



AUTONOMY IN THE CITY?

Reflections on the UK Social Centres Movement

Paul Chatterton / Stuart Hodkinson
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About the authors

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This pamphlet is about the emergence of social centres and their role in both the development of autonomous politics and the growing urban resistance movement in the UK to the corporate takeover, enclosure and alienation of everyday life. In European terms, social centres are not new and have played a particularly important role in the political and cultural world of Italy's autonomist scene. Previously marginal in British radical movements, since the eruption of global anticapitalism in the late 1990s, the number of occupied or legalised social centres and other autonomous spaces in the UK has been on the increase, playing crucial roles in confrontational politics from reclaiming public space to mass mobilisations such as the G8 summit in Gleneagles. Based on personal experience and countless visits and conversations with social centre activists in the UK as part of a forthcoming popular education book by Trapese (www.trapese.org) we offer some reflections on the social centres story so far and how it might develop in the future. An essay-version of this pamphlet will shortly be published in the journal, *City*.

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Since the dawn of capitalist society in the late 1400s and the beginning of land enclosures in the UK, the (re)claiming of space from private ownership by popular movements to re-collectivise their lives and fight the commodification of land, labour and life has had a long and rich history. Key tendencies of these popular movements have been ‘autonomy’, defined here as the desire for self-legislation for both the individual and the collective at the level of social institutions, and ‘anarchism’, the desire to live free of government rule. Many resistance movements have born these imprints such as the Diggers of the 17th century and proto agrarian and intentional communities, as well as more confrontational urban movements such as the mass post-war squatting

movement, or the Stop the City demonstrations of the early eighties, Reclaim the Streets and the 'J-18' Carnival Against Capital in the late 1990s, which sought to consciously confront capitalism by shutting down financial districts in mass street parties.

This experience contrasts starkly with urban resistance movements in other European countries who have politicised and confronted the use and control of public space as part of a broader contestation to the enclosure of everyday life. The most spectacular has been Italy's Occupied Social Centres movement, which was founded in mid-1970s by the non-parliamentary 'antagonist' youth movement seeking to improve their social conditions but rejecting both 'capitalist work' and the socialist parties who had abandoned working class struggles for a share of state power. Occupied social centres turn unused or condemned public buildings and factories into self-organised cultural and political gathering spaces for the provision of radical social services, protest-planning and experimentation with independent cultural production of music, zines, art, and pirate micro TV. The social centre idea has gradually spread across Western Europe with the exception of Britain where autonomous movements have been weak and the socialist left has generally refused to embrace the practice of physically reclaiming public spaces for political, cultural and community use.

Since the emergence of what has become popularised as 'global anticapitalism' since J-18 and the Battle of Seattle in 1999, a discernible growth has occurred in the number of occupied and legalised social centres in the UK, along with dozens of other self-organised, radical spaces that we cannot include here due to space constraints (like infoshops, squat cafés, protest camps, convergence centres, eco-villages). Yet with the exception of Lacey (2005) and a small number of activist debates (Anon 2003a; 2003b; Rogue Element 2004; Text Nothing, 2005) virtually no critical engagement with this phenomenon exists. Our aim in writing this pamphlet is to begin to address this deficit by discussing the origins and role of social centres. We begin by briefly reviewing the social centre scene in the UK since the early 1980s before identifying the main activities and political orientation of contemporary spaces. After moving on to some of the key challenges facing these spaces, we conclude by offering some propositions on their future strategic direction in the development of autonomous social movements in the UK. We've included a resource section at the end listing the reading that influenced and informed our analysis, as well as some useful websites, addresses and email lists.

Social Centres and their Precursors in the UK

Although the term ‘social centre’ does not appear to have been used until the past few years, in the early 1980s a string of similar experiments emerged out of the intense and confrontational anarcho-punk movement. Generally known as ‘Autonomy Clubs’, these radical spaces were both the symbols and centres of punk’s second wave, which fused anarchist politics with a wider DIY counter-culture among an angry and non-conformist youth generation alienated by the political project of Thatcherism. Key political struggles revolved around the Claimants’ Unions and the unemployed, anti-fascism and animal liberation. Set up and run by collectives of anarchists or communists and strongly politicised anarcho-punk bands like Crass and The Apostles who helped fund their existence, Autonomy Clubs mixed live music with “book fairs, fanzine conventions, discussion groups, films, debates and political workshops” (Martin 1994). Probably the first were the occupied 1-2-1 Centre in Brixton (1980-1997) and the rented Autonomy Centre in Wapping (1982-3); others included The Station in Gateshead (early 1980s), squatted spaces like the Centro Iberico (1982) in West London, or collectively owned premises such as the 1 in 12 Club in Bradford and the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh (ACE) both of which still exist today (see Table 1).

