So what does it mean to be anti-capitalist?

A huge amount of people get involved in what are called 'autonomous social centres' – cooking food, putting on film nights, teaching English, making banners, planning actions - the list goes on and on. But what are they all about politically and what are the hopes and dreams of people involved in them? Why are they there at all? How do they organise and strategise?

I've used the term 'anti-capitalism' in the title with good reason. In less than ten years since its media appearance in 1999 in Seattle and in the 'Carnivals Against Capitalism' on June 18th, anti-capitalism has become a widely debated and identifiable movement. Whether acknowledged or not, social centres are part of the building of this anti-capitalist politics. Ok, the way they do it and the way they talk about it is different in each place. But a real desire to make some kind of politics beyond, and against, capitalism begin, right here and now, rather than waiting for some hoped for revolution the future, is what keeps people involved and inspired.

As I talked to people involved in social centres, it became clear that anti-capitalism meant a number of really important things: that they want to create political projects grounded in their communities; they are comfortable with politics which was messy and impure; they want to build strong relationships between people; the way they organise them is experimental and promotes self management; and they develop political strategies which attempt to break outside the activist ghetto. In the next few pages I want to explain what these mean in more detail.

Politics is all about place

Anti-capitalism needs to happen somewhere – to come together and be visible. Social centres allow this to happen – they create something like an 'urban commons' (like the village commons) which is self managed and open to all who respect it. People describe social centres in many ways – using words like platforms, safe spaces, bases, incubators, ground territory and shelters – all of these provide safety in our turbulent times. People want to mix more mobile, confrontational and short-lived politics around direct action in smaller affinity groups or mobilisations at summit sieges with something more permanent. Putting down roots through renting or buying also reflects that squatting is more and more difficult in the UK. Many permanent social centre collectives did emerge out of the strong UK squatter culture of the 1990s realizing that squatted spaces are short lived and can be an energy drain. Loss of space is a constant frustration when you want to start to engage on a longer basis. But securing space also has a wider role. They are a key organising tool for political education within communities and movements.
The impure, messy politics of the possible

What are the political identities of social centres? Anti-capitalism is pretty elusive. It means different things to different people. There’s often general reference to being not for profit, rejecting hierarchy and domination, or embracing equality. People often express it through a unity of resistance and creativity within our everyday lives – blending a confrontational attitude with living solutions. But when you scratch the surface you find that there is a reluctance to be pinned down - the whole point of the politics of the place is that they are open, complex and messy. This impure politics opens up debate so that conflicts and differences can be acknowledged and resolved. It’s not easy - it’s a politics that needs constant work as different views and backgrounds bash together. Time and again people use the word ‘possibility’, in contrast to lack of possibility of the hum drum of parliamentary politics. And it is this possibility that our dreaming means something.

But don’t expect quick results. The timescale of this impure politics of the possible is much slower. Social centres offer a steadiness, longevity, a sense of history and ‘something gentler to hold a position from’. It’s this stability and openness together that can allow some really amazing and powerful politics to emerge.

Rebuilding the social collective

Anti-capitalist politics are not just about bricks and mortar. They are also about the hidden work of rebuilding social relationships around emotions, solidarity and trust. While bread and butter issues such as housing struggles or ecological damage are important so too are our basic emotional connections and responses to one another. This is invisible essential political work, and if ignored erodes the bedrock for affinity, understanding, tolerance and consensus. Social bonds that tie us together are often more important than the roof and the walls. Creating these social bonds is really crucial especially in cities that are becoming dominated by corporate bars, offices and restaurants. Creating these bonds can transform people so they can understand themselves, their situations, their relationship to others and those with more power, and begin the task of political awakening.

Self-management and the art of experimental organising

Ok, social centres might be militantly self-managed, but a huge amount of effort is put into organizing them. They are, in effect, a programme for expanding and making real self-management and a commitment to direct democracy, consensus decision-making, direct participation and a rejection of hierarchical organisations, as well as various forms of discrimination.

One of the trickiest issues faced by social centres is developing a collective understanding of what self-management actually means, and how to get people to take this on. This politics of self-management contrasts with the disempowerment and alienation of our lives at school, work and...
Overall, organisationally, social centres are defined by their flexibility and pragmatism, choosing minimum formal formalities and, in parallel, developing their own forms of direct democracy. Trial and error feature large as well as a willingness to accept mistakes and try new avenues when things don’t work. This flows naturally from the fairly widespread distrust of institution building, hierarchy and bureaucratic organisations within anti-capitalist, anarchist movements.

This informality and pragmatism is about the importance of deeds rather than propaganda. 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 many voices, is used almost universally as a tool for making decisions. Inevitably, such flexible, experimental ways of doing things can go badly wrong. They are far from perfect. But working out how to make decisions means that we also resolve problems and sharpen models for direct democracy.

