

# Observatoire de la société britannique

11 (2011)

Londres : capitale internationale, multiculturelle et olympique

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Jeremy Tranmer

## London: a capital of protest politics

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### Référence électronique

Jeremy Tranmer, « London: a capital of protest politics », *Observatoire de la société britannique* [En ligne], 11 | 2011, mis en ligne le 01 août 2012, consulté le 08 octobre 2013. URL : <http://osb.revues.org/1272> ; DOI : 10.4000/osb.1272

Éditeur : Université du Sud-Toulon-Var

<http://osb.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document accessible en ligne sur :

<http://osb.revues.org/1272>

Document généré automatiquement le 08 octobre 2013. La pagination ne correspond pas à la pagination de l'édition papier.

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Jeremy Tranmer

## London: a capital of protest politics

Pagination de l'édition papier : p. 177-190

### Introduction

- 1 London is one of the main centres of international financial transactions and is at the heart of capitalist globalization. Yet, as befits the city where Marx wrote *Capital*, Russian anarchists plotted against the Tsar, and Lenin penned newspaper articles, it is also a capital of protest politics. However, demonstrations in the United Kingdom have received relatively little attention and have rarely been the focus of serious study<sup>1</sup>. The 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 strengthened the authority of Parliament. Since then, the centrality of Parliament to British politics has never been seriously threatened by a revolutionary upsurge legitimizing extra-parliamentary activity. The British labour movement has always been predominantly reformist, concentrating on improving the position of the working class within the existing political and economic structures. There was therefore nothing similar to the attempts to create Soviets in other European capitals, such as Berlin, following the Russian Revolution. Consequently, the dominant narratives of British history tend to concentrate on parliamentary politics, an emphasis strengthened by the top-down versions of history adopted by many orthodox historians.
- 2 Seen from a French perspective, a study of demonstrations in London may seem rather surprising. As a result of the French Revolution, street protests are a standard form of political activity used by both the left and right, and are an integral part of the political process. France has also experienced other types of non-parliamentary political action such as the *Commune de Paris*. Moreover, statistically speaking, there are fewer demonstrations in the United Kingdom than in France and fewer people attend them<sup>2</sup>. The different status of demonstrations in the two countries is clearly recognized in the United Kingdom. A headline in the *Independent* newspaper in December 2010, proclaimed: "Student leader urges 'French-style resistance' " in the struggle against government cuts."<sup>3</sup> Demonstrators on the first student march in London on November 10, 2010 also chanted the French slogan "tous ensemble, tous ensemble"<sup>4</sup>.
- 3 In fact, London has been the scene of important demonstrations from the time of the Chartists and their campaign for political reform to the present day<sup>5</sup>. In the nineteenth century, demonstrations were a more common sight in London than in other European cities as Britain's political regime was, relatively speaking, more liberal than that of its neighbours. As a result, the forms taken by public political activity in Britain became models for the rest of Europe. One instance of this is the use of the word 'meeting' in several other languages.
- 4 This article will give several examples to show that London, for obvious reasons, has a history of street demonstrations and will suggest that many of them display marked similarities as they have involved almost identical routes. It will then examine changes in demonstrations that have taken place in the recent past, using the annual May Day demonstration as a case study. It will conclude that, from the late 1990s onwards, new forms of action have had a significant impact on London's geography of protest.

### Demonstrations in London

- 5 Before examining individual demonstrations, it is important to remember why protests are held in London. It is partly due to the centralized nature of the United Kingdom. The country's main political, administrative and financial institutions (namely the Houses of Parliament, Whitehall and the City of London) are located there. As a result, demonstrations against government policy are organized there rather than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Other countries also have embassies in London, providing a target for those who wish to protest against the activities of a particular foreign government. Furthermore, most, if not all, radical organizations have an active presence there due to the size of the capital's population. It is

