actions of a group? The emotions and performative, bodily expressions could be observed by immediate presence of researcher, and complemented life-history narratives, obtained through informal interviews.

Due to the limited time and material resources, the actions themselves were organized on a small scale, and from ten to fifty persons were involved in them as participants and spectators. Such a relatively low number is not surprising, and is not uncommon for the public 'social' events in Kaunas<sup>15</sup>. However, the events themselves were important for the participants, and that was the interest for research.

The argument of this chapter highlights a fear of violence as an important moment in the process of organizing public political participation of youth in Kaunas. Being in certain spaces is a contention already, as space and violence (as expression of immediate power) are tightly connected.

Several recent events concerning the use of public space in Lithuania can be presented as symptomatic: the Mayor of Vilnius, Lithuanian capital, has acquired an international attention by forbidding homosexual rally in October 2007 and anti-homophobic ads on public transport for the reason that 'gay people would be in danger of public violence'<sup>16</sup> At the same time, on 2008 March 11 (Lithuanian Day of Reconstitution of Independence) there was a non-sanctioned (illegal) march of Lithuanian nationalist skinheads, shouting racist and fascist

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<sup>15</sup> Recently the Mayor of Kaunas organized the Day for Public Health on the main street *Laisves Aleja*, where, as a local newspaper 'Laikinoji Sostine' claims, just ten or twenty people bothered to show up.

<sup>16</sup> <http://ukgaynews.org.uk/Archive/08/Jan/1601.htm> , <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7063132.stm>

proclamations, and it was escorted by the police cars (although, currently there is a legal investigation going on).<sup>17</sup>

To add another dimension, there is an officially acclaimed public initiative, known as ‘The Day for Street Music’<sup>18</sup>, which has taken place in Vilnius and several other cities on May 3, 2007, and was held on 2008, too. It is a highly publicized event, seemingly supported from EU programme for Vilnius, cultural capital of Europe 2009.<sup>19</sup> It is organized by famous singer, and on this day you can obtain permit to play on street (with compliance of rules). Otherwise, it is quite a rare event on Lithuanian city streets to see musician or other performance (Police comes immediately and asks for permission to perform). These events framed the struggles for public space in Kaunas, and served as a point of reference to forming common answer to the question ‘why are we making these actions?’

## **5.1. Reclaim the Streets**

Reclaim the Streets is a based on direct action and public, open participation. This public event originally started in Great Britain 1991 with the occupation of motorway as a part of anti-road struggles, and since then was included in general repertoire of urban resistance; general crowd occupy certain unusual (and often unauthorized) public space, like main street, and throw a party there. We made two events during the month of April 2008, one in Town Hall Square, other in main pedestrian street Laisves Aleja.

We did not plan first action all together in a common meeting. Julius, Lukas and Giedre met together several times in March 2008 and discussed the possibility to create an event which would connect Kaunas alternative scene to broader activism. They knew from the friends in Vilnius that ‘the days for squats and autonomous spaces’ are organized all over the

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.anarchija.lt/index.php/aktyvizmas/lietuva-fasistams.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.gatvesmuzika.lt/en/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.culturelive.lt/en/events2008/events2008-5/>

Europe and decided to organize an action called 'Reclaim the Streets'. There they planned a joint performance of percussion instruments, and all the participants were invited to contribute whatever they can – make drawings, play music, juggle, bring food. In other words, organizers did not want to be 'real' organizers, only to provide impulse and initiate the occasion for others to join in and create alternative space – reclaim the street from passivity, intolerance and ennui.

The theme of this RTS was chosen to be 'violence in public space'. It was an idea of Julius that the issue of violence in public spaces should be the main during our public events. Julius wants to promote solidarity and self-help among passers-by. The proclamation he produced with his girlfriend Nijole was about immanent violence in Kaunas streets and the need for doing something about it. He told me that everyone can become the target of violence; recently, there has been an increase of media attention to racist attacks in Kaunas and Vilnius, and he felt uneasy about that.

