Anti-Fascist Action and the Transversal Territorialities of Militant Anti-Fascism in 1990s Britain

Abstract

This paper explores the significance of unorthodox territorial activisms through the study of Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), a militant anti-fascist organisation in the United Kingdom and Ireland that operated at its height between 1989 and 1996. In the literature on activist territorialities, little has been written on practices that confront other non-state territorialities. Likewise, despite a small but growing geographical literature on far-right populism, anti-fascism is under-researched. Through archival materials and interviews with former activists, I argue that geographers can understand AFA's militant anti-fascism as *transversal*, following Félix Guattari's theorisation of the term. AFA operated beyond state-centric modes of territoriality, creating malleable pathways between different operational logics, cross-cutting state and non-state forms. Thinking transversally about territory helps to disembed epistemic and ontological framings from dominant statist logics and assumptions, opening up new ways of understanding how movements operate territorially. The paper concludes with reflections for contemporary antifascisms.

Introduction

> "As much as the fight against the [far right] was ideological, it was also very much geographical." (Birchall 2010: 213).

The last decade has witnessed a notable upswing in far-right politics in the Global North, and parts of the Global South, both via electoral parties (Akkerman et al 2016) and street movements (Gattinara and Pirro 2019). In response, anti-fascists have sought to challenge, decapacitate, and undermine far-right groups through a variety of tactics; at times including violence, hacking, property destruction, and other forms of illegal, 'uncivil', or otherwise non-state-sanctioned activism. These tactics are part of a suite of approaches often labelled *militant* anti-fascism. In this context, it is timely to revisit earlier historical periods where variants of militant anti-fascism have operated. A range of scholars have argued persuasively that it is necessary to study past anti-fascist struggles in order to support, and inform academic understandings of, contemporary ones (e.g. Bray 2017; Brink Pinto and Pries 2019). This timeliness is accentuated by a relative dearth of research in geography concerning anti-fascism (Author 2019), despite a clear need for "moving beyond nation-centred and institutional accounts" of the far right and its opponents (Santamarina 2020: 3) to understand how localised or extraparliamentary forms of activism can produce significant political effects. This paper draws on interviews and archives concerning Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), a British militant anti-fascist group that was most active during the early-to-mid 1990s, to investigate the spatial – and specifically *territorial* – strategies and imaginaries of militant anti-fascist movements in practice.

I argue that a geographical analysis of past movements can illuminate the relationships of anti-fascists to their opponents, their co-constitution of political space, and the significance of territorial claims and counter-claims. While digital activism has added complexity to social movements in the present era (e.g. Klein and Muis 2019), AFA's territorial strategies nonetheless demonstrate how activist territorialities operate; crucially, doing so independently of the logics of state territoriality. This autonomous configuration of

territoriality, confronting other grassroots territorialities rather than (explicitly) the state's territorial functions and logics, I call *transversal*, drawing from Félix Guattari's conceptualisation of the term. Transversality helps explain how AFA's anti-fascism cut across and refused traditional cleavages and spatialities of territorial power and struggle. In concluding, I also outline several ways in which the historical study of AFA can speak to the contemporary period.

Fascism, Anti-Fascism and the Civic State

There has recently been a flurry of interest among geographers in the far right and right-populism (e.g. Bessner and Sparke 2017; Gökarıskel and Smith 2016), piquing Anglophone geographers' interest particularly since landmark events such as the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA in 2016. Given geography's many relevant analytical tools that can be applied to far-right political parties and movements, this shift is most welcome, yet it also highlights the relative lack of geographical attention to *anti*-fascist politics, movements, and cultures (Author 2019).

Nonetheless, various studies show that a spatial lens can tell us a great deal about both anti-fascism. In particular, a number of writings on anti-fascism engage with the spatial strategies of solidarity, through which place-based struggles are translated and reinterpreted through online and offline networks to other contexts, both transnationally and translocally (Featherstone 2013; Merrill and Pries 2019). Although the over-arching moniker *antifa* may refer to "a *transnational* movement" (Copsey 2018: 244, original emphasis), place weighs heavily on cultures and legacies of anti-fascist movements as they develop over time (Brink

Pinto and Pries 2019; Wahlström 2010). Anti-fascism is therefore a movement that operates unevenly and fluctuates according to local conditions, political cultures, and outward connectedness to wider anti-fascist and leftist movements. As Pries (2019) notes, anti-fascism is also responsive and relational to fascist spatial claims, especially concerning the well-established spatial strategy of far-right movements to claim urban territory: identifying, understanding, pre-empting, or responding to far right activities are thus central (albeit not the only) components of anti-fascist praxis. As such, the watchful patience, experimentation, and temporariness of much anti-fascist practice implants a particular spatial (and temporal) dynamic into the logics of anti-fascism. As Brink Pinto and Pries (2017: 156) note, anti-fascism is

> "shaped by experiences temporarily connected across time and space that are combined to form new modes of acting. Experiences of events where new modes of acting are tried can act as a powerful cultural resource, enabling a movement to eventually establish new contentious performances if recalled and repeated over time."

The variety of approaches to anti-fascism is reflective of these repertoires of activism, shaped by both history and geography. Indeed, although specific groups can emerge to confront temporary threats, more permanent networks of community-building can prove effective as localised infrastructures through which anti-fascism can mobilise (Santamarina 2020). This embeddedness of social and institutional networks and "structure[s] of meaning" (Santamarina 2020: 3) at the local scale can be mobilised variously through far-right and anti-fascist imaginaries alike. Thus, while the *anti-* suffix of anti-fascism indicates opposition as

its focus, anti-fascism can also operate as an affiliation within broader cultures and subcultures (e.g. Vysotsky 2015; Spaaij and Viñas 2013). Indeed, the development of anti-fascist identity as a mass culture has historically been a key dimension of struggle, especially during in the interwar period, both in specific places (Kuhn, in Deutsch 2017) and through transnational networks and cultures (Braskén et al 2021). Given its connection to broader grassroots cultures, anti-fascism has sometimes been (mis)characterised as gang-related or 'apolitical' vigilantism – especially militant anti-fascism, due to its association with violence and small, close-knit groups (Copsey 2018; Hayes and Aylward 2000). However, although militant anti-fascism has recently become prominent in response to the far right's return to violent, street-based strategies, it has been a central part of the anti-fascist movement throughout its history (Testa 2015).