- therefore easier to mobilize significant numbers of activists, who tend to form the backbone of many demonstrations, in the capital than in provincial cities. It is also relatively simple to travel to London using public or private transport, allowing easy access for people who live elsewhere. As a result, demonstrations are easier to organize in London than elsewhere and attract higher numbers of participants, achieving greater visibility and gaining more attention.
- 6 It would, of course, be impossible to give an exhaustive list of demonstrations in London, but it would be useful to mention some of the more significant ones. In April 1848 the Chartists organized a demonstration at Kennington Common to demand political reform, including the broadening of the franchise. Held at a time of revolutionary upheaval in much of Europe, the demonstration struck at the heart of the British establishment which feared that it might spark off an insurrection. In fact, it attracted a smaller crowd than expected (estimates varied from 15 000 to 300 000<sup>6</sup>), partly as the police prevented marchers from other parts of London from reaching Kennington Common, and marked the beginning of the end of Chartism as a major force. In November 1887, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police imposed a ban on meetings in Trafalgar Square following a number of demonstrations of unemployed workers<sup>7</sup>. The decision was opposed by the left which was afraid of losing a major venue for public activities. It reacted by transforming a planned demonstration concerning the treatment in prison of an Irish MP into a protest against the ban. Several marches from various parts of London aimed to converge on Trafalgar Square, but they were attacked by the police on the way<sup>8</sup>. A group of protesters who had managed to arrive at the Square were violently repelled from Nelson's Column by the police. Three died, and two hundred were injured. The day went down in left-wing folklore as 'Bloody Sunday'.
- 7 In the 1930s, the East End of London was the focus of numerous anti-fascist demonstrations<sup>9</sup>. The best-known is the 'Battle of Cable Street' which took place in October 1936<sup>10</sup>. The British Union of Fascists (BUF), led by Oswald Mosley, announced that it planned to march through a predominantly Jewish area of the East End. This decision was deemed to be provocative by local residents who, aided by members of the Communist Party in particular, attempted to mobilize anti-fascists opinion across London and to organize a counter-demonstration. Over 300 000 people heeded their call and thronged the streets of East London. Barricades were erected, and violent clashes erupted between protesters and the police, who had hoped to be able to escort the BUF to their destination. However, the determination and sheer number of the anti-fascists forced the police to call off the march. Skirmishes between the extreme right and their opponents continued in the following years.
- 8 The post-war period has seen demonstrations against the Anglo-French military attempt to take over the Suez Canal in Egypt in 1956, as well as the first rallies by the newly-formed Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. From the late 1950s onwards, members and sympathisers of the latter gathered in Trafalgar Square before embarking on their annual march to the Aldermaston military base to protest against nuclear weapons<sup>11</sup>. Anti-war feeling reappeared in the late 1960s when the radical left protested against the American military presence in Vietnam and Harold Wilson's Labour government's refusal to firmly condemn it. In March 1968, 100 000 protestors converged on Trafalgar Square in the largest show of force the revolutionary left has ever been able to muster in the United Kingdom<sup>12</sup>. A significant number of them then marched to Grosvenor Square and attempted to storm the American embassy.
- 9 From the mid to late- 1970s, London saw numerous protests against marches or public meetings organized by the far-right National Front. In 1974, protestors congregated at Red Lion Square with the intention of preventing a National Front public meeting from taking place. The subsequent clashes with the police resulted in the death of Kevin Gately, one of the demonstrators. Three years later, militant anti-fascists disrupted a National Front march in Lewisham<sup>13</sup>. In 1979, a demonstration against a far-right meeting in Southall ended in tragedy when an anti-fascist, Blair Peach, died from a blow to the head delivered by a policeman<sup>14</sup>. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, there was also opposition to racism abroad with frequent demonstrations against apartheid held in front of the South African embassy at Trafalgar Square.