There was a dilemma - where should this action take place? The original idea was to occupy the busy transport street, and 'reclaim' it from the 'polluting' transport. On the other hand, we did not want to confront the police immediately and face sanctions just for the sake of fun. We debated - what was at stake? What is the purpose of occupying busy street without concrete claim? Therefore, the decision was made to hold this action in pedestrian zone, Town Hall Square, and keep the 'real' street for better occasion.

The point was – if we really want to attract considerable attention, and achieve something beyond our own immediate satisfaction, then we have to put ourselves in a dangerous and unsure position, where we could be threatened and attacked by drivers, police etc. Here we could refer to the theories of everyday life and argue that the outcome is not predefined – everything seems contingent, and the definition of social situation depends on us alone. "If enough people would go out to the streets of Kaunas, we could achieve so much!"

said Julius, echoing Tardesian analysis of crowds. It was nice to make some jokes and share dreams about doing this, but, as Bourdieu (1984) would say, our bodily habitus were adjusted to the normative spatial structure of the city so much that no one would dare to consider that seriously.

In order to organize a public event you need resources: well accessible space, electricity, participants. Also, you need to know, more or less, what is going to happen. We encountered these constraints the very moment we started discussing our projects. As musical form of expression was dominant in the action, the biggest obstacle became the source of electricity, needed to plug in for the stereo system. In Town Hall square there was no other way to get power other than from generator. At first, Lukas and Ugnius proposed doing action only with 'live' instruments, but, after some rather unsuccessful attempts to play without stereo, rejected this idea.

We had to rent a generator of electricity from private company, and that meant we needed money, around 20 euros. Even this, a minute issue at a first glance, seemed to become an obstacle. No one of participants could afford to spend extra money on this issue, since they were already printing posters, buying food for Food Not Bombs, commuting to the city center to the meetings. I had to rent the generator myself<sup>20</sup> (later the participants collected small amount of money to give back). The issue of electricity probably would not be considered relevant for NGO or any other formal institution, as they could afford this easily. However, for us it was a major issue.

On April 11<sup>th</sup> we were sitting in the basement of a building, located in the old-town of Kaunas, preparing posters and rehearsing music for the party<sup>21</sup>. Giedre and Ugnius had already distributed flyers and posters around the old-town of Kaunas, and expected the

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<sup>20</sup> Thanks CEU for a research grant.

<sup>21</sup> The date was intentionally coinciding with 'The Day for Squats and Autonomous Spaces April 2008', however, my initial expectations to link the two events were turned down.

propaganda to be effective. Participants were excited and anxious at the same time, wondering what is going to happen in the evening. “Maybe no one would come...” Rima was afraid.

“I will make a banner, which says ‘Rage against the Machine’”, told Solveiga and started drawing. No one objected – it sounded cool and something was ‘against’. Does not Hardt and Negri (2000) talk about “machines of desire”? At the same time, everybody felt the irrelevance of this slogan to any real political issue. It was a claim without object. “Probably, some people would not even understand English” was ironic Justas.

When evening came we moved to the place. It was already getting dark, and not many people seemed to hang around. We slowly moved towards the centre of the square, sat on the ground and slowly started playing. Curiously, some passers by stopped and looked to us. There were around twenty people who sparsely occupied the place. Smiling faces and supportive comments indicated that emotions were as intended. More people came, and asked: ‘what is happening here?’ Since there was no representative of common statement, somebody only distributed some texts that Julius had written about violence, but not many people seemed to make a connection. As Lukas told later, *“It still was like a theatre, and passers by did not really join in; however, for us the emotions were great, and feeling of usual space had really changed. Even if we could do things like this more often!”*

All happening took around two hours, and consisted mostly of musicians playing loud music, jugglers spinning fire, and accidental passers by, who looked at the show. Although anarchist slogan proclaims that ‘direct action is not a spectator sport’, it remained unclear how can it reach beyond the spectacular element.

