



Street Fights and Social Reproduction: The Role of Health Mutualism in Berkeley's People's Park Struggle

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ABSTRACT In the social movement literature, the relationship between the political work of collective survival and the politics of the streets remains undertheorized despite robust research on the significance of direct social actions (DSAs). This article revives the work of the Berkeley Free Church during the People's Park struggles in 1969. Through waves of intense street conflict, the Berkeley Free Church ran grassroots health programs and helped launch a free healthcare clinic. The Free Church's health programs served both those with daily needs and those needing urgent care in the streets when police responded to demonstrations with violence. This historical case adds complexity to the social movement literature because the Berkeley Free Church's work reveals a dynamic, interconnected relationship: health mutualism became central to street protest, and street protest in turn made the goals of building projects of health mutualism more feasible.

KEYWORDS direct social action, mutual aid, People's Park, public space, social reproduction

Introduction: What Does Mutual Aid Have to Do with the Politics of the Street?

In April 1969 one of Berkeley's underground newspapers, the *Berkeley Barb*, published a call for readers to build an unsanctioned park on a property owned by the University of California. At the time of the call in the *Berkeley Barb*, the property was being used as an unofficial parking lot, but members of south Berkeley's counterculture envisioned using it as a public space in ways more convivial and confrontational. Over successive weekends thousands of volunteers built a park out of the muddy lot (Mitchell 2003). The creation of People's Park sparked a backlash from the university, which hired a contractor to put up a fence around the park in the early morning on May 15th, 1969. Police guarded the fence as it was constructed and occupied the area immediately around the park. When the park's creators and supporters gathered at a noon rally and marched down Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue, the police blocked demonstrators from accessing the park. A street confrontation ensued. Demonstrators threw rocks and the police responded with shotguns loaded with birdshot and buckshot. One of the young people shot that afternoon, James Rector, died days later at Herrick Hospital. The infamous day of police violence became known as Bloody Thursday. The events of Bloody Thursday sparked a period of continuous street demonstrations to liberate People's Park.

Given Berkeley's historical role in the era's social movements, and the grassroots, bottom-up design of People's Park, this struggle over public space is a significant event in the literature on the politics of public space (see Mitchell 1995, 2003). Despite the attention given to the violence in academic and non-academic versions of the street battles, there is a lesser-known history of health mutual aid at the center of this political conflict over public space. In the years prior to Bloody Thursday, the Berkeley Free Church (BFC) – an alternative church serving Berkeley's counterculture – organized radical mutual aid health services with the goal of launching a people's free health clinic (see Nibbe 2012). Mutual aid, sometimes referred to as direct services or direct social action, is “survival work, when done in conjunction with social movements demanding transformative change” (Spade 2020: 1). According to Spade, “[s]ocial movements that have built power and won major change have all included mutual aid, yet it is often a part of movement work that is less visible and less valued” (2020: 3). Spanning several major demonstrations in Berkeley, the Berkeley Free Church and other health-oriented radicals developed the medical skills and logistical capacities to provide street-based medical interventions during riots. Revisiting the history of the People's Park struggle through this lens of the lesser valued but necessary work of mutual aid (see Spade 2020) – which can be found in the Berkeley Free Church's archival records – provides insight into the relationship between what social movement scholars call direct social action (DSA) and confrontational political claims.

Theoretical Framework: Social Movements and Social Reproduction Theory (SRT)

In the academic literature on social movements, European scholars refer to mutualist practices as direct social actions or DSAs for short (Bosi and Zamponi 2020; della Porta 2022; Zamponi 2023). Bosi and Zamponi define direct social action as “forms of ‘action that do not primarily focus upon claiming something from the state or other power holders... but that instead focuses upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the action itself’” (2020: 848). This definition aligns very closely with what is commonly known as mutual aid (see Spade 2020). In the social movements academic literature there is no question that DSAs are valuable and play a role in collective action. In this literature DSAs are a choice that collective actors may make in a larger repertoire of collective action. Bosi and Zamponi (2020), for example, argue that “DSAs are structurally part of the repertoire of contention, and actors, in the Italian context, have been offering them for a long time” (p. 852). According to other research, contemporary DSAs may be essential for collective action because they “feed a counter-hegemonic emotional culture” (Gravante and Poma 2022: 160), which undermines the atomized and fear-based emotional culture of neoliberalism. In other research, DSAs serve to better hone confrontational political claims by bringing political actors closer to the daily life of marginalized groups, which Zamponi refers to as a “materialisation of politics” (2023: 11). When political actors focus on DSAs, they're less likely to become mired in abstractions, less likely to experience significant social distance from communities with pressing needs. DSAs, in this regard, can also help achieve collective action goals because they “imply a broadening of the community networks”

of organizers while giving them “the opportunity to access different spheres of social reality” (Zamponi 2023: 10). In this way, DSAs help actors produce new network linkages that would otherwise be difficult to create. Additionally, Wood (2022: 145) argues that when social movements provide essential services the work builds trust that is essential for movement relationships.

