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Social Dis-Centres
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Mortgages, loans, investment, property development, licence applications, accountancy, endless legislation, business plans, backbiting, membership lists, the dead time absorbing activists and the debt, oh the debt!

Welcome to legal social centres! Have a pleasant stay. The Cowley Club in Brighton just opened. It's a posh looking bar. It has a bookshop, the prices are cheaper than normal, the front door of the building is made of Indonesian hardwood (Solidarity South Pacific?!) and the plants were bought at Ikea. It has no dedicated meeting space (yet), only the bar area — revealing its priorities in the design. In themselves, legal social centres are what they are; a social enterprise — cafés, bars, possible gathering spaces. But the danger is that, springing up on the back of the direct action movement, they will divert activist time and energy into an essentially non-radical and liberal project. A project perceived, by dint of association, as a radical social space.

The Cowley Club is not the only new legal social centre. There is the Sumac Centre in Nottingham, which has filled a community space left behind by the now defunct Rainbow Centre. The 1 in 12 Club in Bradford is a longstanding example of a legal club. The recent social centre boom has taken a lot of time and energy in the last couple of years, and caused some tension amongst those involved (directly and indirectly). In a way, people feel they have had to take sides as people's politics are thrown into sharper relief. An example of this is some of the discussions that have emerged, the sudden imposition of legal hurdles and ownership allowing more liberal concepts to push into the agenda: should people be paid or not, the merits of CCTV, how the need to appear to be a legitimate café and drinking hole means that people should perhaps refrain from offering too many hardcore books in the library or bookshop or from holding radical meetings or events 'for a while'.

The Sumac Centre considered asking people not to hold Earth First! Winter Moot meetings there due to the threat of not getting their bar license. We were collectively requested to respect the fact that the Sumac Centre was in a vulnerable position and did not want to be too obviously connected with the Moot. While I respect many of the radical people involved in the creating and running of

the space, this request implied that we were obliged to have some allegiance to it as a project, even though we had not been able to use it for the purpose for which we thought it had partly been created. Instead there is a sense of coercion attached to these centres, from 'drink here rather than elsewhere, comrade', through to 'don't set up free squatted spaces that might compete'. These notions coupled with walking on eggshells around the demands of legislation results in policing. An insidious self-policing of radical agendas by those more willing to make concessions, creating division and fucking around with grassroots support — no 'room at the inn' for autonomous groups who potentially compromise the legal status of the centre.

How do we fight against property speculation and ownership, gentrification, and corporate public space with a legal social centre that has more in common with these things than not? How can we engender radicalism in our society if people's first point of contact with non-mainstream politics is a space built on compromise, which exists only because the state says it can? The bricks and mortar, the signatures on legal and financial papers, the SWP-style membership structure, the boredom on the faces of volunteer staff paying off the bank, the ghetto — all these things that come with toeing the line, turn our politics into rhetoric. Running a legal social centre is, at best, the equivalent of working for an NGO.

It may be 'green' money that has enabled people to build them, but pursuing social change through the mainstream means being forced to acquire 'skills' applicable to the terms and conditions of mainstream ventures, it means creating a respectable business to gain the confidence of investors. What does any of this have to do with a movement in revolt against the machinery of capital and which fights the idea of exclusion and powerlessness based on social, political and economic leverage?

But, we hear the Management Committees cry, these centres are for the people, they are welcome, it is their space too. Well sort of, but let's take the idea of membership. If meetings do take place in The Cowley Club, for example, and run into bar time, those attending the meeting must sign in to the club. We complain about a lack of security in our culture and then set up formalities requiring people to put their names and addresses to political activity. The idea also

To me, the legal social centre is a worrying development, selling the illusion of a politicised and radicalising public space when in fact it can by its very nature be nothing of the sort. It poses about in a hoody and mask keeping pretty well clear of the front line. The desire for accessible space is the same desire that underpins autonomous, squatted spaces — to reach out beyond the ghetto. But setting down roots in polluted ground is not going to develop healthy politics or healthy communities. They are a sell-out and a buy-in. We already compromise on so many things (from a place to live, to schooling our kids). Surely we can conspire to at least keep our public spaces radical and admit that if we have to make that many compromises to keep them, then they're probably not worth having?

Disclaimer: This piece probably contains factual errors, omissions, wild sweeping statements, vicious lies and blissful abuse of punctuation! It's an opinion piece. In terms of the ethos and spirit of what I think 'we' stand for and what I would like to see in society in general, I stand by the caution and criticism expressed in this piece regarding the inherent liberalism and dangers of entering establishment space. A culture of tense whispers has grown up around the recent legal social centres: I hope this article will open up space for more discussion about what legal social centres should expect from the communities they demand energy and allegiance from, and I hope that we can distance ourselves enough from these extremely stressful and confusing projects to reflect more deeply on the political character of the spaces we are creating.

clearly promotes the feeling that other people are in charge of your access to social space, either alienating you from that space because you aren't a member or from those outside the space if you are. Furthermore, buying £400,000 buildings is not something everyone can do, it does not empower other people to do the same, it only perpetuates the idea that some people are consumers dependent on the product of those, the elite, who have the power and connections to access resources that most people can't. People can 'work' for the centres, they can get nominated into the inner circle, the decision-making body, but how challenging, radical or empowering a process is that? A squatted social centre or an action can inspire us and we can do it ourselves too.