- 10 The numerous protests against the Thatcher governments culminated in the 1990 national demonstration against the Poll Tax<sup>15</sup>. Approximately 200 000 people marched from Kennington Park to Trafalgar Square to demand the abolition of the tax. Violence between police and protestors broke out in circumstances which are still unclear, and looting occurred in the West End<sup>16</sup>. Protests against the Conservatives continued in the following decade with, for example, a rally in Hyde Park in October 1994 against the Criminal Justice bill<sup>17</sup>. All the demonstrations mentioned above were associated directly or indirectly with the left. However, the 2002 ‘March for Liberty and Livelihood’ was organized by the Countryside Alliance, a conservative grouping committed to preserving traditional lifestyles and practices in the country, including fox-hunting. About 400 000 demonstrators converged on Westminster from a number of starting points including Hyde Park. At the time, it was the largest demonstration in British history<sup>18</sup>. Yet a few months later the record fell, when demonstrations against British involvement in the war in Iraq culminated in the protest of February 15, 2003 when between one and two million people took to the streets of London, marching from Piccadilly Circus to Hyde Park. More recently, two student demonstrations were held in November 2010, during the first of which students forced their way into the Conservative Party headquarters and onto the roof of the building. London has also been the setting of international events, including the protests against the 2009 G20 summit which saw demonstrators converge on the capital from all over Europe.
- 11 The demonstrations mentioned above are only a short selection of the more important demonstrations that have taken place in London since the middle of the nineteenth century. What many of them have in common is the route that they took. Many of them started in Hyde Park, Piccadilly Square or Kennington Park and ended in Trafalgar Square. Some did the opposite, starting in Trafalgar Square and finishing in Hyde Park, for example. The existence of traditional routes can be seen quite clearly if the annual May Day march is taken as an example. May Day demonstrations in London attract far fewer people than in other European capitals (in general, well under 10 000<sup>19</sup>). Nevertheless, the march has existed since 1890, and is an important date on the London left’s calendar<sup>20</sup>. A symbol of working class solidarity, it is organized by the London May Day Organising Committee, that is to say various labour movement bodies including the Greater London Area of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Southern and Eastern Regions of the TUC. Every year, it follows the same route, going from Clerkenwell to Trafalgar Square.
- 12 These traditional routes exist for practical and symbolic reasons. Demonstrations attracting large numbers of people need to start and finish in places capable of holding large crowds without endangering people’s safety. Obviously if there are too many people in a small space, there is the danger that some might panic and could be crushed or trampled, leading to serious injury or even death. The number of suitable places in the centre of London is relatively limited. During the nineteenth century, many traditional rallying points, such as commons, were covered by housing or factories, complicating matters further. Hyde Park remained a “protest ground of choice”<sup>21</sup>, since it is close to Westminster and to the prosperous West End. The transformation of the area around Charing Cross and the redevelopment of Trafalgar Square as a tribute to Lord Nelson in the 1830s and 1840s created new possibilities for demonstrations. “Trafalgar Square constituted not merely a new open space for protest but become *the* open space for radical debate, right next to Westminster”<sup>22</sup>. It was first used as a rallying point in 1848, although, as mentioned above, the authorities temporarily tried to limit its use for political purposes in the 1880s. For practical reasons alone, it is therefore hardly surprising that Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square are venues for many demonstrations.
- 13 Some places are important symbolically because of their history. Kennington Park has been the scene of radical working class activity since the early 1830s. Moreover, the important Chartist demonstration of 1848 was held in Kennington Park, hence the decision by Poll Tax protestors to start their demonstration there. Clerkenwell has a radical tradition, from Wat Tyler’s Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, through to Chartist demonstrations in the 1840s, meetings of Karl Marx’s International Working Men’s Association and Fenian protests during the second

half of the nineteenth century<sup>23</sup>. In the early twentieth century Lenin wrote editorials for the *Iskra* newspaper in the building that is now the home of the Marx Memorial Library. As a result, Clerkenwell is an obvious place for the May Day demonstration to start as it allows the organisers to present themselves as the natural successors of previous generations of activists and to present current day struggles as part of a longer fight against oppression. In other words, the connection with a particular part of London gives them a certain legitimacy.