As for the context in Kaunas, no small event like this is insignificant. After the action I got an impression that the participants highly rated the success of event, first of all because of their own courage to make something happen. Secondly, organizers were satisfied for not

having a really coherent object for such performance. The main goal was being together in space; that already was a contention for the group.

With no pretensions to achieve something beyond immediate satisfaction of organizers, actions like this looks very limited and not actually empowering in a strong political sense. In Simmelian theory of relational power, interactionist mode of resistance is possible by making oneself open to interaction. We clearly saw a will for ‘interaction’ here, but no graspable resistance could be explicitly talked about.

Talking about difficulties to grasp power and resistance in formal sociology, Weinstein (1993:15) quotes Tenbruck on impossibility of formal sociology to theorize change in society: “Formal sociology is incompetent to deal with the problem of change of society itself, a change of the whole system (...) for it refuses to regard society, as conceived of as such a system, as its proper object”. This critique applies to broader notion of pragmatic sociology as well.

## **5.2. Food not bombs**

Activity called ‘Food not Bombs’ (FNB) is a form of direct action, claiming that food and water can be redistributed more equally in the society that could afford huge sums to spend on military issues. It involves a group of several persons, who buy staples, usually at their own expenses, and prepare dishes (vegetarian or vegan, it is a matter of consensus) at their homes and later on distribute it for free in the centre of the city, mostly for homeless people.

Ugnius, Giedre, Lukas and Solveiga were the main initiators of this weekly activity. I was curious how do they choose the place for food distribution, and was surprised that it does not take place in the most crowded hubs of the central street (as it is the usual practice in other

bigger cities in Europe or US, making the performative statement that there ‘is such thing as a free lunch’).

Food not bombs is best seen as a symbolic act of redistribution, and it was a part of all our other activities. The amount of food is also symbolic – usually one or two big pots of rice, a lot of home made pita breads, and maybe some sweet. Everything is prepared at home, and transported to the city centre by bicycle or public transport (organizers do not have cars). It is enough for 20-30 people to eat, but, interestingly, organizers complained that sometimes there are not enough of eaters. *“It is one of the best ways to show the potential of direct action. People are often very surprised that we organize FnB on our expenses. They really do not understand how is it possible”*, explains Giedre.

In Kaunas, people who organize the weekly event try to choose calm and relatively remote location for it, for the rationale that shows two interesting moments. First, as I was told, the homeless people would feel less ashamed to take free food and to lose their face in public, and secondly, the police is less likely to intervene (they don’t have any hygienist permit to distribute food, and are afraid of sanctions). Social control – and power relations behind it – creates the effect of spatial positioning of the event.

### **5.3. The Festival is always close to you**

With the group we often discussed the spread of privatized public places, like shopping malls, in Kaunas, and the possibilities for appropriating them, imbuing them with counter-meanings (like staging a rave or street theatre near the most chic spectacles of consumption). For sure, the questions arose as how much is it for the contestation of consumption and resistance to capitalism, and to what extent that might be just another spectacle. However, the consensus was achieved that it is still better to have a spectacle

organized by ourselves than to be passive consumers of big spectacles. So, we picked two strategic sites - recently build shopping malls Mega and Akropolis.

Sewell (2001) provides an example where in 1911 the suffragettes appropriated downtown San Francisco shopping spaces in order to promote their cause; their transformed the gendered meanings of women from passive middle-class consumer to active political subject by using spatial strategies. However, Sewell expresses encouragement and support for such intent: “The question of how the spatial routines of contentious politics and the spatial routines of daily life are related – for example, how changes in spatial relations of work, leisure, or public ceremony affect and are affected by changing modes of protest – seems a particularly promising avenue of research” (ibid:64).

#### **5.4. Mega: The new leisure and entertainment centre is being opened!**

Huge shopping mall “Mega” was built a few years ago on the outskirts of Kaunas, on the intersection of two main national roads. It is advertised as a largest shopping mall in Lithuania, and is marketed as “the heart of Lithuania”. For activists of my group it was a place, marked with rather negative emotions. They called it a “spectacle of commodities”, “hyper-reality for empty-heads”, “surreal show for the middle class”. In addition, the location was near ‘sleeping districts’ which had reputation for intolerant youth gangs. Unsurprisingly, there was a hesitant reaction when I proposed to stage one of our actions there.

