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Politicizing Childhood: The 1980 Zurich Burns Movement

Francesca Polletta

On 30 May 1980, the Zurich City Council voted to fund a \$38 million renovation of the city opera house. This would augment the city's long-standing subsidization of the opera—already to the tune of \$35 a seat. At the same meeting, council members voted down a proposal to fund a city youth center.

Several hours later, the city's youth erupted, pelting operagoers with rotten fruit, chanting slogans, smashing windows, battling police. The "Zurich Burns" movement was born and in the following months would develop into a head-on and screaming confrontation between Swiss youths and the adult establishment. Before it tapered off in 1982, it would claim several lives, thousands of arrests, and millions of dollars of damage. It would spread to other Swiss cities: Berne, Lausanne, Basel.

Movement participants set off bombs, danced naked through the streets, vandalized Zurich's fashionable shopping district, and released mice in department stores—their rebellion sometimes flamboyant, sometimes violent. The "harmonious and continuous discourse between the young and the adults" described by an American sociologist in 1973 (Clinard 1978) had been shattered and the adults reacted. Bank officials warned of the threat to foreign investment; a prominent Zurich newspaper proclaimed the "disintegration of our democratic state." Swiss citizens called for military intervention.

The foreign press was quick to hail the riots as "Switzerland's entrance into the 1960's" (*Newsweek*, July 1980), and the "Movement," as it came to be called, did indeed share several features with the American and French student demonstrations of the late 1960s: slogans, marches, an underground newspaper, a manifesto. But initial reports generally failed to make clear one difference: these were not students.

The apparent working-class status of the participants makes it tempting to explain the revolt in terms of a realization by the youths of their class-determined, limited life chances, a realization mediated by the rigid career tracking of the educational system. Yet their slogans and actions suggest an outraged howl at the entire adult world rather than a consciousness expressed in organized revolt against the economic/political elite. The absence of any explicitly political agenda or political ideology challenges even the existence of a coherent movement. For the protesters consistently repudiated all political affilia-

tion. “No leaders” was the cry of a revolt that seems to have been directed against all authority.

In this paper, I propose an alternative analysis. It is one that holds central the working-class status of the Zurich protesters but refuses to “read off” their actions from their structural positions and to reduce the declarations, demands, idiom, and style of the movement to rhetoric (with all the triviality the word implies). The economic structure cannot supply a logic of revolt, an explanation for the emergence of a new consciousness or for the actions it engenders. Instead I propose to study economic structures and shifts as experienced through distinctively cultural categories. The Zurich youths transformed an experience of dispossession and superfluosity into a celebration of possessionlessness and childlike autonomy. Their protest both penetrated and exultantly rejected the system that had marginalized them. In their call for a government-subsidized autonomy, moreover, the youths suggested a form of political participation based not on a group’s willingness to conform, to deny difference, but rather on its possession of a sovereign space of difference.

And yet, in the end, the movement failed. The freedom it claimed was finally limited to the bounded space of an abandoned factory, its politics limited to rebellion. This, I will argue, was because the movement remained locked into a set of conventional, and ideological, categories for conceptualizing protest. The Zurich protesters were finally unable to get beyond a dichotomy that pitted childhood against politics—against any politics.

The approach I’m using, which takes the language of social protest as simultaneously empowering and constraining, goes against the grain not only of Marxian but also of two other contemporary models of collective action. The resource mobilization model¹ has conceptualized social movement participants as rational actors pursuing instrumental goals. The goals themselves have been considered a permanent feature of political relations and therefore analytically unimportant in explaining the emergence and trajectory of protest. Rather, the task has been to specify the conditions for the success of a movement. These have been identified as a favorable structure of political opportunities (in some versions of the model), support by powerful allies, and the organizational resources to provide adequate incentives to potential members (the latter in answer to Mancur Olson’s [1965] free-rider problem). The important questions have been ones of organizational resources and constraints. Where the language of protest has been addressed, it has been treated exclusively as a strategic resource, deployable by movement leaders to mobilize consensus and participation.²

By contrast, the identity-oriented or new social movement model has conceptualized recent social movements like the women’s, antinuclear, ecology, and local autonomy movements as preeminently *normative* challenges to an emerging “postindustrial” society. As production has shifted from primarily economic goods to the production of knowledge, domination has taken the

form of an increasing penetration of “technocratic power” into all spheres of life.³ In this context, movements have sought not material economic gain or greater participation in the system but to create or preserve spaces of autonomy. Protest has moved from the terrain of state and economy to that of culture and life-style; the stakes of struggle have become cultural, symbolic ones.

Yet the new social movements hold also a broader transformative capacity. The task for identity-oriented theorists has been to reveal in instances of social protest the values of plurality, equality, and autonomy they tender for a transformed politics.

With their contending visions of collective action as mainly strategic or as mainly normative, the two models have been attacked from opposite quarters. The resource mobilization model has been criticized for neglecting the historical *constitution* of collective interests and identities, the process by which people come to see themselves as having a common identity and set of interests. This would require exploring the normative frames through which solidarity develops, as well as locating the emergence of new identities within broader historical transformations.

The identity-oriented model, on the other hand, has been reproached for making movement goals and strategies simply the expression of a normative challenge, itself necessitated by structural transformation. So the strategic character of collective action completely drops out in what amounts finally to a functionalist model. This makes it difficult to explain the trajectory of a particular movement, and even more difficult to assess its prospects for success. For how can one account for or evaluate the actions of movement organizations without seeing those actions as strategic choices undertaken in a particular institutional context?