## The changing geography of protest

- 14 Something that is quite striking is the emergence in recent years of an alternative geography of protest, alongside the traditional one mentioned above. It has often been linked to the rise of anti-globalization politics in the United Kingdom<sup>24</sup>. The first such demonstration took place on 18 June 1999 and was officially known as the ‘Global Carnival Against Capital’ (although many called it the ‘Carnival Against Capitalism’ or simply ‘J18’). In the morning, a variety of actions were undertaken including a mass bicycle ride through the City of London. In the afternoon protestors gathered at Liverpool Street Station from where five separate marches set off, before converging on the London International Financial Futures and Options Exchange in the City. An estimated 5000 people were present, attempting to occupy and disrupt it. Six months later, a protest to coincide with the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle was organized near Euston Station<sup>25</sup>. On 1 April 2009 the ‘G20 Meltdown’ was held when four different marches converged on the Bank of England in the City to celebrate ‘Financial Fools Day’ – one bystander, Ian Tomlinson, later died after being struck by a policeman.
- 15 The appearance of this new geography can be seen most clearly by concentrating on May Day. In addition to the traditional march from Clerkenwell to Trafalgar Square, other activities in different places have occurred in recent years<sup>26</sup>. For May Day 2000, protestors took part in ‘Guerrilla gardening’ at Parliament Square, planting fruit and vegetables there (although the day is best remembered for the green turf Mohican that someone put on the statue of Winston Churchill). The following year saw protestors play what they called ‘May Day Monopoly’ involving protests in numerous parts of London, in front of banks and shops. In the afternoon a thousand protestors gathered in Oxford Street, following sit-down protests outside various shops including H&M and Niketown, and were hemmed in at Oxford Circus by the police for several hours<sup>27</sup>. In 2002, May Day activities began with two mass cycle rides from Camden and Camberwell Green through the City and were later concentrated in Mayfair. In 2005, demonstrators invaded a Tesco’s supermarket in Hackney. In 2007, a street party was organized in the business district of Canary Wharf. The following year, various protests took place in Mayfair again, and in 2009 the City was the venue of a variety of activities including a street party outside the Bank of England.
- 16 It is therefore tempting to see the Carnival Against Capital as the starting point of this new wave of protest. However, it is a slightly misleading interpretation which perhaps gives too much importance to certain anti-globalization activists. Another potential starting point would be the ‘Stop the City’ events of 1983 and 1984 (which were officially billed as ‘Carnival against War, Oppression and Destruction’)<sup>28</sup>. Up to 3000 people blocked the streets of the City bringing it to a standstill. In 1984 and 1985 ‘Bash the Rich’ marches were organized in the wealthier areas of London such as Kensington, Henley and Hampstead<sup>29</sup>. Since the early 1990s, the Reclaim the Streets group has organized street parties, blocking traffic in Camden, Islington, Shepherd’s Bush, Brixton and Seven Sisters, to give but a few examples<sup>30</sup>.
- 17 Politically, the changes in protest activities have to be linked to the reappearance of anarchism, as well as its direct and indirect influence over new protest movements. The Class War group played an important role in the Stop the City and Bash the Rich activities<sup>31</sup>. Although the Reclaim The Streets movement was originally created by radical environmentalists in 1991, it quickly attracted anarchists who pushed it towards adopting overtly anti-capitalist actions and positions. Many of the May Day actions were organized by anarchists who have often also formed what they term an ‘autonomous bloc’ on the official march. Why have anarchists managed to influence anti-capitalism and anti-globalization? The first reason is the decline of the traditional left, both in its reformist or revolutionary varieties. It is important to remember

that, from the mid-1980s, the Labour Party adopted an increasingly moderate orientation, and that between 1997 and 2010 the United Kingdom was governed by what were arguably the most right-wing Labour governments the country had ever had. Nevertheless, the Labour governments were still supported by the trade union movement as a whole. At the same time, parties such as the Socialist Workers Party or the Socialist Party were unable to develop a credible alternative, creating a political and ideological window for other groups with different philosophies. Consequently, it is not surprising that the 1990s saw the spread of so-called 'Do It Yourself' politics based on direct action, such as the attempts to prevent the building of the M3 motorway in Twyford Down, Hampshire<sup>32</sup>. New forms of communication such as the internet and mobile phones were particularly conducive to direct action making it easier for activists to coordinate activities. New forms of protest were also validated in the eyes of some activists by the failure of more orthodox demonstrations to have an impact on government policy and prevent the war in Iraq, for example. Consequently, more radical methods based on creating disruption and chaos were more attractive to some sections of activists. Finally, the imagination shown by some anarchists in inventing new forms of protest, often with festive aspects, or giving new life to older forms of protest, such as May Day, has given them access to a wider constituency.

