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# **Social Centres and the New Cooperativism of the Common**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years a network of self-managed social centres has been spreading across the UK and further afield. They take their inspiration from an array of previous experiments in autonomous space, including the centri sociali in Italy and the Autonome squats of Germany and the Netherlands. This article looks at several examples of social centres, based on interviews and online responses with participants, as well as the author's own involvement in social centres. At the heart of these spaces are principles of autonomy and collective struggle. This article argues that they represent examples of the production of "new commons," and as such are an important demonstration of self-management and the "new cooperativism" in practice.

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## **Introduction**

*We are passing through Leeds city centre, attracting looks of disbelief from passing shoppers. We are a motley crew, some on bikes, others on foot, bike sound-system in tow and all clustered around a pirate ship, flying the Jolly Roger flag. The "ship" is constructed from discarded shopping trolleys and covered in salvaged wood to make a deck, mast and body for the ship. The sails are emblazoned with a huge squatting symbol. We are handing curious onlookers leaflets explaining that we are "A-Spireates" from a local squatted social centre called "A-Spire" and have been evicted to make way for luxury apartments. The leaflet outlines some of the principles of A-Spire: people before profit, mutual aid, and cooperation.*

The above is just one example of the creative resistance embodied within the social centres movement. Social centres are self-managed "autonomous spaces." They are diverse spaces found, in various guises, across much of Europe and beyond. As I discuss below, they have their roots in the Italian *autonomia* and German *autonome* movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the associated politics of autonomy and social struggle.

This article will use interviews with participants, as well as the author's own experience in the movement, in order to link the creation of social centres and autonomous spaces with the concept of the common(s). It argues that the production of social centres and autonomous spaces creates "new commons" which embody experimental and prefigurative demonstrations of self-management and are examples of the "new cooperativism" in practice.

By the "commons(s)" I mean both the wealth of the material world, such as water, air, and land, but also the products of social production such as forms of code, knowledge, and information.<sup>2</sup> All of these forms of the common(s) are sites of struggle in different parts of the world. It is my argument that as part of the battle over these common(s), struggling subjects reproduce the common(s) as part of a process of self-valorization. I contend that this self-valorization is deployed by activists to construct new forms of common(s) in the guise of social centres.

The concept of the common(s) is being developed through the work of a variety of thinkers, from a range of political traditions and movements, most notably autonomist Marxist theorists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as others closely associated with this tradition, including Nick Dyer-Witheford and Massimo De Angelis.<sup>3</sup> These perspectives view the common(s) as embodying a liberatory capacity that goes against the thesis put forward by others, such as Garrett Hardin, who suggest there is a "tragedy of the commons"<sup>4</sup>--that commoners are possessed by a selfish "Hobbesian egoism"<sup>5</sup> that leads them to exploit the commons until there is nothing left.

### **Social centres and autonomous spaces**

Many city centres are becoming increasingly dedicated to the further reproduction and circulation of capital through endless consumption. Alongside this, gentrification and regeneration, or "regentrification,"<sup>6</sup> is changing the dynamic of vast areas of towns and cities. In response to these developments, social centres represent an attempt to open up pockets of space that are dedicated to "people rather than profit."<sup>7</sup> These are spaces where people can experiment, relax, and become involved in a plethora of activities based on cooperative principles at a grassroots level.

These "autonomous zones," through the process of occupying and opening up space that would otherwise be private and closed, facilitate the creation of life "held in common." Employing the practice of self-management and principles of autonomy, participants aim to create an example of an alternative to contemporary capitalist society: a form of prefigurative politics.

Social centres take many forms: collectively owned, rented, squatted, temporary, or more permanent... but they all rely on collective and cooperative principles. They are ways in which activists experiment with new ways of organizing, tackling problems of participation, burn out, or repression, as and when they occur.

