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Against Apolitical Squatting

Squatters and Homeless Autonomy

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“Squatters and Homeless Autonomy” is a London squatting collective working to combat gentrification and establish autonomous anti-capitalist spaces. Squatting the RBS building on Charing-Cross Road over Christmas 2014, they were also involved in the Institute of Dissidents – the occupied Institute of Directors building on Pall Mall – and have run temporary anarchist spaces at Neal Street and St James’s Square. In September the collective occupied the Mamelon Tower pub to oppose the eviction of tenants there and plans to turn it into upmarket flats.

Coming to Terms

In Camden, an eight-month squat is evicted by pigs and three are arrested under Section 144, the 2012 ban on residential squatting. A man in a SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL SQUAT t-shirt waits for NELSN to forward a text. Two arrive from a council-estate squat further north. Builders begin to secure the building. Against Section 144, against increasing precarity and repression, broken self-identity and fractured organisation, London squatting seems to have begun a coming-to-terms.

Attempts to surround the fragility of the squat scene with nostalgia have come thick and fast: Remember the Squatters’ Union; remember unrestricted residential squatting; remember squatters’ rights. As ever this nostalgia is a thinly disguised dose of forgetfulness: Squatting has always meant struggle; and no mourning for a golden age can deny the permanence of our struggles and the permanent need to politicise them.

In the blur of this permanence, however, squatting has been increasingly forced into the temporary. Court papers are served quicker and quicker, evictions become fortnightly rituals, and the looming ban on commercial squatting places squatters before an ever shortening horizon. The loss caused by the 2012 ban is a collective memory permanently recalled by the imminence of the next.

For those who do not find comfort in a false unity of the past – and whose future seems to have heard its end already – we must come to terms with our present.

The Sacrificial Squatter

Moving when evicted, served when moved, evicted when served. Contemporary squatting is a series of defensive and reactive acts. Ritualistic and cyclical, squatting is determined by forces always separate from squatters themselves.

The promise of “dropping-out” has dropped to the floor of every squat rave. Standing up, it has become the reality of crossed imperatives. The balance between resistance, self-determination and self-preservation is impossible to strike; and, unable to live up to any, collective stress seems organic as organisation.

In larger activist circles too, squatters have offered up liberated spaces only to become the silent facilitator among other rebels and radicals. Seen mainly as preparation for actions and events, squatting features more in the context than the content. In a political and economic situation where content dominates context – where legalistic ideology sees no variance in the same – preparation does not validate whoever prepares.

Abolishing the artificial roles of “facilitator” and “facilitated” ultimately means that everyone must help to facilitate everyone else. Finding themselves repeatedly in the former role, squatters have not demanded the mutual solidarity they need. Even the most politically active squatters now seem to fall into the dominant consensus from anti-capitalists and are absent at the daily eviction resistances.

From this lack of validation and solidarity has grown silence. Most of the political activity squatters do falls under any banner but squatting – and this is one that stretches far: Not only housing, but all struggles have basis in the liberation of space. If there are squats in the struggle, then it is a squatting struggle too.

In Amsterdam, squats were cracked in solidarity with occupations at the University, providing bases for mobilisation and support. The mass squats by migrants and small numbers of anarchist comrades still exist in the cracks of state power and violence in Calais. Occupations stand as clear markers of self-determination and the will to create communities and cultures of resistance wherever people stay.

The forms of squatting able to resist repression will fit the changing needs of larger struggles while emphasising squatting as struggle. In escalated situations, such as Naples or Calais, squatting is generalised by its use in creating temporary autonomous zones and communities of resistance. In Amsterdam, squats broaden the free education struggle beyond the University while providing the mechanisms for its escalation.

In situations where squatting is increasingly deescalated and isolated, the task is to generalise and escalate the squatting resistance. The old networks and forms-of-life are dragging into a state of alienation and disassociation: between squatters and larger struggles, between the varying and sometimes contradictory uses of squatting, between squatting collectives who know nothing of one another, between comrades. In the vacuum of this disassociation, new informal organisation and radical action must continue to grow.

FUCK REGENERATION! FUCK SECTION 144! FUCK PASSIVE RESISTANCE! AGAINST APOLITICAL SQUATTING! FOR AUTONOMOUS CLASS-STRUGGLE SQUATTING!

Squatters and Homeless Autonomy

This is squat-for-squat-sake politics: where flying the squatting banner comes simultaneous to flying others. To emphasise squatting as the liberation of space and temporary expropriation of property demands that it is seen as legitimate direct action in itself.

