Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

Squatters' wrongs [1]

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Squatting in London seems to be on the rise, with a spate of high profile cases [3] including the occupation of a building owned by Guy Ritchie. Out of curiosity, I visited one. The walls outside were plastered with posters denouncing capitalism and calling for an end to public sector cuts. Inside, I found a group of largely courteous, well-educated and well-dressed students living in musty but comfortable conditions. I had expected people struggling to get by and occupying someone else's property as a last resort, but the iPods and laptops suggested otherwise.

These squatters were well-organised and seemed to be very aware of the law. They had been there before, been evicted, and returned after some months to find the place totally untouched: "It was surreal, like some sort of time capsule," said one, an Oxbridge graduate. I asked what they thought about the Ritchie occupation and they said it had been a case of bad research on their part ? it certainly wasn't an isolated case, as they were largely the same people. I asked about using utilities, wondering whether they knew that the owners could get them for theft if they refused to pay. One frowned, but explained that they certainly paid for the electricity they used.

Given they professed to have reclaimed the place for the people, I tried to explore. However, I was stopped when trying to go upstairs: it was apparently "private". I complained that this surely contradicted the whole justification for occupation but was told "if you're going to be like that, you can f*** off then". So much for "property is theft". In fact, the tone of the visit changed drastically at that point ? a few started to view me as a threat and soon after some kind of leader came down to tell me that they were locking up for the night and visitors would have to leave.

I complied and was shown to the door. I'm not entirely sure how they could justify throwing me out under their principles, but one thing is clear: they have occupied buildings in the name of the public, but only selected members are allowed to stay. Hypocrites or not, squatting may soon become recognised as a criminal offence and the social phenomenon may disappear. Unlike the destitute on the streets, I'm not so sure the people I met will have much of a problem finding or paying for alternative accommodation.

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