If in one sense the resource mobilization and identity-oriented models fall into opposite traps—one overemphasizing the strategic character of collective action and the other its normative character—in another sense the models make the same mistake. Both assume that movement goals express collective interests or identities in an unmediated and unproblematic way. What that leaves out, though, is the possibility of a *disjunction* between goals and interests, the possibility that the way goals have been formulated may not further the group’s interests. The Zurich youths’ only consistent demand was for an “autonomous leisure center.” The demand was strategic in resource mobilization terms, for it was initially effective in mobilizing participation. It was potentially transformative in terms of an identity-oriented model, for it articulated a distinctly new kind of freedom. And yet the goal as formulated may also have undermined the movement’s potential for success, success understood as its capacity to change the lives of its participants. This is the possibility that I want to raise in the following account.

But how can one assert or explain a gap between goals and interests? Not by assuming that social movements have a unanimity of identity, goals, and vision

and arguing, accordingly, a kind of across-the-board mystification. The understanding of social movements that I am using insists on the capacity of social movement actors to reflect on norms. They are not simply carriers of normative challenges—emancipatory or otherwise. At the same time, their ability to strategically translate their interests into programmatic goals may be impeded by the very conceptual language available to define those goals.

No protest ideology is fully original. It is always embedded in a preexisting political vocabulary and logic—a logic which in part sets the terms of acceptable protest. The question is to what extent movement leaders, by having to conform to legitimate ways of representing and authorizing goals, are constrained in the range of goals they can formulate.

The question may be posed even of a movement, like the one in Zurich, that self-consciously sets out to breach all rules of the political game. For even a discourse framed as a complete repudiation of a prevailing system of power must make use of recognizable discursive practices and categories. It must make sense. And making sense may mean accepting and reaffirming the normative valuations that are implicit in conventional political language, valuations that help to sustain the very system against which the movement is directed. In other words, the overt challenge may mask a more fundamental—and unwilling—acceptance of political categories and options. The limits of language may reveal the limits of consciousness.

To get at this possibility, I want to show both how the Swiss youths took up and creatively responded to the structures that oppressed them and how that response was undermined by its inability to break out of a set of conventional categories for framing protest.⁴ I begin with a description of the economic life of Swiss youths in the late 1970s. My purpose is not to uncover a set of economic determinants but to suggest what it may have been like to be Swiss and working-class and young in 1980. Then I explore how movement participants took up that experience and gave a name to it—the words and ideas and symbols and narratives they used to articulate a common experience and to seek to change it. I try to tell the story the movement told of itself.⁵ Finally, I turn from the empowering character of language to the constraints it exercises in order to argue that the goals and the forms of protest that were conceptualized by the Zurich protesters were circumscribed by the political vocabulary available to them. Following John Thompson's (1984) understanding of ideology as a meaning system that helps to sustain relations of domination, I'll suggest that one way ideology may operate is through its delimitation of a range of conceptualizable movement goals.

II

Switzerland would seem an unlikely setting for a working-class revolt. With a ready supply of foreign “guest” workers (in 1973, 28% of the labor force were

foreigners, and the figure has not dropped below 24% since then [OECD 1985]), there has always been virtually full employment for Swiss citizens. Between 1965 and 1985 unemployment was nil for most of the time, rising at the highest to 1.5%, compared to a steadily rising rate for Europe as a whole from 2% to 11% (OECD 1985:35). The foreign workers have been the closest thing to a working class in the Marxist sense: performing largely undifferentiated tasks, financially coerced and disposable, unprotected by the state or unions. In fact in 1967, Alain Touraine predicted that the foreign workers, as a marginal and exploited social group, were particularly susceptible to “revolutionary unionism and radical movements” (in Casparis and Vaz 1979). But they have not revolted and have lobbied only intermittently for better conditions. Nor have the unions indicated any incipient radicalism. Proud of their no-strike record, they have viewed their relationship with employers as a partnership based on commonalities of interest.

The Zurich protests represented the first radical activism since a series of workers’ strikes in 1917. But the protesters in 1980 were not adult workers. They were young: 45% were under twenty years of age and 77% were under twenty-five. The largest occupational group represented was that of apprentices (Willener 1984:204). To understand the historical context of the movement demands a fuller understanding of the system of apprenticeship and how it fits into the country’s economic and social structure, as well as recent changes in that system.

In 1980, roughly 75% of all fifteen- to seventeen-year-old secondary school leavers were in apprenticed occupations (86% of the male school leavers and 60% of the female school leavers) (Buchmann 1990:98). An apprenticeship is part of the normal employment tracking for most Swiss males,⁶ for white-collar as well as blue-collar work. The top three occupational choices for male apprentices in the early 1980s were jobs in the metalworking and engineering industries (chosen by 34.2% of male apprentices in 1984), office work (chosen by 12.1%), and jobs as draftsmen and technicians (chosen by 8.9%). Female apprentices’ top choices were office work (37.3%), sales clerking (27.2%), and personal hygiene positions (9.1%). For both men and women the preference rankings were identical to those made thirty years earlier (Buchmann 1990:107).

Occupational tracking begins for schoolchildren at age nine to ten and compulsory schooling is followed at age fifteen to sixteen by vocational technical training (vocational school and apprenticeship) or further academic education. The divisions seem to follow class lines, with teachers’ “assessment of abilities” that determine a student’s placement based largely on the occupational status of the parents (Casparis and Vaz 1979:28). A 1982 survey showed that only 3% of twenty- to twenty-eight-year-old students in the German-speaking part of Switzerland were from a “low” socioeconomic background, and 44% were from a “high” one (Buchmann 1990:102). Compared to other European

countries, there is a low level of occupational mobility. Based on historical data, Claire and François Masnata-Rubattel (1978) argue that, leaving aside the increased number of clerical and white-collar employees, the occupation of the child basically matches that of the parent.