There have been few efforts to define specifically *militant* anti-fascism. Copsey (2018: 245) associates the origins of militant anti-fascism with politicised street cultures, arguing that it is ultimately defined by "physical force", but that it also incorporates art-activism, subcultural elements, and increasingly online activism. Copsey's contribution is helpful, but lacks precision in terms of what militance involves. Testa (2015) identifies three main approaches to anti-fascism: state-legislative, liberal, and militant. The first two approaches accept, identify with, and utilise in good faith the existing systems of governance in order to achieve their goals, principally drawing on the powers of the state and formalised civil society organisations, alongside the norms and values that tend to be articulated through such institutions (e.g. nonviolence, deference to authority, legality, professionalism). In contrast, militant anti-fascists reject the notion that it is possible to effectively combat the far right using these alone. Indeed, while a substantial engagement with radical critiques of fascism would require much more space than this paper allows, for many militant anti-fascists it is

precisely these systems and relations associated with the liberal-democratic state that incubate the seeds of fascism (e.g. Dauvé 2005; Guérin 2000; Testa 2015). Instead, militants emphasise a diversity of tactics according to what is most effective in a given situation, and accept the legitimacy of "direct action and non-state action" (Vysotsky 2015: 236).

Militant anti-fascism might include illegal activities such as physical violence, but it also involves engagement with 'mainstream' organisations, arguing for "a non-partisan approach wherever possible, whilst recognising that popular fronts have met with mixed success" due to compromises among political leaderships that can concede ideological ground to the right (Testa 2015: 5; cf. Berry 1999). This raises another key dimension of militant anti-fascism: an ideological challenge to the far right. Traditionally, this has come via socialist or anarchist principles, but it has increasingly drawn on radical queer and feminist perspectives (e.g. Queer Beograd Collective 2010; Worsdale 2018). Such 'antisystemic' perspectives often overlap with militant anti-fascism since their rejection of the liberal-democratic order often correlates with a denial of the efficacy of 'acceptable' politics and praxis within that order. Moreover, as well as non-white ethnicities and migrants, it is also leftist, queer and feminist groups that often experience heightened risk of far-right attention, alongside marginalisation from mainstream (electoral) politics. Thus, for the radical left, militant anti-fascism is self-defence; confronting both far-right activisms and the fascist-enabling politics orbiting the liberal-democratic state.

Territoriality, Autonomy, and Spatial Strategy

This section builds on themes in the previous section by turning to *territory* as a particular characteristic of spatial strategy. As later sections illustrate, AFA's militant spatial strategy heavily emphasised territoriality, and in recent years geographers have paid increasing attention to the territorial dimensions of social movements. Political geography has traditionally viewed territory as a politico-juridical concept, developed in the context of state-making in the Enlightenment era, primarily for the purpose of dividing, administering, and governing land but also shaping nationhood and belonging (Cox 2003; Elden 2013). In many regards, this characterisation of territory as calculable and ownable cartographic space has remained central to the present day. However, recent scholarship has conceived of territory not simply as a politico-juridical or geopolitical phenomenon but a set of practices – or *territorialities* – that are contested, dynamic, and cross-cut by multiple, shifting territorial constellations (e.g. Antonsich 2016; McConnell 2010; Murphy 2012).

Building on these developments, social movement geographers have identified various grassroots territorial practices that constitute social movements and everyday forms of struggle, primarily in conflict with state enactments of territory (e.g. Author 2012; Clare et al 2018; Halvorsen 2015). This rethinking positions territory as a phenomenon that can be constituted as much by everyday practices as by elites or institutions. As Halvorsen (2015) argues, boundary-making need not be inherently linked to hierarchical power relations; rather, the apportioning of territorial space can be constitutive of collective grassroots self-empowerment.

The forging of territorial spaces through movement practices can produce forms of *autonomy* or *self-management* as an everyday mode of producing meaning and activity that is oriented

to collective fulfilment and liberation (e.g. Katsiaficas 2007). Thus, activist territorialities do not simply resist the dominant order but can develop structures and relations that operate independently of it. Souza (2016) develops this thinking, assessing activist territoriality in relation to how elements of verticality, or connectivity to the state and its operating logics, can remain within movements' structures. He cautions that while some movements "are committed to liberation", they may "not [be] (convincingly) to *self*-liberation" (2016: 1306, original emphasis).

Existing studies on activist territorialities focus primarily on spaces and practices that explicitly orient themselves to the state in some way – be it by resisting or defending policies, challenging legal frameworks or property rights, or, in the case of autonomous praxis, confronting the state's position and function in society (e.g. Giraldo and Rosset 2018; Vasudevan 2017). Research on social movements generally, and autonomous movements specifically, therefore usually emphasises spatial practices that are chiefly oriented in some way toward state power, using the state as a pivot around which acts of 'resistance' orbit. Rarely do studies consider territorial practices that are oriented principally towards confronting *another grassroots actor or social/political movement*.

In seeking to deny the spatial and political claims of their opponents, it is this latter relation to the statist-capitalist order that militant anti-fascism represents, confronting another non-state political actor while operating independently of state power. As a spatially uneven movement dependent on local conditions, anti-fascism deploys territorialities in multiple ways, and this paper does not assume that AFA's territoriality represented a standard approach across geographical contexts, nor even uniform across its own area of operations. Yet, AFA's

emphasis on militance and territoriality is a characteristic shared with multiple historical and contemporary movements.

