rogue element
You Can’t Rent Your Way Out of a Social Relationship
2004

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This article has been written by a group of people who have been involved with squatted social centres and other forms of direct action over a number of years. We write in response to the recent plans to create a host of new social centres that are neither squatted nor co-operatively owned, but rented. It is our opinion that social centres should come from 'need', initiated by a critical mass of individuals and groups that have a common desire and/or need for autonomous space. This network of social centres has, on the other hand, been initiated by a wealthy, albeit well-intentioned, individual within the activist milieu who wanted to collectivise their wealth. The collective that was put in place to manage this money decided to share £70,000 among local activist groups through the Dissent! Network to help set up a network of 'anti-capitalist' social centres in the run up to the G8 summit, being held in Gleneagles in 2005.

This discussion document has not been written to 'slag' people off, but rather to start a dialogue on the issues raised so we can move closer towards realising our desires and challenging our political and personal comfort zones. We did not feel as though we could just 'put up and shut up' as we are very passionate about the issues we are discussing here. We hope that these rented spaces are indeed a springboard to more confrontational action, a place in which to ask why and what and how, and that the people involved in them will support other initiatives that occur in their localities — even if that means closing the rented spaces for a few days.

> "Legalisation is one of the most effective remedies against the inconveniences of subversion. It was used by the Social Democratic regimes in particular in order to suppress the most radical and openly subversive elements."
>
> *Against the Legalisation of Occupied Spaces by El Paso Occupato and Barocchio Occupato*

> "We think it is important to have a confrontation of these topics, even at the risk of disturbing the sleep of the civilised."
>
> *Barbarians: the disordered insurgence by Crisso and Odotheus The Dissent! Network, the PGA and Conflict*

> "How can we engender radicalism in our society if people's first point of contact with nonmainstream politics is a space built on compromise, which exists only because the state says it can?"
>
> *Social Dis-Centres, p185 Do or Die Issue 10*

The new Dissent! Network, mobilising against the G8 in Britain, has adopted the hallmarks of People's Global Action (PGA). The Dissent! Network website reads as follows:

> "As a group we decided that we wished to work non hierarchically with a view to enabling direct action protests against the G8. To enable the non-hierarchical working we agreed to adopt the PGA Hallmarks. The hallmarks promote a confrontational direct action approach, since we believe that it is impossible to negotiate with the encumbent governmental institutions."

The PGA says it is absolutely committed to confrontational approaches to the dissolution of the global capitalist system and social relations built on patriarchy, sexism, inequalities of wealth and status etc. Grassroots groups from all over the world are part of the PGA network.

Groups or networks cannot really describe themselves as confrontational and anti-capitalist when they submit themselves unnecessarily to legal infrastructure. Squatting in the UK is possible (as well as preferable).

of affinity and the pleasure they find in each others' singularity, refusing every compromise."

Against Compromise, Willful Disobedience Vol. 3, No. 2

> energetic people not been engaged in property development."
>
> *Social DisCentres, Do or Die Issue 10*

In terms of action, there is also the potential for conflict to emerge between 'users' of the space, those whose priority is the centre, and those who take action, which may place the centre at risk. This is often a fraught relationship. This was even the case with a squatted social centre in Manchester when those running the social centre tore down another collectives flyposters because they were publicising an action in the city which they thought might bring down repression on the squat.

The squatted social centre A-Spire in Leeds has been about for a number of years now. It has opened and run buildings for parties, film nights, queer events, political workshops and action planning, a free café, an illegal bar, healing spaces, art projects, hanging out space and much more.

The last A-Spire happened in December 2003. It had clearly run its course. Attendance was low, the crew was small, the space was formulaic (though probably no less formulaic than the proposed rented spaces).

But a network of squatted social centres, in bolder and more daring locations, carried out in increasingly creative ways, is a far less compromised and more combative way of doing things than the sordid compromise of the tenant. As someone once said 'How can you think freely in the shadow of a church?'.

Surely the rented, fully licensed social centre is that church?

> "The expansion of the possibilities opened up by the insurrectionary break, the full exploration of the panorama of selfdetermination and of the "collective movement of individual realization", requires, above all, indomitable individuals who associate on the basis

Renting a social centre in the run up to the G8 is not only in direct conflict with the idea of promoting radical self-organisation, do-ityourself alternatives (ie that which can be replicated by any group of people — £10,000 anyone?) and resistance to the state, it is also in direct conflict with those struggles abroad, such as the Piqueter@ movement in Argentina, with whom many involved in networks like the Dissent! Network would claim to be in solidarity with. When a woman from the MTD Solano (part of the militant Piqueter@ movement) in Argentina toured Britain to talk about their experiences, she talked as well of her own life choices: a trained clinical psychologist, she gave up her well-paid job and the house that she owned, long before the 'revolution' in December 2001, in order to set up a grassroots community health initiative in a poor barrio of Buenos Aires and to live in occupied spaces with a collective of unemployed workers and others like herself. Here in Britain, our experience is that there are an increasing number of people taking the easy route, trying to maintain one foot in the system (reaping the benefits of personal security, status and financial reward) whilst posing as radicals plotting it's destruction.