*There is a big resistance and ambiguity on what is going to happen tomorrow near “Mega” shopping mall. One of the most active guys, Julius, said: “It is a shopping mall, not town square...” Somebody else suspiciously added: “and at the end, are we going inside? And what if we get kicked?” Zhilvinas, one of the dj’s we invited to participate, wanted me to clarify: “what is going to happen tomorrow? What kind of ideology hides behind this?” I really could not clearly explain this to him. As I assume, I am not an organizer of any activity, but only a ‘facilitator’. Therefore, I am not obliged to ‘speak-up’ and represent like PR person what ‘this is’. It will be what it will be. Contingency and plans; making use of informal, unstructured organization; is it still an organization?*

*Viktoras, my band mate, who plays sax, would not believe the first time when I told him about the planned event near super-mall. When assured it's for real, he asked: 'so it something like citizen activism'?*

Ethnographic Diary, 2008 04 16

Initial reaction was indicating the structural constraints that operated in peoples minds. That was an occasion to show to ourselves that we could create alternative space. Most of my friends agreed to participate, and were glad that something interesting is going to happen in that very unusual space.

The day before we made efforts to organize the stereo equipment, and again, obstacle was electricity generator, which I had to rent. In the day of event we got three cars and brought all the equipment to Mega parking lot. The day turned to be rather cold, it felt like raining, and that was not a good sign. The immense park lot were half empty, so we had a good chance to select right place for a concert. We chose a location in front of the main entrance, but a bit away from all the traffic rush. Around twenty people came, carrying percussion instruments and drawing tools.

First, there was no one to take initiative to plug in speakers and start the action. "So, *what is going to be here?*" asked people. It was a boundary situation, with no predefined set of the rules how to act. Suddenly, somebody started playing with a ball, other boy started juggling. Ugnius plugged in the guitar and started paying some riffs. Temporary autonomous zone started to expand. The presence of some performances made others relaxed, and Rima proposed to lead an exercise of group gymnastics. People liked the idea and started imitating expressive bodily movements of Rima. Change in bodily regime fed back to general feeling of space. The smiles appeared on faces, and no one seemed to feel the confinement of space.

We staged a free open-air concert and opened provisional autonomous zone for ourselves. Our presence opened the quasi-public space to the extent that it would become a really engaging, entertaining and creative locale. We managed to bring the power generator

and arrange the setting in the very centre of parking lot in front of main entrance. The funny thing is, one has to pay for having any events going on shopping mall's territory, and it cost around 200 litas (around 70 euro) per hour. That means, our bodily presence on that commoditised space was itself illegal and unauthorized.

In an hour security guards came and threatened to call the police. We were not satisfied, but decided, that it is best to leave. Lukas and Julius afterwards regretted that we should have stood longer and not given up so easily.

We can think of shopping mall in Lithuania as a semi-public space where certain informal rules of conducting one-self apply; legally, the private property is defended by constitutional laws, and one must obey. Nevertheless, there are no precisely defined rules about the limits and scope of correct behaviour. Spatial arrangements of mega shopping malls provides quite a lot of possible spaces for creative collective action, creation of 'temporal autonomous zone' (Bey 1991) in such pseudo-private spaces (Low 2001). Pragmatic activism might use such spaces for counter-hegemonic practices, and avoiding immediate encounter of threat to use violence. As my ethnographic phenomenological experience shows, doing something not-prescribed by market exchange relations, like staging a dance and music performance within such space, can be vitalist and joyful activity, where the moment of resistance is felt in the air.

Coronil's article relates to such topic on 'invasion' of exchange spaces with an account on looting as a means of protest during Venezuela popular unrest in 1989: "The smoke of barbecue mixed with that of burning stores. Against the "etiquette of equality" that ruled street behavior in this self-defined egalitarian society, the poor sought to assert, even if only momentarily, their image of real relations of equality" (Coronil and Skurski 1991:317-318). Whether such act can be represented as 'real' relation of equality is suspicious, but nevertheless the mode and regime of social relation changes during crisis.