In studying the everyday practices of anti-fascists – especially militant ones – underexplored dimensions of territory therefore come to light. In particular, little research has been undertaken into forms of territoriality that chiefly involve action against other non-state actors, and do not explicitly take a particular position in relation to the state and the mode and logic of territoriality that it embodies. We therefore need a better understanding of how to conceive of these spatial forms and their significance. Additionally, this may help scholars to find alternative epistemic framings of territory that decentre statist logics from spatial and analytical imaginaries more generally (Author 2016).

Transversal Territorialities and Anti-Fascism

This study requires a vocabulary that presents territorialities as potentially *cutting across* the traditional binary power relation of territory; neither explicitly confronting the state nor replicating its logics and relations. In seeking to conceptually capture this cross-cutting of established boundaries, I turn to the notion of *transversality*, most extensively theorised by Félix Guattari (2015 [1972]). In the context of Guattari's wider political project to understand the relationship between mental illness, institutions, and capitalism, transversality has been explained by Genosko (2002: 55) as "belong[ing] to the processual subject's engendering of an existential territory and self-transportation beyond it." The use of 'territory' in this sentence is metaphorical, but it presents transversality as the autonomous transgression of a dominant mode of being. This mode of being, for Guattari (2015: 109), "crystallises" through

self-referential processes "on the pretext of organisation, efficiency, prestige, or, equally, of incapacity, non-qualification, etc."; in other words, the dominant order forms a *realpolitik* on the basis of utilitarian considerations that funnel activity back into its own structures.

As such, in relation to how institutions – and, indeed the authoritative act of *instituting* (Goffey 2016) – shape normative frameworks, transversality can be further articulated as "a strategy that intervenes in an institution's unacknowledged investment in occupying the role of the superego" (Eng 2015: 448). To act or think transversally is therefore to operate according to logics and frames that may be *coexistent* or even *coextensive* with the institution but fundamentally *distinct from* it. These may end up confronting its dominant order due to how they "intervene", but they are not explicitly oriented towards doing so *per se*. What underpins this, for Goffey (2016: 39) is the transversal being "a counter to the 'contractual' form of relationship", constituted by hierarchically-constituted laws, bureaucracy, and administration. Transversality therefore produces logics of action that are poly- or a-centric, mobile, adaptable, and 'outward' rather than 'upward'-reaching in their articulations of constitutionality and organisational structure.

Scholars (e.g. Bosteels 2001; Kanngieser 2012) have noted that Guattari sought, through transversality, to highlight collective agency and provide ways of engaging in politics in a more creative and unpredictable manner – ones that could bring alternative ways of being into view in the here-and-now by jolting or circumventing the dominant order rather than following binary logics of domination-versus-resistance. Thus, "transversal organisations signify a critical departure from models of organisation predicated on statist and vanguardist forms and ideologies" (Kanngieser 2012: 277).

While, with Deleuze, he would later describe transversality as something 'of the middle' or 'in-between' (Genosko 2002), Guattari's thought is not exclusive to that realm, since it is possible to operate transversally within the very matrices of the dominant order. Transversal logics cut through the pathways of institutional solidity according to purposes that are fundamentally independent of the logics of the institution – not necessarily acting *against* the institution, but *despite* it, or as we shall see, sometimes even *through* it. Guattari (2015: 112-113) likens transversality to a herd of horses with blinkers: while the blinkers are useful for creating relatively uniform movements and responses to stimuli (such as in farm work or a race), their removal, while more unruly for their owner, can lead to a potentially more orderly range of actions and interactions among them. The logic of this order is different from the order of the farm or racetrack, however; it is a self-managed order of the horses themselves. The extent to which the blinkers narrow or widen their field of vision is what Guattari calls the "coefficient of transversality" (2015: 112). While there may be "pressure from the base" if the horses protest their narrow field of vision, if that pressure operates through the dominant ordering of the relative openness of the blinkers, their "overall structure of blindness" remains unchanged (2015: 113).

How does this relate to the territoriality of anti-fascism and social movements? A transversal approach to territoriality is on one level simply to assert that there are ways of acting territorially that do not take as their point of reference and logic of operation the statist pivot around which most territorial imaginaries orbit. This pivot that dominates territorial thinking represents a narrow coefficient of transversality, in which multiple territorial practices exist but they are understood as either resisting or following the statist territorial order. By taking a

transversal perspective, it may be possible for geographers to identify a wider plurality of territorial formations, practices, and strategies otherwise rendered invisible or mischaracterised. As we see in the following sections, even when AFA engaged instrumentally with state actors and institutions, their spatial strategies were often transversal in practice.

Anti-Fascist Action: Origins and Context

Militant anti-fascism in the UK has a long tradition (e.g. Copsey 2000; Testa 2015). Until at least 1994, when the main far-right party, the British National Party (BNP), formally moved away from street tactics partly due to the effectiveness of AFA and other militant anti-fascists, the threat of the far right came not from electoralism but their often-violent physical presence in working class communities. AFA emerged in the tail-end of a period characterised by class conflict in the UK on a number of registers, notably through a crisis of Keynesian social-democracy and subsequent neoliberalisation under Margaret Thatcher. This caused profound shifts in working-class life that saw mass unemployment due to rapid deindustrialisation, reduction in living standards for many, and the emergence of an entrepreneurial *nouveau riche* (Evans 2013). The 1990s left found itself regrouping amidst the collapse of the USSR and a decade of bitter trade union battles, while an emboldened far right used popular insecurities caused by neoliberal globalisation to mobilise working-class whites (Copsey 2008). Groups such as punks, skinheads, and football casuals, which characterised much of the 1970s and '80s youth cultures, were defined or framed around collective working-class identity and defiance of prevailing elites, yet they too began to fragment by the early 1990s as new forms of cultural and political expression emerged

(Roberts 1997; McKay 1998). As partly an outgrowth of an earlier era, this context places AFA within a period of profound political-cultural change; one that ultimately contributed to its decline.

