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The umbrella man: crossing a landscape of speech and silence

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**THE UMBRELLA MAN:
CROSSING A LANDSCAPE OF SPEECH AND SILENCE
NICK COULDRY**

Abstract

In a supposedly 'anti-political age' (Mulgan, 1995), the boundaries which define 'the political' are central to understanding politics, particularly when their construction is determined by wider processes of cultural exclusion (cf Honneth, 1995). This article aims to illuminate these issues by examining the 'political' and media tactics of one British social activist, known as 'the Umbrella Man', who works particularly on campaigns for old age and disability issues. In a society where symbolic power is heavily concentrated in media institutions (cf Couldry, 2000a), the actions of those who try to obtain media attention in spite of lacking the resources of media production, reveal a great deal about the normal constraints on being noticed and heard. These are explored using various concepts from cultural studies, anthropology and political sociology, including transgression, exclusion, tactics and alternative celebrity.

Keywords

Cultural exclusion; 'anti-political age'; definitions of 'the political'; symbolic conflict; transgression; media tactics; activism by the elderly and disabled; public sphere.

' a social analysis derived from Marxism must see as its task today the identification of moral conflicts connected to the social class structure which are hidden behind late capitalism's facade of integration.'

Axel Honneth, The Fragmented World of the Social (1995: 215)

'The inclination to dismiss "individual" acts of resistance and to reserve the term "resistance" for collective or organized action is misguided.'

James Scott, Weapons of the Weak (1995: 297)

Introduction

It has become a cliché of political debate in Britain and elsewhere in Europe to assert that we live in an 'anti-political' age (Mulgan, 1995), or, more positively, that we have put 'class conflict' behind us, so as to face better the challenges of the globalized economy.

Such claims no doubt connect with strategies of political control, but they are also based in serious debates, about the terms on which any critical account of society or culture can now be conducted. If political conflict has genuinely been reduced, then those who mount social critiques from the academy at least have to examine their conscience. But, as the political philosopher Axel Honneth has powerfully argued, the challenge can be reversed. What if, instead of consciousness of class-specific injustice declining, it is the means with which that consciousness can be expressed as such that have declined?

There are many possible reasons for that shift. One is what Honneth calls 'cultural exclusion', by which he means 'those strategies which limit the articulation chances of class-specific experiences of injustice by systematically withholding the appropriate and symbolic means for their expression' (1995: 213). Perhaps Honneth's phrase 'systematically withholding' implies too much intentionality, but we can still ask: is the perception of reduced political conflict, even reduced political awareness, connected with a change in the circumstances in which social and economic conflicts come to be perceived as political? Or, more modestly, is the apparent reduction in political conflict related to the conditions under which some social actors are seen as having political significance, and some are not? The issue, in other words, is where the boundary of politics' 'discursive domain' (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 60) gets drawn.

If so, there is a serious question to be researched: how do people in practice contest the boundaries of 'the political'? How is that connected to class position, education, gender,

ethnicity, and other factors? And since politics is now thoroughly mediated, how do people challenge the media processes which help reproduce particular definitions of 'the political'? We should not look only at those institutions already defined as political, or assume these questions lie safely within the province of political sociology or political theory. They are questions of importance for cultural studies and media studies, because they affect the whole field of cultural and social activity within which 'the political' is demarcated,¹ and therefore the underlying conditions of today's mediated 'public sphere' (Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 1992).

It is not only collective action that matters here. Given the massive authority to define 'the political' that is concentrated in media institutions, we would expect resistance to that authority to be scattered, often disguised. We must look across to the other side of politics, to a region that is not legitimated and lacks the implicit endorsement of collective action. There we cannot dismiss individual actions as insignificant. One reason is that, as Honneth also argues (1995: 214), it is partly through the 'individualisation' of social life that the contexts for wider injustices to be expressed as such are limited, and political activity thereby constrained. We must look at individuals who are precisely seeking collective significance for what they do, but lack the normal routes to collective action. As James Scott in his classic study of everyday peasant resistance in Malaysia pointed out (the second quotation at the head of the article), it is a mistake to dismiss individual, localized action as 'trivial' or non-political; it may be the main, or only, tool of those who are furthest from the resources of legitimate political expression.