Social centres represent points where we can meet face to face. They offer a solution to local changes which mean it can be increasingly hard to find meeting spaces (especially cheap/free) in pubs and community centres. They can be viewed as a way to put down roots or establish movement infrastructure, in a similar manner to traditional working men's clubs. To a limited extent some social centres aid the redistribution of surplus through "free shops" (bring what you don't want, and take what you do) and the use of "dumpstered" food that would otherwise go to waste.

Social centres rely on cooperation throughout: from the process of organizing the opening of a new squat or the forming of a legal structure with which to manage a collectively rented or owned building, but also through the day-to-day management of the space. Social centres make private space "common" and are run on non-profit values. They act as both an ideological and material form of opposition to capitalist logic and its enclosures.<sup>8</sup> Social centres therefore take up both physical and ideological space and can be seen as a direct response, and in resistance to, the neoliberal message that "there is no alternative."

Some social centres are registered cooperatives, and even contain other cooperative bodies within them, for example [the Cowley Club](#) in Brighton is also a housing coop, and the Sumac Centre in Nottingham is a base for a workers coop. Both of these centres are part of [Radical Routes](#), a network that supports radical cooperatives across the country.

### **Back to the future**

The reclamation of space for social uses by the oppressed is a recurring theme throughout history. It has been essential for the experimentation with alternatives, such as those "utopian socialists"<sup>9</sup> like Robert Owen (1771-1858) and Charles Fourier (1777-1837), to the creation of communes by the counter culture during the 1960s. The historical cooperative movement is also full of examples of such projects.<sup>10</sup> Social centres and autonomous spaces are a more recent development along this trajectory.

Social centres and autonomous spaces have a rich history across Europe. In Italy, the occupied social centres movement emerged from *operaismo* and *autonomia* during the 1970s and again in the early 1980s.<sup>11</sup> In Italy, social centres

often act as the cultural and political hub of a community. For example, Italy's rap music scene developed from the squatting movement, and the US hip-hop collective *Public Enemy* chose to play in an occupied social centre in Milan rather than a traditional concert hall.<sup>12</sup> Parallel to the development of Italy's occupied social centres, there were large squatting movements developing in Germany and the Netherlands that were accompanied by an emergent politics of autonomy.<sup>13</sup>

In England, squatting movements have developed at various points in history. Squatting is argued to have been in existence as long as there has been private ownership of land.<sup>14</sup> There was a large post-World War II squatting movement comprised of a "vigilante movement" made up of ex-service personnel. This movement was largest in resort towns on the south coast and acted as a protest against holiday homes that were left empty most of the year and then rented out at great expense during the holiday season.<sup>15</sup> Empty military camps were also squatted around the country by some 45,000 people.<sup>16</sup> Post-1968 there was a new wave of squatting which had its roots among political radicals in the "Committee of 100" and "Vietnam Solidarity Campaign."<sup>17</sup> This wave emerged in London and accelerated throughout the 1970s around the country.<sup>18</sup>

Squatting and autonomous spaces were also an important part of the anarcho-punk counter-culture here in Britain during the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> Spaces opened during this period, sometimes called "autonomy clubs," including the Autonomy centre in Wapping, [the Autonomous centre of Edinburgh](#) (ACE), and the Station in Gateshead. Some centres such as the [1in12 club in Bradford](#) and 121 Centre in London acted both as venues for bands and as an autonomous space, imbued with anarchist and autonomist politics with which to organize political campaigns, direct action and other projects fostering mutual aid.<sup>20</sup> Both the 1in12 Club and ACE are still running today.

During the 1990s another series of spaces opened, including the Anarchist teapot in Brighton, OKaisonal cafe in Manchester, the Cooltan<sup>21</sup> and Rainbow centres in London, and A-Spire: temporary autonomous zone, in Leeds. Many of these ran concurrently with rural protest camps, or were started when protest camps had begun to wane.

