

# So What Does It Mean to be Anti-capitalist? Conversations with Activists from Urban Social Centres

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## Abstract

This paper is about autonomous urban social centres and attempts to show how the everyday lives, values and practices of participants within them give shape and meaning to the idea of anti-capitalism. This is done by reference to five areas: a politics of place, where local space constitutes anti-capitalist practice; political identities based on impure, messy identities; social relationships which prioritise emotions and collective working; organisational practices based on self-management and experimentation; and political strategies which stress the need to cross boundaries beyond the activist ghetto. Overall, social centre participants demonstrate that anti-capitalist practice is not just 'anti-', but also 'post-' and 'despite-' capitalist; simultaneously against, after and within. Just like capitalist social relations, its antithesis anti-capitalism is constituted through ordinary everyday practices. It is this reconceptualisation of anti-capitalist practice as experimental, messy, open, everyday, collective and grounded politics which has the potential to make this kind of contentious urban politics more legible and feasible—in times when we need it most.

## 1. Introduction

What does it mean to be anti-capitalist? This is an intriguing and difficult question, not least because it is wrapped up with so many stereotypes and assumptions about the meaning of activism, politics and social change. Anti-capitalism cannot be captured through any simple, singular definition and what I attempt to do in this paper is show how the everyday

lives, values and practices of participants within autonomous urban social centres give shape and meaning to the term.<sup>1</sup> These mainly rented and bought centres, numbering over a dozen in UK cities and inspired by recent anarchist, anti-authoritarian and anti-global activism, are semi-permanent, self-governing, not-for-profit place-bounded political projects

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which promote grassroots activism, politics and culture and which largely rely on volunteer labour. They both act as a base for activists whilst also focus on reaching out to the local community and responding to local issues and needs.

The work for this article is part of my ongoing inquiry into the practices and motivations of contemporary European autonomous, anti-authoritarian activists and the role of what we call 'autonomous geographies' in constituting activist groups, values and emotions (Chatterton, 2006; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006).<sup>2</sup> Our aim has been to extend the growing body of academic commentary within geography and elsewhere which has explored the values, practices and spaces of activists within radical or 'contentious politics' (Aminzade *et al.*, 2001; Leitner *et al.*, 2008). Anderson (2003, 2004), for example, has highlighted how environmental direct action (EDA) seeks to politicise space in its own terms and reiterate its difference, and that activists maintain a 'spatial division of identity' between normal spaces and sites of activism; and Doherty *et al.* (2001) have explored the strong local bonds that drive EDA. At the same time, there has been an increasing focus on extra-local activism through the ideas of 'transnational contention' and the globalised 'movement of movements' (see Tarrow, 2005; Mertes, 2004). For example, Glassman (2002) has focused on the scale-jumping activities of anti-corporate protestors, Featherstone (2003) has discussed how the spatialities of resistance to globalisation are woven together transnationally, while Routledge (2003) has highlighted the role of transnational convergence spaces in grounding grassroots globalisation networks. There has also been acknowledgement of the key role of emotions and humour within activism (Pulido, 2003; Thrift, 2004; Duncombe, 2007), as well as a critique of the problematic labelling and separation of activist identities from non-activist ones (see Halfacree, 2004; Chatterton, 2006).

Work has also explored the relationship between contentious politics and the urban sphere. The urban has long been a key site for riots, uprisings and fermenting social movements, not least because it is in the city that activists can resist and disrupt the workings of capital, become visible, gain access to and challenge political power, and also find the critical mass of people and resources for building communities of resistance and creating alternatives. The right to the city, in particular, is a long established theme, and one which the squatting and social centre tradition extends (see Castells, 1984; Ruggiero, 2000a, 2000b; Mitchell, 2003; Leontidou, 2006). However, this urban framing of contention has become more complex in the light of the recent anti-globalisation movement which is less place-based and more mobile and technologically embedded. In this paper, I draw on these understandings and use social centres to develop further our spatial understanding of contentious politics at an everyday level (Martin and Miller, 2003). While there is a desire to develop an identifiable extra-local anti-capitalist movement, what is more discernible is a desire to reach out and engage with a local public about the relevance and usefulness of anti-capitalist ideas. Whether this is in the city or the suburbs is less important than the ability to reach out and engage. Wherever they find an opportunity to locate, what I show is that anti-capitalism is constituted through activists' everyday local practices which are largely locally grounded but also complex, negotiated and pragmatic.

Although the particular story of social centres in the UK and beyond has been partially covered elsewhere (see Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006; and also Coates, 2000; Corr, 1999; Wates, 1980; Lacey, 2005; Montagna, 2006; Mudu, 2004; Ruggiero, 2000a, 2000b), for the purposes of this article it is worth briefly restating the recent history in the UK. They have developed through a number of waves, emerging first under the

guise of anarchist Autonomy Clubs in the 1980s, inspired by punk, anti-fascist and Claimants Unions activists. The mid 1990s saw a wave of squatted spaces emerge inspired by the UK free party and anti-roads protest camp culture, while the late 1990s saw many activists involved in anti-global and more conscious anti-capitalist activism, through which a desire emerged for more permanent activist bases or hubs for organising. It was not until the early 2000s, after activists visited and engaged with the daily militancy and innovations of the occupied *centri sociali* in Italy, that the idea was translated into the UK, and first London, inspiring a whole wave of new centres. The current network of social centres in the UK are bases for a range of radical, anti-authoritarian political groups such as No Borders and the Camp for Climate Action and have now become a recognised part of the UK activist infrastructure, hosting tours and national meetings of activists.<sup>3</sup> They have attempted to create welcoming, professional spaces to avoid associations with squats and attract a broader audience. Typically, social centres contain a mix of: public talks, film screenings, reading areas, vegan cafés, bar and gig spaces, food-growing areas, art spaces, open access computers, free libraries, language classes for refugees, free schools and classes and free meeting space. Some have set up workers co-operatives to run the buildings and most are run by regular open assembly meetings using consensus. Centres have emerged in larger urban areas where there are existing cosmopolitan-radical communities and visible counter-cultural traditions and have reinforced these places as hubs for activists who tend to converge where there are opportunities and infrastructure to support them. Some have chosen city-centre locations to maximise access for all city residents, while others have chosen to focus on building deeper relations in one particular community.