Scholars have especially focused on DSAs in the context of large-scale crises like the 2008 global financial crisis, and the more recent Covid pandemic. This research on DSAs reveals that the pragmatic, life-affirming quality of DSAs helps political actors avoid despair and hopelessness (Zamponi 2023: 9). della Porta argues that DSAs “produce resilience by responding to the need for solidarity” (2022: 132). Bosi and Zamponi found that the actors in the political-social path – a category of collective actors with a long history of creating DSAs prior to the pandemic – recognize crises as “an opportunity to grow their activities and to increase legitimacy for their primary [political] action” (2020: 862). During a crisis, a significant increase in newcomers join DSAs, but research suggests longer-term political socialization of new “volunteers” remains a challenge (Zamponi 2023). Zamponi argues that there was a complex and contradictory process unfolding during the pandemic, in which “on the one hand, the emergency created favourable conditions for their recruitment” while “on the other hand, it constrained their availability to the limits of the emergency itself” (2023: 15). In contrast, in research on volunteers supporting migrants, Monforte and Maestri (2023) found that more than half their interviewees went through an emergent process of politicization when dealing with moral dilemmas and social confrontations arising from the work. Borrowing from della Porta’s (2008) work on the eventfulness of protest, Monforte and Maestri (2023: 134) find that these “hybrid engagements” – essentially work that “blur[s] the distinction between charity...and protest” – are also eventful. The volunteer sector they examine differs from overtly politicized DSAs. However, they conclude that the process of volunteers becoming politicized is so common that it becomes difficult to completely separate humanitarian charity work from political protest. This research aligns with social movement scholarship that demonstrates how movements doing on-the-ground DSAs are well-positioned to produce knowledge that reframes dominant depoliticizing narratives that naturalize suffering, oppression, or social hierarchies. Klostermann and Hurl (2021: 515), for example, argue that AIDS activists in Toronto collectively organized crisis support, which helped them to reframe the care for people living with HIV/AIDs as a political, not a strictly scientific, issue. In his work on ACT UP! Shepard (2007) argues that ACT UP! effectively deployed direct action and direct services (akin to DSAs) to complement each other.

Social reproduction theory (SRT) provides an important intervention into the social movement literature regarding DSAs. It is a large body of Marxist feminist theory with origins in 1970s social movements. Federici (2019) argues that contemporary SRT originated when feminists took a formerly pro-capitalist theory and radicalized it within Marxist debates. The Wages for Housework movement and other activists turned social reproduction into a revolutionary theory through “what they discovered, which is the existence of a large area of exploitation until then unrecognised by all revolutionary theorists, Marxist and anarchist alike” (Federici 2019: 55). For Federici, the value of social reproduction as a framework lies in the way it reveals that capitalism also extracts unpaid

labor from unwaged workers, and the way the wage itself can create and naturalize hierarchies. Further, she argues that feminists working with this theoretical framework “unmask[ed] the socio-economic function of the creation of a *fictional* private sphere, thereby re-politicis[ed] family life, sexuality, procreation” (p. 55; emphasis added). This latter element of SRT – the politicization of spheres of life that may appear outside of politics – is particularly important for the study of collective action in the social movement literature.

As Marxist feminist scholars applied SRT to their research on cities and political struggle, they sparked debates about the gendered and locational aspects of class struggle. They used SRT to argue that class politics was not just a politics in and of the paid workplace but included the entire geography of how families survive on a daily basis (see Cowley et al. 1977). This scholarship reconceptualized urban struggles around housing, education, parks, and social services as struggles targeting the realm of social reproduction and constituting a politics of social reproduction (see Pratt 1989). Feminist urban geographers and political theorists further developed a critique of capitalist urbanism and the liberal public sphere (see McDowell 1983; Rose 1983, 1990). Using SRT, feminist scholars argued that capitalist political economy produces a gendered division between spaces of production and reproduction, which is functional to the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Summarizing these insights, Fraser (2016: 102) argues:

From at least the industrial era...capitalist societies have separated the work of social reproduction from that of economic production. Associating the first with women and the second with men, they have remunerated “reproductive” activities in the coin of “love” and “virtue”, while compensating “productive work” in that of money.

This critique applied not only to the separation of “work” and “home” but also of a public sphere of political participation and a private sphere outside the realm of politics. Marston (1990: 451) argued that liberal democratic citizenship abolished a political community based solely on hereditary ties, but created a new political community based on the “traditional bourgeois formulations about the relationship between domestic and private life on the one hand, and the family and the state on the other” (see also Fraser 1990). This naturalized a socially constructed relationship between men and women and in the process “[w]omen (and minority populations) in essence retained their subject status” (Marston 1990: 452). In this manner social reproduction theory disrupts the naturalization of commonly accepted dualisms that ascribe waged work and public space to the realm of the political and unwaged domestic work and homes to the realm outside of politics. This led to scholarship showing how women organizers, via their socialization in the domestic sphere, made homes into political sites (Rose 1990; see also hooks 1997 in the Black feminist tradition) or rescaled the values of the domestic realm onto other scales (see Marston 2000). With these interventions in political theory, urban political economy and other fields, SRT established itself as a framework that reveals that the gendered spatial division of labor is functional to capitalism *and* that the locations and labors of social reproduction are ripe for collective political action.