I want to explore these large issues through a very particular story: the social and media activism of 'The Umbrella Man', so called because of the 'umbrella hats' he wears to protests (see below). (I use this symbolic name, rather than his real name, at his

request.) He is a working-class man in his 60s, living on the outskirts of London. He retired early through ill health from his job as a carpentry supervisor for a local authority. In the past decade, he has participated in many campaigns, spanning the range of activism in Britain, outside, that is, the official political process. He has been involved in countless social conflicts: from purely local campaigns (on practical measures for the elderly and the disabled, such as mobility issues), to national campaigns on specific social issues that continue earlier traditions of trade union and political activism (on hospital closures, pensioner rights, disability campaigns, and so on), to those 'direct action' campaigns connected with the environment and animal rights that have attracted intense media coverage in Britain in recent years (the protests against live animal exports in 1995, the anti-road protests at Newbury and Fairmile in 1996-7, the Pure Genius land occupation in London in 1996, the campaign against the second runway at Manchester Airport in 1997, and so on).²

A common thread throughout the Umbrella Man's activism is his attempt to find ways of attracting media coverage for causes which are not normally in the media eye, and as someone who has no connections with media organizations. His practice is, he contends, 'non-political'; in the sense of being unconnected with formal political organizations, this is true. However, the issues on which he campaigns are increasingly central to the public standing of governments in Britain and many other 'developed' countries - health provision, disability rights and benefits, pensions - and his media tactics are an intervention in the politics of media power. His practice, therefore, illustrates well the dispersal of 'politics' in an 'anti-political' age.

Royal Watcher or Social Activist?

As a way into the issues which the Umbrella Man's activism raises, consider two

newspaper fragments. The first is an ironic report in a British broadsheet on reactions to the Queen Mother's hip operation (Guardian, 27 January 1998, p. 3). Under the sub-headline 'Biggest fan answers 5 am alarm call', it wrote:

[the Royal surgeon] was assisted during the operation by two other members of the Queen's Medical Household . . . However [the Umbrella Man, 'UM'] was assisted only by his wife. She woke the veteran royal-watcher at 5am to tell him about the Queen Mother's stumble, and [he] packed his thermos at once. He travelled from his official home - a bungalow in Waltham Abbey, Essex - to the Queen Mother's official home - Clarence House, The Mall, finally arriving outside the hospital at 8.30am. "It is terrible. It's like when you worry about your own parents", he said. "We are all rooting for her to make it to 100."

The patronising tone is obvious. The echoes of stories about the Prime Minister or other dignitary being 'awakened to news' of a major disaster at his/her 'official home' and reaching the scene 'at such and such a time' (in the precisely measured time of public crises) clash with the 'banalities' of suburbia (the 'thermos', the 'bungalow'). It is implied that the 'veteran royal watcher's' seriousness is out of place, and that he too is out of place on the national stage: an 'ordinary person' seeking vicarious importance from a parasocial relationship with a royal.

Contrast this with how a local newspaper picked up part of the same story a few days later (Essex Guardian and Gazette, 19 February 1998, p. 6):

Veteran Waltham Abbey campaigner [UM] was in the thick of the action when he wedged himself under a bus, protesting for disabled people's rights . . . [UM] was part of the group DAN (Direct Action Network) . . . Messages and chants

targeted Prime Minister Tony Blair . . . [UM] said: "It was a very productive day, it was busy and I believe we achieved a lot. I think it's worth doing, it does get noticed."

Despite his busy day, [UM] found a moment to take a red rose to the Queen Mother who was still recovering from her hip operation last week . . .

This second, unpatronising, treatment puts the royalist gesture in a serious context unimaginable from the first article, a sustained practice of protest against the current British government.

I am interested in the paradoxes of a landscape of media representation that marks some people in advance as politically insignificant: how do people resist being positioned in that way? How are public selves formed, and maintained, in the large, partly obscured space where people outside media institutions and public organisations attempt to influence current events? In this article, I will concentrate on one person's practice of resistance as its details reveal indirectly some of the constraints on being heard in the contemporary mediated public sphere. The larger argument - about the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions and its impacts on social life - is one I have developed at length elsewhere (Couldry, 2000a), and is beyond the scope of this article.

I first met the Umbrella Man in June 1996 at a meeting on a council housing estate in south London, near where an illegal occupation was taking place of a proposed supermarket site owned by the international drinks conglomerate, Guinness Plc. This was the occupation (May to October 1996) ironically called 'Pure Genius' after the Guinness advertising slogan.³ The meeting had been called as part of the public inquiry into Guinness's redevelopment plans; a harassed planning inspector was in charge,

listening to local community views.

The Umbrella Man was not a local resident, but was there to express his support for the occupation and for local residents opposing the development. He was dressed in shorts, a white T-shirt covered with campaign badges, and a Union Jack hat. I discovered that he had visited the site several times, taking food and other supplies, and introducing it to old age pensioners from his area as part of a 'day out' in a local mobility bus. Later I interviewed both the Umbrella Man and some of those passengers. I discovered that supporting Pure Genius was just a small part of his (and their) activism.

I want to emphasise that my argument does not depend on claiming that the Umbrella Man's practice is representative of larger social trends in any simple sense, although, as I have already argued, we can learn a lot from individual stories.⁴ Some of what the Umbrella Man does is clearly exceptional; it is exceptional, precisely because it challenges constraints on public action that are pervasive, but normally hidden. These constraints can be traced in what the Umbrella Man does and how he talks about it. (For more detailed explanation of this type of argument, see Couldry (2000a, ch. 1)).

The Theoretical Landscape

Although this is a quite specific story, behind it lie some broader debates, and absences, in cultural studies and sociology.