But let’s remember that self-managing a space is a form of direct action in itself, especially through its rejection of paid labour and hierarchical structures. It is this that keeps inspiring new generations of people to get involved. Working together and running a building collectively and independently is a political project of self education, where people learn how to work collectively, manage their lives, and come to realize that different ways of organizing social welfare and economic exchange do exist and are doable.

Lots of challenges still remain – the tensions between consumers/service users and maintainers/carers, gender divisions which are made worse when they are simply brushed under the carpet, the tricky and unresolved issues around paid work, the lack of time that people can commit to projects, the problems and limitations of informal self discipline and teaching others about collectively agreed rules, inclusivity and accessibility. This final point is a really important one. Inclusivity 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 people to manage and nourish the project.

**Developing political strategies outside the activist ghetto**

So what about political strategies? Well there’s no blueprint, nor should there be. There’s a rejection of fixed leadership and committees, in favour of more flexible, experimental and participatory strategic priorities to achieving radical social change. An important part of the debate is whether social centres are a means to a broader political end, or whether they are an end in themselves. Are they facilitators, containers or catalysts for political activity, or are they actually confrontational political strategies in themselves? Often, so much work goes into running and cleaning social centres and autonomous spaces that there is little time left for what is seen as the real stuff of activism - political meetings, demonstrations and actions, organising, building social movements. Many activists, used to being mobile, are anxious about fixing themselves to a place too firmly. These fears - creating a self-managed safe space that is too inward looking and comfortable - are important and need addressing, especially if social centres start to become trendy cafés, bars or alternative shops.

So what is their effectiveness as political projects? On one level, they make new worlds seem more achievable and increase the possibility of politics based on self-organising and collectivity. They are also a crucial entry point for a largely depoliticised generation due to the lack of visible, active radical alternatives in their workplaces, schools and communities. But gauging effectiveness is an illusive and probably pointless task. One person’s effectiveness is another person’s failure. Success is also often externally and negatively defined - when such radical projects are seen as an effective opposition they provoke repressive responses from the state and police. A nice double-edged sword.

And who do social centres aim at? On the one hand, they look inward – as resource centres and safe bases for those involved in developing and deepening anti-capitalist resistance and direct action. On the other hand, they look out beyond the comfort zone of known activists and like-minded politicos into the wider community, and connect and support local struggles. Ultimately, these are not separate strategies and there needs to be a desire to build a broader base of support for anti-capitalist ideas and practices locally.

But the relationship between social centre activists and the local community remains largely unresolved. There is a tendency to assume, as one person put it, that ‘they’ (the ‘non-political’ public) have a conservative way of looking at things. In general, there is a strong push to overcome these perceptions. First, people want to reach out through actions and deeds, through living examples that inspire people, rather than through the use of propaganda words and slogans. Second, people value the largely unknown views of the local community in their own right. So social centres reject the ‘sausage factory’ route to social change where ‘non-activists’ are processed and indoctrinated to think in particular ways – in you come Mr and Mrs non-political, and out you come ready for the struggle!

These days social centres really try to avoid looking like ‘ghettoised anarchist squat spaces’, preferring to be professional looking, using familiar signs such as coffee machines, art exhibitions, and reading areas to be part of ‘normal society’. Being wel-
coming is also seen as crucial.

Reaching out is a result of the self-critique and discussions about political tactics within the anti-capitalist movement. It is a reflection of a perceived failure of autonomous, anti-capitalist groups to capture substantial ground and spread ideas within mainstream society, especially since the heyday of Seattle.

Activities in social centres, then, often try to attract people to engage in debate, analysis and socializing, through public talks, film screenings, reading areas, café and bar spaces, gigs. These activities create social centres as hubs for sparking debate and action on key issues in that locality. This isn't to say that there is consensus about reaching out. Doing it is often seen as a sure-fire way of diluting important political imperatives and strategies for working towards insurrectionary and confrontational politics. In one social centre, for example, participants became divided over the issue of whether or not it was 'anarchist' to give local people food.

Closing salvos. Reflections on building anti-capitalist strategy

What are the strategic prospects for these kinds of anti-capitalist projects? There are a number of strategic issues I want to end on. The first refer to priorities for growth. What is needed to promote more individual radical, self managed place projects committed to anti-capitalist practice as well as a network to support such spaces? Progress has already been made through network meetings and a dedicated website and social centres continue to support a range of anti-capitalist projects and host national meetings for movements such as No Borders and the Camp for Climate Action. There is a need, and probably enough desire, for a stronger sense of a collectively functioning network that can mutually support the wider movement as well as individual projects. We also need to ask ourselves if the network is fighting on the right issues, and if not how does it define wider areas that social centres are well placed to address? An obvious starting point is land and property speculation and wider struggles over urban gentrification and privatization.