What, then, can SRT contribute to the social movement literature on DSAs? As noted above, the current research on DSAs analyzes several different ways that social reproduction-oriented work unites with other forms of political work. But SRT theory applied to DSAs

suggests that DSAs are not just an abstract choice in a repertoire of action. Instead, DSAs are a choice informed by (and resistance to) gendered, racialized and spatialized features of capitalist political economy. Often this choice is steeped in an explicitly feminist politics and a commitment to care for one another using spaces differently, or by laboring differently, or by rejecting the notion that features of one's body delegate the responsibility to care. Such choices are potentially and frequently *in conflict with* other choices in a repertoire of action due to the way social movements themselves struggle to deal with dominant values (such as sexism, racism and ableism) in movement organizing. Choices about what to do when one confronts power arise from organizers' experiences and knowledge of their working and organizing lives. Choices arise because of values embedded in capitalist societies and (sometimes) because of the way dominant discourses on politics devalue political social reproduction work.

Furthermore, SRT offers a critique of a fundamental feature of the DSA concept in the social movement literature. Bhattacharya (2017: 9) argues that "the two separate spaces – spaces of production of value (point of production) and spaces for reproduction of labor power – while they may be separate in a strictly spatial sense are actually united in both the theoretical and operational senses". Scholars define DSAs as practices that don't make a claim upon power, but which seek to transform society through the action itself (Bosi and Zamponi 2020). While this definition has strong descriptive features, it still elides that much of DSA work is collective care, or work that targets features of social reproduction as its goal. The social movement literature certainly values DSAs. However, it does so in a way that recreates a dualism between political claims tout court on the one hand and DSAs on the other hand. In this conceptualization, DSAs can serve a movement engaged in making political claims but ultimately are not claims upon power. From a narrowly descriptive standpoint, a street protest does differ from a meal served in a community kitchen project. But it is a theoretical slippage to conceptualize DSAs by segregating a street protest from a community kitchen project (or free health clinic) because both make a claim upon a power structure. Nor can they be separated because, as Spade (2020) argues, all social movements that have won social change include mutual aid. Returning to Bhattacharya's argument about SRT, the observed descriptive differences in this simplified example (street protests and community kitchens), which tend to be differences of space, of labors, and of social groups, are potentially united.

Bhattacharya (2017: 4) argues that SRT is firstly "a methodology to explore labor and labor power under capitalism and is best suited to offer a rich and variegated map of capital as a social relation". To return to Federici's (2019) point on the origins of SRT, one of its primary goals as a method is to always be attentive to the manner in which reproductive labor is naturalized, devalued or otherwise rendered unseen by virtue of being gendered and racialized. This critical method applies to social movement work as well, insofar as social movement work remains embedded in capitalist social relations while also resisting those relations (see Katz 2001 on resilience, reworking and resistance). This means that a SRT approach to social movements, whether historical or contemporary, begins with an analysis of reproductive work as likely to be gendered, racialized, undervalued or possibly even ignored. The consequences of this for the archival record are legion, as much

of the movement work done by women and racialized groups, or movement work in the realm of social reproduction, remains hidden or likely to be overlooked. Just as revealing the “hidden” city of social reproduction is a significant element of SRT research (see Katz 1998), revealing the hidden, radical reproductive labor of social movements is an urgent issue (for some examples involving the Black Panther Party and Civil Rights Movement, see Abron 1998; Spencer 2012; Nelson 2013; Lloyd 2014). The critical insights of SRT raise a set of broad questions regarding the work of community survival and how communities rework reproductive labor for the purpose of resilience or resistance. In this manner, welding SRT theory to social movement theory provides a more robust framework to analyze how social reproduction work itself can operate as a form of making claims upon power, not only operating as a highly valuable adjunct to claim-making politics.

Historical Case Study: Bringing the Survival Politics Back into the Struggle for People’s Park

In *The Right to the City: Social Justice and Fight for Public Space*, Mitchell (2003) canonizes the People’s Park struggle within a longer lineage of free speech fights (see also Mitchell 1995). Mitchell (2003: 105) uses the People’s Park case to exemplify how struggles over speech rights are also locational struggles in which the ability of disfavored groups to organize in urban space conflicts with liberal institutions that demand public space be “safe” and orderly for dissent. Berkeley’s People’s Park is also a prominent political struggle because it is a public park created not from top-down design expertise but from the bottom-up by a broad coalition of environmental, anti-war, racial justice, and labor organizers. Given the prevailing position of the People’s Park struggle in the academic literature in geography and the overriding role of Berkeley’s social movements in the 1960s, I conducted archival research on the role of the Berkeley Free Church’s (BFC or Free Church) survival programs in the People’s Park struggle. The historical analysis in this article comes from archival research in the Berkeley Free Church files housed at the Graduate Theological Union archives, along with published and unpublished secondary sources. In conducting a form of social history informed by social reproduction theory, the goal of the archival research was to locate and analyze primary documents in the Berkeley Free Church archive dealing with the organization’s mutual aid, or direct social action, projects.

On the one hand, the city of Berkeley plays an oversized role in the historical geography of 1960s social movements. In this manner, revisiting political struggles in Berkeley may serve to reinforce dominant histories of social movements. However, the attention given to Berkeley also makes the political confrontations on the city’s streets and in its parks a worthy historical case for examining the too-often hidden elements of social reproduction in social movements. The method of applying SRT to social movement histories suggests that any social movement history that is missing the labors and spaces of community survival is insufficient for understanding the full picture of a struggle. As Spade writes, mutual aid is “less visible and less valued” (2020: 3), and the People’s Park struggle provides an ideal place to uncover and analyze the less visible, less valued forms of collective action in the archives. The choice to focus on the Berkeley Free Church’s archives is due to their

extensive survival projects (mental and physical health clinics, a switchboard service, and crash pads among others), which were forms of direct social action.