The 1990s brought another surge of social movement mobilisation around the injustices of the Poll Tax, the repressive Criminal Justice Act and the Tory Government’s road and airport expansion programme. A new generation of activists emerged more focused on deep green politics fused with the ‘party and protest’ attitude of rave culture. Organised around the ecological direct action network, Earth First!, and inspired by Hakim Bay’s idea of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), numerous squatted rural protest camps appeared with the aim of halting road building such as at Newbury and Twyford Down. In the urban environment, precursors of social centres sprung up in the form of Squat Cafés like the Anarchist Teapot in Brighton (1996-99), the OKasional Cafés in Manchester (1998-2003) and Eclectic City in Newcastle (2000-2002) offering cheap organic vegan food, DIY cultural events and a living example of anarchist politics. Some collectives also sought to establish more permanent self-organised spaces in their own communities such as the Kebele Kultural Project in Bristol, which began in 1995 when a small group of residential squatters gradually opened up a disused charity office to the working class

neighbourhood for benefit parties, donation based vegan food and a range of facilities for activist groups. In 1998, the occupiers negotiated an affordable lease with the owners.

By the late 1990s, the destructive effects of neoliberal globalisation and multinational corporate power saw the groups and networks behind a decade of ‘party and protest’ morph into the much wider global anticapitalist movement that directly targeted the institutions of the global elite (the Group of 8, EU, World Trade Organisation, International Monetary Fund and World Bank) while supporting myriad struggles worldwide. The success of ‘J-18’ – the global day of action against capital on June 18th 1999 when 10,000 people shut down the City of London in a ‘carnival against capitalism’ – energised the Reclaim the Streets idea and brought a huge surge in interest and involvement in autonomous politics. It also impelled the need for more permanent and secure bases to “put down roots, be visible, hold meetings and have some of the resources needed for action” (*anonymous interview*), particularly in London whose size naturally dispersed activists around the city at a time of increased police repression and intolerance of squatting. The result was a sudden explosion of new legalised social centres across the country. In East London, activists bought a run-down rag-trade lock-up and opened it as the London Action Resource Centre (LARC) in 2002. Similar collective-ownership initiatives, but with the added dimension of a housing co-operative, were established in Nottingham in 2002 (The Sumac Centre) out of the ashes of the eco and peace focused Rainbow Centre (1985-2001), and Brighton in 2003 (The Cowley Club). The momentum was given a further boost in mid 2004 through the creation of a £70,000 activist fund to set up more social centres across the country with the primary aim of helping to mobilise all those wishing to take direct action against the G8 up to Gleneagles. Since then, half a dozen rented social centres and activist resource centres have sprung up in Leeds (The Commonplace), Manchester (The Basement), Oxford (OARC) and Glasgow (Chalkboard), with ones planned in Liverpool, Newcastle and Cardiff.

This move to create stable activist bases in the form of legalised social centres has not been universal. Since 2001, a series of overtly anticapitalist, confrontational and high-profile Occupied Social Centres (OSC) have also been set up all over London by activists from or linked to the anarchist/libertarian communist group, the Wombles.¹ Taking their inspiration from the daily militancy and

¹ Standing for White Overalls Movement Building Libertarian Struggles, the Wombles began in 2001 as a coming together of anarchists and communists inspired by Ya Bastal in Italy who wanted to support social struggles through direct action.

innovation of the occupied social centres and autonomist movement in Italy, between late 2001 and 2003, the Wombles occupied a small shop in a residential area of Stoke Newington in Hackney, naming it the Radical Dairy Occupied Social Centre. Their aim was to build up longer-term relationships with local people on an everyday basis and experiment with alternative ways of living without self-marginalising, escaping or acquiescing to capitalist property relations. The Radical Dairy galvanised relationships that underpinned a number of subsequent OSCs such as Ex-Grand Banks in Tufnell Park, RampART in Whitechapel and the massive central London university centres, Institute for Autonomy and The Square. Table 1 summarises the main centres which have existed since 1980 and Figure 1 shows the current extent of autonomous spaces and collectives (including social centres, resource centres, alternative cafés, radical bookshops and info shops).

