

Art, politics, memory: *Tactical Tourism* and the route of anarchism in Barcelona

cultural geographies
17(4) 525–531
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DOI: 10.1177/1474474010368610
<http://cgj.sagepub.com>



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A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus ... This nowhere gives a tactic a mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment.¹

Since its establishment in 2001, *Tactical Tourism*, a group of artists based in Barcelona, has been organizing interventions in public spaces drawing on the practises and language of tourism. Their artistic interventions have generally been aimed at rescuing both personal and political memories of the city, in particular those invisible life (hi)stories hidden in everyday spaces of the city. Their projects have included *Love Story*, *You are here*, *The Route of Infamy*, and the *Secret Guide to Barcelona*. The most prominent of these interventions was the 'Route of Anarchism', which explored some of the more emblematic spaces and moments of the libertarian movement in Barcelona. The route was conceived as a guided tour to a hidden Barcelona, silenced and out of tourist view, the 'red and black city' of the anarchist movement, a Barcelona that is also known as 'the Rose of Fire'. The original intervention took place in 2004 and was publically funded by a municipal centre for contemporary arts. The route lasted three hours and 30 minutes and was available to the public for a period of 10 days, although it was later extended due to popular demand. The route was envisaged from the very beginning as a (tourist) exercise of social and political memory. As one of the organizers explained in a newspaper interview, 'With this route we have not attempted to summarize the history of anarchism, but to give voice to a people and a story that has often been hidden and that it is worth remembering.'² Our interest in this particular intervention arose from our participation in an adapted version of the route (or tour) in 2005, which was specially organized for an undergraduate fieldtrip to Barcelona we were leading. This route is the focus of attention of this paper.

The route of anarchism

Our tour began at the end of Les Rambles where the city meets the harbour, a place that is now regularly thronged by tourists and party-goers. We were led by Mariano Maturana, a video artist and a founder of *Tactical Tourism*. He opened the tour by highlighting some of the hidden histories

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of this particular place. To the left, our attention was directed towards the building where the first Labour conference was held in 1870. To the right a convent and a church – now an exhibition centre – that was burned in 1909 in what is known as la Setmana tràgica – ‘The tragic week’ – one of the earliest revolutionary uprisings in the city. Paradoxically this exhibition centre had also been the final stop on an ‘urban regeneration’ tour that we had taken on the previous day. The architect leading that tour did not mention its troubled past. Further down, a military barracks that was assaulted by the anarchists on 20 July 1936, three days after the military revolt against the democratic government that marked the start of the civil war. In the assault on the building, the last to remain under the control of Franco’s troops, Francisco Ascaso, a prominent figure of anarcho-syndicalism, died. A little further down still the site of an aborted assassination attempt on Franco in 1947 – aborted, we were told, because of the presence of too many children in the crowd. In drawing attention to these hidden (hi)stories, Maturana superimposed on the well established tourist sights of Les Rambles and the monument to Columbus, an alternative narrative that subverts the official rhetoric of cultural tourism.

The route continued through the narrow streets of El Raval, a poor district with a long history of political riots, searching for signs and traces of the anarchist movement. We stopped first in a square that stands in the former site of an infamous women’s jail, attacked in 1936 by activists from the union of free women. In the attack the jail was severely damaged, and the prisoners released. Walking through the neighbourhood, historically significant sites were revealed, again and again often in unexpected and everyday places: the former headquarters of the anarchist publication *Tierra y Libertad* (Land and freedom); the site of an infamous barricade from 1936; the edifice of the Modern School, an innovative education project from the first half of the 20th century; the Hotel where Albert Einstein stayed in 1923 and met the leadership of the anarchist movement. None of the sites we visited had any visible reminders of their anarchist past, the exception being the site where Salvador Seguí – one of the most prominent leaders of the anarchist union – was assassinated in 1923. A small commemorative plaque has become encrusted in the façade of an old apartment building that stands next to a brand new five star hotel, the centrepiece of a controversial regeneration programme. In an attempt to reconnect the past and the present, the route also passed through some current examples of radical activism such as a squatter house and a radical bookshop. Not without taking some historical licence, the route covered a period of time that starts with the burning of churches in 1835 and finished with the anti-globalization movement that took to the streets in 2001. We finished our tour in the bar El Tranvía. The entrance hall next to the bar still has a number of visible bullet holes that relate to an infamous incident that took place in 1973, when Salvador Puig Antich, a young political activist, was arrested. His execution, fiercely contested both in Spain and abroad, was the last in Spain by the Garrote Vil, a particularly cruel medieval execution method.