In this historical case I focus on the initial period of struggle beginning in April 1969 when the park's builders claimed a piece of University of California (UC) Berkeley land and created a user-generated park. Shortly after the university fenced off the park on May 15th, mass street demonstrations erupted and lasted for about a month. During this time a broad coalition of groups used street mobilizations against the police power of the city, county and state. The size, longevity and solidarity of these demonstrations in the face of state violence led to a legitimacy crisis in the city. It is common in this story to focus on spectacles of violence – the police killed James Rector on May 15th and a military helicopter tear-gassed Berkeley's campus on May 20th – as the moments that provoked a legitimacy crisis. This policing-centric interpretation, as important as it is, belies the role played by counter-institutions that laid the groundwork for a community to survive and broadcast its humanity through (and beyond) periods of extreme state violence. In the case of the People's Park conflict, mutual aid services organized by the Free Church – street medics, ambulances and emergency triage – played a decisive role in radical counter-hegemonic community survival. To put it differently, the Free Church developed a distinctly confrontational politics of social reproduction as their mutualist projects transformed public *and* private spaces.

The Berkeley Free Church, an ecumenical hippie congregation, began in the vein of urban charity but soon transformed itself into something more akin to a radical social center (see Mudu 2004). From this autonomous geography (see Pickerill and Chatterton 2006) or free space (see Evans and Boyte 1986), the Free Church's direct social actions served the movement in the streets. However, Mitchell's (2003) work on locational conflict and other non-academic histories do not highlight direct social action (whether by the Free Church or others) as central to the political confrontation. Further, the case of the Berkeley Free Church provides insight into the central role that mutualist DSAs play during mass street confrontations, not just in terms of building relationships, enhancing network linkages and transforming affective orientations ahead of a claims-based protest (though those processes certainly were important). In creating a public park and using it for DSAs such as a first aid station (among many other uses), the survival politics made confrontational claims upon power. Crucially, the Free Church's DSA-style projects did this before, during and after the most intense street fighting. By examining this historical case, it becomes clear that politics of the street are *unified* – to return to Bhattacharya's claim about SRT – with survival-focused collectively-organized social reproduction.

In Mitchell's (2003: 81) analysis of the People's Park struggle, he argues that rights-based struggles are necessarily locational conflicts. According to Mitchell, “[r]ights have to be exercised somewhere, and sometimes that ‘where’ has itself to be actively produced by taking, by wresting, some space and transforming both its meaning and its use – by producing a space in which rights can exist and be exercised” (81). As the holder of the title to the land on which People's Park was built, the university asserted its property rights to exclude unwanted users and/or uses. The South Campus community, a diverse and tenuous coalition of students and non-students, claimed the land for use as a space of community survival and conviviality. Here, one group's demand for typical private property rights

over space conflicted with another group's demand for its use-value as a place for new forms of social reproduction work. But this conflict did not play out in a realm of purely abstract representation. And here is Mitchell's key insight about speech and space: "because speech and action are inseparable," he argues, "geography matters" (82). Through wresting a physical space that was underutilized and making it public by putting it to use in ways that served, resonated with and built the community, the park's builders represented the needs of a community through spatial action. In contrast, university representatives made statements that land purchases and redevelopment of lots in the South Campus area would both serve urban renewal and displace the white counterculture of the area. These university-initiated spatial tactics were an offensive against a group they opposed. Ashbolt argues:

On one level, the university was claiming its rights of ownership. But on another, more fundamental level, it was attempting to assert some control over the campus and over the local radical community. Whereas the park connoted openness, space and movement, the fence signalled closure, blockage, prohibition. It was yet another wall. (2016: 146)

For Mitchell, this signifies that the 1969 People's Park struggle was about a fundamental right to the city, not just a right to speak. Since the locational conflict was a conflict over the right to be a member of one's community in the city, it forces us to look at the experiments in social reproduction in which members of this community cared for each other and made the city livable.

The energy and vitality of organizing in response to the state repression during the People's Park riots helped to launch a people's free health clinic in the South Campus area, a clinic which previous organizing had failed to win. Both People's Park and the Berkeley Free Clinic remain to this day and live on as legacies of this significant period of struggle. The health mutualism of the Free Church served the street demonstrations, and the street demonstrations in turn served the community's ongoing needs. Rather than a linear process where DSAs serve confrontational street protests, this history reveals a process that is united, relational and iterative. DSAs attuned organizers to combating slow violence against and criminalization of their community. Once those services became attuned to taking and holding space, they continued to make a political claim but in a location and at a scale that sparked confrontation. Then the infrastructure of care that had been built up by the DSAs shifted to caring for people injured in the street mobilizations. In this way the work elevated the movement by caring for people facing swift and extreme state violence. Later, that same work – in the form of a free clinic – returned to serving people experiencing slower violence. This ebb and flow ties clinics to streets. It ties social reproduction work to the confrontational politics of claiming public space in inseparable ways.