The Role of Social Centres: Orientation, Purpose and Praxis

How should we understand social centres and the political spaces they represent? From our personal and active involvement in a number of political squatting projects, occupied and legalised social centres, and wide-ranging discussions and interviews with social centre activists across the UK, we see a number of common tendencies that appear to define, albeit to differing degrees, the social centre experience. The emphasis on diversity and difference is key. Although all social centres belong to the broad 'autonomous movement', each space is unique in origin, character and focus reflecting the era and socio-political context in which they were founded, the peculiar mix of philosophical currents, personal histories, local cultures, and even the very physical contours of the building itself. Some began life as squatting projects as a solution to a material need for housing (Kebele), others are overtly anticapitalist and anarchist in identity associating themselves with the more confrontational occupied social centres movement (ex-Grand Banks, The Square), while others are more like independent community centres (Sumac). Those that are more limited in size often prioritise a particular aspect such as providing resources for activism and campaigns (e.g. LARC), giving advice to claimants (e.g. ACE), being a 'radical bookshop' or 'vegan café' (e.g. The Basement).

Confronting and resisting the neoliberal city

What sets social centres apart from residential squats or housing cooperatives is their simultaneous politicisation of the very act of reclaiming private space and opening it up to the public as part of a conscious refusal and confrontation to neoliberalism and the enclosure of urban space. As in Italy, a common theme of city or town centre-based social centres is their opposition to gentrification, which starts again from the material loss of free or cheap places to meet and socialise through the corporatisation of entertainment and the closure of community centres and local shops and their regeneration into corporate chain stores and luxury flats. Social centres represent an open challenge to this neoliberal process by taking these buildings emptied or abandoned by capital and regenerating them *back* into non-commercial places for politics, meetings and entertainment. In the face of rapid changes to the urban fabric, social centres constitute a new claim to the city – a demand that land and property be used to meet social needs, not to service global, or extra-local, capital.

An activist hub: widening, strengthening and uniting social movements

Reflecting on the Italian experience, Montagna explains how the *centri sociali* act as ‘politically autonomous’ nodes in broader “regional and national networks based on self-help, shared identities, and tactical alliances for specific campaigns” (Montagna 2006). This experience benefits from their historic relationship to the rich and varied revolutionary tradition of Italian autonomism (see Wright, 2000). In a similar way, social centres in the UK create free political meeting places or ‘hubs’ where activists and other concerned citizens can have political exchanges, network and organise to further the social struggle against capitalism. Almost every day, these buildings are in use, be it for meetings, workshops, film nights, solidarity benefits, pamphlet writing, banner making, reading groups, drumming practice and large-scale gatherings. Although the campaigns and groups making social centres their home differ from place to place, it is rare not to find anti-war, environmental, animal rights, independent media networks (like Indymedia), Palestine and Zapatista solidarity and anti-corporate activism at the heart of any space. A clear emerging focus for all social centres is solidarity with asylum and migrant struggles through the No Borders Network, which fights for freedom of movement and against detention, destitution and deportation.

Social centres thus bring the various fragments of social movements together under one roof where a process of dialogue, contamination and greater unification can take place. By organising public events and running a cheap

Table 1 Social Centres since 1980²

Name	Era	Location	Type
1-2-1 Centre	1980-1997	London	Occupied
1 in 12 Club	1981-present	Bradford	Coop-owned
Autonomy Centre	1982-83	London	Rented
Pad	1982-85	Dunfermline	Rented
The LMC	1982-83	London	Rented
Centro Iberico	1982	London	Occupied
The Recession Club	1983-84	London	
The Station	1980s	Gateshead	Rented
Counterpoint	1984-87	Elterchley	
Gros/Warzone	1985-2003	Belfast	Occupied/then leased
Rainbow Centre	1985-2001	Nottingham	Rented
Blackcurrent	1988-present	Northampton	Coop-owned
Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh	1991	Edinburgh	Rented
Kebele	1995-present	Enstol	Occupied/then owned
Anarchist Teapot	1996-1999	Enghton	Occupied (several)
OKasional Café	1998-2003	Manchester	Occupied (several)
A-Spize	1999-2005	Leeds	Occupied (several)
Button Factory	1999-2001	London	Occupied
Eclectic City	2000-2002	Newcastle	Occupied
LARC	1999-present	London	Coop-owned
Radical Dairy	2001-2003	London	Occupied
Atherton Nursery	2000	London	Occupied