18 It should be clear that there has been a diversification of protest activities in London in the recent past, reflecting broader changes in radical politics. What does this mean in terms of geographies of protest? Traditional spaces of protest still exist. They were chosen for practical reasons and are related symbolically to the struggle against industrial capitalism. Some of the protest that take place there almost blend into the background, as people are not surprised to see them. New spaces have appeared that are linked to struggles against corporate, consumer and financial capitalism. As a result, there has been an overall expansion of the space of protest, which has spread out beyond the areas where demonstrations habitually take place. Although the City has clearly become a main pole attraction for demonstrators and is a focal point in the new geography of protest, it is difficult to accurately map out a new geography since it is fluid and unpredictable. Any area of London with financial institutions and shopping outlets is a potential target for protest. To a certain extent, this raises the question of the division of space in the capital. By breaking out of the traditional confines of demonstrations, protestors are challenging the organization of London and its division into different areas with different functions. By demonstrating festively in the City and in various shopping areas, protestors are suggesting that the normal usage of these areas is not inevitable and that they can be put to other uses not imposed by financial or corporate capital. Although there is no coherent, unified plan of an alternative London, there is a utopian, libertarian vision of a city which is controlled and run by its inhabitants according to their needs and desires rather than for economic imperatives.

## Conclusion

19 Changes in political forces and political culture have led to the emergence of a new geography of protest in London, which exists in parallel to a more traditional geography. While the latter is established and relatively rigid, the former is an on-going process, which is far from finished and is an attempt to challenge the division of space in London. However, given the relatively small numbers involved and the sporadic nature of the new forms of protest, this challenge will probably remain symbolic. Another London may be possible, but it is unlikely to see the light of day in the foreseeable future.

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## Notes

- 1 This article will accept the basic definition of a demonstration given by Olivier Fillieule and Danielle Tartakowski. According to them, a demonstration has four characteristics: the temporary occupation of space, the creation of a group, a collective dimension, and the expression of political or social demands. Fillieule, O. and Tartakowski, D., *La Manifestation*, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2008, p.168-174.
- 2 Fillieule, O. and Tartakowski, *ibid*, p.15-16.
- 3 "Student leader urges 'French-style resistance'", *Independent*, 12/11/2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/student-leader-urges-frenchstyle-resistance-2131897.html> (accessed 20 November 2010).
- 4 "Video – students and lecturers all together!", *Socialist Worker*, 13/11/2010, <http://socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=23023> (accessed 4 December 2010). It is highly likely that the chant was 'imported' to the United Kingdom by anti-globalization protestors who attended the European Social Forum in Paris in 2003 and participated in demonstrations during their stay.
- 5 This is not to suggest that demonstrations in London began in the late 1830s. However, Chartism, named after the Charter of political demands the organization defended, was the first modern mass political campaign in British history and is, as such, a convenient starting point.
- 6 Controversy surrounding the number of people present at demonstrations is hardly a recent phenomenon!
- 7 Thompson, E.P., *William Morris. From Romantic to Revolutionary*, Merlin Press, 1996 (1955), p. 488.