The first is the terrain of symbolic action where early British cultural studies was particularly productive: the study of resistant practices of 'bricolage' and parody of elite or mass-distributed culture (Hebdige, 1979; Chambers, 1990). But we need to connect this with more recent insights into symbolic production in European political sociology,

especially in the context of the 'new social movements' (Beck, 1992; Melucci, 1989, 1996; Offe, 1985). This work has brought out the pervasiveness of symbolic conflict as a political phenomenon, particularly (as Melucci argues) in mediated consumer cultures, saturated with messages and images. In such a world, one central form of inequality is not broadly economic or social, but rather unequal access to the 'power of naming' (Melucci, 1996: 225): that is, unequal access to the media resources to define, among other things, 'the political'. The Umbrella Man's practice sits awkwardly at the boundary between 'cultural' and 'political' production, which it contests. As a result, I will argue, he has to draw on a shared context of humour and popular patriotism to make interventions, whose real message is much more provocative and political. That is one reason for his activism's apparent eccentricity and conservatism.

A connection can also be made with historical work on the everyday resistance of subordinate groups (Hobsbawm and Rude, 1972; Rude, 1980; Scott, 1985), a tradition that shares with Hebdige and Chambers' work a common origin in E. P. Thompson's pioneering studies (1968, 1971 and 1978). Interestingly, Axel Honneth also refers to this tradition (1995: 315 n3) to support his argument that there is a great deal of contestation lying disguised behind the 'control mechanisms' that limit political expression. If the tools of symbolic action are unequally shared (through the 'de-symbolization' of most people: *ibid.*: 213), then we have to look for 'politics' within the broader culture, where it may be 'forced below' into the realm of 'prepolitical privacy' (*ibid.*: 218). Honneth's essay was originally published in 1981, but it has even greater resonances now after two decades in which trade unionism and working class politics have been largely marginalized in Europe. This is the broader political context of the Umbrella Man's apparently unpolitical actions.

The Umbrella Man himself was a committed trade unionist, until ill health forced him

to retire from work prematurely at 48 in the mid 1980s. His subsequent activism, however, has coincided with the declining fortunes of trade union activism in Britain after the cataclysm of the Miners' Strike in 1984-85. Since then, there has been a resurgence of other forms of social activism (the anti-Poll Tax campaign of 1990, the anti-road protests, environmental and health-related campaigns), but these tend to be discussed in isolation from the decline of trade union activism. The Umbrella Man's career as an activist is interesting therefore because it connects the two periods of trade union activism and decline; its background is precisely the fragmentation of formal working-class solidarity predicted as early as the 1970s (Roberts et al., 1977).

When I interviewed the Umbrella Man in July 1996 and February 1997, experiences of solidarity were something to which he often returned. He had been particularly inspired by a national miners' rally in the early 1990s, held in torrential rain in central London:

The unity was fantastic, people actually shared anything and everything . . . and they were only too pleased to tell to each other where they came from, and they did come from all over the country.

The experience of solidarity and sharing was something he saw on later protests characterised by physical hardship, such as the Pure Genius occupation and the anti-roads protests up trees and down tunnels at Newbury and Fairmile. When profiled in the tabloid Sunday Express, he made a provocative connection between the solidarity of activism and wartime (or, in his case, conscripted National Service in the early 1950s):

I don't hold with criticising the young people who get involved in protest. Standing up for your beliefs is a damn sight harder than just going to work every

day to look after Number One. Life is like the Army - it's comradeship and caring about each other that really matter.

(Sunday Express, 23 February, 1997, p. 23)

I will come back to the significance of the Umbrella Man's military analogies later. His comments about solidarity are interesting in other ways. Echoing Hannerz's point that the contemporary experience of work normally generates individualism, not solidarity, he told me that it was only when he retired that he felt ready to be active in wider causes: 'where I was an ordinary person who went to work . . . I was actually working for myself and my family . . . the difference is now, as I'm retired, I've decided to help others.' And it was precisely such a sense of solidarity that, in the final year of Britain's 18-year long Conservative government, he saw threatened by the notorious Criminal Justice Act that restricted public gatherings in a draconian way: 'what this government don't want is people [to] get together. They become a threat.' The night the Criminal Justice Act became law was in his view the night when 'our rights were taken away'.

The Umbrella Man's actions, then, are effectively political, even if he has no formal links with institutional politics. His reference-points instead are broadly social. This connects with Ulrich Beck's argument (1992: 194) that 'political modernization disempowers and unbinds [official] politics and politicizes society', except that it is, in a sense, still the overwhelming concentration of political power that the Umbrella Man is, in part, contesting. The welfare state is probably the main focus of his decade of protest: pensions, National Health Service cuts, other public services (such as support for striking firemen), disability rights and disability benefits. Whether or not such campaigns are presented formally as political, their consequences clearly are political: for example, the march organized by the public service union Unison (which he attended) in North East England in April 1999, that contested the level set by the British

government for the Minimum Wage: the 'March for a Living Wage'.