Background: The 1960s and the Struggle Over Public Space in Berkeley

By the late 1960s Berkeley was already a significant place for radical political culture. The portion of the campus near Sproul Plaza and south along Telegraph Avenue was an urban streetscape under intense spatial conflict. This area featured significant experimentation associated with hippie culture and radical collective care along with other forms of collective

action. Campus chapters of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized anti-discrimination demonstrations against local stores. Students in this radical network fought against the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). CORE, along with SLATE and local Du Bois Clubs, used creative direct action tactics in major anti-discrimination campaigns in San Francisco against Lucky Stores, Mel's, the Sheraton Palace Hotel and car showrooms on Van Ness Avenue (Ashbolt 2016: 53). In fall 1964 the Free Speech Movement exploded when the university administration attempted to regulate the content and location of political organizing (see Ashbolt 2016; Mitchell 2003). And in 1965, a Berkeley-based coalition of student and non-student leftists, labor, and church organizations launched the Vietnam Day Committee (VDC), which led demonstrations of thousands of anti-war protestors.

Berkeley's streets became key spaces of democratic collective action inseparable from other areas of confrontation with established power. This was especially so for Telegraph Avenue. Ashbolt argues that a relationship developed amongst the key sites of conflict. "A rally in Sproul Plaza, an occupation of Sproul Hall or a march down Telegraph Avenue, became common occurrences," he writes (2016: 62). The "critical importance of spatial links between the Plaza, the administration centre, the student union building and Telegraph Ave, was underscored time and time again" (62). Crucially, these were also spaces of community building infused with social reproduction. Ashbolt argues that the experience of being in a budding community drove this protest activity forward (2016: 63). Participants in the Sheraton Hotel lobby and the Sproul Hall occupations spoke of the heightened sense of community in these albeit short-lived liberated spaces (2016: 63).

These white left tactics of communal experimentation with social reproduction also led groups to reclaim public space for collective survival. Coming out of the San Francisco Mime Troupe's politics of public space, the San Francisco Diggers developed a form of dramaturgical protest that claimed space for free services like meals (see Doyle 1997). Not simply dramaturgy however, the Diggers were also concerned for the safety and well-being of the young people coming to San Francisco for the Summer of Love. They organized health services at their free stores (Doyle 1997: 150) and helped launch the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic (see Nibbe 2012; Doyle 2002: 81). Berkeley's Diggers, influenced by Provos in Amsterdam, staged free meals and free services across from city hall in a park they renamed Provo Park.

It is this expansive geography of the South Campus area that one must consider in relation to local elites' attempts to suppress the street politics of the late 1960s. Collective action transformed Berkeley's urban space, and local and state elites began to take notice. According to a December 1967 memo by Isabel Weissman, a psychiatric social worker for Berkeley's Mental Health Services, the Diggers' use of parks and streets was a key concern for the City Council (GTUA, Box 6, 1967). Weissman claimed that the Diggers had been serving free meals in Provo Park relatively quietly in early 1967, but they later sparked a crisis when they requested permission from the city to close Telegraph Avenue in April. The city rejected the request, and the organizers closed the street using direct action without city permission. This led to a confrontation with local police, and instances of police brutality. Weissman wrote that the City Council was subsequently forced to address public

policy and hippies (GTUA, Box 6, 1967). Here, activists in Berkeley reworked urban space – blurring the designation between public and private – for collective survival and organizing. In the process they confronted the city and university’s attempt to enforce other regimes of urban public space.

The Berkeley Free Church’s Clinic Organizing and the People’s Park Riots

I remember the sight the medics made – they appeared seemingly out of the walls at the first sign of trouble on the avenue; hairy and/or bearded, wearing white or once-white bus-boy-like jackets with red crosses crayoned on, or made out of red cloth and sewn on the sleeves and back. They carried little tins of first aid supplies, slung from straps across their shoulders. (Isabel Weissman quoted in Nibbe 2012: 97)

The Berkeley Free Church began in 1967 as the South Campus Community Ministry (SCCM), a joint effort of area churches and Telegraph Avenue merchants who were “concerned about the youth ghetto emerging in the ‘South Campus’ area near the University of California” (Stelmach 1977: 6). The merchants and mainstream churches hoped that a Christian street minister and some charitable services could be a mediating influence between youth and establishment institutions. The SCCM, as its original by-laws stated, proposed “[t]o minister to the needs of persons in the South Campus area, especially those temporary resident[s]” (quoted in Stelmach 1977: 9).

Although it began as a reform-minded institution, the Free Church leaders transformed it into an alternative church willing to forsake charity in favor of mutual aid. Upon starting the SCCM, the board hired seminary student Dick York to be the minister and leader (Stelmach 1977: 11). York worked with social worker Glee Bishop to launch a switchboard (14), essentially a hotline to connect people in need with institutions and individuals that could help. The switchboard operated as the logistical hub of the Free Church’s services. Isabel Weissman’s 1967 memo describes the Free Church’s services in the following manner. The services:

were to find housing for transients, counsel people about drug use, search out doctors and dentists to treat acute illnesses and injuries, bring medical and psychiatric emergencies to the hospital, act as “Ombudsman” [sic] with police and other civic agencies, share food when they had it, provide transportation to enable use of resources, and scrounge for money. (GTUA, Box 6, 1967)

The service-oriented switchboard work gave York, Bishop and others direct knowledge of the urgency of people’s medical and mental health needs and established the ministry’s credibility. In this manner the direct social action of the church matches social movement research regarding the ability of DSAs to reduce barriers that prevent political actors from understanding people’s needs (Zamponi 2023).