Our route was specially adapted for us and was carried out in English. The original route was conducted in Catalan and Spanish and was addressed primarily towards the local population, with the explicit aim of making them feel like tourists in their home town. The vast majority of those who booked the tour were from Barcelona although it also attracted a fair amount of people with an interest in the libertarian movement from other parts of Spain and even Germany. The organizers were particularly surprised by the number of older people taking the route with personal involvements with anarcho-syndicalism dating back to the 1930s. As well as the walking tour, the original route also made use of a bus, specially ‘intervened’ for the occasion with anarchist motifs. The bus toured more peripheral areas of the city including el Camp de la Bota, where hundreds of political dissidents were executed after the civil war and which has recently been incorporated into the tourism-economy following a massive programme of urban regeneration; the cemetery of

Montjuïc where the most prominent figures of the libertarian movement are buried; and The Park Güell, where in 1977 a libertarian conference was celebrated gathering up to half a million people in a series of political rallies, concerts and other politico-artistic events. All three sites criss-cross with major tourist attractions in Barcelona. The route drew upon a variety of additional sources. On the bus, audiovisual materials were screened; videos introduced the participants to the history of the Libertarian movement in Barcelona and combined interviews with films from the 1930s. *Tactical Tourism* gave prominence to oral sources outside the official records, regarding them as more authentic. Oral testimonies from anonymous participants were incorporated as they went along; making the route dynamic and ever-changing. Participants were also provided with textual documentation including a publication specially produced for the occasion, a map (Figure 1) and an historical chronology. This publication brings together an eclectic mix of political articles, photos, poems and historical documents.

In some locations, participants would encounter surprise performances or ‘interventions’; ‘actors’ would emerge from the street, and bring to life cultures and histories of anarchism in the city. The most prominent intervention took place in Park Güell, where a ‘libertarian poet’ surprised tactical tourists with a series of upbeat poems and readings. On more than one occasion the participants responded to readings by shouting political slogans. The visit to the Park Güell, which also included the screening of revolutionary songs, was for many people – according to the organizers – the high point of the route, since it revived the living memory of the political euphoria of the 1970s. A particularly intense moment was orchestrated (through the reading aloud of anarchist prose) in the cemetery while visiting a common grave in which people executed for political reasons were buried often anonymously.³ With the ‘Route of Anarchism’ *Tactical Tourism* managed to break with the selective nature of contemporary art and reach non-specialist audiences. Its popular appeal is partly evidenced by the amount of ethnographic material that can be found in blogs and newspaper articles that document the reactions of participants in the route.⁴

Art as tourism, tourism as art

What makes *Tactical Tourism* especially interesting is the ways in which this group wraps art, tourism and politics together. Inspired by the work of Lippard,⁵ *Tactical Tourism* makes artistic interventions in the city using the strategies of tourism. These interventions, which engage with ghostly presences of the political past, seek to disrupt certain kinds of political and geographical formations. In so doing, the work of *Tactical Tourism* brings into play fundamental parallels between art and tourism.⁶ Equipped with its own tool kit of technologies, aesthetic sensibilities and predispositions, tourism, like art, can be considered a cultural milieu where meanings and frames about ourselves and the world are produced and distributed. It is a way of accessing the world and finding our place in it, ‘a means of world-making and of self-fashioning’ according to Adler.⁷ This relation has a visual and aesthetic dimension; as Lippard points out, both activities teach us what to see and how to see it, thus providing us a lens to ‘look around’.⁸ As well as bringing into play these fundamental parallels, the work of tactical tourism emphasizes the political dimension⁹ and emancipatory potential¹⁰ of tourist practices in the city, not unlike the *Toxic Tours* that the American environmental justice movement promotes,¹¹ which similarly subverts tourism for political purposes. Although not a form of political activism, *Tactical Tourism* appropriates the language and practices of tourism for politically progressive ends, as a cultural resource for dissent and emancipation, paraphrasing Pezzullo as ‘embodied rhetoric of resistance aimed at mobilizing public sentiment and dissent’.¹²



Figure 1. Map of the Route of Anarchism (©Tactical Tourism).