There is to all this a spatial dimension. The importance of material and symbolic space to political contests, and also to the media's social impacts, have often been neglected (cf Couldry, 2000a). An alternative approach would, perhaps, begin by drawing on Michel de Certeau's work (1984) on the 'strategies' and 'tactics' of cultural production, as well as Stallybrass and White's work (1986) on transgression and marginal spaces. There are parallels also with recent symbolic geography (Cresswell, 1996; Shields, 1991; Sibley, 1995). In thinking about the space of public life, it is worth remembering David Sibley's comment that 'the human landscape' (both literally and symbolically) 'can be read as a landscape of exclusion' (ibid.: ix). What, then, is the price of contesting the landscape of media and political exclusion?

Participating in public life through media interventions means taking quite specific paths across national territory. Richard Sennett (1977) has done more than anyone to articulate the subtle links between story-telling and space. What, Sennett has asked, are the impacts - on the types of stories we can tell to each other - of the intensified regulation of public space, the reduction of so much public space to 'dead space' (1977: 12)?⁵ And if, less polemically, our strategies for dealing with contemporary urban space often involve the masking of our differences (Lofland, 1973), what individual means are available to use public space in order to project political messages that (like all politics) raise questions of difference?⁶ These issues are relevant to the Umbrella Man's actions at political and symbolic centres, such as Westminster, but also his tactics in the television studio: particularly in the new public space of television talk shows on which he regularly appears in the studio audience. Symbolic politics and the politics of media power here intersect.

I will be working, finally, against two kinds of neglect within cultural studies and much sociology. First, there has been a general neglect of cultural production that falls outside the cultural industries, or is not implicit in the consumption of cultural industry products. I mean the vast area of amateur enthusiasms and voluntary cooperation which Bishop and Hoggett (1986) have highlighted. While their work focused on pleasure and relaxation, the point could be extended to voluntary work with political implications.

There is also the neglect within media and cultural studies of the elderly, or even those in late middle age, like the Umbrella Man (61 when I first met him). Prejudice against the old is of course a wider social phenomenon (Hazan, 1994), but age has been a particular blind spot for cultural studies (cf Couldry, 2000b, Chapter Three). Yet even a superficial knowledge of social activism in 1990s Britain reveals that it is partly alliances across the age range that characterised them: for example, the protests against the live export of animals (Couldry, 2000a, chapter 7). It is a myth that only the young are at the 'forefront' of social change or conflict, and a pernicious one, that prevents us from seeing how in 'developed' nations many of the elderly too have been radicalised by harsh government treatment, a process directly related to class position (more specifically, the ability to draw on a private pension).

There are, then, a number of debates that coincide in the figure of the Umbrella Man and the 'landscape of resistance' (Scott, 1985: 48) he crosses.

Specific Themes

I have followed the Umbrella Man's public actions closely for more than three years across many different campaigns. Since most of those campaigns have received little, if

any, academic attention, there is a great deal of detail that could be discussed. I want to concentrate, however, on four themes that illustrate the range of what he does, and the constraints under which he operates: transgression, mobility, media tactics, and, finally, what I speculatively call an alternative geography of celebrity.

Transgression

One key to understanding the Umbrella Man's practice is to see the constraints under which he works. He is trying to transmit a message to those who would not ordinarily listen to him. He is intervening, in other words, in the politics of speech: who speaks and who is silent (and from where)? It in no way trivialises this point to connect it to the clothing the Umbrella Man wears for his public actions, for example the 'umbrella hats'. The umbrella hat idea originated in a joke hat bought at the seaside: a base supporting a sunshade, shaped like a small umbrella in the colours of the Union Jack flag. Each hat and the rest of his clothing worn on public events (T-shirts, placards) are covered in stickers and badges relating to particular campaigns in which he has participated in the past. In this way they are easily recognizable to camera crews and press photographers, and through them, perhaps, to a media audience.

[FIGURES 1 AND 2 NEAR HERE]

The function of these protest clothes is worth exploring in more detail. It applies even to situations when the Umbrella Man is standing in the audience for royal events. Among the waiting crowd, he often still wears his umbrella hats with their condensed references to protest activity, intending that people should read them. The late King Hussein of Jordan once spoke to him on such an occasion: 'he wanted to know why I should wear red white and blue with all the stickers and I explained to him that I highlight the campaigns that I support people with and it shows that I'm red white and

blue, I'm English'. The point of his clothes becomes clearer: he is using the conventional backcloth of 'red, white and blue' to project a message that would otherwise not be heard. He is trying to ensure that he (and the activist message he carries) are seen and read by people of higher status. This is not vanity; it connects with an acute sense of the social and class differentials that determine who is and who is not normally seen and read:

It's sad to say you don't always see the truth. Because, as I say, the camera always moves into a different direction . . . they always talk nice about the Queen and Royal Family and everything else . . . I'm not being rude, but what I'm saying is, they always show the goody-goodies, the, em, upper crust but the ordinary people . . . the only time you can gather is to wave your flag to the Queen and the King or whoever . . . (added emphasis)

The Umbrella Man through his clothing on royal occasions - its combination of conventional reference-points (nationalism, humour) and messages about specific protests - attempts to influence where the eyes of the powerful (whether individuals or cameras) move. He described to me how he dresses for actual protest actions in similar terms:

If I was dressed in clothes like this [i.e. normal casual clothes] and I was that keen to get my story over, nobody would ever listen to me. But if I stand out as an individual that represents the campaign, I'm not there just for myself, I'm there for the cause . . .