Drawing on my encounters with participants in social centres, the later sections in this

paper flesh out how participants understand and enact anti-capitalism through their everyday practices in five areas: a politics of place, which stresses the importance of local space in constituting anti-capitalism as a practice; political identities based on impure, messy identities and a foregrounding of possibility and indeterminacy; social relationships which prioritise emotions and collective working which also extend beyond the physical boundaries of centres; organisational practices based on self-management and experimentation and which require constant renegotiation; and political strategies which stress the need to cross boundaries beyond the activist ghetto and embed radical change in everyday practice. Social centres allow us to reconceptualise political activism that is ‘anti-’, ‘post-’ and ‘despite-’ capitalism<sup>4</sup>—simultaneously against, after and within. Participants embody the everyday social relations of both capitalism and anti-capitalism, dealing with the here and now and what comes next. And so, when we look for anti-capitalism, we are not necessarily looking for big moments of rupture and conflict, but rather for the ordinary everyday practices that people undertake outside capitalist social relations. It is this reconceptualisation that makes anti-capitalist practice mundane, but also accessible, exciting and feasible.

### 1.1 A Methodological Note

The research underpinning this paper was undertaken during a two-year project funded by the ESRC which became known as ‘Autonomous Geographies.’ The aim was to explore the values and practices of self-managed political movements in the UK and the project focused on eco-villages, social centres and tenants networks struggling against privatisation. We attempted to use a participatory action research (PAR) methodology throughout this project. PAR, which prioritises engagement, reflexivity and collaboration with research users and which aims to produce socially useful knowledge (Kindon

*et al.*, 2007), was valued by the research team as it allowed us to build trust, empathy and understanding in these kinds of contentious political settings and to give something back to the movements we were researching. We wanted to work in close collaboration with our case studies, developing and showing solidarity not as researchers but as movement participants. We wanted to stress the ‘a’ in PAR which emphasised research as a tool for social change rather than merely reforming institutional practice or improving policy (see Chatterton *et al.*, 2007). Our actual experience was less smooth. Problems revolved around a poor definition and explanation of the research project to the case studies, as well as our own identities within the research project which often led to a confusion of what we were doing and why, and a lack of clarity about exactly what we were adding or offering. We never really resolved this and, to a certain extent, we accepted that this was part of the messy action research process with dynamic activist groups (see The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010).

The intention behind the research engagement with social centres was to collaborate with participants to explore how they understood their own anti-capitalist practice and values, what motivated them to get involved and what they hoped to achieve, both individually and in terms of the network of social centres. My research engagement with them was as someone who was already embedded and actively involved in the social centres movement in terms of project building and developing political aims. I was very much an ‘insider’ and hence this was not a detached academic study. Rather, my intention was to provide resources and further clarity for, and co-enquiry with, this developing network of social centres. It was of particular interest due to the use of anti-capitalism as a framing point and I was keen to explore what this rather nebulous term means as an everyday practice. This kind of study allows us to evalu-

ate the strengths and limitations of activist practice and a study of contentious politics as an everyday practice can say much about how radical ideas can be normalised and made more feasible and legible to a wider public. I spoke with a range of social centre participants in 10 social centres. Although many people pass through social centres, those who gave me more time might be regarded as classic activists—middle-class, White, educated and self-identifying as activist. I also encountered several cosmopolitan, mobile activists from outside the UK who are familiar with counter-cultural spaces. The conversations reflect these characteristics.

## **2. Exploring the Everyday Anti-capitalist Lives of Social Centre Participants**

### **2.1 Politics Happens in Place**

One of the tendencies within the recent anti-capitalist movement is to stress its global, or at least deeply internationalist nature, especially through solidarity with other struggles challenging capitalism. The Zapatista struggle has become the benchmark for such global solidarity and connectivity and banners unfurled at the Carnivals against Capitalism in 1999 which read ‘Our resistance will be as transnational as capital’ have become important motifs.

What social centres reveal in practice is a much more place-based interpretation of political engagement, almost a deglobalisation (Bello *et al.*, 2007). Social centres, first and foremost, aim to be territorially grounded projects and, for the participants, politics happens in place. They are described through various motifs such as platforms, safe spaces, bases, incubators and shelters which reveal a desire for groups to anchor themselves and find meaning, safety and visibility. This kind of grounding is seen as particularly important in light of the destabilising effects of land speculation, gentrification, privatisation and enclosure, as well

as the loss of public services in cities (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Smith, 1996).

Social centres respond to a very basic need—independent, not-for-profit, politically plural spaces where participants can meet, discuss and plan. It is not just space, but safe space which participants desire—to evade direct policing and surveillance, and to develop ideas and tactics in private. This safe space becomes constitutive of social relations that help to foster anti-capitalist ideas and practice. As Geoff from Leeds commented

Anti-capitalism, whatever that means, it needs somewhere to materialise. To come together. It used to be in the work place and now we are looking for new places.

His last point is important as social centres attempt to plug the gap following the closure of older political spaces such as working men's clubs, unionised workplaces and churches.

A common feeling expressed by participants is a desire for permanence in a world which is increasingly unstable and difficult to comprehend. Providing stability in a time of change and uncertainty, providing anchorage in a turbulent society, was seen by one social centre, London Action Resource Centre, as a key role for them

And in a sense that means LARC has become a bit of a hawk in the storm I suppose. Things flourish and wax and wane and LARC kind of stays in the midst of it.

This turn towards more political permanence also reflects a shift by many campaigners away from more mobile, confrontational and transient political engagement towards a more locally grounded, anti-capitalist politics which engages with the public. John, from one London social centre, discussed how there was actually a need to turn away from more covert, hidden activism

We could really do with some kind of a long-term permanent place where we can put down

some roots and be seen and be visible and be proud of what we were doing, and not to be seen to be hiding or actually hiding.