Sumac Centre	2002-present	Nottingham	Coop-owned
Hackney Wicked	2002	London	Occupied
Cowley Club	2003-present	Enighton	Coop-owned
Ex-Grand Banks	2004	London	Occupied
Maelstrom	2004	Leeds	Occupied
RampART	2004-present	London	Occupied
The Circle Community Centre	2004-06	London	Occupied
Basement	2004-present	Manchester	Rented
Institute for Autonomy	2005	London	Occupied
Common Place	2005-present	Leeds	Rented
Matildas	2005-06	Sheffield	Lent then occupied
ASBO	2005-present	Nottingham	Occupied
Nursery	2005	Birmingham	Occupied
OCSET I, II, III	2004	Oxford	Occupied
Paintworks	2004	Glasgow	Rented
OARC	2005-present	Oxford	Rented
Chalkboard	2005-06	Glasgow	Rented
The Squaz	2006	London	Occupied
Everything for Everyone	2006-present	London	Occupied
Shearbridge		Bradford	Occupied
The Cottage of Content	2006	Birmingham	Occupied
Lost and Found	2006	Manchester	Occupied

Table 1 Social Centres since 1980²

² We have compiled this table with the help of Martin (1994) and the Free Spaces wire on the Indymedia UK website (www.indymedia.org.uk). It is by no means complete and we would welcome additions/corrections. Email us.

Figure 1. Autonomous spaces in the UK.

Source: The author.



● SOCIAL CENTRES

Name	City	Address	Website
1 Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh	Edinburgh	17 West Montgomery Place, EH7 5HA	www.autonomous.org.uk
2 Georges X Chaliboard	Glasgow	34 Clarendon Place, G207PZ	http://georgesxchaliboard.blogspot.com
3 The Common Place	Leeds	23-25 Wharf Street, LS2 7EQ	www.thecommonplace.org.uk
4 1 in 12 Club	Bradford	21 Albion Street, BD1 2LY	www.1in12.go-legend.net
5 The Basement	Manchester	24 Lever Street, M1 1QZ	www.basementmanchestersites.org.uk
6 Seomra Spraoi	Dublin	No. 6, Lower Ormond Quay, Dublin 1	www.seomraspraoi.org
7 Sumac Centre	Nottingham	245 Gladstone Street, NG7 6HX	www.reggies.org.uk/sumac
8 ASBO Community Space	Nottingham	33 Burns Street, NG7 4DS	www.asbocentre.org.uk
9 Kebele	Bristol	14 Robertson Road, BS5 6JY	www.kebele.org
10 564 InFoshop	London	56 Crampton St, SE17 3AE	www.564.org.uk
11 RampART Creative Centre and Social Space	London	15-17 Rampart Street, Whitechapel E1 2LA	www.rampart.co.uk/
12 Everything 4 Everyone	London	4 Dakston Lane, Hackney, E8 3DE	everything4everyone@riseup.net
13 Cowley Club	Brighton	12 London Road, BN1 4JA	www.cowleyclub.org.uk

★ OTHER SOCIAL CENTRE COLLECTIVES

1 G42 Collective	Glasgow	g42collective@riseup.net, G41 2QL	www.g42collective.net
2 Why don't you	Newcastle	PO Box 1TA, NE99 1TA	whydontyou@post.com
3 Liverpool Social Forum/Squat Collective	Liverpool	liveiposof@yahoo.com, L1 9BQ	liveiposof_squat_action@yahoo.co.uk
4 Matilda	Sheffield	matilda@lists.aktivis.org, S1 4QF	www.matilda.aktivis.org
5 Peoples Autonomous Destination (PAD)	Cardiff	thepad@riseup.net, CF10 1DD	www.thepad.org.uk
6 The Square	London	squares@riseup.net, WC1B 5ER	www.london-social-centre.org.uk