Through his clothes, then, the Umbrella Man makes himself into a readable sign of the events to which he wants to draw attention.

A similar strategy underlies the many other transgressions he makes. First of all, various actions which block the normal course of events and force attention onto the image he wants to project: for example, handcuffing himself to buses, trains or buildings. These actions are not just random gestures, but are linked directly to his concerns with issues of mobility (see next section). So, for example, in October 1996 he chained himself to an London underground train at a suburban station to draw attention to his claim that most disabled people are unable normally to board those same trains.

A second type of transgression involves crossing a controlled physical boundary: entering government buildings without permission (the Treasury, the Home Office), putting a foot across the threshold of Ten Downing Street ('just to say I've been in'), and so on. Although these actions can simply be read for their humour (playing with the boundaries of government institutions), they are usually intended to project a wider point. His unofficial entry into the Treasury on Budget day 1996 received some media coverage, as he intended: he was wearing Father Christmas uniform, adapted with flashing lights, campaign stickers and texts referring to the expected ill-treatment of pensioners in the Budget!

These transgressions are striking because they work, in part, through signals of normality. This applies not only to the Umbrella Man's clothes (whether the umbrella hat with its nationalist colours overwritten with campaign stickers and messages, or the Father Christmas uniform), but also to the account he gives of himself to the media. Here again is the passage from the short press profile in the tabloid Sunday Express (23 February 1997, p. 42):

I don't jump on every bandwagon. I study each issue to work out my opinions and I'm non-political. I don't hold with criticising the young people who get involved in protests. Standing up for your beliefs is a damn sight harder than just going to work everyday to look after Number One. Life is like the Army - it's comradeship and caring about each other that really matter.

A deliberately non-controversial framework - 'I'm non-political' - is reinforced by a consensual reference-point - army life - to make a far from uncontroversial point about protest actions: the idea that protesting is more admirable and more courageous than going to work. The newspaper condensed these tensions into a sub-headline: 'The Old Soldier Who's Still Fighting'.

It would be a great mistake to see these consensual reference-points simply as evidence of the Umbrella Man's 'conservatism', without considering their tactical role in transmitting a message, constructing a transgressive act out of non-controversial material. His comment when I interviewed him captured the ambiguity: 'today, instead of getting medals, which I don't need, I get a [campaign] badge, and that's as good as a medal.'

The Umbrella Man uses the reference-points of normality to make his transgressions readable as something more than mere 'law-breaking'. His own descriptions of his practice reflect this tension between normality and transgression directly in their language. Although he lacks any 'elaborated' language (Bernstein, 1971) to describe what he does, he expresses it effectively in other ways, particularly through adverbial phrases ('in a different way', 'in a nice way') that reappropriate words whose normal implications he wants to resist. For example, he talks of 'caus[ing] problems' or 'becom[ing] a criminal' 'in a different way'. Or: 'I always try to break the law in a nice

way'. His language is also is, in a sense, a form of transgression.

Mobility

In the 1990s Britain saw increasing social activism by disabled groups, and this has recently begun to receive national media attention with coverage, for example, of the painting of the gates of Downing Street in autumn 1997 to protest against disability benefit cuts by the new Labour government. The Umbrella Man has been very active in these campaigns and provides considerable practical assistance to disabled protesters, particularly the Direct Access Network (DAN). There have been many protests across Britain, not only on issues of benefit cuts and service cuts (such as the closure of the Centre for Independent Living in Lambeth, south London, in 1999), but also broader issues of disabled access and mobility. In April 1999 he travelled to Washington with members of DAN to join up with American disabled protesters. I mentioned earlier the Umbrella Man's chaining himself to a London underground train.

Issues of mobility have been central to the Umbrella Man's activism from the beginning. Shortly after he was forced to retire, when his own mobility was still limited, he became concerned with the numbers of elderly and disabled people in his town who were unable to leave their homes, because of lack of transport services. He organised a local mobility bus to give them days out. He has also mounted a large number of local campaigns to preserve bus and other transport services.

His links with DAN developed in the mid 1990s and are closely related to his views (already discussed) on the importance of building solidarity, as he explained to me:

I also get involved with disabled people. Disabled people . . . travel around [to

protests] because, why?, they have to support their groups. The whole idea of disabled people moving around in wheelchairs [to protests] [is] to highlight their problems in different areas . . .