The 1970s and '80s also saw decentralised militant anti-fascism that confronted the leaderships of left-wing parties and trade unions regarding the extent of the fascist threat and appropriate strategies for confronting it. The Anti-Nazi League, established in 1977, was a popular front organisation and the primary national co-ordinating body for anti-fascist activism, but it was wound down in 1981 due to a perceived decline in the far-right threat and growth of wider political struggles against Thatcherism (Renton 2006). 1981 also saw the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) expel large numbers of members for so-called 'squadism', the practice of forming semi-autonomous groups of militants to undertake physical action against the far right (Birchall 2010). A range of other radicals and rank-and-file trade unionists were similarly resentful of their leaderships for discouraging participation in anti-fascism at a time of high numbers of racist attacks on minorities and leftists (Copsey 2000). Thus, many of these individuals, who might not have otherwise collaborated politically, found common ground (Hayes and Aylward 2000).

When Anti-Fascist Action was formed in 1985 by a broad-based coalition of both militant and other groups, it provided an opportunity for dissident anti-fascists to regroup within a formal structure in the absence of major national-scale anti-fascist organisations. However, soon after its formation, liberal elements of AFA expelled the anarchist group Class War. Subsequently, several other radical groups that formed AFA's militant wing[i] resigned in protest, and the organisation went into decline. The expelled groups relaunched AFA in 1989

with a grassroots-led structure and explicit focus on both "physical and ideological" confrontation of fascism (Birchall 2010; Hann and Tilzey 2003). AFA's magazine, *Fighting Talk*, gives an indication of the organisation's size and trajectory, listing a peak of 37 branches in November 1995. In 1992, three years following AFA's relaunch, the ANL was also relaunched in recognition of the growing threat of the resurgent far right that AFA had rightly identified[ii].

AFA formally disbanded in 2001, but while some local branches continued regular activity into the late-nineties, interviewees and the content of *Fighting Talk* indicate that AFA as a whole declined from 1996 onwards. This was partly due to wider cultural and political changes in British society, but also due to a large number of AFA's central activists who orbited the socialist group Red Action leaving AFA to establish a new political party, the Independent Working Class Association (IWCA), in 1995. As such, this study focuses primarily on its period of highest activity, from AFA's relaunch in 1989 to approximately 1996.

Investigating Militance

This research draws from archival analysis of AFA publications and activists' memoirs, alongside nine interviews with former AFA activists, to bring together experiential reflections and 'official' accounts of AFA's everyday spatial strategies. The partially clandestine nature of the organisation meant that only through speaking to activists directly, alongside retrospective memoirs, could the quotidian workings of AFA be ascertained. Archival sources orbit 24 issues of *Fighting Talk*, the quarterly magazine of AFA, alongside other

documents, pamphlets, and communiqués produced by AFA. The study also draws on

published memoirs by former activists (Birchall 2010; Bullstreet 2001; Hann and Tilzey

2003) and associated left-wing publications contemporary to AFA, such as Red Action's

eponymous magazine. Although it is hard to verify the accuracy of memoirs and activist

literature with absolute certainty, these sources correlate broadly with interviews and

academic histories, and memoirs present rich accounts of the motivations, everyday practices,

and emotional registers of activists.

Accessing interviews with former AFA activists presented various challenges. Firstly, the

historical nature of the group meant that many former activists had left political activism,

changed political affiliation, or were otherwise untraceable. Activists were also security-

conscious and reluctant to talk about their involvement, which was often illegal or

clandestine. The ideological anti-intellectualism among some elements in AFA presented an

additional barrier for an academic study. Finally, a lack of funding for the project inhibited a

wider geographical scope. Despite this, interviews lasted between one and three hours,

generating a good depth of data that could be compared and verified through archives and

memoirs.

Difficulty accessing interviewees led to a geographical bias towards southern England.

Several interviewees noted cultural, ideological, and tactical differences between branches

and regions, which are not fully explored in this paper. All interviewees were male and white,

which according to interviewees' accounts is broadly representative of AFA's membership.

All interviewees mentioned the involvement of women and ethnic minorities, although these

were in the minority. As a result of these demographics and geographical skew, certain voices and experiences are not present, despite conscious effort to address this.

Researching organisations that engage in illegal and violent activities brings with it a range of ethical challenges; most obviously, the need to maintain anonymity for participants. Moreover, as an active supporter of the anti-fascist cause, it is essential that the level of detail provided does not aid political opponents, and that the study takes place in a spirit of solidarity, rather than simply extraction. In seeking this spirit, Driscoll Derickson and Routledge's (2015) notion of 'triangulation' has been applied as much as possible to bring together academic questions, activist concerns, and a sensitivity to what publics are being served by the research. As such, my recent and past engagement with anti-fascist activism has guided the priorities for the research, a number of details have been deliberately left omitted from the paper, and interviewees' wishes informed how their stories were shared. As discussed in the concluding section, one aim of the wider project is to help nurture and inform contemporary anti-fascisms by learning from the recent past.