The low social mobility is experienced by the youngsters themselves. A comparative study of Swiss German, Swiss French, and Canadian youths found that only 17% of the Swiss Germans saw “working hard” as an important factor in getting ahead, compared with 92% of the Canadians and 44% of the Swiss French (Schmid 1980).

The apprenticeship, directly following secondary vocational school, continues and reinforces the class tracking of the formal educational structure. In addition it places the youths in a separate occupational, economic, and social category. For at least two years—increasingly, three or four years (Casparis 1990:166)—the apprentice works four or five days a week for an employer and attends vocational school. The work is usually tedious and apprentices are paid less than other employees; they are not protected by the unions’ collective bargaining structure.

The apprenticeship system is considered crucial to the Swiss economy and one of the reasons for Switzerland’s freedom from the unemployment that has plagued other European economies. It is intended to serve foremost the needs of employers. This was graphically illustrated by the response to a reform attempt in the mid-1970s. Criticizing the inflexibility of apprenticeship programs biased to employer rather than apprentice needs, as well as the inequality of the educational streaming system, apprentices and some educators demanded fairly modest modifications that would grant apprentices further educational opportunities. The investigative commission set up in 1978, on which no apprentices sat, moved against the reforms and, in a resounding victory for employers, the structure remained intact. The economic recession of the late 1970s squelched all further discussion of reforms as students, fearing unemployment, vied for apprenticeship positions (Masnata-Rubattel 1978).

The rigidity of the training structure and its class grounding are reinforced by other institutions. Swiss men begin military service at age twenty and are required to serve active service periodically until age thirty-one. While the pool of recruits shows a diversity of class backgrounds, the higher military positions tend to be filled by the better-educated, better-off candidates. Indeed, Casparis and Vaz point out,

at the upper levels the elite positions in the military and economic spheres are very often occupied by the same men. The candidate for a high civil service position must provide his academic credentials as well as have his military superior vouch for his political-patriotic reliability. . . . The academic establishment, rather than providing a counter-weight, interfaces well with the military since many professors are also army officers. (1979:31)

Working-class apprentices' lack of economic power is unmitigated by any kind of political voice. There are few specifically political organizations for young people, and none run under the auspices of city, cantonal, or federal government—this in spite of the supposedly participatory character of Swiss democracy.

Three features of the apprenticeship system bear underscoring. The first is the low salary attached to it. Youths are forced into a position of economic dependence on their parents or, if they choose to leave home, on the city government for the provision of low-cost housing. The latter is risky: the government has been ungenerous in its construction of low-income apartment blocks and, as in most European cities, housing crises have been recurrent. In a position of compulsory dependence on the family, youths are forced into a kind of economic adolescence, lacking the secure freedom of childhood and the independence of adulthood. Their lack of economic autonomy is reinforced by and reinforces their lack of autonomy in other educational and political institutions.

The second distinctive feature of the Swiss apprenticeship system is its permanent, vocational character. With educational tracking beginning at age nine, the Swiss youth is so specialized as to be effectively barred from embarking on another career by the completion of vocational school and an apprenticeship. Virtually all jobs require a long period of training for certification. A study of apprentices found that only 7% switched professions after receiving their certification (discussion on Radio Swiss Romande, September 1984). The degree of mobility between jobs is low; the degree of upward mobility is also low. There is a sense of permanency about jobs, and a sense that job defines identity (all entries in the telephone directory, for example, include the profession of the individual), as well as a lack of alternative routes to a job.

In the late 1970s, a third feature of the apprenticeship system began to emerge: its obsolescence. The decline of the economy after 1977, an intensification of international competition, and the rapid development of new technologies brought about a veritable restructuring of the productive system (Lalive d'Épinay 1990:76). Some observers at the time argued that a process of deskilling was taking place in Swiss industry, with still-increasing automation and division of labor producing a downgrading of level of skilled blue-collar work (Casparis and Vaz 1979). The result was that jobs previously guaranteed to Swiss apprentices could be filled by foreign workers. With brief, on-the-job training, the foreign worker could equal the performance of the vocational-schooled, apprenticed, and certified Swiss worker and yet remain cheaper, requiring no substantial benefits, and essentially disposable (because granted only a temporary work permit). Swiss youths, in this scenario, faced permanent superfluosity.

Since then, other analysts have argued that the availability of foreign workers has in fact served to push Swiss workers up the occupational ladder into

high-tech, high-skilled jobs (Hopflinger 1990:60; Lempen 1985). However, both scenarios pose a serious challenge to the value of the apprenticeship. One scenario makes the apprenticeship unnecessary (because it would simply continue to train workers to perform essentially childlike tasks); the other makes it inadequate (because of a rapid devaluation of vocational qualifications [Buchmann 1990:109]). In the context of fears of unemployment raised by the recession,⁷ these economic changes may have raised questions in Swiss youths' minds about the validity of a structure—of a society—which neither accorded them a political voice nor guaranteed them a job. If their political and economic powerlessness was a trade-in for the certainty of work, the changes may have suggested to the Swiss youths a marginalization political, economic, and permanent—adolescence become not only an age category but a structural one. The autonomy boasted by adulthood would be unattainable.