As we can see, autonomous spaces often arise out of a particular cycle of struggle. The 1990s were a period of social movement activity around a series of injustices, from the Poll Tax to the Criminal Justice Bill and the government's road building program. One of my research participants relates this to their involvement with A-Spire: "A-Spire is part of a generation of squat cafes which picked up the baton dropped at the end of the CJB [Criminal Justice Bill] era, when there were absolutely loads of squatted centres as part of the Freedom Network."<sup>22</sup>

During this period, spaces rarely called themselves “social centres,” opting more often for “infoshop” (for example 56a in London) and simply “squat cafe” (e.g., Cookridge Street cafe in Leeds). Recently, however, there has been a newer wave of spaces established, explicitly identifying as “social centres” and taking their influence from Italy’s Occupied Social Centres. In particular, activists visiting Milan for a Peoples Global Action Meeting in 2001 came back inspired to establish similar spaces in the UK.<sup>23</sup> This can be likened to the influence the Europe-wide autonomist scene had on 1980s/90s spaces such as 56a Infoshop and 121 Centre.<sup>24</sup> This cross-fertilization between movements, struggles, and spaces is an important element of autonomous politics.

The different cycles of struggle in which these spaces were established make their mark in a variety of ways. The Criminal Justice Bill struggle of 1994 brought together free-party goers with direct activists, and many of the spaces that were established in this period had a strong emphasis on hosting parties. In the 1980s, anarcho-punk, claimants unions, and the miners strike were the dominant politico-cultural markers for centres such as the 1in12 club in Bradford. The spaces established in the 2000s emerged from the post-Seattle political landscape and were largely embedded within the struggles of the “movement of movements.”

Processes of gentrification also have an effect on social centres and autonomous spaces. During the 1970s and 1980s many urban environments were in disarray, with empty buildings relatively easy to find in many cities. This created an environment in which a vibrant squatting movement could establish itself. However, with processes of gentrification changing the faces of many towns and cities, it has become increasingly difficult for squatted spaces to exist, especially for any length of time. To some extent London is the exception to this, though with the recent eviction of the [RampART social centre](#) after five years, it is evident that it is becoming harder to establish long-term spaces here as well.

### **Autonomy in the UK**

As we have seen, social centres in Britain today are spreading, and are used by activists for a plethora of activities, from raising funds for campaigns to English speaking classes for asylum seekers.<sup>25</sup> A Social Centres Network has begun to be established to help facilitate communication, organization, and networking between spaces.<sup>26</sup> This growing network of autonomous spaces are run not-for-profit or not-for-private gain and along alternative models of organizing, such as cooperative ownership or expropriation through squatting and consensus decision making. They both further the vision that another world is possible *and* attempt to start making that world in the here-and-now through a prefigurative, participatory politics.

Some have suggested social centres act as post-action “safe spaces”: “temporary zones to which we can retreat after a protest, gather our thoughts, and re-compose ourselves before we sally forth again.”<sup>27</sup> But in addition to this they are sometimes intense experiences or “moments of excess”<sup>28</sup> in and of themselves, laboratories of cooperation in which to push the boundaries of what is possible and the limits of our capacities for openness, horizontality, and collectivity.

In Leeds, there have been numerous examples of autonomous spaces and social centres. Currently there is The Common Place, which is in its fourth year of existence. Previously there have been a number of occupied spaces, such as the Chaos Embassy<sup>29</sup> and Maelstrom, which focused heavily on ideas around the surveillance society, disciplinary measures, and new technologies of control. A collective called Queer Mutiny has put on shorter-term squatted projects that open up space to discuss and celebrate queer politics, and challenge heteronormative praxis. Also, as already mentioned, in the late 1990s and early 2000s a series of squatted spaces were organized called [A-Spire](#), which I will explore in further detail below.