## 5.5. 'Akropolis'. The beach is under the pavement<sup>22</sup>

It was a sunny day, and we took the opportunity to make a public beach zone in the parking lot of huge mall Akropolis. No one really knew what we are going to do there, but that seemed not to matter a lot. We made no official announcement; only more public invitation was the day before during Reclaim The Streets event in Laisves Aleja.

There were some dilemmas, whether it would be safe to make some unauthorized gathering in a private space, but curiosity were stronger. The exit strategy was always based on the fact that there is no 'centre' of organization, and each individual would just part away. Around ten people gathered, and all of them more or less knew each other. As it was first action this type, and we did not expect more people to show up.

We went to the uppermost ground of a parking lot, and found the most distant corner perfectly suitable for our goal – to have a DIY beach established, and time spent without buying anything. The very word 'Akropolis' has meanings of public space, where citizens could freely interact. We wanted to revive this meaning, and re-appropriate it for our aims. The sheets were spread on the ground, and people lied down to get some tan, barefooted. The excitement and joy filled the air. We spent time there sitting lazily and playing games, without much abstract discussions of the purpose for our being there. People just kept on mentioning the 'change of place'. This was nearly perfect fulfilment of 'Temporary Autonomous Zone'(Bey 1991) It was a moment of 'bioproductive' power of social relations, 'multitude', striking the centre of Empire in the very heart (Hardt and Negri 2000).

However, it was a very insignificant and minuscule attempt to subvert and change spatial power relations. Evaluating critically, the impossibility to measure any sustainable effect of such action leaves almost no hope for testing whether 'multitude' is operational concept.

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<sup>22</sup> Fr. *Au dessous le pave - la plage.*

Then we have decided to leave our improvised beach in order to experience more hardcore space inside the shopping mall. Here goes my description of experience:

*We entered the huge shopping mall 'Akropolis' after having spend several hours in an improvised beach camp on the outskirts the building's parking lot. The mood and feeling in the air changed immediately. Outside, we were brave barbarians at the gates of corrupt Pharaoh's plaza. Inside, we were bodies under the leisure regime, and the corpresence and corporeality of other consuming bodies made other interpretations rather obsolete. As there were no strategically organized act of subversion - that means we did not plan much in advance what we will do inside, just imagined it will be the same fun - I did not feel despair; I waited for others to stop and say 'hey, I have an idea'. Normally, one would expect this thing from these guys.*

*Other participants just felt silent and descended the elevator, heading towards the exit, without stopping or proposing any idea. Someone said: 'I just one to get out of there, into the street'. I inquired - 'why don't you want to stay inside and to organize the similar things we did inside - like, having a public preaching about negative effects of consumption or sit-in under the palm tree just for fun?' Ugnius strangely looked to me and asked 'Wow, you guys are really weird. Are you on drugs or what?'*

Ethnographic diary, 2008 04 22

He implied the fact that this is a private, securitized space of a super mall, and we are inside, not outside. CCTV is installed everywhere, so better we do not make problems to ourselves. The point is, beforehand we had quite intensively discussed various strategic ways of appropriating the space of shopping mall. Our bodies simply assumed the 'normal' mode of spatial conduct; structural properties defined correct behaviour, and resisted our attempt of an alternative redefinition of place.

Space as a resource is laden with meanings and values that are not easily manageable according one's will; space itself resist the 'alternative' appropriation of it. In the example we saw how place of commodity relations does not easily allow an alternative definition of it by others.

## **5.6. Mayday**

Many people, who lived under the Soviet regime, remember the holiday of Mayday as fake compulsory celebration, organized centrally official party, and made sure by communist

politprops that everyone in the school and factory will be in the joyful parade, waving red flags and shouting Party-praising slogans. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that after independence Mayday is regarded as a relic from the old communist times, and there are no big emotions around it – people prefer to spend their holiday in near the lake or in front of TV, rather than in the street parade.