The church’s attention to medical needs attracted people interested in doing DSA-style work, which was a growing feature of the civil rights, New Left, anti-war, feminist and Black Power movements of this period (see Loyd 2014; Nelson 2013). Loyd, for example, argues that amongst the health-oriented left “a general consensus emerged regarding the imperative

of community health, an organizational reform they believed best promised to provide access to health care and new kinds of services” (2014: 183). What were those imperatives in the South Campus area? In contrast to racialized forms of state-sanctioned violence, this white hippie community was impoverished due to their choice to build a countercultural collective life. This was a voluntary community that dropped out and migrated to neighborhood hubs like Haight-Asbury and Telegraph Avenue. Aside from lack of money, the urgency of their medical needs was also due to issues of policing, transportation and residential status. The county’s public hospital had some free services, but it was a significant distance away in Oakland. Public services also required residential status, which transient individuals did not have, and put up barriers for those considered able to work (GTUA, Box 6, 1971). The hospital closest to Telegraph Avenue, Herrick Hospital, was a non-profit institution whose emergency services coordinated closely with the Berkeley police. Knowing this, hippie youth would often refuse to use Herrick’s service to avoid carceral contact (GTUA, Box 6, 1971). For the Free Church, direct social actions provided clear knowledge that the people the church wanted to serve would not work closely with pre-existing establishment institutions.

From its inception in 1967, the Free Church included some minimal forms of first aid. Glee Bishop organized a doctor and nurse from St. Mark’s Episcopal church to provide aid one night a week (GTUA, Box 6, 1971). Isabel Weissman, the municipal psychiatric social worker, states that on her first visit to the church she “saw first aid being rendered by a ‘street person’”, who was the same individual that introduced her to the Free Church (GTUA, Box 6, 1971). These early forays into providing care set the stage for a dual process. One, the Free Church became a leader in organizing a free clinic in the South Campus area, along with the local chapter of the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR). Two, the Free Church began to organize riot care and violence intervention in the streets.

The initial attention to daily health needs soon fused with crisis care during the ongoing campus and street demonstrations of the late 1960s. These demonstrations frequently involved clashes with police, tear gas and protestors clubbed by police. The Free Church’s health radicals began this protest-oriented work within the burgeoning anti-war movement in the region. During protests at the Oakland Induction Center as part of Stop the Draft Week they provided first aid and a “clergy phalanx” to intervene in street conflicts and then continued to do both tactics at anti-war actions in early 1968 (Nibbe 2012: 97).

By summer 1968 Berkeley street confrontations continued to hail the church’s medical and clergy phalanx work into serving those in the streets. During a late June 1968 rally in support of French students, police fired tear gas on demonstrators. A “running battle between police and young people erupted on the street and raged through the night” (GTUA, Box 27, n.d.). During these street conflicts the Free Church worked with members of the Medical Committee for Human Rights to set up a first aid station in their space called the Liberated Zone (Nibbe 2012: 104). The church also organized medics out on the street and had nurses and doctors on standby (Nibbe 2012: 104). Police tear gassed the church’s first aid space and beat Jock Brown, a radical priest working with Dick York as the resident theologian (GTUA, Box 27, n.d.; GTUA, Box 2, n.d.). In the Free Church’s reports on the June 28 to July 4 week of street clashes, staff claimed that “during the siege it [the church] was dormitory, canteen and first-aid center” (GTUA, Box 2, 1968). A Free Church statement written for

the American Civil Liberties Union claims that the “Free Church first-aid station took people in off the streets all night, giving them medical treatment for their eyes, scalp wounds and other injuries” (GTUA, Box 2, n.d.).

The intensity of the police violence and targeted repression did not stymie the resolve of the Free Church. Instead, they saw the three core phases of their work – serving people through the switchboard, building community through the Liberated Zone, and worshipping together – as fused together during the crisis moments in the streets (GTUA, Box 2, 1968). According to the church’s Unified Proposal for continued funding, “[t]he three phases of course are not fully separable, and in time of crisis completely fuse together” (GTUA, Box 2, 1968). Similarly, in a draft version of a developmental history of the Berkeley Free Clinic, Isabel Weissman stated that the “crisis of the riot and the resultant injuries strengthened the resolve of people who had already been hoping to establish a free clinic patterned after the Haight-Ashbury [clinic]” (GTUA, Box 6, 1971). By the end of 1968, Free Church leaders used the phrase “street riot work” in communications with their board members about their contributions to the South Campus community (GTUA, Box 3, 1968). At this point they clearly saw a relationship between meeting daily health needs with a clinic-type project and providing service to the movement in the streets.