Against the unachievable duties of “Resist all Evictions”, new squatting politics must find a place for self-preservation in resistance. The duty to resist in all cases contradicts maximum expropriation in some and the self-preservation of squatters in many. It surrenders self-determination to agitprop painted as unreachable duty. It decreases the times when we can actually resist in keeping them out, not just longing them out.

Our Squats are not Tokens, Our Barricades are not Gestures

A planned eviction resistance at a council estate occupation begins with a collective meeting on the potential roles of newly arrived recruits. The punch-line is that Russia Today live-streamed the whole event – which turned out to be a non-event altogether.

Often as theatre and often seeming farce, the Left is playing eviction resistance to an audience of corporate media and well-meaning professional activists. The show is titled something like Awareness-Raising or Mass Appeal.

Eviction resistance is rarely something for the cameras. The forces of populism rush to condemn or ignore the less watchable aspects of resistance – the messy violence and dull labour required to defend our squats and occupations. Squatters are left with the spectacle of resistance and a trolley of possessions in the street.

The need to defend squats and the political creativity they have is urgent. The political creativity drained from squatting by leftist tokenism and the strategy of passive resistance goes hand-in-hand with a situation drained of politics itself.

Against Apolitical Squatting

In Amsterdam, squatting and gentrification has often had an uncomfortably close relationship. In areas of London too, such as Shoreditch or Camden, in occupying empty, sometimes derelict buildings in poor areas, squatters bring refurbishment, street art, and a look of “alternative authenticity” so appealing to trendy middle-class house-buyers. And so: the process goes from dereliction, to squats and, in turn, to regeneration and invasive economic power. That the squatters themselves were evicted sooner or later to make way for yuppiedom is important to note.

Equally important is the use of squatting as resistance to gentrification. The squatted council estates at the Aylesbury in Elephant and Castle and Guinness in Brixton – additional to the presence of squatters in street-based resistance – continue the legacy of Gospel Oak and 144 Piccadilly before them. Squatters at 10 Otterhaken in Hamburg put up a fierce resistance which continued the escalation of their neighbourhood. Young squatters in the Basque Country continue to make the liberation of space the basis for insurrectionary action.

That these two forms of squatting – to create alternative forms-of-life and larger class-based resistance – have had such different effects should not suggest a natural contradiction between them. The political use of squatting culture to add to larger cultures of resistance should not be denied. Oppositional self-identity, whether on the streets or in squats, continues to make squatting a threat to cultural power.

The cooption of this self-identity in the name of middle-class warfare falls at the feet of squatters also. In splitting squatting culture from squatting politics, they have been left with a culture unable to defend itself.

A squatted space not used for politics soon loses the politics of squatted spaces. Creating spaces intolerant to social hierarchy and state surveillance, for organising and consciousness-raising, is in-

tegral to the creation of effective resistance in squats and on the streets.

Further along to apathy, squatters build lists of recommendations from ex-landlords in hope of a longer stay. A reversion to comfortable hierarchy in the present always means uncomfortable coercion in the future. The creation of the “landlord-friendly squatter” strips squatting of its oppositional nature and, with it, its political potential.

In the social realm too, radical forms-of-life created by communal living and unusual shared experience are replaced with family, precedence and guilt. While benefiting from the organic mutual aid within familial relations, being restricted by them restricts the potential for subversive forms-of-life.

All squatting starts from a level of anonymity. The flow of bodies in and between squats, hostels, social centres, streets, council-estates and university occupations causes a contradictory coupling of familiarity and anonymity. Making new, more effective squatting collectives and networks means recognising this interplay between the familial and anti-familial. Groupings must be strategic and personal – recognising one in the other – and must work for both political action and self-preservation.

The withdrawal from risky politics into comfortable normalcy in the street and squat is a core symptom of increasing repression. The 2012 ban on residential squatting, a Left dead-set on passive resistance and a depoliticised squatting movement has left squatters with increasingly fewer lines of defence and political creation.

Organic as this repression seems, resistance is sprouting everywhere. Squatting continues to prove itself as direct action against power. People rip down the fences at the Aylesbury; squatters refuse to stop squatting residential. On the continent, in Naples, Amsterdam, Calais and elsewhere, mass occupations continue in the context of illegality.

In Naples, autonomists occupy empty buildings in solidarity with homeless migrants. ‘Homes for All’ is not a request but a strategy.