

## 13 why we need autonomous spaces in the fight against capitalism



Paul Chatterton and Stuart Hodkinson

As we contemplate the vicious assault on even the limited democratic systems, rights and welfare we have historically won from capital, and as the spectre of irreversible climate change and 'peak oil' looms ever closer, the question of how we as ordinary people respond – and from what *bases* of resistance – becomes increasingly urgent. An important lesson from the history of popular struggles against the theft of common land, the wholesale destruction of communities or the imposition of authoritarian rule is how they have often striven to create their own self-managed, autonomous spaces free of those very relations of domination and exploitation and as bases from which to regroup and politically organise. This idea can be found in land movements from the English Diggers to the Brazilian MST (Landless Workers' Movement), the European squatting movement, the occupied factories of Argentina and the Italian social centres. The term 'autonomous space' is of course a political one – there is no such thing as 'autonomy' under capitalism; there is no 'outside' the system. Autonomous spaces are instead places of creativity and experimentation where the colonising, dehumanising and exploitative logic of capitalism is actively resisted by people trying to live and relate to each other as equals. This chapter discusses the crucial role that fighting for such autonomous spaces can play today in both resisting global capitalism and helping us to develop viable alternatives to the private profit system. We begin by situating the idea of autonomous spaces within the historical struggle between Enclosures and Commons, or what we today might call the choice between privatisation and direct democracy.



## resisting enclosure

The present crises of corporate power, the privatisation of our resources and the expansion of authoritarian social control are nothing new. The drive to 'enclose', 'dispossess' and 'enslave' has been a constant feature of human societies from the early empires of the Mayas, Aztecs, Romans and across Mesopotamia, to the violent birth pangs of global capitalism in the 1400s heralded by the start of the great land enclosures in England and the European slave harvesting from Africa, to the later city states and hinterlands controlled by wealthy burghs and the nobility respectively, and the more recent great westwards movement in the USA that disposed native Americans of their lands and created huge farming areas for European settlers.

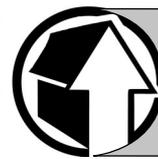
Enclosures are deliberate and necessary mechanisms of domination, exploitation and power. The land enclosures in Britain from the fifteenth century onwards, led by the monastic orders, kings, warring lords, landowners and later the feudal manorial system, forced farming communities off their land and commons, which were then enclosed, privatised and capitalised as giant agricultural areas to enrich kings, religious orders and big landowners. By robbing people of their land, this 'primitive accumulation' ended the communal control of the means of subsistence, separated people from these means, and created a population of workers with only their labour to sell as a means of survival. As capitalism spread across northern Europe, it was this landless working class that fed the needs of, first, agricultural capitalism and, then, the voracious demand of nineteenth-century industrial cities for cheap factory hands. The simultaneous development of European colonial systems in Latin America, Africa and Asia directly stripped indigenous peoples from their land, deprived them of their own basic resources such as timber, water, oil and minerals, imposed foreign rule and developed their economies as mere supply chains to enrich European societies.

Instead of being a one-off act of acquisition, however, the process of enclosure is a constant feature of capitalism in response to its internal contradictions. Since the global neoliberal turn from the mid 1970s onwards, international business and its state partners in government and the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have orchestrated a dramatic and unprecedented enclosure of land and life in almost every corner of the globe, what is better known as 'neoliberal globalisation'. In the global South, the policies of privatisation, lower corporate taxes, public spending cuts, free trade and anti-trade unionism – often termed 'the Washington consensus' due to their championing by the US dominated International Monetary Fund and World Bank – have merely replaced 'colonialism' and formal independence with 'neocolonialism'. Direct military rule has given way to free trade areas and conditional debt relief as the

main levers by which the rich North strips poor countries of their natural resources and wealth. Global corporations linked to ruling political elites, not nation states, have gained back control of industries at knock down prices, while deregulation has led to labour and environmental abuses as capital has been allowed to rip free. Seizing land for debt has pushed a massive new army of labour into the world economy, making mobile and migrant labour the dominant form, undermining collective organisation and place based struggles, depressing wages, and making workers vulnerable and precarious, and thus more compliant. The liberalisation of financial markets has enabled massive and almost instantaneous transfers of money, which have rapidly devalued and bankrupted economies. Thailand, Russia and Argentina literally lost control of their sovereignty, assets, resources and industries all in a matter of a few years (see Stiglitz 2002, Klein 2001). What we see is a more gloves-off type of global capitalism, based on more nineteenth-century style primitive forms of economic policy as corporations are able to dispossess and accumulate in brutal and ruthless ways (see Harvey 2005, Pilger 2002).