### **A-Spire: Temporary autonomous zone**

A-Spire was a fluid collective that organized a series of squatted spaces in Leeds between 1999-2005. Although all these incarnations differed, some of the common examples of what constituted A-Spire include: DIY-based entertainment, such as live bands, parties and open-mic nights; political film showings, workshops and meetings; and a cafe providing healthy, ethical, vegan food. Some one-off activities included an indoor skate-ramp built by and for local skaters, almost entirely from materials found in local bins. There was also the building of a “pirate ship” which, as described above, after the eviction of an A-Spire, was “sailed” by “A-Spireates” through the city centre, accompanied by a bicycle-powered sound system and leaflet distribution. The leaflets explained what A-Spire had been attempting to achieve and why participants thought it important to have spaces such as this in Leeds.

In each incarnation A-Spire has had a commitment to providing self-organized food, shelter and entertainment, on a not-for-profit basis, and wherever possible for free. A-Spire represents an attempt to create a common resource, belonging to no individual or group, but freely available to use by those that need and/or desire to use it. In this sense we can see A-Spire’s values as being implicitly anti-capitalist and in opposition to the enclosures being introduced both locally and globally.

A-Spire acted as a point of commonality between various threads within the city of Leeds: students, the DIY music scene, as well as political activists and people who just walked in off the street. All these strands came together to cooperate on a common project, the production of a common: a desperately needed space to be creative, to escape the pressures of a city increasingly based on consumption, and to explore new forms of activism. A-Spire was also a space in which to make visible what is sometimes invisible, underground, or off the map. Through a project such as this, the space becomes a point of interaction between worlds, a chance to see what possibilities exist to further collaborate on projects of mutual needs and desires.

One of the purposes of A-Spire was to open up space for people to use and to collaborate in order to create something that can be worked and held “in common.” It is important to differentiate the concept of the “common(s)” from the “public” and the “private.” Whereas the conception of the public/private creates a dualism between state and private ownership, the common(s) is entirely different. The common(s) is inherently anti-property, and rather describes a situation where us commoners have access to our commonwealth, and engage in its collective management. Thus creating a rupture: public/private // common(s).

Important elements of A-Spire include its anarchist(ic) and anti-capitalist politics, its commitment to providing food and entertainment for free, and its focus on the collective and communal. Through the principles of self-management and “each according to their ability, to each according to their need,”<sup>30</sup> a space is created in which people are free to experiment in creating new ways of organizing and looking at the world, as distinct to capitalist social relationships. As the A-Spire website states: “This social centre was founded through a spirit of cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid.”<sup>31</sup> A participant states that A-Spire was based on “collective organizing, anarchist principles, anti-capitalist movement, direct action/ environmental movement & DIY culture.”<sup>32</sup>

Capitalism restructures itself through a process of endless enclosure, in what David Harvey terms “accumulation by dispossession.”<sup>33</sup> But Leeds, as a city, is also regenerating itself through the increased privatization and commodification of life.<sup>34</sup> Whether this is through Private Finance Initiative (PFI) projects, new bars, or city centre apartments, the result is the same.<sup>35</sup> In response to this, A-Spire occupied space, without asking for “permission,” and helped build and open up a venue that is the antithesis to capitalist enclosure: non-profit, non-hierarchical, and anti-capitalist.

As an interviewee affirms: “A-Spire would be challenging the everyday capitalist life we were confronted with, especially living in the ever-expanding ‘financial centre of the north,’ that was rapidly becoming unrecognizably gentrified.”<sup>36</sup>

The website for the first A-Spire made this very clear: “Leeds is becoming a centre for overpriced, corporate [sic], entertainment outlets that are more about grabbing your cash than providing a useful social function.”<sup>37</sup> An interviewee reflects that the mainstream, capitalist world “can be very expensive and therefore exclusive if you’re skint, it can be really plastic and dull.”<sup>38</sup> Another interviewee, when asked about A-Spire’s influences, stated: “collective organizing, anarchist principles, anti-capitalist movement, direct action, environmental movement, and DIY culture.”<sup>39</sup> When asked what their personal highlights of A-Spire were, one person stated: “collective action, shared motivation and vision, meeting interesting people, feeling a sense of belonging and family.”<sup>40</sup> This can be seen as an example of community building. All these reflections can be viewed as examples of the “new cooperativism” as embodied in the practice of social centres and autonomous spaces.