Spaces of Engagement

AFA's spatial strategy commonly orbited several key social and cultural spaces, emphasising pubs, council estates, football grounds, and certain music scenes (especially punk and oi) as key sites where those most at risk of far-right recruitment would be present in large numbers. These were identified in official AFA literature, memoirs, and activist interviews as pivotal public spaces in which (predominantly young, male) working class life took place. These were spaces where either the far-right were organising or where their potential recruits could

be found. As Ron explains, for the far right, "their whole strategy was based on controlling the streets". With the term "streets", Ron signalled the broad spectrum of public space as implicated in what Birchall's (2010: 213) account described bluntly as "[t]urf wars". Speaking of the North London borough of Islington, an "AFA stronghold", Birchall notes that "from the understanding gained through the crushing of the [National Front] a decade earlier, militants were absolutely resolute in denying the Far Right even the tiniest foothold in any previously conquered territory" (2010: 214). The application of anti-fascist strategy to particular neighbourhoods and their dynamics is therefore bound up with a sense of the distinctiveness of place (cf. Santamarina 2020).

More specifically, the far-right had a long tradition of targeting council estates for recruitment: "The working class weren't going to them, they went literally onto the estates" (Frank). In response, some residents approached AFA:

> "I was living on a council estate, um, on the edge of [the city], and you could see that these people were, they were around, they had a presence, so somebody had to do something really, and we took it upon ourselves to do it" (Ron)

This mirroring of far-right spatial strategy is equally apparent in the use of pubs as spaces through which both AFA and the far-right mobilised and made territorial claims. Often used by the far-right as redirection points for mobilisations, spaces for meetings, or informal socialising, pubs that offered sanctuary to fascists were targeted by AFA as nodes in their recruitment, communications, and mobilisation infrastructure. Given the threat of attack or disruption by AFA or other groups, most far-right events did not advertise their location;

instead, a redirection point was advertised to minimise risk to the main event. Often, these were fascist-sympathising pubs:

> "[T]hey still had a secretive, or semi-secretive redirection point, which they always used, […] [But] AFA had very, very, very good intelligence [and] found the pubs really quickly." (Tony)

Depending on the specific pub and its relationship to the local far right, pubs were variously seen by AFA activists as focal points for undercover surveillance and intelligence-gathering, targets for intimidation or attack, or as 'neutral' spaces that could be claimed as 'no-go areas' for fascists (Birchall 2010; Bullstreet 2001). This usually required in-depth, high-grain understanding of, and therefore embeddedness in, the neighbourhood in question. Affiliations to particular football clubs were mobilised in the same vein:

> "[A] lot of the fascist groups were recruiting from the terraces, and around the football grounds, […] [so] the recruiting ground was the same recruiting ground that AFA had, it was still white young disaffected working-class youth." (Stuart)

Territorial strategies were deployed in actions themselves, and in the discourses used in AFA publications, through which AFA sought to "drive them [the fascists] out of the community… [in] a kind of clandestine turf war" (Ron). Among the most prominent were the occupation of key far-right spaces, such as the weekly BNP newspaper sale on Brick Lane in East London, which became a high-profile territorial struggle for control of public space. Considering the

centrality of pubs in far-right infrastructures at the time, this brought together public spaces and local pubs as entwined loci of territorial conflict to disrupt their patterns of activism:

> [T]he two key targets […] are the paper sale itself, and the pubs used by the fascists. […] [F]ollowing a very successful demonstration against the fascist paper sale [which involved occupying the location of their 'pitch'] and a mass picket of *The Sun* public house on Bethnal Green Road in March, East London AFA stepped up the pressure with leafletting campaigns and 'flash' pickets […]. After the fascists were unceremoniously pushed out of this watering hole, they hid for a while in the comparative safety of another pub […] [T]hey've now moved over the road to *The Ship*, where the AFA campaign is once again on their tail." (Anon., 1991: 4).

AFA activists sought to disrupt the spatial ordering of their opponents' activities. In doing so, AFA generated more open, contested spaces through which to stake their own territorial claims. Additionally, this incessant and often violent pursuit of their opponents in both their official events and informal socialising meant that AFA had both psychological and operational effects on the far-right. Crucially, as Frank explains, the *possibility* of an attack from AFA was often as effective as an *actual* attack, since it occupied considerable material and emotional resources:

> "[The far right put] a disproportionate amount of energy into it, I mean, almost all had to go into protecting the march, protecting the pre-meeting for the march, protecting the stewards for the march, protecting the after-party […]. And the beauty of it was that you didn't have to turn up every time." (Frank)

This approach was partly designed to publicly undermine the violent ultra-masculinity that was glorified by the far right. By confronting far-right groups physically, AFA activists saw themselves as undertaking a performative role: not only making space for leftist and minority groups to organise more freely but also demonstrating to potential far-right recruits that fascist machismo was a façade. As Stuart argues, if they could successfully confront "the hard-as-nails image of the tough sort of National Front type…, then you'd be able to undermine that image that people held of those kinds of people", thus impacting far-right morale and recruitment.

What we see is a territorial strategy designed to dismantle the coherence and infrastructure of the far-right, as well as to challenge its appeal to young, white, working-class men. Rather than build a mass movement, based on open recruitment or broad-based alliances, AFA's approach primarily emphasised the disruption and denial of fascist territorial claims, while enacting territorialities and boundary-making practices of their own. The ebb and flow of territoriality and counter-territoriality point to the plasticity of territoriality, as outlined by Novak (2011), Halvorsen (2015), and others. Spreading uncertainty and fragmentation among fascists sought to render their claims to territory vulnerable and incomplete – both materially and symbolically. This disruption of far-right territorialities was also intended as an opening-up of space for radical and progressive causes – in Guattari's (2015) terms, a broadening of the transversal coefficient through which autonomous forms of activity could operate and grow.