Use of words such as pride, visibility and roots reveals a desire to create an outward-looking, engaged politics. One aspect of this desire to put down roots through renting or buying was due to increasing difficulties with squatting.<sup>5</sup> Permanent social centre collectives did emerge out of the strong UK squatter culture of the 1990s, but their temporary and increasingly legally contested nature becomes an energy drain and frustration for groups who want to begin to put down the permanent roots and engage with their local community over a longer period of time.

Yet permanence has a broader political function. Many participants regard space as a key organising tool in terms of the political development of participants and of the wider movement. Julie from Newcastle reinforces this educational role

And a lot of that is to do with using a social centre as a platform or a space where you can develop other things that would mean you could take control of your life.

The 'things' that Julie refers to include free schools, DIY classes, talks, film screenings with discussions and just having a space such as a café where people could gather and exchange views and local information. In a context which has seen a significant depoliticisation of education (Cote *et al.*, 2007), activists value the role of social centres as places of self-education, especially in terms of developing an awareness of local issues and to link these upwards to wider concerns. As Julie goes on to explain

So it's basically creating space where you're allowed to develop that analysis and discuss and socialise and, really, increase your understanding of what's happening in the world and what you can do about it. People want to develop and they want to analyse and

identify as part of a bigger thing and whatever. I think it's still important because there's nothing like that in the city.

One example here is the No Borders network, which uses social centres for solidarity work with asylum-seekers, but also undertakes gatherings and film nights to raise awareness on wider issues of detention, migration and destitution.

While the immediate locality of the social centre remains the focus for most of its participants, through what Tarrow (2005) calls 'rooted cosmopolitans' (more internationally minded activists), other places and struggles are brought into the story. One clear example is the Zapatista struggle in Mexico which, due to its role as an inspirational example of autonomous self-governance is ever-present in social centres through the sale of coffee and merchandise, posters and occasional talks. The *centri sociali* of Italy also provide a political inspiration of the current wave of social centres, in the same way that the German and Dutch squatter and punk movement did in the 1980s and 1990s. Direct links and exchanges between the UK and Italy, especially through activist meetings and convergences such as the People's Global Action Meeting in Milan and the G8 summit protests in Genoa in 2002, led to a cross-fertilisation of ideas and action about how to construct an anti-capitalist identity which was locally rooted and which could radicalise and transform everyday politics. We return to this later. However, rather than a well developed multiscalarity or scale-jumping, instead what we see are more occasional exchanges, with international links serving as a wider inspirational context.

## 2.2 The Impure, Messy Politics of the Possible

As discussed earlier, anti-capitalism is a rich tradition not simply defined through one ideology and, for social centre participants, there was a similar reluctance to be defined. Instead, participants seemed to embrace and

accept political identities that were open, incomplete, complex and multiple. James from Leeds expresses this lack of definition

Say we all passed a resolution saying that we are now against capitalism, which I always assumed it was, what the fuck does that mean? I am an anti-capitalist, I will completely say this now right, but I have no idea what that means; I have no little blue plan in my bedroom about how society should be run. It is meaningless; it is like, what we do now basically.

What we can take from this is that, while there may be agreement in principle with being anti-capitalist, it is everyday practice that constitutes it. By doing politics in particular places with particular people, through cooking, cleaning, making decisions or fixing computers freely and for the collective, the social relations of anti-capitalism are given form. These are Lefevre's (1974) perceived spatial practices, the material spaces of daily life where social production and reproduction occurs.

James goes on to say

I think one of the wonderful things about this place is that it holds together, it's a really open, complicated space that accommodates really very different people.

What we learn here is that social centres are open spaces and this openness makes them complicated. The actual act of dealing with this is what is at the heart of their everyday rhythm. David from Leeds reflects

The people who congregate round here are people who want to get their hands dirty basically. They want to get involved in all the complexities of something, they don't want pure things. It makes you face up to loads of stuff all the time.

What is 'faced up to' are conflicts and differences that have to be acknowledged and dealt with. So this politics of impurity needs constant work. One tool used when relations break

down is mediation realised through group process such as consensus, specific mediation teams or just constant social contact.

One of the recurring motifs which participants express is a politics of possibility (Gibson-Graham, 2006), where anti-capitalism becomes a post-capitalist politics for what comes next. This spirit of possibility is used to counter the politics of fixity of representative politics and the bureaucracy of the local state. It is a politics of prefiguration which aims to build achievable future aspirations in the present, as David from Newcastle outlines

You know, that's what I think it contributes towards—showing alternatives and contributing therefore to alternative realities. It's like a window of possibility and that's where I think its validity comes from, but in terms of like achievableness.

A constant sense of opening and possibility, of becoming, is at the heart of the political identity of social centres. Possibility is seen as an everyday event, the fact that projects are not fixed and can be altered or renegotiated at any point by the creative energies of participants. One person suggested that possibility was what “keeps me going”, the fact that future directions were largely unknown and could be renegotiated through deliberation at open meetings. Possibility is also about indeterminacy, as David from the Common Place outlined

I think it is also important to maybe not ask the big ‘Why are we here?’; maybe there doesn't need to be a big reason, and to think, as you say, that it is just a big exercise to see what we can get away with and what we can do—what the collective imagination can dream up. A process with no kind of aims or destinations, it's kind of what you develop along the way.

It is what the collective imagination can get away with, then, rather than the rules of the local state or the workings of money system, that provide, whenever possible, the direction

for these projects. The time-scale of this deliberative impure politics can also be much slower. As one person commented, social centres offer a steadiness, longevity and sense of history which might look dull compared with the excitement and immediacy of squatted spaces, summit sieges and direct action. Simon from the 1 in 12 in Bradford saw their impact in this way

If you want to go for something very focused, very activist, it probably is going to burn out very quickly, quite spectacular. What we have is that longevity—but from the outside is that we look pretty dull.

Gibson-Graham (2006) outlines how, in these open moments of political becoming, opportunities for new identities and relationships emerge. Drawing on the work of Connolly (1999), Gibson-Graham discusses the need for ‘fugitive energies’ that release people from predefined modes of being. It is in these messy, open political moments that new, adaptable and powerful, anti- or post-capitalist social-political subjects can be formed.