For the group I worked with Mayday was not an important date. Nor was very interesting the general struggles of trade unions. They simply did not relate to them directly. When I mentioned that the chain of supermarkets “Rimi” made one of the first supermarket workers trade-union in Lithuania, there was no big reaction, but they new this event, and its precedent too.

The story goes that some months ago workers in supermarket chain IKI established its first trade union (only 40 persons from the thousands of workers), and the first confrontation immediately occurred – the organizing head of the union was fired. It seemed that people made almost no connection about how they could relate our protest (kind of aesthetic expression) with unionist struggles. Nevertheless, Lukas, Ugnius, Justas and Julius wanted to commemorate the occasion, but not as serious date, but full of energy and joy. Therefore, we staged another party on the street, and at the time the meeting, described in the introduction occurred.

May 1968 in France marked a contradictory time where parent’s generation of *fordist* regime, and most importantly- social state, encountered liberal claims from children generation, directed towards self-expression and what became known as ‘post-fordist’ regime, with the critique of rigid and limiting social structures (for more on ‘new spirit of capitalism’, see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) Precarious self-subsistence regimes came into foreground, and it applies to my case to the extent that personal histories indicate the pattern of unstable incomes and dependence upon family structures. The status of ‘student’ or ‘young

person' (late teen - yearly twenties) partly legitimizes such precariousness, allowing as well for political and social engagement; nevertheless, as the time goes, later on the fact of not having stable job becomes systematically stigmatized and marginalized. This might partly explain the relative absence of older persons in our events. Hence, this could help to understand the gap between trade unionism as traditional left, and informal activism.

## 5.7. Fear of Violence

There is an ongoing contestation of what is to be considered legitimate action in certain public spaces. Struggles against increasing securitization and privatization of space are not articulated coherently. These are internally-contradicting utterances, like: *“I want there would be no police on the streets, no CCTV cameras. But wait, who will defend us from the violence of Nazis, if they start to organize ‘order squads?’”* (Lukas).

Violence is a rather amorphous category. I often heard saying: *“I am against violence, but if we remain pacifists, we cannot defend ourselves”*. Stories, circulating around, tell about physical and symbolic violence on the streets. There is a territorial control over space by other youth gangs, who look for opportunity to attack.

*There is a drunken guy hanging around the place. Here come two subjects – young hip guys, who would fall in the category of my research interest group – these are the ones which would change the world. The drunken guy aggressively approaches them asks for cigarette. They seem frightened, give them one and leave the zone. We fail as a projected of creating ‘autonomous space’ without violence and hierarchical power.*

This narrative is similar to what I have often heard, and it is related to the structural properties of Kaunas. The rationale behind this common way of feeling can be like this: if I am insecure, police should be there to defend me; if police is unable to do so, the fellow citizens could be there to help. But that is not usually a case either. Julius found solution to

this by organizing the days for Autonomous Spaces with the invitation for solidarity of passers-by.

Review of historical and economic developments of Kaunas, and Lithuania in general, can reveal symbolic and structural violence in this case. People are suspicious not because they are inherently ‘unmotivated’ or ‘passive’ (in the sense of cultural/psychological trait), but because they realistically feel insecure and are afraid of possible repercussions, that would affect their lives (in) directly.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Lithuania is a case of post-soviet neo-liberal landscape, where shrinking public liberties are replaced by often self-blaming talk on 'need' for more civil society. Erosion of participation in public space is often complained about. Nevertheless, there are certain groups of people that try to change their immediate situation. These can be seen as social and political activities, based on direct action engaged participation, in more general terms, contentious politics (Tarrow and Adams 2001)

The symbolic performances of activist group can be evaluated from different perspectives. On the one hand, from the intellectualist and academic point of view it symbolizes the thread of continuity of aesthetic and performative resistance and intellectual critique of 'one-dimensional' everyday life, attained by disenchanting middle class youth from sixties. On the other hand, in the practical action, there is a rupture in the social memory and appraised 'global' aspects of 'local' struggles. Almost none of my group mentioned the 40th anniversary of neither May 1968 student uprising, nor local protests for the independence in soviet times.