Transversal Intelligence

Aside from brief but intense moments of confrontation with the far right, much of AFA's energies were oriented towards observation and intelligence-gathering: "the kind of actual physical violence stuff, you know, it was a very, very small amount of the time", notes Ron, since "[w]e would sooner do nothing" than put anti-fascists or their broader cause at risk. Again, this was partly linked to the performative aspect of their activism – of undermining the physical prowess of the far right – but also the practical issue of how arrests or police attention could affect their ability to operate. Intelligence-gathering included tracking the movements of key individuals, amassing photographs and other information, infiltrating far-right groups, and accessing personal details:

"I ended up with bank account details of fascists…, I ended up with photos of them in police custody, I had photos of them from the [local newspaper] – somebody working there was sending me photos." (Ron)

This intelligence allowed AFA to understand the nature and motivations of their opponents, internal debates and fractures, geographical movements across cities, and to target specific nodes in their organisation, especially key individuals. Clandestine collaboration with sympathisers helped AFA develop an ever-deeper place-based understanding of far-right networks and activities, especially in places where AFA's coverage was weak. Since territorial street control was central to far-right strategy at the time, detailed place-based knowledge was crucial in interrupting far-right organising in specific localities. Richard, a local council worker who regularly interacted with the public, used his access to confidential government records to track down a prominent fascist organiser: "I know his address, I know

his fucking phone number, I know his name, I know where he shits, know what I mean?"

Here, practices of state control were simultaneously mobilised and undermined through Richard's illegal action as an employee of the state: he used state-centred information, but for a radically different purpose, and overstepped state-legislative boundaries in doing so.

An ambiguous relationship with the state is not uncommon in AFA and other militant anti-fascist groups, using state power and resources only instrumentally to achieve certain goals. However, as illustrated in *Fighting Talk* magazine, AFA was unambiguous in rejecting the notion that state action against fascists could support the anti-fascist cause:

> "One mistake that is commonly made by anti-fascists is to call for state bans on fascist groups and activities. […] In simple terms, if fascists are banned, militant anti-fascists will also be banned, if their marches are banned, then so will ours be."
> (Blakey 1992: 5).

This indicates a recognition that militant anti-fascism, in the eyes of the state, is not unlike the far right in terms of their 'abominable' presences beyond the realms of acceptable civil society; as such, state intervention can undermine militant anti-fascists' activities (cf. Hayes, 2019). Nevertheless, despite seeking to evade state capture and statist discourses, AFA regularly intervened in the electoral cycle as part of their repertoire, selectively using the state's logics, processes, and structures, such as campaigning against BNP candidates. Often, this was planned to coincide with more confrontational activities:

"it'd be things like leafleting estates, quite often Dagenham or East London […].

[T]he BNP had their electoral campaign so we were countering that, but um, and

sometimes we'd go around in the evening just putting up stickers but it was also with

a view that we might run into their lot. So it was doing both really." (Tony)

AFA therefore sought to enact an anti-fascism that operated transversally to the institutional

boundaries of the state, not explicitly acting with or against it but "redefining the relations"

(Genosko 2002: 200) and increasing the diversity of these relations between nodes in the

institutional framework. This is not about reorganising the institution of the state itself, but

repositioning the citizen-subject in relation to it, and becomes clear when state action or

inaction is evoked through its role in fascist-antifascist relations. While state security services

were watchful towards AFA, they also maintained close surveillance over their opponents,

and sometimes one was confused for another:

"We went round there, right, to stake out his place […] we never saw him, but some

other AFA guys, um, tracked him down one time and followed him. […] [T]hey

jumped him, gave him a beating and nicked his bag… with all his papers in, and he

was heard saying 'I know who you are! I know who you are, you're MI5[iii]!'"

(Richard)

AFA's practice of intelligence-gathering undermined state power and territoriality by

replacing it in practical terms. Half-jokingly, Frank called this process of intelligence-

gathering and targeting individuals "counter-terrorism", further emphasising that AFA

partially mimicked state security discourses for their own purposes. Frank's description also

alludes to the wider political context at the time of so-called 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. British far-right activists were well-known supporters of Loyalist causes and paramilitaries (defending the UK's claim to Northern Ireland), and elements within AFA had connections with Irish Republicans (seeking Irish reunification), especially through Red Action's large Irish membership in cities such as London and Manchester. Therefore, in seeking to effectively combat their non-state opponents independently of statist processes and institutions, transversal intelligence practices were a crucial means through which AFA negotiated this parapolitical landscape. In its "counter-terrorism" and strategic use of state resources, AFA was certainly not an anti-state organisation – although some of its activists were – but the intersections between the British state, far-right activists, and Loyalist paramilitaries, meant anti-fascist struggle inevitably interfaced with these dynamics. This interface was not geographically uniform and each AFA branch negotiated these relations according to local context. As noted, the transversal is not oriented with or against the dominant institutional order but is a reworking of connections and logics in its midst.

In/Visibility and Exposure

In the context of both high levels of far-right violence and institutional racism among the police, managing risk involved a complex balance between threats from these two directions: "principally, can you do it? Is this possible? But also, how many coppers? Is everybody going to get nicked?" (Ron). As William explains, errors of judgement could lead to serious consequences:

> "[W]ord went around that there was going to be a meeting of BNP people…, and AFA decided to get a group of people together and go over there and confront them. Um, I didn't go, um, but… there was a massive fight and everyone was arrested."

To avoid such situations, the high speed and high risk of many AFA actions required experienced individuals to make quick decisions on behalf of the larger group. Tony notes: "when we're on the streets, it's like, well, we're not all fucking standing around discussing things, you know [laughs]" This level of tightly-knit organisation was also apparent even in 'mundane' activities, as Tony continues:

> "[I]t was one of the towns in East London, and I'm standing there giving out leaflets and the stewards were all standing around the middle and you had people dotted around them giving out leaflets. And I remember the guy saying to me "could you come back and stand in range of the stewards?" I.e. if you're giving out leaflets in the town centre and you're drifting off a little bit, it's not going to take much for a couple of fascists to come round the corner and batter you."