### 2.3 Rebuilding the Social Collective

Anti-capitalist politics is not just about developing spaces, nor about bread-and-butter issues such as housing struggles or ecological damage, although of course these are crucial. They also concern the hidden work of rebuilding social relationships around emotional response, solidarity and trust and shared practices of working and learning together. It is about the desire to develop, as Pulido (2003) suggests, the inner life of politics—our basic emotional connections and responses to one another. This is a political process that recognises and responds to desire and emotions and embraces carnival, humour and the everyday potential of subversive behaviour within consumer society (Jasper, 1998; Flesher-Fominaya, 2007). The kinds of anti-capitalist currents that run through

social centres attempt to break out of the nostalgia for traditional, comfortable ways of Left politics (Duncombe, 2007).

The shared social spaces and working practices of social centres allow these humorous moments and emotional connections to develop. Through the daily routines of social centres—running events, cooking, delivering food, maintaining and cleaning, organising rotas—less visible but essential political work is undertaken. This work, which is non-profit, non-monetarised and which has a clear benefit for the centre, constitutes a sense of a collective, that is both social and political and responsive to the individuals within it, their needs and desires. This focus on changing each other and working towards more durable and caring communities of resistance, rather than merely responding to crises, is further articulated by John from Newcastle

Basically, I would go along to a meeting every week and there would be a new area of discontent in the world, something today would be going utterly, dreadfully wrong. And it was, and it is, and we would try to do something about it. And it's like fire-fighting. You know, there are literally thousands of things wrong with this world and I began thinking 'there has to be a better way doing it than this'. And what attracted me to the idea of the social centre was instead of trying to change individual policies, you can start changing people, and then communities.

What John expresses is a desire to engage with people and their emotional relationship to politics rather than using crisis situations and political ideologies to convert people. The everyday routine spaces and times of the social centre allow experimentation with ways of relating and organising socially beyond those we adopt in our daily capitalist practices. For example, food is made collectively and sold for donation, space is offered free to groups wanting to meet and talk, and computers use free open-source software. The starting-points of these encounters are not coherent and fully

formed political subjects who subscribe to this 'ism' or that ideology. Rather, social interactions create the possibility where, as Kevin from Oxford, suggests: "people are working out politically where everyone's coming from".

Many centres are located in downtown urban areas with the explicit aim of challenging the kinds of social interactions which unfold in consumption-dominated landscapes. Ed from Leeds commented on how 'gentrification' was actively reducing the amount of open free spaces and this begins to affect the nature of interaction in cities

It's like trying to recreate society almost, because the whole focus of gentrification is like as if government and business are trying to create atomised individuals and trying to really destroy any social setting, so the best you get is going down the pub. The idea of doing this, of creating a space where it's not to do with conforming to certain norms, it's somewhere where we can actually come down and have a social co-experience.

The assumption here is that the contemporary urban consumer experience is a very poor 'social co-experience', but the wider point is that the types of social experience which social centres attempt to create are different as they have political intent. As Ed continues

The reason why governments want to destroy socialisation is because they realise that they can get really fucked over by it. People start talking to each other and think 'Hang on; we don't actually have to live like this.

The political strength of social centres is not expressed in dramatic political actions or gestures, but through socialisation as part of a collective which fosters common interests which respond to need. And it is a collective socialisation that is open and fluid and occurs as much in the formal setting of meetings, as in the moments and gaps in between—peeling potatoes, carrying sound equipment, chatting over a beer.

Social relationships are often more important than the physical space that facilitates or initiates them. A member of the 1 in 12 Club suggested that

The 1 in 12 is beyond the building anyway, it is about relationships. It won't go if the building goes, even though the building is very important.

What this expresses is that, while the physicality of social centres constitutes anti-capitalist social relations, those social relations then spill out and over beyond that physicality. In this way, social centres are nodes, albeit relatively central ones, in an ever-expanding network in which people interested in alternative values and practices circulate.

#### **2.4 Self-management and the Art of Experimental Organising**

Direct democracy, or horizontal organising is valued within the anti-capitalist movement and tools for direct democracy such as consensus decision-making are used to promote more egalitarian social relationships. Although little acknowledged, these values and tools have been passed down directly from the peace and feminist movements of the 1960s. A main impulse here is towards autonomy, literally self-legislation. Yet this is not individual self-management or autonomy in the liberal-individual sense embedded in enlightenment values where individuals are cut adrift from responsibility and acquire a legal right to maximise profits freely in the market. Rather, it is self-management that builds times and spaces to bring autonomous individuals together, undermining the logic of private ownership and which allows us to recognise our needs and differences. This kind of collective self-management and the common ownership and management of spaces and services are devices to erode the capitalist logic of accumulation for individual gain. They urge us to recreate and reclaim 'the commons' in its many forms: material,

discursive, knowledge-based, resources (see de Angelis, 2007; Midnight Notes, 1991).

Self-management of this kind is what attracts many participants to social centres and it is worth looking in some detail at how this works in practice. A rejection of formal political structures, permanent leadership and standing committees, goes hand-in-hand with some fairly rigorous organising principles which are, in effect, a programme for expanding and embedding a politics of self-management. This is achieved in practice through the use of tools for direct democracy, consensus decision-making, direct participation and a rejection of hierarchical organisations (such as political parties or religious groups), as well as various forms of discrimination (sexual identity, race, age etc.). Weekly or biweekly general assemblies, along with working groups which report to them, are the most common structures which are used to put this into practice. Rotating facilitators, Quaker minute-taking techniques, open agendas and welcome sessions are all used, to be as transparent, inclusive and flexible as possible.