If we think we need 'access points' for new people to be inspired by our political perspective, then surely this is best achieved through practising direct action — not through acquiring crippling mortgages, obeying a myriad of regulations set by the state and spending years doing DIY of the conventional sort. The energy that has gone into legal social centres during what has been an action-quiet couple of years might well have found other avenues for action had a lot of very energetic people not been engaged in property development. And it doesn't stop when the centre is 'up and running', as the mantra goes.

My best experience of a social centre (A-Spire in Leeds) is my counter-argument. I like A-Spire — a lot. And although I haven't personally been to them, the OK Café in Manchester and Radical Dairy in London are projects that through their process and their inherent conflict with the state have been truly radical and desirable spaces. Squatted spaces are temporary autonomous zones reclaimed from property owners and councils. They explode through the cracks in the system and when they are crushed — often forcibly — they leave pieces of themselves everywhere, in the hearts of the people who went there, in new behaviour, new alliances, new thoughts. They are a practical attempt to get free from the state, to be free from the compromises and creeping obedience of a legal space.

Everyone there holds the squatted space together, with no formal membership, no nominations, no rulebook, just based on a self-determined responsibility for each other and the people who may

use or simply neighbour the space. As a radical project, the group process of working together to choose and crack a building, open it up, decide what it's going to do and run it until an eviction, develops collectivity, responsibility, mutuality and autonomy. It has no management committee, just a bunch of people who've come together, it does not have to make money, no one gets paid for anything, there are no legal rules or bureaucratic strangleholds limiting what can be done with the space beyond those we internally discuss and evaluate. After much discussion about whether to be selling anything at all, A-Spire had a really cheap bar with proceeds going direct to various radical projects (not to 'pay off debts and the mortgage') but you could bring your own too, it had a donations-café (with skipped and stolen food), a free shop, an indoor skating ramp, an art space, and many meeting spaces. It was radical to a level that I believe a legal social centre can never be.

It is radical because the squatted social centre endeavours to get to the heart of the matter by removing itself from questions of legality and compliance. The space is laid bare. The people that occupy the space are laid bare. Each squat, each A-Spire or OK Café or Radical Dairy is a new world. Psychologically, the space is liberating. It is an action. It is about clearing a way through formal structures and accepted ways of organising social spaces. It is about how we relate to each other outside the dominant system. It is hard enough to explore fundamental questions of social transformation, process, mutuality, inclusivity, and hard enough to break down ingrained power structures and behaviours in a squatted space which has gone a long way to clearing its head of legal constraints and practical ownership, but it is even harder to find those the questions if you still shuffling along head and shoulders bowed under the added weight of legal and state apparatus or to reach anything resembling autonomy.

The squatted social centre is radically politicising in and of itself. As radicals, we try to challenge or bypass laws, regulations, routine, hierarchy. Not only this, but I would argue that by desiring and seeking permanence through legal social centres, in a sense we collaborate with the system. Every time we leave the state behind, every time we accept that what we have created in a squatted space may get moved on, we confirm our refusal of the system because

we understand that the state will only allow to be permanent that which is compliant, corrupt, of no threat.. By accepting transience, by re-evaluating a desire for permanence in a world we wish to move on from, we expand our ability and desire to transform the world as it is into what we want it to be. The temporary autonomous zone is characterised by an intensity, militancy and dynamism only possible under those circumstances. For the time it exists, it is everything — not a daily or weekly shift in a permanent space.

In my experience, people are very different in a squatted social centre. They are more open and creative, more communicative and questioning. While doing the bar at A-Spire one night I spent a long time talking to a young guy who'd just left prison and heard that A-Spire was happening (this is a very important word — a legal social centre doesn't happen!), that it was pretty cool and decided to give it a go even though he didn't know anyone involved. He'd never experienced anything like it and was really excited. I was excited too and we talked for hours about our lives, and politics and the politics of the space. I don't hear those conversations happening at the Cowley Club, and I'm pretty sure that had it been a legal social centre with regular clientele and sign-up book, this guy might well not have come in, would certainly not have been that excited by it and I doubt whether I would have communicated with him in the way I did. There would have been less to talk about for a start. A job is so much less exciting and dynamic than an action.

That intensity creates an explosion of political understanding and bonding that is harder to achieve in a permanent, legal space. When the last A-Spire was evicted, it brought everyone together, it introduced people to crackdown by the state. It wasn't rhetoric, it wasn't an eviction described to someone new to evictions over morning coffee or read in a book. It was a clear and actual political situation, an experience of 'us against them', inspiring solidarity. It was difficult yet invigorating. If the Cowley Club or the Sumac Centre got closed down, I believe it would divide rather than unify. We would probably see blame put on the heads of other people in the community rather than on the authorities. It would be a cause of resentment between those who have put money and work into it and those who have 'transgressed', who have 'disrespected' the space.