Swiss youths in 1980 faced a lack of economic and political autonomy, the overwhelmingness of the world of work, the possibility of permanent superfluousness. Given these experiences and a strategic model of collective action (whether a resource mobilization model or a Marxian one), one might have expected the youths to demand radical changes in the employment structure, to link those demands to broader political concerns, or to widen the movement to the adult working class. In fact the youths' single demand—other than amnesty for the arrested protesters—was an “autonomous leisure center.” They described this as a place to gather and listen to music, outside the jurisdiction of city police. They had one in mind: a complex of abandoned factory buildings in the city center called the “Rote Fabrik,” the Red Factory.

To analyze the movement exclusively in terms of its ability to secure the autonomous leisure center would miss what I think is the critical importance of the wording of the demand. For against the world of work, movement participants demanded a world, or rather a space, of leisure. And against the world of adults, they asserted the autonomy of childhood. The autonomous leisure center thus stood in for much greater demands. It gave voice to, without explicitly articulating, the youths' experience of economic and political superfluousness. In the following section I explore how the themes of leisure as freedom and childhood structured the language of protest.

III

David Apter (1985) has described “disjunctive moments” as periods in the life of a nation when politics as usual is breached and suspended. In that moment political authority and power can be bought with cultural capital: marginalized groups can challenge and sometimes cripple the legitimating myths of the regime in power with new antimyths. Apter draws here on Ricoeur's (1967) observation that emancipatory movements project an alternative future by retrieving and asserting a different past, a myth of redemptive struggle. At the

myth's origin is the experience of defilement, of stain, a point at which the purity of a people was transgressed and lost, and a memory of an earlier era of innocence. These become the negative and positive poles of the struggle: the experience of dispossession and the telos of overcoming.

In the disjunctive moment, according to Apter, the myth is transferred from the realm of collective memory to that of collective action. It becomes a manifesto and narrative of the struggle. The disjunctive moment is thus an originating moment, the point at which the real struggle begins. But it also "provide[s] ingredients for a mythic language, including signs, codes, traces, multiple signifiers, metaphors and metonymies" (281), narrative strategies that are used to tell the story of the ensuing struggle. After the disjunctive moment, not only does the myth guide/legitimate the movement, but the movement becomes part of the myth. Events are narrated, indeed experienced, through the myth.

The disjunctive moments that Apter refers to are of the order of revolutions and nation foundings, but his attention to the mythical elements of protest may be relevant to social movements more broadly. For the Zurich movement drew on the elements of the redemptive struggle: a real economic experience of dispossession,⁸ a memory and retrieval of an innocent past, a founding myth of moral overcoming. But unlike the redemptive projections of other movements, the past retrieved was not a historical but a developmental one: childhood. Dispossession was associated with adolescence, a possibly permanent adolescence, past the autonomy of childhood and denied the independence of adulthood. And so the movement turned childhood against adulthood, turned children against adults. To be a child became a political act of opposition, and childhood became the narrative frame through which opposition was mounted.

That narrative drew on a variety of cultural materials: rock songs, TV images, slogans from other movements. And, importantly, a book called *Mars*, published in 1976.

Authored by a young Zurich resident who called himself Fritz Zorn (German for anger; his real name, ironically, was Fritz Angst), the book opened:

I'm young and rich and educated, and I'm unhappy, neurotic and alone. I come from one of the very best families on the east shore of Lake Zurich, the shore that people call the Gold Coast. My upbringing has been middle-class, and I have been a model of good behaviour all my life. (1982:3)

What made the book, which is an impassioned attack on Swiss society, more than just a case of romantic middle-class angst, and what turned it into the rallying cry of a whole movement was, first, the author's youth. Other than this, he had nothing in common with the Zurich apprentices. He was a banker's son and a university student. But he was young, dependent, and he directed his attack against the Swiss adult world as a generalized parent: "Who are my ene-

mies? My parents, my family, the milieu I grew up in, bourgeois society, Switzerland, the system” (165). He attacked the conformity, the repression, the denial of autonomy. Decisions were not made in his family, real issues were not confronted, harmony was to be preserved at all costs, and threatening topics were disposed of as being “difficult,” “beyond comparison,” or postponed until tomorrow. He claimed to be living in a concentration camp and conceived his oppression as a denial of his childhood. As the Swiss writer Adolf Muschg wrote in an afterword to the book:

In such a world, it is possible to pass through one’s childhood without being a child, to pass one’s youth without being young, to become an adult without a present, to greet people without living. (229)

The other thing which recommended the author to the Zurich youths was that he was dying. He had terminal cancer as he wrote the book, which was published just after his death. In it he attributed his cancer to the repression and the postponing of life that he had experienced. The lack of autonomy that the young Swiss workers experienced thus became potentially lethal and the parents, the adult Swiss world, became responsible for Zorn’s death:

In Switzerland, peace and quiet have to reign at all times, and the demand for them is always expressed as an imperative, “Be quiet, quiet!” people command, and the implication is “Die, be dead!” . . . But a society whose children die from completely internalizing the values of that society is doomed. (196, 207)

Zorn’s act of rebellion was his cancer. His assertion of illness was a rejection of the enforced harmony of his upbringing. He protested the denial of his childhood by choosing not to grow up.

The Zurich youths took Zorn as their martyr and also chose not to grow up, but by pitting themselves as children against the adults. The negative pole of their struggle became the denial of their autonomy by a repressive, artificial, adult world, and the positive pole—the telos of overcoming—the retrieval and assertion of the autonomy of childhood. The myth and the movement it narrativized came into play in Zurich’s own disjunctive moment: the 30 May battle at the opera house.