The constant arrival of new participants means that there is a constant discussion and renegotiation of what self-management actually means in practice and whether activities are living up to the expectations of participants. The practice of self-management contrasts with the experiences that many people bring into the centres from encounters at school, work and home, and there is a need constantly to revisit and reaffirm what self-management means and what its social value is. Overall, organisationally, social centres are defined by their flexible and pragmatic nature, choosing minimum formal legal structures (simple limited liability companies to manage assets and financial flows) and, in parallel, developing their own bespoke organisational forms based on direct democracy. Trial and error feature large, as well as a willingness to accept mistakes and try new avenues when

things do not work. Collectives show a desire to improve group process, look at recent mistakes and show how these models of direct democracy are relevant, useful and replicable for other groups.

Decision-making structures are also highly inventive and flexible. Consensus decision-making, a tool for promoting direct democracy between individuals based upon an equality of participation and the incorporation of all voices, is used almost universally as a tool for making decisions. Inevitably, such flexible, challenging and unfamiliar organisational forms can lead to confusion, frustration and a certain amount of inefficiency. To some extent, this is simply accepted, but it does also help to sharpen awareness of what direct (i.e. slower) democracy feels like. Andy from London explained how problems that arose were not actually problems, but opportunities to develop the group and improve democratic practice

We made every incident a situation to mobilise people and to actually discuss that. How do we deal with crackheads? How do we deal with drugdealers trying to take over the place? How do we combat this?

Returning to James, again from Leeds, he reflects on the strong experimental nature of developing the project

I remember sitting down with somebody and writing a potential budget to see if we could afford ..., what we could afford, like if we had a bar how much money you'd make from a bar, how much money you'd make from a café; figures plucked out of the sky. We had no idea what we wanted to do, no experience of it and no idea how to do it.

In part, this sentiment stems from a lack of experience and this informality and pragmatism are both a source of strength and weakness. Yet this also goes hand-in-hand with the sense of excitement and possibility previously discussed and shows how people express anti-capitalism through practice rather than

as ideology. Conversely, there have also been concerns about an underconceptualisation and lack of debate about the ideological underpinnings of projects, which leads to a different set of tensions as participants make assumptions about what they thought was the identity of the project.

However, one social centre participant was keen to stress that self-management was an inherently ideological and political act of direct action in itself, especially through its rejection of paid labour and hierarchical structures. The act of working together and running a building collectively and independently becomes politicised as participants learn how to work collectively and to manage their lives, and come to realise that different ways of organising leisure, social welfare and economic exchange do exist and are feasible. The interesting aspect which Sarah from Newcastle points out is how we have almost forgotten how to do this

Because it's like at times we've almost forgotten why the hell it was important for us to have, you know—it was important for us to create this new world, and be autonomous, and we've forgotten what it's like to be self-sufficient, and take things in our hands and create things.

These kinds of experimental forms of organising raise a number of challenges. The first is the tension between those who see themselves as consumers or service users and those who see themselves as maintainers and carers. The dominance of paid workers and wage labour within our economy means that activities based upon free labour and gift exchange seem at first alien. Julie from London explained that many newcomers simply think that behind the veneer of self-management, there must actually be someone running the show.

The second emerges from the issue of paid work. In general, social centres privilege free collective labour, a form of collectively sanctioned, self-exploitation. Most projects are

extremely financially precarious, relying on a mixture of loans from co-operative sources, income from selling alcohol, putting on gigs and events, or donations. They would not exist without freely available collective labour. However, the amount of free time that people can commit to such projects has changed drastically with the changing nature of the welfare and benefit system. In the 1980s, a whole wave of social centre projects emerged based on dole (unemployment benefit) labour which was extremely common on the anarcho-punk scene. Twenty years later and the situation is very different. Welfare and unemployment structures are more restricted and have essentially eliminated the culture of living off the state. Outside pressures from work, debt and finance loom large and, in this kind of situation, social centres almost become a secondary pursuit in the (alternative) leisure sphere appended to 'normal' capitalist life, maintaining a family and paid work. Many are forced to find grants (and be limited by restrictions) and become more entrepreneurial to survive.

Thirdly, 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 to in our collective non-capitalist lives? Educating and regulating familiar acquaintances and strangers about the need to adhere to collectively agreed rules is a task full of potential tensions. Problems arise because self-management is often conflated with no-management and an opportunity to, as one person put it “take the piss, smash stuff up and steal beer”. Further, if self-management is implemented or understood poorly, it creates unresolved and unfinished tasks and makes the political project a burden. Cleaning up after large events, in particular, creates many tensions.

Inclusivity and accessibility are a final area of concern. There are clear gaps in participation along age, class and racial lines—these radical spaces do remain predominantly White and

middle class. Yet one of the strongest recurring concerns is the continued imbalanced gender participation. Social reproduction tasks remain divided on gender lines, one obvious example being maintenance and set-up tasks (usually men) and cooking and cleaning (usually women). Such problems are unresolved continuities from previous eras and, while there is an awareness of this issue and the use of focused discussions to highlight it, efforts to understand and resolve it are on-going.

Inevitably, in spite of efforts to get more people actively involved in self-management, in terms of time input most projects have a large periphery of people who are occasional users and a smaller number of core volunteers who give the project consistency. This divide is exacerbated by the dynamics which emerge between founding and newer members. Inclusivity and the ability of a project to sustain itself through newcomers rest on structures which are both flexible and consistent and legible enough in form. Inclusivity, then, is key to the politics of self-management as it both extends radical politics to newer groups but also sustains new energy and attracts new generations of participants to manage and nourish the project. Actually achieving a broad sense of ownership and participation is one of the key aims of participants, a point we now turn to.

## 2.5 Developing Political Strategies Outside the Activist Ghetto

What emerge from these complex, messy and impure place projects are similarly complex political strategies. There is a rejection of blueprints in favour of more flexible, experimental and participatory approaches to what social change might mean. To understand this complexity more, we can also see within it both rejection and immediacy, as Holloway forcefully summarises

Our dialectic is not a Hegelian dialectic that ends in synthesis, but a negative dialectic that says no and no and no that does not rest

until all exploitation, all dehumanization is abolished. We want a real break, not an adjustment of capitalism. We want revolution, a different world. We want the revolution now, not in the future: revolution here and now (Holloway, 2007, p. 4).