▲ RESOURCE CENTRES

1 Lancaster Re-source Centre (la.RC)	Lancaster	78a Penny Street, LA1 1XN	www.eco-action.org/lancaster
2 Oblong	Leeds	47 Westfield Road, LS3 1QG	www.oblongleeds.org.uk
3 Blackcurrent Centre	Northampton	24 St Michael's Avenue, NN1 4JQ	http://oblong.com/bca/
4 OARC - Oxford Action Resource Centre	Oxford	Princes St, OX1 1HU	http://theoarc.org.uk/
5 LARC - London Action Resource Centre	London	62 Fieldgate Street, Whitechapel, E1 1ES	www.londonarc.org

□ RADICAL BOOKSHOPS / DISTRIBUTION

1 Word Power	Edinburgh	43 West Nicolson Street, EH8 9DB	www.word-power.co.uk
2 AK Press	Edinburgh	PO BOX 12766, EH8 9YE	www.akpress.org
3 News From Nowhere	Liverpool	90 Gold Street, L1 4HY	www.newsfromnowhere.org.uk
4 Slendermans	Sheffield	PO BOX 1251, S11 8XG	www.slendermans.org.uk
5 Little Thorn Books	Leicester	73 Humberstone Gate, LE1 1WB	www.housmans.com/books/index.htm
6 Housmans	London	5 Caledonian Road, N1 9QX	www.freedompress.org.uk
7 Freedom	London	84b Whitechapel High Street, E1 7QX	www.octoberbooks.org
8 October Books	Southampton	243 Portswood Road, SO17 2NG	

▽ ALTERNATIVE CAFÉS

1 Beans	Leeds	70 North Street, LS2 7PN	www.beanwholefoods.co.uk
2 Crocus	Nottingham	Unit 2 Church Square, NG7 1SL	http://thecrocus.co.uk/
3 Pogo Café	London	76 Cleance Road, Hackney, E8 8HB	www.pogocafe.co.uk



café, a wider section of society also circulates through the space, leading to further contamination and the strengthening of social activism. This supports Lacey's (2005: 297) view of social centres as "both part of a network and a network facilitator". However, the contribution of social centres to wider social change is unclear as they remain weak social actors and are largely unconnected from each other and wider civil society.

Remaking citizenship: horizontality, self-production and constructing the social commons

Surrounded by the exclusive, fleeting and often brutalised interactions promoted in the chain stores and designer bars of the corporate city, social centres play an important role in re-thinking and re-making 'citizenship' by bringing people together in spaces whose very *raison d'être* is to question and confront the rampant individualism of everyday life. Lacey (2005: 292) sees social centres as "concrete manifestations of activist networks" bonded by an emotional desire to "seek connections and community at the same time as pursuing activism" (Lacey, p. 287). This notion of collective security finds echoes in the writings of the Free Association (2005) who see social centres as primarily "safe spaces" for activists to retreat to after large-scale mobilisations where they can re-group, experiment and enable those going at different speeds and coming from different directions to "compose together."

A core part of recreating social bonds is the oft-used concept of 'horizontality' that goes beyond liberal notions of equal rights and instead encompasses all aspects of human relations. Horizontality means co-operation, solidarity and mutual aid. It is intolerant of racial, gender and sexual discrimination, opposes hierarchical power relations, and is open to the participation of all in collective decision-making through direct democracy via a mixture of regular open meetings, semi-autonomous collectives and consensus decision-making in large groups – social centres have no leaders, committees, or any other permanent structures.

Horizontality is also reflected in the practice of 'self-production' or 'DIY politics' wherein participants voluntarily give their time and energy to create a 'social commons' that plugs the gaps left in service and welfare provision as the local state retreats into the skeletal functions of neoliberal management. In the Italian case, Ruggiero (2000: 176-77) emphasises the efforts of the youth to 'reclaim the city' from capital and bourgeois opulence and create alternative, independent, small-scale economies for the "prosumer" where "work serves the immediate needs of those inhabiting it". These activities can be understood

under the broader articulation of *autogestione*, which encapsulates ideas of self-production, self-management and self-financing of social, political and counter-cultural events, free of state or capital (Mudu, 2004: 925).