Jean Baudrillard (1981) defines the term “simulacrum” as a simulation of the real which, by its very artificiality, intensifies the important features of the real; it is thus more real than the real. In the founding moment of the Zurich movement, the opposition between adulthood and childhood was enacted in the most exaggerated form. The adults, Zurich’s elite, bedecked in jewels and furs, tried to enter the glittering opera house as they were pelted with rotten fruit and eggs by ragged youths, some naked, who screamed obscenities and detonated paint bombs. As the adults tried to ignore them and the police were

called in to quell the riot, the protesters ran through the city singing, yelling, and smashing windows. The youths recognized and celebrated the artificiality of the battle: they called it “The Battle of the Theater of the Elite.” But the name also expressed the artificiality against which they rebelled. One protester explained, “We are frustrated people in an artificial society. I’m out in the street because I want to be a human being” (*Time*, 30 March 1981).

By its hyperreality, the episode threw into relief the struggle, the contenders, the issues. It set up a semiotic space of struggle. Like Barthes’s (1983) wrestling match, the battle at the opera unfolded in a space intersected by a set of oppositions which defined the struggle between good and evil: children against adults, low culture against high culture, workers against bourgeois, leisure against money (in two senses: the leisure of the operagoers was at the expense of the funding for the youth center; the leisure of the youths was asserted against the world of work imposed by the [moneyed] adults). These would become the oppositions and issues of the struggle.

The disjunctive moment founded the two themes I think were central to the discursive construction of the ensuing events: childhood, as metaphor for autonomy, structured the rhetoric of protest, and a space of leisure became the metonymic objective of protest.

The groups that sprang up in the days after the opera called themselves “Friday Freaks,” “Forum of the Discontented,” “Autonomen.” They sang a fight song called “Sabotage Boogie,” showered police with candy, and blew bubbles at municipal meetings. But the childish rhetoric of the protest should not be mistaken for innocuousness. By its ninth month, the protest had caused over \$3 million worth of damage. Nearly eight hundred youths had been arrested (four thousand would be arrested before the end of the protests [Kriesi 1984]). A police officer had died (of a heart attack) in a scuffle. The Zurich protest was an angry and violent one, and the assertion of childhood represented a real political opposition. It is for that reason that the protesters rejected the overtly political in favor of the childish. Overt politics belonged to the rigid and artificial world of adulthood, and so they refused it, rejecting students, activists, and their own leaders. “No power to nobody” they chanted, and tattooed “A” for anarchy on their buttocks. The subsequent political episodes entered into the metaphoric discourse of childhood, of play: a protest march in which police retaliated with tear gas was dubbed the “Gasmaskenball.”

The refusal of an adult politicization of the movement made its authoritative narrativizing problematic. Usually that task belongs to a class of professional exegetes, to prophets, wise men, or theoreticians who fit day-to-day contingencies into a mythic logic (Apter 1985:280). But in a movement that refused leadership, the authority of text interpretation had to have a somewhat different base. The solution was to make authority impermanent and unorganized. The movement’s first newspaper, *Icebreaker*, was by its eleventh issue selling

twenty thousand copies and paying its own printing costs. Yet, “we had too much power,” claimed one of its editors, “we were beginning to manipulate the movement.” And so the newspaper staff disbanded and ceded place to a new staff and new paper, *Crowbar* (*International Herald Tribune*, 17 February 1981:5). At meetings, announced by word of mouth and scraps of paper taped in café windows, no leadership held the floor. Rather, members of the assembly spoke into a microphone handed around the room. Strategies discussed at the meetings were limited to street-fighting tactics. It was a kind of crazy reflection of the Swiss idea of participatory government: participation not to legitimate and conceal the economic power of one class, but to rebel against it; participation not to instill rules and proper conduct, but to flout them.

The disjunctive moment concentrated the issues and contenders of the struggle into a physical and semiotic space. Ensuing events were formulated (and thus experienced) in terms of the oppositions set up in that space. The dynamic of a spatialization of struggle, a locating of the rupture with normal politics, had its corollary in the spatialization of freedom, of the object of struggle. The battle was fought for a place of freedom, understood as a concrete refuge from the world of work. Thus the demand for the autonomous leisure center. Zorn wrote that when he was a child, there was an expression that was current among adults:

“Anyone who doesn’t like it here can go to Moscow.” The reference was to dissidents and to critics of our Swiss system, the implication being that anyone who had criticisms to make of Switzerland should go to that legendary city of Moscow where—as we all knew—everything was much worse than in Switzerland. (156)

Against the adults’ expulsion of dissent, the Zurich youths asserted their own space of dissent right in the city center. In the financial district of the most moneyed city in the world, the treasure chest of world capitalism, they vandalized luxurious storefronts. In a former factory, they played music and played hookey. The factory, in a city perpetually cold and grey, in a society the Zurich Burns movement called “ice,” was red.

The city officials participated in and acted on the same discourse of space. Protesters were to be moved from the city center to outlying areas where they would pose less of a threat. Interestingly, while attempting to destroy the movement’s space of autonomy, the authorities recognized other spaces of freedom. The Zurich police chief expressed regret that during one of their clashes with the demonstrators they had been forced to enter and tear-gas a church against the protestations of its pastor (*La Suisse*, 14 August 1980:32).

What this points to is the empowering of concepts by their spatialization, by their attachment to specific settings. To have a space of freedom was to have freedom. Or, perhaps more accurately, to *name* a space of freedom was to have it. For the substantive liberties promised by the autonomous center were not that radical: to smoke hash unimpeded by the police (drug use was already tol-

erated), to play loud music. The importance of the center was symbolic, performative, metonymic—a space officially named free stood in for a much broader autonomy.