As we understand it, the key reason for renting rather than squatting a space that can be used as a social centre (or a series of social centres) seems to be people's desire for a space defined by its continuity. If something is not continuous because it is constantly repressed — such as a squatted space — then surely the alternative is not co-option or the creation of continuity by buying into the system, but resistance. Throughout history, many politically confrontational and challenging times have been accompanied by a strong, and confrontational, squatting movement. It was true with the ecological direct action movement in 1990s Britain. Not only were there many urban squats, but squatted land in the form of protest camps. If you are doing something the state doesn't want you to do, if you are challenging the way things are, then you will be repressed. Renting a social centre is, in our opinion, an admission of failure and cannot promote anything other than the idea

that the anti-capitalist movement has been absorbed into the system. It demonstrates a lack of commitment to realising the ideas that you expound, and by calling such a space 'radical' is to rewrite the dictionary.

Worse still, state-approved social centres can have a damaging impact on other projects. For example, in Italy, social centres that have negotiated with the state — often run by people associated with the White Overalls Movement/Tute Blanche, now 'Disobbedienti, — have not only become recuperated but, through their negotiations with the state, have further marginalized the squatters movement. In the preface to 'Barbarians: the disordered insurgence' (a critique of the ideas of Negri and Hardt) the authors talk of the activities of leaders of the 'Disobedient' causing the state to issue an ultimatum, either you dialogue with the system or you are labelled 'terrorist' and repressed.

The Social Centre as Direct Action

> "…the act of occupying a building is a form of direct action: illegal — collective — carried out openly that leads a group of individuals to reconquer a living space previously taken away from the collectivity by those in power."
>
> *Against the Legalisation of Occupied Spaces by El Paso Occupato and Barocchio Occupato*

> "Increasingly, in the face of the juggernaut that is civilization, our present social reality, I hear many radicals say, "It's necessary to be realistic; I'll just do what I can in my own life." This is not the declaration of a strong individuality making itself the center of a revolt against the world of domination and alienation, but rather an

people are resisting the G8, rather than a one-off carnival, a temporary rented social centre and a symbolic street fight against a meeting where the decisions have already been made.

You've Got Kraakers!*

*(*Dutch for squatters)*

> "In Berlin and Hamburg, during the occupation movement of the early eighties, the number of illegal squats was gradually reduced until they nearly vanished. At the same time, the most radical struggles also diminished."
>
> *Against the Legalisation of Occupied Spaces by El Paso Occupato and Barocchio Occupato*

So the rented social centres are going to act as some sort of focal point for those that want to resist the G8. But with all this energy going into officialdom and cake selling, what will come of direct action and resistance? Will all the form filling, maintenance and café shifts not sap the energy from those who might otherwise be taking part in acts of resistance against what the G8 represents, and direct action?

> "If we think we need 'access points' to be inspired by our political perspective[s], then surely this is best achieved through practising direct action — not through acquiring crippling mortgages [or rents], obeying a myriad of regulations set by the state and spending years doing DIY of the conventional sort.
>
> The energy that has gone into social centres during what has been an action-quiet couple of years may well have found other avenues for action had a lot of very

Against the Legalisation of Occupied Spaces by El Paso Occupato and Barocchio Occupato

The rented social centres that will be springing up in cities in England, Scotland and Wales in the next year have been initiated through the antiG8 process that began in Britain a year ago. They are to be part of the build-up to a mobilisation against the G8 when it comes to Gleneagles in June 2005.

It is outside of the scope of this article to go into much detail on the role of summits, the mobilisations for them and 'summit hopping' as a phenomenon, but we would like to say just a few words about them. Since the kick start of what has variously been called the 'anti-globalisation' and 'anti-capitalist' movement, arguably June 18th 1999 or the anti WTO protests in Seattle in the same year, the level of autonomous direct action has gone down. Much of what passes for action now is a crowd of people kettled by cops, occasionally breaking free, only to follow a samba band around whilst dressed in pink and silver. For example, at the BP AGM action in London in April 2003, most of the crowd were content to protest the meeting by partying with a samba band outside — despite the fact that 100 shareholder tickets were available to enable people to get past security and disrupt the meeting. The majority of protestors, however, were happy to engage in spectacular pseudo-resistance rather than confrontation with those they claim as their enemies. There is no doubt that in Seattle, and in Genoa, a critique free of mediation by 'organisers' and against domination was demonstrated, despite the dates being set by the leaders, and the presence of reformists in the street. Seattle took cops of all types by surprise, and at Genoa we hear of people physically challenging the authority of 'White Overall' stewards who were attempting to orchestrate resistance according to their 'acceptable' confines. But if domination and oppression are in every part of society and in daily life, attack has no need for dates set by the enemy. We can develop forms of action that can act as concrete examples of why

admission of resignation, a retreat into merely tending one's own garden as the monster lumbers on.