The work of *Tactical Tourism* revisits and adapts dominant aesthetics and sensibilities within tourism, using the language, practices, and strategies (or tactics) of tourism but in more politicized ways. In particular, it reassesses the generally a-critical and distant gaze of tourism.¹³ In so doing, *Tactical Tourism* creates the conditions for a more interactive and decentred form of sightseeing that complicates but does not eliminate the binary oppositions underpinning modern tourism. The following statement is an extended extract from their website, which nicely captures the subversive tourist strategies they employ:

Our group considers tourism a mass media; the same way TV, the radio, the press and the Internet are mass media, as well. Tourism industry has transformed the 'tour' into a medium with its own codes and protocols – tacit codes and protocols that we socially accept usually without questioning them. We accept the idea of being guided to a place and being told the history and events related to such location.

Tactical Tourism's tours are presented by performers using the strategies of tourist agencies. The matters studied in these tours and interventions can vary according to the space and (hi)stories subject to investigation. These (hi)stories have their starting point in real historic or contemporary issues, though fiction, or a mix of fiction and the real, is not discarded.

Our tours consist of a route through the city or the rural public space. During the journey, places would be visited that are related to the narrated events. Tracks and remainders would be sought: graffiti, monuments, buildings, walls, squares, streets, venues, etc. The visited space could also have been previously 'intervened' by us according to the designed route through the use of graffiti, mise en scène, performances, participative actions, etc.¹⁴

There are three issues raised by this statement of ambition that we think are particularly noteworthy. First, there is a clear sense of the *use of tourism as an artistic media*. *Tactical Tourism* clearly borrows from the tourist lexicon, using the guided 'tour' to articulate political (his)stories about specific places. Their guided tours, virtual, on foot, or by bus, are complemented with guides and maps, much like conventional tourism. However, rather than emphasizing the artistic qualities of the images and symbols of tourism, the 'routes' developed by *Tactical Tourism* draw attention to the artistic dimension of tourism activity itself, and in so doing, emphasizes the connections with performance art. As well as a means of conferring meaning then, tourism also functions as a form of public intervention, as a kind of performance piece situated in the city.

Second, there is an emphasis on the *transformative qualities of tourism*. *Tactical Tourism* turns to tourism not simply to explore the identity of the city but to transform it, by rescuing ghostly presences of its political past and developing new ways of 'looking around' the city. The Route of Anarchism is an example of what Loretta Lees calls 'emancipatory practice', performative responses in/to the city that seeks to enhance emancipation while unsettling dominant identities of place.¹⁵ For *Tactical Tourism*, museums, interpretation centres, ethnic markets and guided tours can be powerful emancipatory media, just as much as they are also sites of consumption and cannibalism.¹⁶

Third, there is an emphasis on *play and creativity*, as opposed to the detached and distant attitude traditionally associated with the romantic sensibilities that underpin the tourist gaze. Tourism here is not seen as a passive spectator activity but rather as an active, playful form of engagement with the city. Rather than following the dominant pedagogic style of the 'guided tour', in the Route of Anarchism the past is experienced playfully as a kind of a game, through the use of surprise encounters, hidden performers, and film projections from the 1930s. Paraphrasing Pezzullo, what tactical tourism is offering is a 'pleasurable sense of agency'.¹⁷

Situationism is the key artistic reference point for the group. The relationship between situationist and touristic practices have always been ambiguous; on the one hand, tourism is perhaps the practice par excellence of the 'Society of the Spectacle' and thus does no more than to reduce human independence and creativity; it is a barrier to the discovery of 'authentic life'; on the other, the languages and practices of tourism are at the very heart of the Situationist project. Jacques Fillon, for example, joked about 'establishing an alternative travel agency' providing tours of 'cultural others' living in Paris.¹⁸ More significant than this, however, is the emphasis within situationism on *play* and *creativity*. Perhaps, the key distinction between the situationists and other radical movements is that *leisure* becomes the central feature of liberation struggles, where work is usually assumed primacy in other radical systems of thought (or unalienated work in Marxism, for example). The situationist movement, in contrast, identified *leisure* as 'the real revolutionary question'.¹⁹