### **“Commonism”**

As we have seen, autonomous zones have a long history and provide a range of facilities. The people involved give their time, not for selfish motivations such as profit, but in order to take part in collective organizing and self-management.<sup>41</sup> As such they both operationalize value practices and foster social relations that are contra to those of capital. They operate on principles of autonomy which “has its roots in the ancient tradition of the commons.”<sup>42</sup>

The reclamation of social space, whether in terms of common ground for community use and subsistence or the establishment of autonomous spaces, has been a site of continuous struggle throughout history. The creation of “new commons” is a potentially productive and practical way of discussing alternatives to, and ways out of capitalism. Social centres are one of the ways in which we can experiment with the production of new social commons in the present, as well as bases from which to organize resistance against further enclosures. Cooperation is fundamental to the production of the common, however it is important not to overstate the links between cooperation and the common. Contemporary capitalism also relies heavily on cooperation, especially through some forms of immaterial labour. Thus cooperation does not always imply liberation. However, we can look at the production of the commons as a means to reorganize life along cooperative principles in the here-and-now, within and despite, inside and against capitalism.

Through embedding and expanding the commons in their multiple forms, as well as resisting the destruction of those already in existence, we can further develop communities based on cooperative principles and partake in acts of creative-resistance. The occupation of space through tactics such as squatting brings together the antagonistic and creative/playful side of politics--the “negative”

and “positive.” The reproduction of the common, through the act of “communing,” can aid us in our remaking of the world, from one based on capitalism and its endless accumulation and exploitation to a “commonism”<sup>43</sup> based on a praxis of cooperation, mutual aid, and collaboration.

By creating commons we are simultaneously resisting the enclosures imposed by capital, for example, within cities through resisting processes of “regentrification,” capitalist planning, and the neoliberalization of city centres. To some extent, spaces such as A-Spire represent an example of this resistance. Many of the buildings A-Spire occupied were due to be demolished to make way for the city’s wide-reaching luxury housing projects (many of which now stand empty), or were evicted to make space for yet another characterless chain bar. At points, A-Spire attempted to comment on or in other ways criticize this process. As an interviewee states: “there was one [A-Spire] that had a focus on gentrification issues due to the buildings that they were in being demolished to make way for flats.”<sup>44</sup> This was A-Spire 4 where, as discussed above, participants took the “pirate ship” around Leeds city centre, with publicity proclaiming: “They gentrify our areas; we will downgrade theirs.”<sup>45</sup> However, A-Spire lacked the capacity and/or the political willpower to directly challenge gentrification in Leeds.

For De Angelis,<sup>46</sup> the creation of commons is a way to create “outsides” to capitalist social relations. Sometimes these “outsides” can manifest themselves in material space. These can be small subversive spaces (such as temporary autonomous zones), other times they are engaged in open revolt (for example protest camps or urban spaces reclaimed through street parties or riots). As De Angelis states, these “struggles bring values, their tensions, and boundary lines to the forefront, and this creates the *outside* as an emergent property.”<sup>47</sup>

De Angelis suggests we create new commons through

occupations of land and the building of communities; by struggling against rent positions of intellectual property rights threatening the lives of millions of Aids patients; by simply downloading and sharing music....<sup>48</sup>

Examples could include anti-road protests camps, self-managed social centres, and anti-copyright and copyleft licenses. We have seen already that social-centres aid the creation of community; they are also a base for launching a variety of social struggles. The Common Place runs skill shares for using open source/free computer software and operating systems, such as Linux. The promotion of these alternatives to proprietary software can be seen as an extension to both the values of cooperation and mutual aid fostered throughout social centres and an important way of showing collaborative alternatives

based on the knowledge commons as opposed to closed systems resting on “info-enclosures” and capital accumulation.

In this sense, those resisting place themselves and their relationships as the potential “outside,” in which they can attempt to overturn capitalist social relations. Yet the contradiction is that until capitalism is deconstructed this “outside” is internal to capital and bears to a greater or lesser extent its marks.