The power of the spatialization of freedom may help to explain the authorities' initial response to the protests, which was particularly heavy-handed. What the Swiss may have been most afraid of was not the destruction of property but the undermining of the Swiss "image." That image—of tranquillity, stability, order—was important not simply to national pride but to the continued reliance of the world on the Zurich banking industry, the bedrock of the Swiss economy. To tolerate a space of dissent was then to tolerate dissent, to allow a zone of disorder right in the heart of the whole system. To their childish tantrums, the authorities had to respond with a vigorous, authoritative, and effective show of force.

Initially, the authorities did come down hard on the protesters. They broke up demonstrations with tear gas and rubber bullets, made arrests, denied demands for amnesty, prohibited marches and gatherings. The protests continued, and spread to other Swiss cities. In the next section I argue that what ended the movement was not the limitations imposed on it but the limitations that had been there—in the movement itself—all along.

IV

The dynamic that I want to get at is one by which social protest both represents the experience of its participants and yet misrepresents it—or better, represents it in a way that is denuded of real transformative power. To understand the failure of the Zurich movement, we must first understand its success.

In an ethnographic study of English working-class schoolboys, Paul Willis (1977) uses the term "penetration" to refer to the lads' consciousness—through their distinctive counter-school culture—of the hypocrisy of a liberal democratic educational system that promises equality of opportunity and yet trains them for the working class. For the school's emphasis on qualifications and individual effort as the route to success and on the diversity of types of labor has little practical meaning for the lads or for the working class as a whole. Qualifications do not guarantee mobility, and "meritocratic" testing simply legitimates the occupancy of the highest positions by the class possessing cultural capital; the virtues of conformism, diligence, and hard work are unable to raise the status of the group or the class; and the manual labor for which the lads are prepared is undifferentiated. But far from a fatalism, the lads' cultural penetration takes the form of a creative opposition, an inversion of school and authority values. The lads' assertion of their solidarity, their rejection of ambition and of the importance of qualifications, their wholesale enthusiasm for manual labor as undifferentiated labor is an assertion of the plain stupidity of the middle-class model of success. Job satisfaction for the

lads is rather to be found in the cultural diversions of the workplace, the machismo, the us-against-them mentality—for which the counter-school culture perfectly educates them.

Willis manages to connect structural determination and individual agency by the mediation of culture. For the working-class lads, culture took the form of a celebration of working-class values against the middle-class ethos of schooling. For the Zurich youths, the oppositional culture took the form of an assertion of the autonomy of childhood against the adult world of work, an assertion that was at the same time a symbolic penetration of their lack of adult autonomy. Their rebellion translated their economic position into childhood and celebrated it. It translated their dispossession into the free possessionlessness of childhood. But, even more, it addressed the fact that, in economic terms, they could never grow up. This was the twist: the celebration of their child-status expressed and concealed the impossibility of their becoming economically adult. The generational conflict was a class conflict; the working-class youths' protest was against the middle-class adults. But it was a class conflict experienced, understood, and acted upon via the cultural apparatus they possessed, which opposed the high culture of opera to the low culture of pop, the culture of work to that of leisure, youth to adulthood. On this view, the power of the movement for the Swiss youths was its ability to penetrate and creatively reject the constraining conditions of their lives.

Read in terms of an identity-oriented paradigm, the youths' penetration of their conditions of existence may have been an even more challenging and potentially transformative one. For in their refusal of polite negotiation with authorities, their insistence on multiple and temporary leadership structures, and the determinedly self-limiting character of their protests, the Zurich youths mounted a profound attack on conventional politics. The very form of their protest was a retort to a political system that enforced a respect for tradition, order, and patience in order to keep them quiet and unheard. In calling for governmental subsidization of their autonomous leisure center, moreover, they challenged the liberal notion of freedom as governmental nonintervention; instead they insisted on the right to be recognized. For an identity-oriented theorist, the Zurich protests may have prefigured a form of political participation based not on a group's willingness to conform but on its possession of a sovereign space of difference.

In the Swiss youths' assertion of the power of play, they may have gone even further in suggesting an alternative politics. For postmodernists, whose critique of modernity is even more thoroughgoing than that of identity-oriented theorists, childish play may be the only revolutionary impulse left (Kariel 1989). Faced with a world in which conventional politics is subject to the deadening, homogenizing forces of modern instrumental reason, postmodernists are at once unwilling to embrace a blithe nihilism and unable to posit a directive metanarrative. They turn to the play of children as a model of nonin-

strumental politics—action for acting’s sake. In a space bounded only by the as-yet unexperienced, children act autonomously, purposelessly, and yet in community. They celebrate difference, contingency, action not for rewards but for the pleasure of acting, freedom not as refuge but as enlarging their scope of action, rules not to repress freedom but to repress arbitrary power. The purpose of politics is simply to engage, with others, in politics. On a postmodernist reading, the strength and success of the Swiss movement then was in its tapping of the power of play.

Together, the identity-oriented and postmodernist readings are valuable in discerning the real transformative potential of the Swiss movement. But neither enables us to understand and evaluate the actual course of the movement. For in the end, when the movement petered out two years after it had begun, the structures constraining the Swiss youths’ lives had not changed. Their leisure center had been virtually razed. The autonomy they had created was fleeting and temporary, and their antipolitics had disintegrated into squabbling factionalism. The movement was finally incapable of moving beyond a small, bounded space of autonomy and a simple assertion of childish protest.