The very idea of a revolution, then, is reconceptualised in a number of ways—as “one no, many yeses” (Kingsnorth, 2003), but also at a more mundane level as rupture through a million bee stings rather than a great dagger blow (Holloway, 2007); through ordinary people rather than a vanguardist party. It is a revolution that does not aim at seizing state power, but multiplying and connecting the many cracks which can challenge contemporary capitalism (Holloway, 2007). It is an everyday process that enacts the joy and playfulness of what making a revolution here and now might mean (see Vaneigem, 1979). This immediacy makes the revolutionary process also a process of becoming, one which is emergent and always partially formed. It is interstitial, experimental, a border-crossing as participants dwell both in the hoped-for and actual world.

However, in terms of the overall strategic role of social centres, disagreements do emerge, along the fault lines of whether they are simply facilitators for political activity amongst users, or whether they should adopt their own political identity. There is generally a reluctance for the latter, mainly stemming from difficulties in defining it. What generates more debate is the issue of whether the daily act of running social centres displaces time from the ‘real stuff’ of activism such as political meetings, demonstrations and actions, organising, building social movements. Social centres raise real anxieties amongst activists who have been extremely mobile and transient, about fixing themselves to a place project too firmly. Gary from Leeds reflected on his personal fears of creating safe space that neither broke free from nor confronted capitalism, but just coped

How can we go from being neither confronting the system nor escaping from it? Within this kind of purgatorial state where we’re just sort of coping—like it’s a safe place, it’s a safe house that we come to; we manage it ourselves.

There is also some disquiet as to what social centres are actually achieving if they become part of the consumer landscape of a city, or as Jess from London described, as “a trendy café for people to hang out rather than actually get stuff done.” This self-criticism points to fears about becoming spaces for alternative or radical lifestyles, without a recourse to their wider context and political potential.

Nevertheless, the wider political impacts that participants feel that social centres do have relate to providing working and viable alternatives. The immediate and direct act of building and maintaining social centres allows participants glimpses of the types of world that they hope for, but are denied in their everyday ‘normal’ lives. Here, we see possibility and immediacy intermingling. They make these worlds seem more achievable and allow participants to experience directly the feasibility of self-organising and collectivity. Many music collectives, for example, are attracted to social centres as they allow them the freedom to self-manage their activities on a not-for-profit basis.

At the heart of the political strategy of social centres is a dual tension between an internal role (as resource centres for those involved in anti-capitalist resistance and direct action) and an external outreach function (through a desire to reach out beyond the comfort zone of known activists into the wider community, and connect and support local struggles and issues). Ultimately, these are not separate strategies and, on closer inspection, there are many cross-overs that make divisions between anti-capitalist activists and ordinary participants redundant.

Yet fracture lines do remain between the values held by activists (such as anarchism or

anti-capitalism) and those of 'non-activists' or at least occasional/non-users of social centres. There is a tendency to assume, as Mary put it, that 'they' (the 'non-political' public) "have a conservative way of looking at things". However, Mary goes on to say that "actually being here has thrown that up in the air really". Many groups are actually clearer about what they do not want to be. As one person from Leeds reflected: "whether we knew what we wanted it to be or not, we knew that we didn't want it to be an activist's ghetto". Ironically, there is often more enthusiasm for reaching out to non-activist groups beyond the activist ghetto than there is for accommodating other activist groups on the political left. Being open can be conditional, excluding those, for example, wedded too closely to socialism, communism or anarchism.

These boundary crossings outside traditional activist circles occur in different ways. First, there is a desire to express political aims through actions and living examples that inspire people, rather than through the use of propaganda. As Kevin from Oxford commented

I think it's more been about the way in which we engage with people rather than trying to make a political statement, like that our politics is mainly, seems to be about mutual aid and building a place where people can get involved in all that stuff.

In this case, the Oxford centre helped to run a bar in a community centre, set up Internet connections and offered access to media training, library and computers, all of which were used as outreach tools so that "people can get involved". He went on to explain how it was useful not to try and "hide our politics" but to "make it something that people want to get involved with".

A further approach values the, largely unknown, political views of the local community in their own right and seeks to engage with these openly in pursuit of new political languages and opportunities. Implicit is a

rejection of the role of social centres as factories which process 'non-activists' to think in particular ways. As one member of the London Social Centre collective commented

The most productive thing we can do is create an accessible place where people are engaging in an analytical dialogue with us and then developing from that point onwards. Also not patronising people ... they create their own sort of political engagement as well rather than some sort of factory thing where they come in non-political and they come out as anarchists.

Many collectives expressed the desire to be professional-looking, using familiar symbols such as coffee machines, art exhibitions and reading areas, and were opposed to "looking like a commune or squat" catering for the "same old crusty types" and instead wanted to be part of "normal society". The design and layout of space are seen as crucial to maximise interaction and inclusivity and this often happens through more subtle emotional interactions, as Gary from London explained

When you walk through the door what is the first thing that happens to you, the first person you talk to, what is that interaction like? Does someone smile at you do you get a gentle non-judgemental interaction with somebody, on an architectural level, what's the place like when you come into it, you know, how can you make the place as welcoming as possible?

The desire to reach out is a result of self-critique and discussions about the successes of recent anti-capitalist politics and a perceived failure to continue to reach out especially since intense moments of success like Seattle in 1999. This is reflected through a desire to broaden the repertoire of tactics away from large summit mobilisations and smaller affinity-based direct actions. Geoff from the London Vortex Collective said

The problem with the anti-capitalist movement was basically that it mobilised

once every six months ... we were serious about changing the world so how do you do that if you are only communicating to one section of society?

Reaching out is part of a conscious political strategy not just to 'communicate with one section of society', but to engage more broadly about the usefulness of anti-capitalist ideas and self-managed spaces in people's daily lives. Indeed, the term 'social centre' specifically emerged in the UK as a more legible label and to break links with previous squat political cultures. This desire to connect with and support social issues and struggles in a locality is a recurring theme. For many centres, the whole point of their existence is to create spaces for engagement and new political potentials and alliances that could not have been conceived before. One member of the London social centre network even stated that their ideal situation is that they could give the building to the community and say 'right you run the place now'.