UK social centres have developed similar functions and host meeting rooms, radical bookshops or libraries, cheap cafés, cinema/gig spaces, recording studios, concert/cinema spaces, free shops and Internet; they also offer computer lessons, benefit advice, language classes, bike workshops, and crèches. Several also provide temporary refuge for the homeless, international activists and destitute asylum seekers out of both solidarity and the hope they will politically self-organise in the space. What is produced is normally offered by donation – if you can't afford the suggested price, you give what you can. But this social commons is not about re-creating traditional public services on the cheap – it is instead about inventing alternative economic models based on need not profit and respect for the planet. Most social centres use only fairly-traded, local products, minimise waste and energy, recycle as much as possible and do not serve meat: They thus relate strongly to Adamovsky's (2006) definition of “anticipatory” spaces that “embody in their own shape and forms the values of the society we are striving to build”.

Challenges, Tensions and Contradictions

As with any political entity, social centres must confront numerous challenges, tensions and even contradictions in their everyday existence. Many simply reflect the reality of practising radical, self-organised politics simultaneously “in and against”³ capitalist society, and the difficulty of putting into practice the values of anti-authority, horizontality and solidarity. We now briefly discuss some of these controversies and future strategies for UK social centres.

The limits to openness: 'breaking in' to the activist ghetto

A frequent refrain of many activists involved in UK social centres is the desire to ‘break out of the activist ghetto’ by connecting with ‘ordinary people’ and creating welcoming, accessible public spaces attractive to a wide diversity of groups, especially from traditional working class backgrounds and different

³ A term that was frequently used by those involved in the recent The Square occupied social centre.

ethnic communities. In reality, however, all social centres become ghettoised around fairly homogenous class, race and cultural identities (middle class, white, sub-cultural) and putting the emphasis on those on the outside to 'break in' to what can often appear as a closed, private space or club for activists and their friends. At times the aims and ideas of social centres are poorly explained to the public and there is often a breakdown in language especially when talking about ideas of autonomy and anarchy. This is repeated in a frequent failure to advertise and communicate outside immediate networks and circles. A particular weakness of legalised social centres is their tendency to be closed during the day as those involved tend to have regular jobs and run the space in their 'spare time'. While this makes them less momentarily intense and possibly more sustainable over a longer timeframe, it also reduces the dynamism and diversity of people involved, and fails to engage with people in their everyday lives. This is the flip-side of the "safe space": "[r]ather than being doors to other worlds, they've become gated communities with limited horizons: 'safe' in the sense of 'sheltered' and 'risk-free'" (Free Association, 2005).

Horizontality, or survival of the fittest?

As living, breathing spaces of relatively unregulated social interactions, social centres routinely face the challenge of how to put horizontality into practice through structures and participation. The opposition to all forms of hierarchy can often translate into a failure to put in place any workable decision-making procedures to protect plurality and enable greater input. As Adamovsky (2006) argues, in this context, "horizontality" becomes "a fertile soil for the survival of the fittest". Running such vast and complex entities through mass open meetings can lead to hours of unstructured, draining discussions which is unwelcoming to newcomers. Paradoxically, the desire to avoid specialisation and role hierarchy by making everyone responsible for everything means ultimately no one is accountable for anything and spaces can rapidly either fall apart as essential tasks remain undone, or those with more resources and/or commitment take on more work, creating a *de facto* oligarchy. What Jo Freeman (1972) coined the "tyranny of structurelessness", where hierarchies form around those with more experience or knowledge, can be tempered through the creation of collectives responsible for running a certain aspect of the space (e.g. bar, café, finance, maintenance), but this can also create a new layer of bureaucracy. The reality is that despite hundreds of people circulating through social centres each week, only a handful actually make that space happen, leading to burnout, resentment and inefficiency.

Legalisation, social enterprise and the perils of co-optation

One of the major political tensions within and between social centres anywhere is the question of legality. Illegality and conflict are central to occupied social centres: activists deliberately break the law by occupying buildings to militantly reclaim what has been denied whilst politicising the waste of public land. But when dozens of OSCs in Italy began accepting legalisation by the state in the mid-1990s, a war of words broke out as several other occupied centres called them ‘fools’ for believing that “antagonistic struggles can still be conducted from the centres that are legalised, restructured, regulated and controlled by the state” (El Paso Occupato & Barrochio Occupato, 1995).