Because disabled people's own mobility is restricted, it is all the more important (practically and symbolically) for them to coordinate protest actions between otherwise isolated groups around the country. These links are a major part of what the Umbrella Man does: he drives activists to sites they would not otherwise reach. This connects with Richard Sennett's idea that the way we move around public space affects what stories we are able to tell about ourselves. The story of a mobile protest is particularly powerful if told from the position of the disabled person. Equally, the story of elderly people's 'day out' at a protest action (whether for their own cause, or for others, such as the Pure Genius occupation) is significant if told from the perspective of the elderly, since it contradicts the usual assumption that elderly people are not involved in protests of any sort.

Through practical action, whether or not with media coverage, the Umbrella Man challenges the normal geography of protest; he connects areas of social life and activism that would otherwise remain separate, not perceived as part of a wider pattern. Strikingly, he sees his umbrella hat as materialising precisely this sort of connection. The umbrella hats are covered with badges and stickers, bringing together in one place references to the many campaigns across Britain in which he is involved, and informing whoever meets him of those campaigns. Given the lack of media information connecting most of those campaigns, this is far from trivial. As the Umbrella Man put it:

I've got probably hundreds of badges, different campaigns . . . And there's loads of stickers , stickers on stickers. And . . . it highlights what is what . . . And I

think in terms, that if I'm supporting the pensioners and I'm supporting the disabled people and I'm supporting the homeless, it all comes together doesn't it? . . . And what makes it come together is this [pointing to the hat]. (added emphasis)

To call this a 'geographic' practice is not an academic inflation, since it is implicit in the Umbrella Man's own language: 'the whole idea is to bring the groups together', 'I have got to move around', 'I travel where I am needed'. Not only does he have a strong sense of the importance of solidarity, he negotiates the conditions under which (in a highly dispersed and fragmented society) such solidarity can now be achieved.

[FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE]

At the same time, the Umbrella Man spends a lot of time at the key ritual centres of British political life: not only outside Buckingham Palace, but more importantly outside the Houses of Parliament and around the government departments of Whitehall. As he put it in one letter copied to me, 'I spend lots of time at the House of Commons to ensure we're not forgotten'. It is all part of being 'in the right place at the right time' (interview with author). Mobility, then, involves not only making new connections across space, but travelling to the fixed ritual centres of Britain's political life, which, of course, are also central sites of media activity, my next theme.

Media Tactics

I want now to consider the Umbrella Man's media tactics more specifically. The link between mobility and media tactics is direct, because it is by travelling to the ritual political centres and to demonstrations across the country, that the Umbrella Man has

the chance to project his message to a media audience: remember that he has no resources of media production himself. As he wrote in another letter: 'always look out on TV, you never know where I'm going to turn up'.

If we are interested in the contemporary relationship between media and politics, it is vital to consider the many types of media tactics: only in this way can we get beyond the small percentage of 'politics' in the media eye, seeing the much wider landscape of activism that is aimed at media coverage, but does not achieve it. Not receiving (deserved?) media coverage is a major issue for less fashionable campaigns, such as pensioner and disability rights. A comment from one of the many pensioner campaign magazines about a protest in Whitehall on the day the Blair government announced its pension reform package in early 1998 captures this tension:

. . . with all this magnificent show of pensioner power and despite the TV cameras and journalists present - not a word in the media except for one captioned photograph in the next day's *Times*, and some very brief glimpses of a small section of the lobby queue on the main television news channels.

Essex Pensioner Summer 1998, issue 8, p. 5

In spite of their appearance of playfulness, humour and (English!) eccentricity, it became clear to me from studying the Umbrella Man's actions, that they are a well developed form of media 'tactics' (in de Certeau's (1984) sense), designed precisely to combat the difficulties of an 'ordinary person' obtaining media coverage.⁷ The Umbrella Man's principal media tactic is to insert himself within the frame of larger events or spaces which are already likely to receive media interest, in order to become readable by the media. He achieves this, first, by performing actions that are 'outrageous' and, second, as we have already seen, by wearing particular clothes. It

helps, however, if he can do all this within the context of some larger story that is already guaranteed media attention.

That is why many of his actions take place near Parliament, especially on major media days such as Budget Day. Those spaces provide a narrative context within which his actions may get 'picked up' (his own phrase). Here he describes his entry into the Treasury Department on Budget Day 1996 wearing Father Christmas uniform:

I made a beeline for the Treasury Department. And what was good about it was, he [the Chancellor of the Exchequer] didn't turn up, so we went in after him . . . And it must have been , whether it was luck or whatever, but the TV cameras came running down to Treasury Department and by the time I'd got inside the door, as normal security came after me and politely pushed me out the door, yeh? And what was good about it was, when the cameras were there in front of them, they ran back in because they don't like to be seen on the door with Father Christmas . . . I've got my sack, my hat and all those boards . . . and this went all over the world.