The "positive" projects developed in the name of this sort of realism are nothing more than alternative ways of surviving within the present society. They not only fail to threaten the world of capital and the state; they actually ease the pressure on those in power by providing voluntary social services under the guise of creating 'counterinstitutions'."

'Realism' in Against the Logic of Submission, by Wolfi Landstreicher

In our opinion, an anti-capitalist social centre, paying rent to a landlord, paying rates, and bills, obeying licensing laws, legal structures, and insurance, cannot in essence be in any way in conflict with the capitalist system. It is not direct action and it is not confrontational. At its heart is defeat, sometimes called realism.

To occupy, to squat a building is an act of direct action. It is taking what you want when you want it. Although squatting is not illegal in Britain, much of what goes on in a squat is illegal — providing food, beer, and entertainment for people without a license and without insurance. By squatting, we introduce ourselves to the new social relationships that develop when we take what we want from the state and property-owning class rather than asking and paying for it — and to the very idea that it is possible for us to exist outside those parameters. The experience of opening a squatted social centre is fundamentally more liberating than setting up a legal structure, a bureaucracy, in order to rent a building from a capitalist landlord. The experience of entering an occupied space is also fundamentally different to that of entering a legitimised one. There is often an atmosphere of anything can happen. In some senses this is the very essence of wildness, of revolt, and therefore in direct opposition to domesticity and obedience. The feeling that one is outside

the petty rules and regulations of the system, even in some small way, is a magnificent one. Entering a centre that follows rules, pays it's rates and licences, and has financial and cultural ownership of the space is radical suicide.

Private property is a product of theft, repression and exploitation. It is an agent of oppression and exploitation. The land used to be ours, now it is theirs. It is a principle of radical political activity to refute this ownership by simply taking back what we used to hold in common. Squatting is taking 'private' space and opening it back up to the collectivity. To rent space and call it a 'radical' or 'anticapitalist' social centre is an oxymoron. As it was said during the May '68 insurrection in Paris " Don't demand. Occupy!"

The history of revolt is one that occurs largely outside the workplace, the rented house, the ballot box. The rented social centre is no more radical than an alternative café. It is not what you say (or how many leaflets you put out), it is what you do, that matters. Revolt is about bringing the war home in a society where it is often too easily hidden beneath the veneer of isolation and alienation, where we are told (and believe) the war is always somewhere else, where we continue to labour under the illusion that we are privileged and where in fact some of us do actually have a 'nice life', where abundant opportunities arise for recuperation and the insidious selling out of ideals. To bring the war home is to make war on this society, on the way we live our lives, on the power structures that exist both outside ourselves and within us. Our project is one to destroy a system that impoverishes us and leads us to live increasingly mediated existences devoid of any meaning.

We wonder if the rented social centre offers a perfect displacement activity for those who are essentially part of the system, but wish to appear to be involved in radical politics. A rented social centre is never going to be a substitute for the spontaneous, transformative human interaction that comes about when people live together, struggle together, and spend time together on their own

terms on a daily basis. When people have to come together against a system that doesn't want them there.

> "Politics is the art of recuperation. The most effective way to discourage all rebellion, all desire for real change [is] to transform a subversive into a man or woman of state. Not all people of state are paid by the government. There are functionaries who are not found in parliament or even in the neighbouring rooms. Rather, they frequent the social centre and sufficiently know the principle revolutionary theories, they debate over the libratory potential of technology; they theorise about non-state public sphere and the surpassing of the subject.
>
> Reality — they know it well — is always more complex than any action. So if they hope for a total theory, it is only in order to totally neglect it in daily life. Power needs them because-as they themselves explain to us-when no one criticises it power is criticised by itself"
>
> *From Ten blows against Politics, by Il Pugnale May 1996*

Samba, Summits and Counter Summits

> "We who cultivate the taste for adventure and the free flow of passions see that only through the ongoing practice of direct action, springing beyond the four walls, going beyond the limits of lawfulness imposed by the state, can we succeed in opening new spaces for the selforganisation of our lives outside the squat and instilling new dignity into the existing occupations. In short, in spreading the practice of generalised selforganisation."