However, there are real questions to be posed about the nature of a conception of an “outside” to capital. The pure “liberated spaces”<sup>49</sup> discussed by some involved in autonomous spaces may not exist, or even be possible without a total break from capitalist social relationships. In tension with the idea of a “pure” liberated space, Harry Cleaver suggests: “we craft autonomous environments and activities but we do so in spaces scarred by capitalist exploitation and with commodities and personalities at least partly shaped by the process of valorization.”<sup>50</sup> I think this is a productive way of approaching the problems inherent in the messy politics of autonomy, autonomous space, and the constitution of “outside(s).” As others have stated:

Many [social centres] simply reflect the reality of practising radical, self-organized politics simultaneously “in and against” capitalist society and the difficulty of putting into practice the values of anti-authority, horizontality, and solidarity.<sup>51</sup>

We can frame the conflict between the principles of autonomy and processes of self-valorization and those of capital in terms of *value struggles*. These value-struggles relate heavily with the creation of “outsides” discussed above. One of the ways in which these alternative value practices are experimented with is through autonomous spaces. As Chatterton states:

Self-management is an experiment in group self-discipline--how do participants (re)regulate themselves and others, not relying on values in our individual capitalist lives, but those to which we aspire in our collective non-capitalist lives?<sup>52</sup>

### **From capitalist valorization to self-valorization**

It has been suggested that “activists need to think about ways in which we can move beyond a cycle of struggles based only on resistance to capital to a cycle of struggles that consciously includes post-capitalist possibilities.”<sup>53</sup> This attempt to practice new post-capitalist ways of living and generate new values can be seen at work in social centres and autonomous spaces, such as A-Spire.

Using the autonomist Marxist concept of *self-valorization*, we can view social centres as an experiment in use-value versus surplus value. As Paolo Virno & Michael Hardt state: “Self-valorization... refers to an alternative social structure of value that is founded not on the production of surplus value but on the collective needs and desires of the producing community.”<sup>54</sup> Social centres can be one of the ways in which we engage in processes of self-valorization... and partake in what Carlsson calls “nowtopia.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, social centres often form a base for various nowtopian projects, such as DIY bike repair workshops, urban gardening, and feminist health groups, to name just a few.

Hardt & Virno go onto elaborate that in Italy, self-valorization has been used to “describe the practices of local and community-based forms of social organization and welfare that are relatively independent of capitalist relations of production and state control.”<sup>56</sup> What Hardt & Virno are describing is present within autonomous spaces such as social centres. As an interviewee reflects regarding A-Spire: “I think it's generally been one of the best opportunities to make the world how you want it to be that I've ever experienced.”<sup>57</sup> While another states:

Reclaiming space from private ownership to create social space and public space..., to provide things which aren't provided for by the market, that governs society today in Britain..., to spread ideas of how to live differently, effectively... for less money so you don't have to get a job that ties you into working in capitalism or not having enough time to do other things you want to do.<sup>58</sup>

This example of A-Spire as “life despite capitalism” is illustrative of self-valorization.

Following Karl Marx, the present contains the seeds for the future world, so to some extent it must contain potential “outsides” to capitalist social relations. These seeds need to be nurtured alongside our resistance to capital, because as Monty Neill states:

The working class cannot beat capital only with resistance and opposition. The class must keep in mind Marx's observation that the new society emerges from the womb of the old and try to protect and hasten the development of the embryo.<sup>59</sup>

The process of self-valorization is one of the ways in which this “embryo” is developed and nurtured. Another way of stating this is that “communism is not an ideal to be realized: it already exists, not as a society, but as an effort, a task to prepare for.”<sup>60</sup> Experiments in autonomous space and other forms of self-valorization could be argued to be preparation for a new society. They

engender experimentations with the new cooperativism: non-hierarchical ways of organizing and self-management becoming bases through which campaigns and resistance are organized. As Antonio Negri states, “*from resistance to appropriation, from reappropriation to self-organization...* In short this is a journey through the various figures of *self-valorization*.”<sup>61</sup> These are all present within social centres and autonomous spaces, we appropriate through occupying space and then reappropriate it for anti-capitalist ends and organize according to principles of self-management.