The conventional Father Christmas uniform (a source of automatic, uncontroversial humour) made him ready material for the television cameras already present to cover the Budget announcement. Once again, his aim was to ensure he was read not as an individual but as the representative of a cause. As he put it elsewhere in the interview, 'we attract the camera for the others'. If he stood there as an individual, he implies, he would be ignored - just another 'ordinary' bystander to important national events. His actions are therefore a reaction to necessity. This suggests a wider, but little studied, topic: how are people outside institutional politics now using media tactics as an instrument of symbolic conflict in Alberto Melucci's sense, the tactics of the amateur

photo-opportunity.⁸

These actions are not just 'antics'. The Umbrella Man is well aware of media stereotyping, and resists it, using the resources at hand (including his status as an ex-soldier, already mentioned):

I'm one of the old soldiers who's got a clean nose . . . but I support the elderly and the young people. But I do believe . . . me being there helps them. Because they can't call me a thug or a bully or out of work . . . because they tend to paint people with a brush and then they push them aside. Well they can't do that to me.

For the same reason (his awareness of stereotyping), he is equally ready to adapt his normal practice, when the conditions of media coverage alter: for example, when he appears as an individual 'ordinary person' on a television talk show or discussion programme (such as as Kilroy, Question Time). He is well aware that in this setting, because of those programme's exclusive interest in individualising general issues - yet marginalizing the eccentric - it is crucial to appear 'normal' in order to get points across: 'being part of the audience, I always dress pretty smart so I look normal'. But his aim, as elsewhere, is to contribute to a campaign and get beyond an individual persona:

if you're fighting a cause, you should be allowed to have a few words to say what you're fighting for. And I mean, to talk about yourself on the telly is not worth being there really, it's what you're standing for . . . you're speaking for the people, the real people really.

An Alternative Geography of Celebrity

Just as the Umbrella Man's transgressions have to work within the geography of our dispersed social world (its ritual centres, its potential connections), so his media tactics suggest an alternative geography of the media. The media (Couldry, 2000a), involve not only the transmission of messages across space, but a geographical concentration of symbolic production in certain places, rather than others. Celebrity is directly related to this spatial concentration of media activity.⁹ An alternative geography of celebrity might develop in two ways: first, by attempting to draw the cameras to different types of place and person; or second, by appearing in spaces where the cameras are already present, in order to project an alternative type of person within existing media narratives.

Some of the Umbrella Man's protest actions take the first approach: for example, chaining himself to a tube train at a suburban station did obtain a small amount of television coverage (on local news reports) for an issue (disability access) that is rarely represented in the media. He has also been involved (although only through providing practical and moral support) in protest actions by others which drew large numbers of cameras away from the normal political 'centres', for example the anti-roads protest encampments at Newbury. Another example would be the Umbrella Man's participation in 1996 in digging up the palatial garden of the then Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine for a campaign against open-cast mining. As one woman I interviewed in another context commented on national press coverage of this incident (Daily Mail 22 October 1996, p. 13): 'it's funny when you pick up national newspapers and see people you know in there digging holes in people's gardens'. The potential impact of such media appearances can only be appreciated against their normal background: the fact that when most people watch or read the news, it never involves anyone they know, or are likely to know! The news is 'another world' (cf Edelman,

1988: 35). The Umbrella Man is well aware of this - his experience through most of his life has been no different - which gives a meaning to his media appearances that is not mere exhibitionism:

. . . I'm making the most of what I can do. And I think it actually gets home, they say, 'Oh, saw you on the telly'. It's not me they saw, they saw what I represent and it gives them hope.

Much of the time, however, the Umbrella Man challenges celebrity in the second way mentioned above: he uses existing media narratives as a framework in which he can insert himself, in order to project his causes. I have already discussed his actions at the centres of political action (such as Westminster). The same applies to his following of media celebrities, such as television personalities and sportspeople. It is clear both that he is fascinated by celebrity and that he sees a tactical advantage in associating himself with it. He claims to be increasingly known to celebrities and politicians, and when a significant meeting occurs, sometimes passes on this information to the local press as a way of maintaining his profile as a campaigner. Hence, local newspaper reports of his trips outside Buckingham Palace to see the Queen Mother, his various meetings with television personalities on protests, or the occasion when a Japanese television crew covered his protest outside Parliament on Budget Day, 1998 and then did a wider report on his activism.

It is easy of course to dismiss such small stories; for some, they will seem like the small change of provincial news, where news demand outstrips supply. I am not for a moment using them as evidence of the wider 'effects' of the Umbrella Man's tactics, although it is worth remembering that the Umbrella Man has received a profile in the national press (see above). They are evidence rather of a different process: the continual

small-scale battles along the borderlines of celebrity and media power. Each local report crucially referred to the Umbrella Man as a campaigner for pensioners rights; the 'celebrity' storyline therefore kept alive another story about activism, against the grain of normal media storylines. But, as with the whole of the Umbrella Man's practice, his causes are precariously poised between a temporary promise of speaking and a long-term condition of silence:

Somewhere along the line I do get the papers [in which he has been featured] posted to me . . . It's the feedback . . . I think it's important to know the feedback on the result that you got. And . . . you can show other people what the outcome is, otherwise it's just word to mouth and you don't know really.