This careful management of visibility in AFA's public-facing activities is contrasted with their other preference for *in*visibility and a strategic desire to look inconspicuous. This was a tactic of attack in cases where they could blend in with opponents' marches or meetings, but also a tactic of defence to avoid drawing attention to themselves as a distinct organisation. For example, at a 1993 ANL-led demonstration against a far-right bookshop in Welling, south-east London, Tony recalls AFA's approach:

"We were tail-ending the demonstration, um, with no badges, no placards […]

because we thought fascists would be somewhere around. […] AFA I know located

C18[iv] at, er, at Abbey Wood station. [I]t was another example of lefties focusing on

this building whereas AFA were looking for fascists. And they found them."

AFA remained at the most vulnerable part of the demonstration in order to quietly provide

some level of 'security' for the march, which faced threats of attacks from the far right. It

also allowed them to easily leave the march and pursue the far-right, a large number of whom

on the day were gathered in a nearby neighbourhood. The transversal character of this tactic

is significant in two ways: first, invisibility was an effort to circumvent visible distinctions

between anti-fascists and non-activists, in order to maximise effectiveness and evade state

and far-right surveillance; and second, avoiding the main point of confrontation with police at

the front of the march rendered AFA flexible and mobile enough to engage their primary

target.

This incident sheds light on how autonomous organisation can create transversal dynamics

through generating rationalities of action that operate *through* the logics of the very

orthodoxies being circumvented: AFA's tactics would not have worked without the "lefties"

targeting the bookshop. Here, AFA's relation to mainstream anti-fascism drew its strength

from interacting transversally with those institutionalised patterns of operation, cutting across

them, through "a domain [of action]… that could traverse these multiple fields" (Guattari

1996: 121): AFA attended the march but used it as a vehicle to pursue other anti-fascist

activities.

While AFA used their position to seek far-right activists, their location at the rear of the march was partly due to an awareness of the possibility of being attacked. This resonates with Vysotsky (2015), who has described militant anti-fascism as a form of "alternative policing practice", providing various forms of 'security' for leftist, minority, and other groups at risk of far-right attacks. AFA provided this formally or informally for a range of actors, including leftist musicians, Irish Republican marches, anti-nuclear events, and meetings of ethnic minority campaigns. This was a territorial practice of demarcating and defending space, but in a fluid manner and with temporary territorial practices (e.g. the duration of a meeting or march) that cumulatively may ascribe certain places as under anti-fascist influence. This is in contrast to earlier examples of "red citadels" or "red zones" such as Vienna or Bologna where socialist movements sought permanent, urban-scale forms of control; instead, this formed a patchwork of neighbourhood-scale (or smaller) territorialities that operated not with or against the state but parallel to it.

Within AFA, this was known as creating a 'vacuum'. However, there was always a risk of political vacuums being used by their opponents: "there is a dangerous vacuum outside of the mainstream parties that the fascists are aiming to fill" (Anon. 1992: 2). Here, bounded spaces are established and contested through competing territorial claims, be that territory physical or discursive, static or mobile. AFA literature and interviewees were keen to emphasise the embeddedness of their activists in broader movements – such as community groups, tenants' unions, trade unions, and various political parties – which indicated the kinds of struggles that AFA hoped would 'fill' the vacuums created by their efforts.

Through this, interviewees noted how they sometimes found themselves defending groups they disagreed with, but recognised a necessity for "this exchange of, kind of, 'muscle'" (Chris) between different tendencies within a wider context of anti-fascist struggle. They therefore mobilised a form of solidarity that sought to bridge between different groups through active – and often physical – effort. This "solidarity without guarantees" (Featherstone 2012) was imperfect, continually negotiated, and AFA sometimes struggled under the weight of its ideological diversity. In Chris's local branch, alongside state-socialists, "you had the, kind of, doctrinaire anarcho-communists, and then Direct Action Movement, the sabs[v], then you had the dreadlocks… and the casuals[vi]". As discussed in other studies (e.g. Arlow 2019), anti-fascism can serve as a unifying cultural force, despite often profound internal differences.

Several activists retrospectively recognised a tension between the desire to provide solidarity through this "exchange of muscle", and the barriers to participation that their physicality inadvertently created among those who were not white, male or able-bodied. Moreover, the struggle for control of public space served to secure territories through that set of relative privileges. As such, it would be simplistic to argue that AFA's transversal territoriality – or transversality more broadly – was unproblematic. A left-wing critique of emergent (and later hegemonic) liberal multiculturalism was a driving force in the organisation's reluctance to address this, especially among dominant factions of AFA, such as Red Action (Stott 2015). While these critiques were valid, centred primarily on the risks of providing further fuel to the far right, they largely failed to account for how such tactics might also serve to deepen regressive imaginaries and practices.

AFA and Beyond: Toward a Geographical Understanding of Militant Anti-Fascism

The tide of history changed for AFA in late 1994 when the BNP, its main adversary, announced a fundamental strategic shift. Unable to simultaneously contest both the streets and the electoral realm, the BNP ended its strategy of street control, and instead would focus entirely on electoral activity (Copsey 2000). This took some time to implement, and other far-right organisations continued their traditional spatial strategy in many parts of the UK, yet factions within AFA decided that this shift signalled a need for anti-fascists to reconsider their approach. In October 1995, Red Action and others within AFA established the Independent Working Class Association (IWCA) partly as a means of 'filling the vacuum' created by AFA's successes, and partly for contesting other areas at risk of far-right influence, through electoral and community activism (London AFA 1995; n.d.; IWCA n.d.). The IWCA's founding represented an impasse within AFA that resonates in militant antifascist movements more generally: how to address a far-right shift from the streets to electoralism without explicitly and in good faith (rather than instrumentally) engaging with the state? Large, autonomous, left countercultures within grassroots social institutions (such as sports, arts, unions, or working class education) have the capacity to continue challenging far-right electoral threats via other means, but this is not easy or quick, especially where pre-existing counter-institutions are weak.