A similar critique has recently emerged from within the UK social centre movement in response to the current wave of rented and bought social centres (Anon, 2003a; Rogue Element, 2004). While acknowledging the logic behind the search for continuity and permanency as opposed to the short-termism of the squatted space, these critics argue that once ‘legalised’, their priority at all times becomes *legal compliance* and obeying private property relations to avoid losing state-sponsored licenses or being closed down. The constant need to find the rent/mortgage rapidly transforms social centres into ‘social enterprises’, creating the same alienating, authoritarian structures as capitalist society and making radical groups feel unwelcome or forced to limit their radicalism in order to protect the space (Anon, 2003a: 186). This diverts a huge investment of activist time, energy and resources away from the real fight for public space – squatting – to an “essentially non-radical and liberal project” built upon compromise, constrained by legal hurdles and enshrined in unnecessary bureaucracy (ibid.: 185).

This critique undoubtedly resonates with the experiences of all UK social centres in some shape or form. The logic of spatial revolt comes up against the logic of spatial enterprise as the pressure to maintain a legally-conforming social centre can turn a nominally ‘free’ space into just another consumption-oriented, revenue-generating city nightspot competing for market share and disposable income. Entrapped by the burden of chores, responsibilities and service provision, a semi-permanent staff of unpaid volunteers find less and less time and space for communication and critical reflection on the direction of the social centre, and direct action in civil society. However, while squatting allows people to break free from the constraints and compromises of obeying the rule of private property, occupied social centres are still caught ‘within’

capitalism. They too can easily be overtaken by the desire to fill the space with people and activities to raise funds for solidarity appeals and pay costs debts.

By creating a false binary opposition between the evils of legalisation (compromised/co-opted) and the radical purity of the occupied social centre, critics fail to understand the dialectical relationship between them. Many of today's rented or bought social centres are run by the collectives behind the squat cafes and protest camps of the 1990s who grew increasingly tired, frustrated and burnt out, the clampdown on squatting in the city and being evicted just as they start to build up relationships with local people. This desire to create more "stable bases" as a reaction against the ghettoisation of radical/libertarian politics goes hand in hand with the conscious strategic move to create more open and accessible spaces to get people involved in challenging neoliberal policies and respond to the historic weakness of confrontational social movements. Buying or renting private buildings might be far less confrontational than militantly occupying them, but it should be seen as a tactical compromise with the property system towards the same goal of re-collectivisation. Legal spaces have more control over their own destiny and use of resources. Far from being in competition with each other, squatted and legal places in the same locale are in fact deeply interconnected and interdependent, feeding off and supporting each other as part of the same political network.

Towards a Social Centre Strategy?

Looking back over the distinct but overlapping periods of social centre activity in the past three decades, each space has arguably been a unique weave of different strands of conformity and resistance, but has also shared a common language of 'autonomy' – self-organisation, self-production and horizontality. Unlike in Italy, most UK social centres do not have a collective memory of radical and violent struggle against the state and those current today are thus more pragmatic than idealist. Yet they also attempt to be living alternatives to neoliberalism by practising, as much as possible, their politics in the everyday, being 'the change they want to see'. At the same time, social centres must also confront their own problems of ghettoisation, participation and recuperation.

While many take on the provision of services abandoned by the state, few make any in-roads into creating a self-managed city. These limitations stem partly from the concrete reality of putting radical, self-organised politics into practice in capitalist society. But they are also rooted in a far more serious condition affecting social centres and autonomous movements in general – the absence of a shared strategy for how social change will occur. This rejection of top-down politics and the all-knowing certainty of the Leninist tradition within autonomous movements is their strength. However, social centres are in danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater unless they address the urgent question of how to develop infrastructure which can promote autonomy from capitalism while preserving a diversity of perspectives.

A first step must be to move beyond largely symbolic actions against capitalism's worse excesses and instead organise active and sustained resistance to the growing enclosure and precarity of everyday life. Social centres must therefore change from being relatively closed 'activist hubs' to open centres of what has been termed 'social movement unionism' encompassing more traditional and hierarchically-organised social movement actors such as trade unions, tenants groups, NGOs and progressive parties if broad, popular coalitions against neoliberalism are to emerge. This also means fighting on more 'bread and butter' issues like welfare cuts, hospital and school closures, job losses, labour casualisation, the outsourcing of GP surgeries to faceless corporations, the loss of council housing and the gentrification of city centres.