- 8 For an account of the events, see Herson, I., *Riot! Civil Insurrection from Peterloo to the Present Day*, Pluto, 2006, p. 109-113.
- 9 The extreme right has constantly targeted the East End due to the presence of ethnic communities there (for example, Asians after the 1950s). Consequently, the area has witnessed a large number of anti-racist and anti-fascist initiatives, ranging from marches to open-air concerts. For a general overview of British anti-fascism, see Copey, N., *Anti-fascism in Britain*, Palgrave, 2000.
- 10 See Branson, N., *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927-1941*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1985, p. 162-168.
- 11 See Hudson, K., *CND. Now More Than Ever. The Story of a Peace Movement*, Vision, 2005, p. 55-61.
- 12 For an account of the demonstration by one of the organizers, see Ali, T., *Street Fighting Years. An Autobiography of the Sixties*, Verso, 2005, p. 251-257.
- 13 The Lewisham demonstration was especially significant since it received widespread media coverage, and led to the creation of the Anti-Nazi League, one of the most successful social movements of the decade. See Renton, D., *When We Touched the Sky. The Anti-Nazi League 1977-1981*, New Clarion Press, 2006, p. 51-73.
- 14 “Blair Peach killed by police at 1979 protest, Met report finds”, *Guardian*, 27/04/2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/apr/27/blair-peach-killed-police-met-report> (accessed 10 February 2011)
- 15 The Poll Tax, or Community Charge as it was officially known, was a flat-rate local tax introduced in Scotland in 1989 and in England and Wales the following year. It was hotly contested throughout the United Kingdom, and thousands of people broke the law by refusing to pay it.
- 16 For a detailed account of the demonstration and the incidents that followed it, see Burns, D., *Poll Tax Rebellion*, AK Press, 1992, p. 87-104.
- 17 The Criminal Justice bill, which became law in 1994, was particularly controversial since it made rave parties and anti-roads protests illegal.
- 18 Bloom, C., *Violent London*, Sidgwick & Jackson, 2003, p. 522.
- 19 Fewer than in some provincial towns in France, confirming the cultural difference between the two countries regarding demonstrations. However, it must be borne in mind that May Day is not a bank holiday in the United Kingdom. Consequently, workers wishing to attend the demonstration are obliged to take a day off work. This may be a factor limiting the number of people present.
- 20 Although some isolated May Day activities were organized as early as the late 1880s. <http://www.glatuc.org.uk/maydayhistory.php> (accessed 10 February 2011)
- 21 Bloom C., *op cit*, p. 225.
- 22 Bloom C., *op cit*, p. 226.
- 23 An overview of the radical history of Clerkenwell can be found in the following pamphlet, Fagin, *Reds On The Green - A Short Tour of Clerkenwell Radicalism*, <http://libcom.org/library/reds-green-short-tour-clerkenwell-radicalism> (accessed 12 February 2011). See also Ackroyd, P., *London. The Biography*, Chatto & Windus, 2000, p. 461-474.
- 24 The British anti-capitalist movement has two main activist components – the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its sympathizers on the one hand, and various anarchist groups on the other – which do not always see eye to eye. The latter dates the rise of anti-capitalism in the United Kingdom to the Global Carnival Against Capital of 1999 (Carter, J. and Morland, D., “Anti-Capitalism: Are We All Anarchists Now?”, in Carter, J. and Morland, D. (eds), *Anti-Capitalist Britain*, New Clarion Press, 2004, p. 9), while the former tends to downgrade it (Bircham E. and Charlton J., *Anti-capitalism. A Guide to the Movement*, Bookmarks, 2001, p. 340-341). Without wanting to take sides politically, it would appear that the Carnival Against Capital was the first major event in London of a new wave of activities. Nevertheless, the 50,000-strong protest in Birmingham against the 1998 G8 summit was the very first protest of its type in the United Kingdom.
- 25 The ‘Battle of Seattle’, when police were overwhelmed by the number of demonstrators and their determination, is often seen as the start of anti-globalization as an international movement.
- 26 For a brief presentation of events at the turn of the century, see Herson I., *op cit*, p. 256-261. See also <http://www.urban75.org/mayday/index1.html> (accessed 12 February 2011).
- 27 A controversial form of crowd-control known as ‘kettling’.
- 28 Bone, I., *Bash the rich. True-life confessions of an Anarchist in the UK*, Tangent Books, 2006, p. 153-154.
- 29 Bone, I., *ibid*, p. 202-205.
- 30 Reclaim The Streets defines itself as “A direct action network for global and local social-ecological revolution (s) to transcend hierarchical and authoritarian society, (capitalism included), and still be home in time for tea.” <http://rts.gn.apc.org/> (accessed 12 February 2011).



31 Class War was founded in 1983 by Ian Bone. Although only a small group, it made a name for itself largely thanks to the biting humour of its eponymous newspaper.

32 McKay, G., *Senseless Acts of Beauty. Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties*, Verso, 1996, p. 134-158.

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### ***Pour citer cet article***

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#### Référence papier

Jeremy Tranmer, « London: a capital of protest politics », *Observatoire de la société britannique*, 11 | 2011, 177-190.

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### ***Résumé***

It is sometimes forgotten that London has been the scene of numerous demonstrations, from the Chartists in the 1830s and 1840s to students in November 2010. Many of these demonstrations are quite similar since they follow the same route, often including Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park, for example. However, it will be suggested that new routes have appeared in recent years, modifying London's geography of protest. This change is due mainly to the spreading of anarchist-inspired ideas concerning direct action. The new geography of protest is unpredictable and questions the traditional division of space in the capital.

### ***Entrées d'index***

**Keywords** : anarchism, anti-globalization, demonstration, geography of protest, labour movement, march, May Day, protest politics