### 3. Conclusions: Anti-capitalism, Post-capitalism, Despite Capitalism

So where does this journey through the everyday lives of those seeking to build anti-capitalism take us? Table 1 provides a summary of the five contours of the messy everyday life of anti-capitalism and counterposes what participants seek to resist and what they seek to promote.

So what do these five contours add to our understanding of contentious politics? First, as place projects, social centres represent an everyday groundedness which speaks much more to the needs and rhythms of a locality than to a more abstract transnationalism and scale-jumping, although the latter are present through political memories and inspirations, and the presence of a few 'transnational cosmopolitans' (Tarrow, 2005). Leitner *et al.* (2008) rightly suggest that contentious politics mobilise a variety of spatialities (place, scale,

networks, positionality and mobility), but what this study has shown is a tendency towards place-groundedness which seeks connections pragmatically rather than seeking mobile network forms. Moreover, Marston *et al.*'s (2005) critique of the local-to-global paradigm alerts us to the need to critique interpretations of contentious politics which merely see activists able to move up and down spatial hierarchies or radiate out from centres. It is each localised space and its everyday rhythms that give meaning to anti-capitalism. Following Routledge (2003), social centres are less an organisation and more a convergence space, where heterogeneous affinities and identities converge. However, they are much more grounded and mundane convergences than the kinds of transnational melting-pots that Routledge alluded to. This localising echoes what Harvey (2001) called 'militant particularisms' and, in these difficult neo-liberal times, some projects just survive rather than call into question broader social and economic issues. While Harvey (2001, p. 175) lays down the challenge of how to transform these local 'militant particularisms' "into something more substantial on the global stage", many social centres are enmeshed in a politics of "defensive localization" (Escobar, 2001, p. 149), responding to various crises such as privatisation (Mansfield, 2007), cuts in welfare services, asylum destitution, or homelessness.

Secondly, while social centres may have their own normalised practices and pre-given identities, at the same time participants have pushed their social and spatial boundaries to the limits. There is an overwhelming desire not to be bounded, ghettoised or differentiated. Unlike Anderson's (2003, 2004) spaces of environmental direct action (EDA), there is a rejection of the spatial division of self-identity. Rather than the need to self-identify as activists, participants show a more fluid and changeable identity which highlights the difference between what Bobel (2007) calls 'doing activism' and 'being activist'; people are keen

**Table 1.** Sketching out what anti-capitalism means to participants

	<i>Points of resistance</i>	<i>Points of promotion</i>
Space	Enclosure, privatisation, speculation, gentrification	Commons, platforms, safe spaces, permanence, incubation, shell
Political identity	Fixity, purity, answering	Impure, messy, possibility, questioning, complexity
Socialisation	Alienated, dependent, depersonalised, individual	Autonomy, care, interdependence, collective, mutual aid, solidarity
Organisation	Hierarchy, representative, static, wage labour, for profit	Experimental, consensus, direct, flexible, free labour, not-for-profit, self-managed, biodegradable
Strategy	Ghettoisation, blueprints, propaganda, indoctrination, co-optation	Means and ends, deeds and words, outward-facing, engagement

to participate in the running of social centres without self-identifying as activists and thus blocking the kinds of engaging and inspiring politics many participants seek to create.

Further, while social centres are political projects, there is also a desire to create a space which is not overtly politicised or confrontational—to create a more complex narrative of the activist self and place by bringing and holding together different identities and practices. One of these convergences is the tension between anti-capitalism as an oppositional and a creative sentiment. Novel repertoires of contention are being built up in these place projects, which present to us more complex and subtle understandings of what it means to be anti-capitalist based on repertoires of both creativity and confrontation. Social centres underline how anti-capitalist social relations are built through practice and activities which aim to expand an infrastructure of resistance and creation through independent media, health, production, prisoner support or outreach. These are a reminder that anti-capitalism is embedded even in the most mundane acts such as cooking free food or teaching English. The hope is also that these projects provide more strategic glimpses of an oppositional politics that can show the

feasibility of what an anti-capitalist, or really post-capitalist, life may look and feel like.

Gibson-Graham (2006, p. xxv) discusses how a post-capitalist politics involves engaging in “new practices of the self”. By looking at social centres, I have attempted to flesh out how this “micro-politics of (re)subjectivation” (p. xxv) works out in practice through a post-capitalist identity politics. This self and group cultivation of identity is full of possibility and is largely indeterminate. It is about being comfortable with not knowing (Solnit, 2004). It is, as we learned earlier, what the collective imagination can dream up (see also Holloway, 2002). Yet if social centres are sites for political openings, these openings can be conflictual and need work. As Gibson-Graham (2006, p. xxvii) states, post-capitalist imaginations need “to be sustained by the continual work of making and remaking a space for it to exist in the face of what threatens to undermine and destroy it”.

Thirdly, we have gained insights into the socialisation process which social centres frame. Interactions are attuned not just to intellectual arguments, but to the importance of emotional connections (Pulido, 2003; Gibson-Graham, 2006). Dyck’s (2005) work on the everyday emotional work of caring

communities speaks much to social centres and this kind of work is central to building collective belonging amongst participants. Crucially, she also points out that, like social centres, this is often the hidden work of women in place and community making. Hence, we need to be attuned to the sheer amount of (unequally distributed) effort which goes into the social reproduction of these spaces. The sense of a social collective which is constituted within social centres is also not just confined to the physical boundaries but spills out and over. Hence, social centres play a complex role in activist politics—they may be convergence spaces, but they are also nodes within local networks of many kinds. They are contact zones which periodically bring together activists and non-activists, and it is these contact moments that give the collective its ever-changing character.