Here in Leeds a new and dramatic phase of privatisation is taking place under the mantra of so-called regeneration, driven by the city's local strategic partnership, the Leeds Initiative, which brings the private sector in to plan and deliver "all aspects of the city's life" – transport, culture, health, economy, children, communities, learning and environment. As a result, massive, multi-billion pound urban regeneration schemes are underway that are drastically altering the ownership and balance of power in the city towards the private sector, property speculation and the accumulation of capital. As Leeds skyline rapidly fills up with skyscrapers, every last available public space in the city is being handed on a plate to developers to turn into commercial zones while major regeneration projects in the poorest working class areas in Leeds are seeing the mass demolitions of cheap, affordable council housing and its replacement with expensive private housing, displacing thousands of the suburban poor further and further to the outskirts of the city. Public services, meanwhile, are gradually being outsourced through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), which

awards the private sector lucrative multi-million pound contracts for 20, 30 or 35 years to design, build, finance and operate public service facilities such as schools, hospitals, leisure centres and social housing, turning the public sector into a mere client of private capital. In order to maximise profit, PFI contractors are being allowed to close and merge schools and commercialise community centres. Activists in the Commonplace social centre in Leeds are gradually taking up the struggle against these New Enclosures, leading the opposition to GP surgery sell-offs and supporting tenants on a near-by council estate fighting a possible PFI regeneration scheme that will force an estimated 450 families out of their own community. Social centres should be at the forefront of anti-privatisation campaigns – we urgently need a joined-up social centre strategy to fight privatisation locally, nationally and globally.

We also need to create an instant-response network, mobilising activists and localities to take direct action when communities elsewhere come under the assault of global capital or the state. A great current example is the growing solidarity movement with people in County Mayo, Ireland, who are fighting Shell and the Irish State's attempts to build a socially and ecologically destructive gas pipeline through their community and land. Through encounters between UK social centres and activists from the Rosspoint Solidarity Camp in County Mayo, a recent call for solidarity actions when police broke the local picket was met with pickets and shutdowns of Shell garages and oil depots across the UK on 11 October. It was largely the networks of communication and trust built up through the UK social centre movement that made this small but rapid response possible. To make such responses more potent in the future as will inevitably be required, there is an urgent need for a genuine social centres network to emerge that develops means of mutual support and regular political exchange, and mobilises participants to defend evictions of occupied spaces and engage in political actions against neoliberalism as a movement. We need a shared website to facilitate this network-building. Further down the line, existing social centres could help activists to establish similar spaces in every city, town and community, creating a dense network of autonomous nodes that could rapidly mobilise people across cities and bring radical politics into communities.

These are just a few ideas about the directions in which we could go. We look forward to a debate within and between social centres about how we go forward together.

PC / SH, Leeds, October 2006



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InfoUsurpa	www.infousurpa.co.nr
Wikipedia on Social Centres	www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_center
Wombles	www.wombles.org.uk
Global Infoshops network	www.eco-action.org/infoshops
Italian social centres	www.ecn.org/presenze
Indymedia UK Free Spaces	www.indymedia.org.uk/en/topics/freespaces
Discussion on history of the Commonplace	www.wikihost.org/wikis/commonplace/

Squatting & land

Advisory Service for Squatters	www.squatter.org.uk
Schnews Squatting Guide	www.schnews.org.uk/diyguide/squatting.htm
Squatters Handbook Australia	www.cat.org.au/housing/book.htm
No frills Melbourne Squatters Guide	www.geocities.com/squattersguide
Italian Squats	www.tutto.squat.net
Squat Net	www.squat.net/
The Land is ours	www.tlio.org.uk
Wikipedia on Squatting	www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Squatting

Co-operative advice/finance

Radical Routes	www.radicalroutes.org.uk
National Community Development Assoc	www.ncdaonline.org
Co-operative & Community Finance	www.icof.co.uk
Industrial Common Ownership Movement	www.icof.co.uk/icom
National Confederation of co-operative housing	www.cch.org.uk
Co-operatives UK	www.cooperatives-uk.coop
Catalyst Collective Ltd	www.eco-action.org/catalyst
Upstart Services Ltd	www.upstart.coop
Co-operativesUK	www.cooperatives-uk.coop
Working Men's Clubs and Institutes Union	www.wmciu.org.uk

E-lists

UK Social Centres Network	www.lists.riseup.net/www/info/socialcentrenetwork
London Social Centres Network	londonscn@yahoo.co.uk
Infoshops send e-mail to:	lists@tao.ca with message 'subscribe infoshops'