Although Western social theory of immanent resistance and micro-spatial power offers promising concepts and invites to apply them in practice, the structural properties of Kaunas seem to be very constraining for any attempt to experiment with alternative ways of life.

Therefore, there is no way to provide an optimistic conclusion. Structural disempowerment in place is felt in every action we tried to work out. The people I worked with have similarly patterned biographical backgrounds, and are partly empowered by family, education and travels. However, they are only momentarily stuck in boundary episode between finishing school and entering the work market. That allows them for some time to spend on alternative ways of life.

In general, they orient themselves to the direction of post materialist west, and their imagination is about either going there (Scandinavia) or to the exciting South (Turkey, Iran). The third way is to attempt to change Kaunas. They feel the lack of the big space for self-expression and "relaxed", tolerant institutional and public regimes in the big western cities ("gay parades").

However, it is not just attitudes of people that do this; in that case you could just change the local situation in Kaunas by changing attitudes through performances, or believe in the personal power of the multitude and immanence, as Western theories propose. Alas, there is a big difference between Kaunas in post-socialist East and the big urban centers in post-materialist West, which has rich global middle classes in place earning their salaries in the corporate core of capitalism.

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## 8. APPENDIX



Figure 1. Kaunas Map

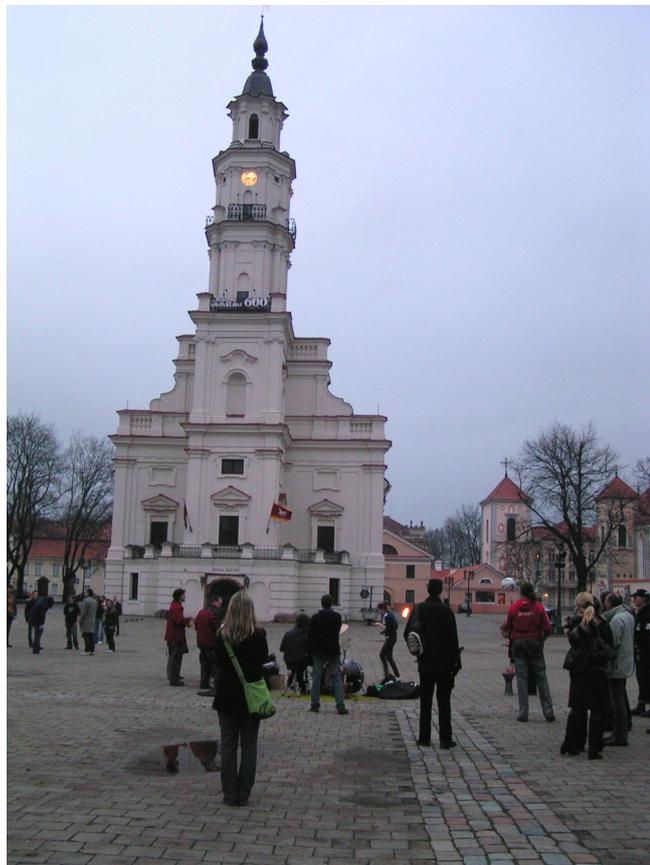


Figure 2. Huge parking lot of “Akropolis” from the other side of Nemunas

*(Source: www.bernardinai.lt)*



**Figure 3.** “Akropolis” parking lot and a historical baroque church.  
*(Source: www.bernardinai.lt)*



**Figure 4.** Town Hall Square



**Figure 5.** In the parking lot of “Akropolis”



**Figure 6.** Next to “Mega”



**Figure 7.** Rima next to “Mega”



**Figure 8.** Mayday, trade unions



**Figure 9.** Near the gates of Eden  
("Akropolis" Shopping Mall)



**Figure 10.** Provisional beach  
("Akropolis" parking lot)