In Willis’s account of the English schoolboys, there is a second twist. The boys’ rebellious celebration of working-class culture guarantees that they will become working-class. By opposing the middle class, they both express the impossibility of their entrance into it and actively preclude their entrance into it. And it is this twist, by which working-class kids actively *choose* working-class jobs, that, according to Willis, reproduces the class logic and keeps the whole late capitalist system going. Similarly, the Swiss youths’ protest both expressed the impossibility of economically “growing up” and precluded it.

As formulated, the goals of the protest fundamentally failed to challenge the overwhelmingness of the world of work or the experience of economic dependency. In demanding an autonomous leisure center, movement participants sought not autonomy but a *space* of autonomy, a realm of freedom off-limits to the world of work and the world of adults. But by spatializing autonomy, by attaching it to a bounded setting, they limited it to that setting. The freedom they demanded was a self-circumscribed one which thus legitimated—and strengthened—the lack of freedom surrounding that setting. They demanded not reforms in the apprenticeship system, a loosening of educational rigidity, an end to the paternalism of the military, but rather a refuge, a small space of freedom from the domination of those structures. And by refusing to formulate their demands in terms of reforms of those structures, they forewent the possibility that they would be reformed.

In June 1980, a month after the protest at the opera house, an autonomous leisure center housed in the Red Factory was made available to the youths. In September, it was raided by the police and closed because of drug use on the

premises; in April it was reopened and city funds allocated for its operation. But, the space of autonomy granted, the freedoms it promised proved problematic. The center was located in a neighborhood of bars, prostitution, and sex shops; inevitably it began to attract addicts, hard-drug dealers, and homeless people. A great deal of energy was spent debating how to deal with these new movement constituents and whether to disassociate the movement from them. Had the location not been chosen by the youths themselves, it would have been a brilliant move on the part of authorities to further deviantize the youths. For erstwhile sympathizers, movement participants now were symbolically associated with prostitutes, sex shop patrons, and drug dealers. There were squabbles over how to divide up the municipal funds and how to mediate between the competing groups interested in running the center. A tract distributed at the time read, "It makes one vomit, all these arguments about money while some of us are in prison, some arrested and many are still suffering from the housing crisis" (Willener 1984:37; my translation). But the movement seemed unable to move on to other issues.

Within a few months after it had begun, the movement was undergoing what Willener calls a process of "implosion." The movement began to turn in on itself, to consume itself.⁹ On 12 December 1980, a young woman burned herself to death outside the opera house. After that the nonserious became serious. The disintegration of the movement took on a sinister, morbid character. At movement gatherings there was much talk of agent provocateurs, a sign, noted one observer, "of the [protesters'] own weakness and of the sense of impotence that had replaced the 'power-feeling' [in English] of the beginning of the movement" (CILIC Report, quoted in Willener 1984:33; my translation).

Meanwhile, efforts to focus the movement on issues separate from the leisure center failed to attract participation. Attempts to organize demonstrations and workshops on issues of housing and discrimination against women and immigrants met with little success. Increasingly, the only events capable of bringing out crowds were demonstrations planned in response to police actions. The movement became more and more dependent on its ability to provoke police retaliation, usually by rock throwing and acts of petty vandalism.

A month after the opening of the center in April 1981, movement leaders themselves shut it down, complaining of excessive drug dealing and people treating the center as a "temple of consumption" (Willener 1984:42). The movement continued to lose adherents. The center was reopened but it was gradually taken over by heroin dealers and users. Many of the movement leaders themselves succumbed to heroin abuse.

By March 1982, the autonomous leisure center had become a refuge for dealers, older "alkis," and other "social cases." Fires and theft had destroyed most of the building. A last effort by movement leaders to create a functioning space proved futile and one activist commented, "The Center is swallowing us." A year and a half earlier the slogan had been, "The Opera is swallowing

us” (Willener 1984:52). On 23 March 1982, the center was closed and the building gutted by police. The movement was over.

The movement’s weaknesses were its inability to move beyond the demand for an autonomous leisure center and its refusal to engage in strategic politics. In staging a childlike rebellion against the parental bourgeoisie, the Swiss working-class youths articulated their position as permanently adolescent: dependent, lacking status, and disciplined by a paternalist state. And their protest—of children against adulthood—reaffirmed that position. With the cameras of the world trained on them, they pulled off their clothes and jumped into the lake. They grabbed attention but did not speak. They formulated no strategic demands, no proposals.

They could not be political. For to be political was to be adult. It was to engage in civilized discourse and polite negotiation. But it also worked the other way. To cry “power to nobody,” to refuse leadership or organization, to formulate no strategy, was to eliminate the possibility of any real change. Just as the freedom the Zurich protesters fought for was limited to the bounded space of an abandoned warehouse, so the rhetoric of childhood limited political action to childish rebellion.

The failure of the Zurich protesters was their unwillingness to engage in adult political discussion—however radical the demands. Finally, they were unable to think past the dominant political logic that defined protest in terms of unalterable dichotomies: either adult or child, either exclusively strategic or completely nonstrategic, either conventionally political or nonpolitical, either conformist or chaotic.¹⁰ By opposing childhood to power, the youths reaffirmed their marginal status.

V

In this paper, I have argued the importance of the goals and language of a movement for understanding how it emerges from historical, structural conditions. I have tried to show how structural conditions are experienced and responded to through distinctively cultural categories: stories, personalities, images, symbolic oppositions.¹¹ The Zurich Burns movement made use of the antinomies of childhood versus adulthood, work versus leisure, political convention versus autonomy, and of a story of a child who refused to grow up.