The strengthened resolve for a permanent free health clinic in the South Campus area led to rounds of fall 1968 meetings, and new people interested in organizing the work (Nibbe 2012). Three School of Social Welfare students enrolled at Berkeley began dedicated work on the clinic for their field work experience, while a health education student in Berkeley’s School of Public Health spearheaded a series of health education meetings on topical subjects (GTUA, Box 6, 1971). The Free Church hosted these health education meetings and played a significant role in clinic meetings throughout the end of 1968. In a nod to accommodation, the city responded to the June riots by giving a little more leeway to their agencies that had called for social services for people in the South Campus, which led to a two-month city-funded Health Information Services pilot project. This pilot project mimicked the Free Church’s switchboard in that it did not offer health services directly but networked closely with providers and organizations in the region. However, this efflorescence of meetings to get a permanent clinic running was consistently rebuked when proposals for funding were either rejected (Rosenberg Foundation) or too meager (University of California Service Project Fund) to launch the clinic (Nibbe 2012: 112–113). It took another period of intense street violence to finally launch a permanent free clinic in Berkeley’s South Campus.

Then in April 1969 the *Berkeley Barb* published the famous call for people to build a park on a muddy UC-owned lot, and people responded to the call. Prior to the park being fenced in on May 15th, two organizers associated with the Free Church ran a first aid station on park grounds. The Free Church got word of the fencing plan the day before, possibly due to Dick York being on the People’s Park negotiating committee. Weissman wrote that upon learning of the plan, “[s]omeone (Dick?) called Chuck McAllister; he came to Free Church on Parker and set up first aid station” (GTUA, Box 6, 1971). McAllister “[g]ot medics from his class at UC” and the “[m]edics brought injured to Free Church” (GTUA, Box 6, 1971). A pamphlet from the Telegraph Avenue Liberation Front in October 1969 stated that during the park struggle “hundreds were streaming into the emergency aid units hastily set up by

the Free Church to be treated for head lacerations, bayonet wounds and gunshot wounds” (GTUA, Box 3, 1969). In a diary of the days of crisis, one observer wrote:

Police tied up all the ambulances including the private ones and refused to call them many times. An ambulance station begun at Oxford Hall at Oxford and Addison. Free Church turned into first aid station with medics going out into scene of battle. Treated gas, bullet wounds, and near surgery cases. (GTUA, Box 27, 1969)

Here is how Dick York described the scene in an interview in 1974: “All the wounded would come out, or be brought out, and brought to the Free Church and the Free Clinic people, committee, put it together real fast [with] Chuck McCallister leading organizing” (GTUA, Box 32, 1974). According to York, the inside of the Free Church soon filled up with people needing care. Isabel Weissman brought the head doctor from Berkeley’s public health department down to the Free Church to see what was going on. York described the scene at the time, saying there were “all these bodies on church tables...and we had them like beds and surgery being done by veterinarians and doctors and everybody with desk lamps and all this kind of stuff” (GTUA, Box 32, 1974). With help from an establishment doctor appalled by this triage situation, Weissman was able to get civil defense supplies released to the church (though they were spoiled). The two also went to Herrick Hospital “and organized the ‘cops out’ to ensure the protection of patients” (GTUA, Box 32, 1974). Once organizers felt assured that Herrick Hospital would not work with the police, they transferred injured demonstrators at the Free Church to the hospital (GTUA, Box 32, 1974).

Following weeks of street battles in which the police and National Guard also dropped tear gas from a helicopter and engaged in indiscriminate mass arrests, Berkeley’s ACLU chapter collected statements from 525 witnesses and/or victims. These statements reveal the influence of medics in the streets. One victim said, “I was struck by 18 birdshot pellets in the back, arms and neck. I was treated at the Free Church and by a medic in the street” (GTUA, Box 16, 1969). According to a witness of a police beating inside a cafe, “[t]wo medics arrived and began to minister to him” (GTUA, Box 16, 1969). The author of the ACLU’s summary report concluded that the official numbers of those injured based upon hospital counts are inaccurate because some victims were not treated at hospitals but at the Free Church and other aid stations (GTUA, Box 16, 1969). According to Nibbe, “[a]t the height of the People’s Park protests, the Free Church had at least 10 private autos in use as ambulances and 5 first aid stations, and they estimated that McAllister had trained/or was coordinating an astounding 500 medics”¹ (2012: 116).

Upon reflection, Weissman and York cite the People’s Park riots as the origin of a permanent free clinic in Berkeley, based upon the Free Church’s crisis care in the streets. In a June 1969 memo, Weissman stated that the “Free Medical Clinic was thrown into operation on ‘bloody Thursday’, May 15, when it set up emergency headquarters at Free Church and where the Health Department became involved through the crisis situation”

¹ In an interview York stated this number was 50 medics (GTUA, Box 32, 1974). A petition titled “Medic Legal Defense” signed by over 20 doctors stated that 20 uniformed medics were arrested on Thursday, May 22nd.

(GTUA, Box 6, 1969). In her developmental history draft, she wrote similarly that the “clinic actually came to life in a blood-bath crisis, as a result of war between the street and the forces of City Hall” (GTUA, Box 6, 1971). York concurred in a 1974 interview in which he stated that the emergency first aid station at the Free Church that started with the People’s Park riots operated continuously while street demonstrations went on for another month. “So that’s how the Free Clinic started, operated there day and night there for a long time”, York stated (GTUA, Box 32, 1974).