### **Challenges and contradictions**

Social centres and autonomous spaces are not without their problems. Breakdowns in processes of consensus and cooperation can and do happen in these spaces. Specialization of tasks can occur, something that can lead to burn out as well as the development of informal hierarchies. There is the potential for a hegemonic politics to evolve, where the space becomes a “ghetto” or “pure” space in which participants project their moral lifestyle choices out upon others in the wider society. Tensions can arise over how best to use a space, for example: should having a large party mean that the centre isn’t in any condition to run a mass meeting the next day? Drugs and alcohol can become a problem too, not least because it can cause an atmosphere/environment that limits inclusivity. As a report from a recent squatters network meeting in Bristol illustrates:

The subject of gender was, inevitably, introduced in connection with the issue of safer spaces and the problems of maintaining an open door policy. Several examples were given of squatted social centres that failed because of the presence of drug users and it was pointed out that chaotic spaces automatically become exclusive because “when things get rough, it is the women that leave.”<sup>62</sup>

Instead of a public point of interaction between worlds, autonomous spaces can become a bunker in which to lockdown and reaffirm sub/counter cultural choices/identities. This can become a problem for wider participation in the space. However, it is important not to see counter-cultural forms as purely negative. There is a fine line between the playful and subversive rebellion of cultural movements and the capture of these forms within restrictive indentitarian and moral frameworks. The various manifestations of contestation and creative experimentation present within counter-cultural practices are a scream of refusal--a “No!”<sup>63</sup>--to the disciplinary frameworks of the nuclear family and the (social) factory. As Hardt & Negri state, these movements that the traditional left like to relegate to being “merely cultural” have “profound political and economic effects.”<sup>64</sup>

In 1994, an inquiry in the form of a survey of sixteen of Rome's social centres was conducted. Among many other things some of the following criticisms were raised: a tendency towards being self-referential, a lack of politics, an inability to communicate with people, a tendency towards ghetto formation, and a position of illegality and anti-conformism at any cost.<sup>65</sup>

A commonly discussed problem within social centres is the risk of becoming an alternative service-economy, picking up the pieces from a welfare state (where it exists) that is increasingly under attack. Another common criticism is that social centres can drain energies from other forms of activism.<sup>66</sup> Spaces can become blocked, too rigid and stuck in one way of organizing/responding to problems. This can result in an unproductive dogmatism in place of real critical engagement.

Practical considerations such as rules and regulations, health and safety requirements, and especially money, can interfere with more gratifying elements such as taking part in direct action and organizing events in the space. This can especially be the case within spaces which are rented or owned and therefore subject to tighter regulations, for example through licensing acts.

An example of this is The Common Place, a social centre in Leeds which has recently had its performance licence taken away, largely thought to be a result of its decision to show a film about the Smash EDO anti-militarism campaign in Brighton. Many spaces that were screening the film up and down the UK were subject to pressure not to show the film. The removal of The Common Place's licence has made it hard for them to continue. Not only do they need the revenue through bar sales to pay the rent and bills, but without a licence they are unable to publicly show films or have any other form of entertainment such as live music. This makes it hard to organize events in the space other than meetings and suchlike.