There could also be a stronger push to support an anti-capitalist politics in the UK, and through this identify which parts of a wider infrastructure of resistance and creation could be supported and developed (for example, independent media, health, production, prisoner support, outreach). Social centres could also state more forcefully what they are for and against and contribute to stating feasible alternatives locally. Many do this through, for example, workers co-operatives, not for profit entertainment, and free libraries and meeting spaces.

Second is the issue of growing these kinds of projects into a more connected, coherent and politically effective movement. Are they just defensively local projects or can, and should, they have wider meaning and provide models for the benefit of our society? What is their role in a wider parallel, externally oriented, growing infrastructure which meets our desires and needs right here and now, but which also genuinely represent non-capitalist values? This is not to suggest creating a comfort zone in which activists can circulate, but rather promoting an ever-expanding set of activities that can start to genuinely create parallel opportunities for housing, leisure, work and food. It is about making a post-capitalist future begin that seems feasible, exciting and doable and avoids the deterministic, moralist politics of the Left.

Another strategic area is about developing and sharing anti-capitalist ideas. Education, and the long tradition of popular education, is important here. There needs to be more times and spaces for people to come together to discuss joint approaches to confronting neoliberalism. At some point there needs to be serious conversations with all those on the Left about the merits, or not, of movement
building to seize power on the one hand, and focusing on grassroots power on the other. Locally, social centres also should consider whether, and how, they need to confront the local state as it becomes a block to further change, and the problems of just promoting their own version of local self management. One final issue relates to the ongoing tensions between strategies of illegally occupying/squatting space and legally renting/buying space. The accusation that legality and inclusivity has de-radicalised these place projects and professionalised activism needs addressing head on and needs talking about.

There are a number of key internal strategic issues such as, often invisible, internal hierarchies, lack of attention to accessibility, emotional needs and inclusivity, gender divisions and domination of men especially within group process, and age divisions especially those between different political cultures and movements. The wider issue is how anti-capitalism can break out of the limits of the protective, internally looking ghettos it sometimes makes for itself. We have to ask ourselves, how can our examples appear more doable and what we say more feasible? Finally, there are strategic issues of evaluation and collective methodology. What methods can be used for evaluating our own projects so we know what is working and what isn't? Can we evaluate why anti-capitalist ideas do not spread. Is it the content, the medium, the messengers, the process, the presentation? How do we decide what we do next? How can we use wider consultations and an inquiry to develop a greater collective understanding of what we have achieved, and would like to achieve, and to engage with others about key issues?

A commitment to anti-capitalism is always going to be messy and incomplete. Social centres and autonomous spaces in these dark times are amazing reminders of the possibilities of building the new worlds we dream of. We still ask, what now? What next? When will the future begin? Social centres help here: they continue to give us strategic glimpses of what an anti-capitalist life may look and feel like.

[DISCLAIMER: This is a shortened version of an article that appeared in the booklet ‘What's this place? Stories from social centres in the UK and Ireland’ available at http://www.socialcentrestories.org.uk/]

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days of action

Following an international meeting at 'Les Tanneries' in Dijon last year, there was a call out for a weekend of decentralised actions in defence of autonomous spaces on Friday 11th and Saturday 12th April. The aim was to develop interconnections and solidarity between autonomous spaces internationally and to raise the profile of squatting as a political movement.

In the UK, new squats were opened in Bristol, Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham, Manchester and London. Bristol saw a vacant city centre building, the Little Theatre in Colston Street, occupied by homeless Bristolians. In Leeds an empty council housing advice building was brought back to life in the form of a squatting, autonomous spaces, alternative housing and anti-gentrification advice centre and Angel Group offices were attacked (dodgy landlords exploiting asylum seekers) to highlight that housing is a right, not a means to make profit. A temporary autonomous zone was established in Digbeth, Birmingham and became the venue of three days of workshops, talks and discussions. A new space in Nottingham hosted workshops, films, discussion, zines, and free jumble stalls. Manchester saw the opening of a new squatted social centre, which has since been evicted, and a demonstration in defence of autonomous spaces through the city centre before squatting an old pub for the evening before an attempted free party in the city. In London a series of events took place: a squatters estate agency, a benefit gig for the Advisory Service For Squatters and a program of workshops, films, discussion and art at various autonomous spaces around the city that are currently threatened with eviction (rampART, Hackney Social Centre, Wominspace). In Reading, the Common Ground Squatted Community Garden was reopened. A squat themed spoof news paper was also distributed in participating cities.