Conclusion: Locational and Confrontational Aspects of Direct Social Action

The meaning of certain places and spaces is bound into particular configurations of power and resistance; locations may become significant through often violent attempts to control them, or through the painful struggles of the exploited for a place of their own in which they can become themselves. (Rose 1990: 395)

The Berkeley Free Church’s direct social action provides insight into the relationship between DSAs and the collective action more commonly associated with street demonstrations. This historical case brings additional supportive evidence to scholarly conclusions that DSAs produce resilience through solidarity (della Porta 2022) and that DSAs broaden networks and facilitate access to different social realities (Zamponi 2023). Indeed, Free Church leader Dick York claimed, “The Free Church is a project of maximum need, maximum promise, maximum risk. Step by step, through responding to our current understanding of the need, *we were led to an enlarged understanding of the real need*” (GTUA, Box 2, 1968; emphasis added). Other scholars argue that mutual aid, a movement-centered term for direct social action, is a feature of all social movements but often overlooked and undervalued (Spade 2020). A closer look at the Berkeley Free Church’s DSAs and the People’s Park riots (along with preceding street demonstrations) supports this claim. The emergency first aid stations and street medics are often left out of this struggle over public space. But they were there in the moment and played a significant part in caring for those who took to the streets in the face of state violence.

The historical case also adds support to scholarly conclusions that charity work is “eventful” and frequently leads to more overt politicization (Monforte and Maestri 2023). Early on the Free Church began doing free medical services a couple nights a week and the project’s leaders saw their role during demonstrations as clergy intervening to stop violence. Later the church saw its role as more explicitly serving the oppressed in their movements for liberation. This entailed less a desire to mediate violence as to heal and serve the wounded during these crises. While working first in a more charity-oriented model, organizers built infrastructure and capacities regarding common elements of social reproduction (housing, health, food). In times of heightened conflict, the skills, capacities, networks and logistical infrastructure were at the ready. Free Church organizers mobilized these skills and capacities in ways that were both predictable and unpredictable. The church’s switchboard and liberated zone organizing proceeded in such a manner that organizers developed a tactical sense of how to shift into crisis mode to serve the streets. The free clinic organizing work

directly influenced setting up a first aid station in People's Park, emergency triage during the riots and training medics. Less predictably, though unsurprisingly, the Free Church became the main organizer of the bail fund following the mass arrests that ensued in the days following the fencing of the park, a fund that raised and distributed about \$50,000 (GTUA, Box 32, 1974). Stretched as they were with the medical organizing, the church's built-up logistical capacities and 'serve the people' framework was nonetheless well-positioned to take on the bail fund. Free Church leader Dick York argued that the bail fund, as much as anything else, helped the church develop a base of support for their work following the People's Park riots (GTUA, Box 32, 1974). The church's 1971 Manifesto of the Switchboard Collective reveals the group's understanding that their medical and legal capacities could be modularly and flexibly deployed during street demonstrations.

Because Free Church has a list of legal resources and sympathetic lawyers, we can choose to become a legal exchange, and even a bail fund depot. This decision will be made by staff as a crisis develops...Free Church has several trained paramedical personnel, and the potential to train many others...we have collected emergency medical information likely to be needed during Berkeley-type crises, eg., anti-gas treatment, etc. We have the potential to train and send out paramedics to crisis zones as necessary. (GTUA, Box 5, 1971)

As the above quote clarifies, the Free Church organizers took steps to formalize (and publicize) this relationship between meeting daily survival and meeting the needs of those in intense conflict with the state.

The history of the Berkeley Free Church uncovers the hidden direct social actions at the center of a significant political struggle. Once uncovered it is possible to see how direct social actions transformed elements of social reproduction in Berkeley. In making parks, streets and liberated social centers key nodes of survival and cultural sustenance, the DSAs rescaled the geography of social reproduction (see Marston 2000). Further, these DSAs made normative claims about the need for non-capitalist, cooperative labor to make social reproduction free. Crucially, the claims rejected the spatial norms and labor norms of reproduction under capitalism. The DSAs critiqued and rejected the framework that social reproduction work in homes be unpaid due to the natural love and virtuous care that women provide, while everything else needed for sustenance (such as housing, healthcare and food) be exchanged through markets. In this manner, the case of the Berkeley Free Church demonstrates that direct social action cannot conceptually be differentiated from claims-based collective action. Direct social actions frequently are forms of alternative social reproduction work, which make claims upon the spaces, labors and gender roles of reproduction in capitalist cities. The Free Church's DSAs not only reproduced a movement community; they not only served the community's most urgent needs during periods of police violence; they also claimed space and used it in manners that contested a configuration of public and private life that those in power wanted to impose upon other groups. For social movements, geography and community matter a great deal. In the People's Park struggle there were many indicators that building the park mitigated conflicts in the area between hippies and local merchants, that it was a reform-oriented geographical fix that dissipated conflict. The Telegraph Area Concerns Committee (TACC), an establishment committee

convened in the wake of the June 1968 riots, recommended that the city build a park to take pressure off Telegraph Avenue (GTUA, Box 32, 1974). Yet, when people built their own park and filled it with life-affirming projects like a first aid station, the state responded with violence. Why, then, did a user-designed park, which had the support of reform-minded institutions, get enclosed using live ammo and chemical weapons? Here it is important to recall Mitchell's (2003) point that the university had invested in using the space to displace and undermine the white counterculture in the area. Direct social action happens in particular places. It harnesses specific modes of cooperation, and it reproduces specific groups. In each of these ways direct social action may confront and make claims upon a power structure. The People's Park struggle is one example where direct social action exploded into pitched street battles which ultimately won both a park and a free health clinic.

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