In a world where, for most people, media attention - being publicly listened to - is extremely scarce, tactical challenges to that inequality are inevitably local; they work along the border zones of media geography, playing with its boundaries and rituals of exclusion. de Certeau in his reflections on tactical play put it well: the tactician must 'insinuate[] [him]self into the other's place . . . without being able to keep it at a distance' (1984: xix). These tactics of the media world are all too easily obscured or ignored. As Dick Hebdige famously put it, it is a matter of discovering those who are 'hiding in the light' (1988): hidden from us by the glare of media productions, caught up within the supposedly central narratives of our age.

Conclusion

Before we can understand the politics of an anti-political age, we have to understand the wider forces that shape who and what gets defined as 'political'. We have to grasp the mechanisms through which many people are excluded from existing political

cultures and their mediated forms. Cultural studies is well placed to open up these issues, particularly if it connects with recent European work in political sociology and symbolic geography. This is what I have tried to do in drawing out the implications of the Umbrella Man's highly individual 'political' practice.

The Umbrella Man has had many successes. It is perhaps no accident that, following his many local campaigns, on health, transport and other issues, the local authority in his home town has begun to describe itself as 'a campaigning council' (Essex Guardian and Gazette, 23 July 1998, p. 7). The Umbrella Man has also been involved in effective national campaigns, particularly on issues of disability, where for example the protests outside Downing Street's gates and the entrance to the Houses of Parliament have helped put disability benefit cuts onto the national front pages.

My argument, however, does not depend on such a balance-sheet of success and failure; it is not a question of 'effects'. The point has been to illustrate - here from one case only, but potentially from many more - how the immense concentration of symbolic power in contemporary societies shapes the actions of those outside the 'centres', whether of media power or political power or both. The story has not simply been one of reproducing inequality, but one of contestation and humour, a continuing struggle on unequal terms.

I raised at the beginning questions about how people's position in such struggles are affected by broad social variables: class, education, gender and so on. Clearly, to develop systematically such large-scale connections would require a much larger programme of empirical work, and this is a project for the future. It would be interesting also to discuss at greater length the extent to which in the mediated public sphere individual actions can sometimes make connections on a larger scale than would

be possible without mediation: the balance-sheet of media power is complex (cf Corrner, 1995), and I have tended to focus on its hidden negatives, rather than its potential positives. The Umbrella Man's case remains, however, suggestive of what a close attention to individuals' media tactics can achieve.

During his struggle, the Umbrella Man's relationship to the media has changed. Before, he told me, he read the paper only occasionally and watched little television: he was in a sense alienated from the media. Now, he says, he is too busy to read or watch much, unless he, or his causes, are covered. His media consumption in quantitative terms may not have increased, but he has become a different type of media non-consumer, someone active within, or at least on the borders of, media production.

He has made, then, a journey across the uneven landscape on which politics and media narratives are constructed. Such journeys are normally obscured behind the constructed facade of 'the events of the day'. They give us an insight into the processes of inclusion and exclusion that underlie our present politics, and its absences.

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Endnotes

¹ Here I am reviving a line of argument from earlier cultural studies: notably Hall (1977) and Stallybrass and White (1986).

² For more general background, see Couldry (2000a: Part Three, Introduction) and McKay (1996).

³ For more analysis of that event, see Couldry (2000a: ch. 8) and Featherstone (1996).

⁴ See more generally Steedman (1986), Bourdieu (1993) and for discussion Couldry (2000b, ch. 3).

⁵ This process is of course gendered (Valentine, 1989), although I will not focus on gender issues here.

⁶ A similar issue arises also in relation to public art (cf Couldry, 1995; Hebdige, 1993). Public art, however, is almost always recognised as an exclusive discourse with special (even if limited) rights; the public artist has an institutional licence which someone trying to make an individual stand in public space on a social issue rarely has.

⁷ On the construction of 'the ordinary person' versus the 'media person', see Couldry (2000a, ch. 3).

⁸ One example would be actions aimed at the cameras by 'ordinary' shareholders outside general meetings of large corporations, a topic I intend to write about elsewhere.

⁹ Cf Couldry (1999) on 'the geography of celebrity' in the events following the death of Princess Diana.

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FIGURES

Figure 1 The Umbrella Man posing for press photographers outside the House of Commons, Budget Day, November 1998 (photo by author)

Figure 2 Wearing miner's helmet at a fast in protest at live animal exports, Essex, October 1996 (photo by author)

Figure 3 A photo-opportunity with Kenneth Clarke, Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer at Westminster (Financial Times 7 December 1994, reprinted with permission)

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