In recent years there has been debate within the social centres' movement regarding the relative merit of squatted and bought/rented spaces.<sup>67</sup> Rogue Element, authors of a critique of rented social centres, were involved in a squatted project called Maelstrom, and had been involved with A-Spire (both in Leeds). They put forward arguments against rented social centres, claiming that renting a social centre was not only a waste of money, but that the legal red tape involved (fire regulations, health and safety procedures, etc.) would inhibit the creative experimentation that had been the hallmark of many squatted social spaces. An interviewee involved with A-Spire echoed many of the same points:

I think the existence of ongoing social centres are related but different to squatted social centres... I think the idea of temporary autonomous zones are

really interesting for me, and the idea that the temporariness are part of the delight and freedom of it, and the fact you don't have to go along with licenses, the fact you're sort of off-radar and off-limits of the institutions of mainstream culture, that limit what you would otherwise be able to do in a venue, because of health and safety regulation, because of licensing hours, because of all those issues which you know, A-spire, essentially burns all that bollocks.<sup>68</sup>

Hakim Bey poses a similar problem in an essay on "Permanent Autonomous Zones" (PAZ): "how can the PAZ renew and refresh itself periodically with the 'festival' aspect of the TAZ [temporary autonomous zone]?"<sup>69</sup> This question would appear relevant to both Rogue Element's critique and the above interviewees' comments on rented social centres. It is further elaborated by an A-Spire participant interviewed for someone else's project: "the reason that I like temporary social spaces are the lack of bureaucracy the lack of a need to fulfil [sic] criteria to meet legislation, the feeling that you can all decide to leave if you want to."<sup>70</sup> These comments can certainly now be related to the legal problems at the Common Place in Leeds.

However, Rogue Element's criticisms are not without acknowledgment of the pitfall of occupied spaces. They point out the potential for squatted projects to become formulaic and staid, citing A-Spire's recent experience as one such example.<sup>71</sup> In response, one of the authors behind Text Nothing, noted the 56a Infoshop squat in London had started paying "peppercorn rent," having squatted the building since 1991. If the collective had decided not to pay the rent, they would almost certainly have been evicted and all the projects they run from the building would have ended.<sup>72</sup>

A commentator on [my research wiki](#) states that: "the growth of rented social centres has, predictably, correlated with the disappearance of squatted ones."<sup>73</sup> This supports Rogue Element's criticisms that "state-approved social centres can have a damaging impact on other projects."<sup>74</sup>

Rogue Element raises some interesting questions about the temporal element of squatted and rented social centre projects, the potential pros and cons of permanency. However, their critique sets up a false binary between squatting/renting and legal/illegal. In their eagerness to respond to and comment on specific local political developments, they generalize and fetishize illegal political activity or activity that is on the borders of legality, such as squatting. Ultimately, they fall into a moral position and reify "radicalism" into one dimensional "militancy."

These debates raise important questions about the governance of the common(s), the process of commoning, and about the social reproduction of

the common(s). The creation of new commons is never an easy process--it involves contestation and antagonism. The common(s) do not represent pure spaces, where all the answers have been worked out, but are constantly in a process of becoming.

### **Conclusion: *Omnia sunt communia***

The new cooperativism, as embodied in social centres, is messy and deliberately unfinished, constantly in the process of “becoming.” There are no easy answers or blueprints to creating a new world, but through the process of constant experimentation, creativity, and collaboration we can make a start in the production of developing alternative practices and ways of being.

The value practices developed within social centres and other autonomous spaces are in stark contrast to those driving the new enclosures around the world. The commitment of these to providing food, shelter, and entertainment for free, on an empowering self-managed rather than charitable basis, creates a common resource. This common resource belongs to no one individual or group but, rather, is freely available for use by those that need and/or desire to use it, along the principles of *omnia sunt communia* (all things are common). As such they are engaged in value struggles that are implicitly part of the resistance to the new enclosures.

Although not without their tensions and contradictions, autonomous spaces embody a prefigurative approach to politics that has been prevalent in much of anarchist and autonomous practice throughout history. A form of self-management is alive and well and being put to work within social centres: the self-management of space and the practicalities this implies, problem solving, conflict management, and much more. They foster experimentation in developing new ways of living and organizing, inside/outside, against and despite capitalism. To this extent they represent an example of an attempt to reclaim and expand the commons. It is through both this extension and defence of the commons that the new enclosures are resisted and experiments in the new cooperativism are begun.

## Endnotes

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