We recognize that *Tactical Tourism* offers some very modest interventions into the politics of urban space in Barcelona, and that furthermore their work is politically ambiguous; whilst critical to the de-memorialization of cultural tourism in Barcelona, their work also contributes to a local municipal discourse of a 'subversive city' that helps to position Barcelona in certain ways, not least as a particular kind of tourist destination.²⁰ However, their work, which is in line with a broader and more widespread 'urban explorations' movement,²¹ does pose some interesting questions concerning the relation between art, tourism and crucially, politics. First, rather than focussing on sites which are somehow out of the ordinary or spectacular (the model of looking around established within 'the tourist gaze') this form of tourism focuses on making ordinary spaces appear extraordinary, granting them an excess of meaning and significance. In one sense this accords with the notion of the touristification of everyday life (or space), but alone this underplays the extent to which tourism itself is reconfigured. Second, rather than downplaying tourism as banal or as a politically irrelevant sphere, play and leisure emerge as key sites of struggle and transformation; tourism becomes politicized. Third, rather than reproducing a traditional narrative of authenticity, this form of tourism concentrates on the disruption of dominant meanings of place and the recovery of hidden (his)stories that underpin each tourist site. Last but not least, rather than conceiving tourism as a passive spectacle, tourism emerges as a performative and creative activity, a tactic, in the language of De Certeau.

The artistic interventions of *Tactical Tourism* then, point towards the possibilities of a politically progressive form of tourism, achieved through a subversion of certain conventional practices associated with tourism. Given the lack of visible memorialization of key aspects of Barcelona's turbulent political history, which often goes hand in hand with its mystification, and the sense in which certain kinds of political history within Barcelona remain unnamed, absent and invisible, the potentially subversive tourist strategies of *Tactical Tourism* acquire an even greater significance – for it is only through such performative acts that the ghostly presences and absences of the political past are made visible at all, even if only fleetingly.

Notes

- 1 M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 36–37. A slightly different translation of this quotation is reproduced on the Tactical Tourism website (<http://www.tacticaltourism.org/texts.html>).
- 2 C. Serra, 'Paseo por el Anarquismo', *El País*, 4 November 2004.
- 3 This and other information on audience responses is taken from an interview, by the authors, with four members of *Tactical Tourism* on 13 November 2007, in Barcelona.
- 4 J. Marlet, 'La Barcelona Anarquista', *Avui*, 4 October 2004, available at: <http://recercalibertaria.pbworks.com/ENTREVISTES>.

- 5 L. Lippard, *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place* (New York: New Press, 1999).
- 6 Lippard, *On the Beaten Track* and J. Adler, 'Travel as Performed Art', *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 (1989).
- 7 Adler, 'Travel as Performed Art', p. 1368
- 8 Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, p. 13.
- 9 R.L. Stein, *Itineraries in Conflict: Israelis, Palestinians, and the Political Lives of Tourism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 10 L. Lees, *The Emancipatory City?: Paradoxes and Possibilities* (London: Sage, 2004).
- 11 P.C. Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2007).
- 12 Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism*, p. 3.
- 13 J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990); E. Jokinen and S. Veijola, 'The Body in Tourism', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11, 1994, pp. 125–51; A. Franklin, *Tourism: An Introduction* (London: Sage, 2003); J. Adler, 'Origins of sightseeing', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 16, 1989, pp. 7–29.
- 14 *Tactical Tourism*, available at: http://www.tacticaltourism.org/pdf/tactical_tourism_en.pdf.
- 15 Lees, *The Emancipatory City*, p. 89.
- 16 Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, p. 5.
- 17 Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism*, p. 50.
- 18 Sadler, *The Situationist City*, p. 93.
- 19 Sadler, *The Situationist City*, p. 151.
- 20 See also E. Swyngedouw, 'The Strange Respectability of the Situationist City in the Society of the Spectacle', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 26, 2002, pp. 153–65.
- 21 D. Pinder, 'Ghostly Footsteps: Voices, Memories and Walks in the City', *cultural geographies*, 8, 2001, pp. 1–19; D. Pinder, 'Arts of urban exploration', *cultural geographies*, 12, 2005, pp. 383–411; K. Battista and others, 'Exploring "An Area of Outstanding Unnatural Beauty": A Treasure Hunt around King's Cross, London', *cultural geographies*, 12, 2005, pp. 429–62 and A. Phillips, 'Cultural Geographies in Practice: Walking and Looking', *cultural geographies*, 12, 2005, pp. 507–13.

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