Meanwhile, broader cultural changes inhibited AFA's operation, including the criminalisation and decline of football hooliganism; the rise of closed-circuit television (CCTV); hegemonic shifts towards cross-class multiculturalism under New Labour; and the emergence of new youth cultures[vii]. There are also critiques of AFA specifically. Ironically,

their effectiveness on the streets was a factor in the BNP's turn towards electoral politics, which proved fruitful for the BNP in the short-term and paved the way for subsequent far-right parties such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Moreover, as already noted, while some women and ethnic minority activists were involved in AFA, it was mostly characterised by white men engaging in a violent conflict for the control of public space. When learning from AFA's experiences, there are also distinctions between the 1990s and the present day. The growth of the internet as a political sphere and the (partial) deterritorialisation of far-right recruitment through this, the increased acceptability of far-right policy agendas in mainstream politics, and the enhanced role of environmental politics in struggles against the far-right, are perhaps the most prominent. These come with specific challenges for anti-fascists that were not present 30 years ago.

Notwithstanding these points, AFA's distinctive spatial strategy highlight important points about the geographies of militant anti-fascism specifically, and the nature of activist territorialities more broadly. First, territoriality is not always structured through its relation to dominant state-territorial logics. Using Guattari's notion of *transversality*, I have argued that there are modes of acting territorially that neither explicitly resist nor explicitly reproduce these statist logics. For AFA, while their tactics put them into both contact and conflict with state legal frameworks, engaging the state was secondary to tracing the shifting patterns of far-right activism, and was to be engaged for instrumental purposes if it helped them exert autonomous force against their opponents. *Evasion* could be seen as a watchword of AFA's territorial practices, in relation to both statist territoriality and its reflection in mainstream anti-fascism. AFA was by no means 'anti-state' but it deployed various forms of (dis)engagement, deception, mimicking, and confrontation in relation to the state, according to contextual factors pertaining to combatting the street-based far right as effectively as

possible. This transversal suite of tactics afforded AFA the ability to disrupt traditional relations with the state, premised on binaries of 'for'/'against', and forge a multiplication of contact points and logics of operation within, against, and despite prevailing institutional orderings.

Secondly, the broad principle of autonomy made AFA's transversal praxis possible, allowing AFA the flexibility to learn, operate, and strategise more freely than they might have otherwise done if bound to 'respectable' civil society modes of campaigning. This evasion of state-centric modes of civic engagement highlights the benefits of decentring the state from spatial-political imaginaries, to refuse its limits as the reference point for knowledge and praxis (cf. Author 2016). Nevertheless, while we may assume autonomous praxis to be primarily resistive to dominant (liberal-statist) modes of acting and relating, AFA was able to retrofit elements of the latter for militant anti-fascist purposes, with some degree of effectiveness. The transversal therefore does not take a single form or relationship with the institutional arrangement in which it resides: it may be resistive or transgress its boundaries, engage in forms of exodus from its sphere of influence, or engage substantially with the institution. The distinction between transversality and its institutional context is about logics and purposes, rather than its particular 'shape' *per se*, and the principle of autonomy can be a key tool in operationalising transversality in practice. Attention to case studies that highlight the potentiality of transversal logics can help scholars to develop meaningful contributions to social movements.

Finally, several points can be raised in relation to contemporary anti-fascist struggles. AFA's story warns us of the risks of becoming entrenched in a specific repertoire of tactics, invoking

movements neither to conform to the established institutional patterns of civic anti-fascism nor to overemphasise alterity or subculture, but instead "travers[ing] these multiple fields" (Guattari 1996: 121). The operational 'tightness' of AFA was central to this tactical flexibility and effectiveness, and encourages anti-fascists to revisit discipline, not as an inherently hierarchical, coercive phenomenon but as a practice of individual focus and collective organisation that can contribute to liberatory politics if undertaken carefully and accountably. However, there was also institutional stubbornness in AFA to find ways of applying militancy to an emerging electoral threat, where physical confrontation was increasingly ineffective. AFA's activists' embeddedness in certain communities was also a strength, through which they built a reputation and connections in popular working class institutions locally. A refusal to abandon 'left behind' places amidst the slow violences of 1990s recession and neoliberalisation increased their capacity to create counternarratives in such communities. However, as several interviewees noted, AFA's geographical unevenness and concentration in large cities meant that smaller towns were less amenable to this approach.

Overall, militant anti-fascism can tell scholars important stories about autonomous forms of territoriality and political activism that operate beyond the boundaries of statist framings. Bringing such learning into conversation with the present can also help support and inform contemporary movements. Future research should be attentive to anti-fascism as a movement, culture, and set of spatialised tactics: it can be manifested diversely, operates relationally to far-right strategies, and is adaptive to geographical and historical context. Unpicking these nuances can both be intellectually stimulating and politically helpful in bringing to light the capacities of grassroots actors to enact effective territorially-focused struggles.

Acknowledgements

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[i] These included the socialist groups Red Action and Workers' Power, and the anarcho-syndicalist Direct Action Movement. Many former SWP squadists joined Red Action.

[ii] Due to ideological and tactical differences, AFA's relationship with other anti-fascist groups were often tense, and sometimes openly hostile. More detail on these relationships can be found in Birchall (2010) and Copsey (2000).

[iii] The UK government's intelligence and security service, focusing principally on counter-terrorism and counter-espionage.

[iv] Combat 18 (abbreviated to C18) were a neo-Nazi group associated with the British National Party.

[v] A shortened term for Hunt Saboteurs.

[vi] A British slang word for football fans who dress in designer sportswear.

[vii] Raised particularly in interviews with William and Tony.