By calling attention to the empowering capacity of words, I want to identify *language* as a resource that must be mobilized by an emerging social movement. My argument is that the rhetorical content of the protest, a variable neglected by most theories of social movements, is critical to understanding both the emergence of the movement and its demise.

Language is important for understanding the failure of a movement because words not only empower action but also shape, constrain, and delegitimize actions. By expressly adopting particular forms or goals or objects of protest, a

social movement excludes others. Just as the freedom the Zurich protesters fought for was limited to the bounded space of an abandoned warehouse, so the rhetoric of childhood limited political action to childish rebellion. The way that goals were formulated implicitly reaffirmed the marginalized political role of the movement's participants and reaffirmed the system of power that marginalized them.

More broadly, I am arguing for the importance of regarding social movements not just as organizations operating in a field of other organizations, and not just as bearers of structural imperatives, but as oppositional discourses, fashioned through debate and contestation. Why one goal formulation comes to dominate has to do not only—perhaps not even—with its articulation of the “real” interests of the group. Goals must also “make sense” within a prevailing political logic. What must be assessed then, is whether the ideas, concepts, and categories which “make sense” are in fact ideological, and whether they therefore undermine the movement's prospects for success.

An inquiry into the ideological character of social movement goals can contribute to integrating a Geertzian conception of ideology with a Marxist one. The former understands ideology as the political culture of a group that structures practical decision making; the latter as a meaning system which sustains relations of domination (Thompson 1984). In the case of social movements, the key to their integration is the recognition that the language of social protest is politically embedded. It can be mobilized by insurgents but not limitlessly so; the limits are operative both in the range of goals conceivable and in the normative inheritances that language trails. Integrating the two conceptions of ideology, I believe, can restore a critical function to the concept of ideology without thereby forfeiting a view of social (movement) actors as conscious and creative.

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Notes

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1. Some of the model's early formulations are Jenkins and Perrow (1977), McCarthy and Zald (1973, 1977), and Oberschall (1973). For an overview and critique see Jenkins (1983), Fireman and Gamson (1979), and Cohen (1985).

2. See Gamson (1988), Snow and Benford (1988), and Klandermans (1988). The authors do well to address the problems that ideology poses for a social movement. But they consider only the ideological beliefs of movement rank-and-file and constituents, not those of movement leaders. They fail to see that movement leaders too may be participants in dominant ideologies. I take up the point below.

3. The theory has received its fullest formulation in Touraine (1981, 1982, 1985); see also Melucci (1980, 1985).

4. My account should really have begun with the debates over goals that took place within the movement. By studying the grounds on which particular goals and goal formulations were rejected or accepted I might have been able to tease out a conceptual vocabulary of goal formulation, and specifically a set of assumptions about appropriate protest which underpinned all formulations. The questions would then have been whether those assumptions represented as natural and right the dominant definitions of the proper scope of protest, and whether they thus implicitly reaffirmed the limitations on protest.

5. In this section, I'll rely mainly on Swiss newspaper accounts of the protests as they unfolded and on Alfred Willener's *L'avenir instantane* (1984), a study of the movement that drew on interviews, movement materials, and accounts of the movement published only in German.

6. An important aspect of the Swiss employment structure is the rigidity of the training structure for and job discrimination against women. The problems facing young Swiss men are worse for young Swiss women, who are subject to sex-stereotyping in the home and school, higher rates of unemployment, and an unresponsive government. Yet in 1978, Claire and François Masnata-Rubattel complained that if studies on occupational mobility in Switzerland were few, ones that addressed the role of women were nonexistent (Masnata-Rubattel 1978:215). Since then, Swiss researchers have begun to investigate gender differences in labor patterns (for example, Ley 1990; Buchmann 1990). They show that women tend to go into the shorter and less prestigious apprenticeships and to choose from among a narrower range of occupations. They are also, along with foreign workers, the most vulnerable to lay-off during recessionary periods (Ley 1990:83; Lempen 1985:16). To investigate the role of women in the Zurich Burns movement would be illuminating and important. I have not undertaken it here simply because of a lack of material: reports of the movement failed to quote or to describe any women in the movement.

7. These fears were also expressed in a hardening of Swiss sentiment against foreign workers. In popular referendums in 1981 and 1982, Swiss voters overwhelmingly rejected proposals to improve the status of foreign workers (Lempen 1985:14).

8. University students were largely excluded from the movement. They had, in fact, their own movement, which protested the University of Zurich's ban on a film they had made documenting the first few weeks of rioting. This is a fascinating episode because it shows how the students constructed the movement to answer to their own concerns: the rigidity and authoritarianism of university education. Their struggle used the same events in a different discourse, gave them a different symbolic loading.

9. In his afterword to *Mars*, Adolf Muschg describes Fritz Zorn's cancer as:
 a protest against the dominant . . . conditions of non-life in our society;
 a signal of impending death that the organism, stunted by those conditions, gives itself, developing a compensatory growth in itself and, ultimately, against itself. (234)

The cancer was at once a penetration of those conditions, a protest against them and, finally, their agent, destroying the youth. The metaphor is an apt one for describing the course of the movement itself.

10. A number of scholars have begun to talk about dualistic thinking—the categorization of people, places, and things in terms of difference and hierarchy—as a central ideological bolster of racism and sexism, and about the problems it poses for the women’s and black movements. See Collins (1986).

11. I’m returning, then, to E. P. Thompson’s (1966) understanding of class as a relationship between groups (rather than as reified economic categories) and as an experienced relationship, mediated by cultural traditions and categories. I’m suggesting that “childhood” and “adulthood” are cultural categories.