Fourthly, self-management becomes the key organising principle, but as Castoriadis (1991) noted, the individuals' capacity to manage their own affairs only makes sense when the collective has an ability to manage and distribute power equally. Social centre participants rightly conceive that self-management is a collective and often antagonistic process. It is also one which needs constant renegotiation and reaffirmation rather than dogmatic adherence. The implications and effects of this kind of project of radical self-management are difficult to track. One concern which Mayer (2003) raises is the extent to which activist projects are becoming cornered by modes of neo-liberal governance based around mobilising 'social capital', becoming entrepreneurial and chasing grants to maintain their activities. This is compounded by the fact that the decline of generous welfare benefit regimes which supported 'dole autonomy' (non-market labour) disciplines activists into professionalising formerly confrontational political activity. Without realising, activities and services at social centres, such as language classes and cheap food, unburden the local welfare state of

their responsibilities. Within such neo-liberal governance (Brenner and Theodore, 2002), social centres need to consider whether, and how, they need to confront the local state as it seeks to discipline, neo-liberalise and depoliticise community activism.

Finally, we come to issues of strategy. Social centres continue to provide inspiring examples of radical politics which highlight immediacy and an everyday micropolitics of resistance (Pile and Keith, 1997). The work of Day (2004) is useful here as he points to the 'newest social movements' which largely reject older counter-hegemonic social movements based on a politics of demand, in favour of a non-hegemonic politics based on the immediate act. Yet a word of caution is also needed. Much of what social centres are trying to achieve is often tempered by on-going police repression and surveillance, especially in the light of the solidarity days of action in April 2008 in support of squats and social centres throughout Europe. Social centres also face low-intensity attrition with local state bureaucracy, limited funds and volunteer burn-out. There is also no reason to assume that these current projects of micropolitical resistance will be any less prone to failure as those of previous generations.

Yet the historical challenge which remains, as Wendy Brown (2002) reminds us, is to make whatever micro tactics we are involved in seem feasible and exciting. Maybe they are simply maintaining a glimmer of hope in dark times. Duncombe (2007) explored how progressives often fail to capture the popular imagination and are often perceived to be dogmatic and moralist as they do not creatively use the more spectacular elements of consumer culture. This is crucial, as Flesher-Fominaya's (2007, p. 257) found: "humour can play a significant role in generating a sense of common identification and solidarity". Social centres have partly responded by creating more open places for political becoming which can be made and remade by participants

and which embrace socialising as a part of everyday politics. They have also attempted to be more professional and welcoming, pitching themselves on the intersection between sub-culture and pop culture with greater attention to layout, aesthetics and design. However, as we have seen, this raises criticisms of co-optation and a creeping lifestyleism.

Perhaps the main impact of social centres is that they invite participants to engage more experimentally and creatively with social change. When Holloway (2002) talked about 'reinventing the revolution', he was referring to a more participatory process—a revolution as the Zapatistas say, 'that is made by walking'. Participants aim to self-critique their practice and impacts, and seem genuinely to be open to dialogue rather than self-congratulation. Following Routledge (1996), this kind of dialogue creates 'third spaces' and border-crossings (Giroux, 1992) between those who self-identify as activists and a wider public, creating new and unforeseen political identities. Here, conversations are always open-ended and concern 'becoming' rather than completion (Holloway and Kneale, 2000) and, in the daily lives of social centres, we see a desire to reach out and debate with political others about the practice and meaning of anti-capitalism.

Overall, this discussion has led to an understanding of anti-capitalist practice as not actually just 'anti-', but also 'post-' and 'despite-' capitalist. It is simultaneously against, after and within, and so participants problematise alternatives as things which have to be fought for and worked at in the here and now (see Holloway, 2002). Clearly there are other less sanguine versions of what comes after capitalism and hence it is more liberatory versions which are fought for. Just as capitalist social relations are reproduced at an everyday level, so too their antithesis, anti-capitalism, is found in the ordinary everyday practices—in the spaces liberated from capitalist social relations. It is this reconceptualisation that makes anti-capitalist practice mundane, but also

accessible, exciting and feasible. Participants accept that their everyday lives will weave together practices and values that will feel more capitalist and, at other times, more anti-capitalist. Yet they simply get on with it, acknowledging that a commitment to something so amorphous and anticipated is always going to be contradictory, interstitial, in the making. And it is this kind of experimental, messy, open, everyday, collective and grounded politics which has the potential to make an anti-capitalist urban politics really mean something—in times when we need it most.

## Notes

1. Although anti-capitalism as an idea and a practice is difficult to pin down, it is worth attempting a brief definition here. It describes a broad variety of movements with roots as old as capitalism itself (see Hill, 1991; Federici, 2005; Linebaugh and Rediker, 2001) which reject outright or disrupt the normal workings of 'capital' and 'capitalism' and seek to replace it with another system. Yet there is no singly defined anti-capitalist movement or set of ideas and there is certainly a broad set of contemporary writings in this area (see George *et al.*, 2001; Tormey, 2004; Notes from Nowhere, 2003; Saad-Filho, 2002; Callinicos, 2003; Yuen *et al.*, 2005; Lowes, 2007; Parker *et al.*, 2006). What we also see around the edges are groups ranging from NGOs, lobby groups, trade unions, liberal reformers and protectionists, who oppose neo-liberalism and globalisation and hence are usually against a particular aspect of 'capitalism' rather than an outright rejection. Definitions of anti-capitalism that have most currency in social centres relate to strands of anti-capitalism whose birthplace was on the streets of Seattle in 1999, which privileges direct democracy, non-hierarchy, the use of direct action, an experimental, playful approach to activism, a transnational outlook and a rejection of bureaucracy and ideological dogma (see Mertes, 2004).
2. See also: [www.autonomousgeographies.org.uk](http://www.autonomousgeographies.org.uk). A shorter and less academic version of this paper

will appear in a forthcoming booklet on UK social centres (see: [www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk](http://www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk)).

3. See [www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk](http://www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk).
4. The idea of life despite capitalism was developed more fully at a conference in 2002 during the London Social Forum (see <http://www.lifedespitecapitalism.org>).
5. A lengthy debate about the pros and cons of squatted occupied spaces versus legalised (rented or bought) social centres can be found in the following references: Anon., 2003a, 2003b; Rogue Element, 2004; Text Nothing, 2005.

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