One of the most disturbing effects is growing volatility in terms of shelter and housing. The International Alliance of Inhabitants states that 15 per cent of the world's population is now threatened with eviction and the United Nations estimated that in 1996 1 billion people lived in inadequate housing (quoted in Corr 1999, 4). Further Mike Davis in *City of Slums* (2005) suggests that in Africa by 2015, there will be 332 million slum dwellers. Even for those with some money, price inflation and property speculation, as well as debt, has meant it is virtually impossible to buy your own house, let alone find land. This problem is acute in urban areas where land values have soared over the last decade due to the growth of large corporate backed entertainment-retail-office-condo mega projects. Enclosure is now also spreading to the very building blocks of life as corporations claim legal ownership by patenting ancient knowledges, medicines and genetic plant codes. This is known as biopiracy (see Shiva 1997), the appropriation and monopolisation of traditional knowledges and biological resources leading to the loss of control of resources. In recent years, through advances in biotechnology, and international agreements on intellectual property such as TRIPs (Trade Related Intellectual Property), the possibilities of such exploitation have multiplied.

This is not just a developing world phenomena. Similar policies have ripped through the rich West. Downtown areas of big cities have become hubs for global capital and playgrounds for wealthy residents and business elites creating a donut effect between the hyper-rich core and the impoverished outer rim. At the same time, the state with its falling tax base has shaken off the management of public services like hospitals,



schools, playing fields and parks, day care centres and libraries. Its core business has now become attracting footloose investment, out of town tourists and business elites. As the welfare state crumbles, thousands have been left abandoned by a rolled-back state and a global economy that has moved elsewhere. What this adds up to is the destruction of the 'social commons'. Land and space is at a premium and goes to the highest bidder. As a result, community centres, local shops, playing fields, post offices, public access woodland and open spaces, and working men's clubs all get sold off and recycled into shopping malls with private security guards, exclusive condos and riverside apartments or air conditioned offices. Much of this is summed up by the term gentrification, when higher order services and activities displace traditional, lower order ones. These processes have been documented in excellent commentaries like Mike Davis' *City of Quartz* (1990) or Sharon Zukin's *The Culture of Cities* (1992).

In this perspective, we can see how enclosure and dispossession are widespread processes of commodification encompassing all of the commons – natural and human – from physical assets such as oil, public housing, leisure centres and schools to the provision of welfare and health services; from open public spaces like city squares to ancient knowledges, medicines and the very genetic codes of life itself. In a world moment of potentially irreversible climate change and looming resource wars, the need to reclaim the commons from the rich and powerful, resist dispossession and enclosure, and create structures of solidarity and welfare, protection and shelter, has become nothing less than a question of human survival itself.

### historical struggles for autonomous space

However, if enclosure, dispossession and enslavement have been constant throughout history, so too has the capacity and willingness of people to first resist and then seek ways to recollectivise their lives by managing and sharing land, work and resources together as equals. What we see is a more gloves-off type of global capitalism, a primitive form of economic accumulation as corporations are able to impose their will on countries for their own gain in brutal and ruthless ways (see Harvey 2005; Pilger 2002). This democratic and egalitarian vision of 'autonomy' has its roots in the ancient tradition of the commons – the belief that the Earth and its resources belong to us all, and cannot be bought or sold in the marketplace, or claimed and partitioned by force for one group over another. It is thus a vision of self management, non-hierarchy and mutual aid. The (re)claiming of space from private ownership by popular movements to recollectivise their lives and fight the commodification of land, labour and life has a long and rich history and offers inspiring examples.

### **The Diggers**

In the wake of the land enclosures and destruction after the English civil war, the Diggers (or the True Levellers), led by the radical preacher Gerard Winstanley who believed that the earth is a common treasury for all, established an agrarian community at St George's Hill in 1649 to feed and house the destitute. The experiment didn't last long and they were eventually evicted by the local lord, but it has had a lasting resonance as they advocated a radical restructuring of society where the poor would inherit the common wealth. Thousands of intentional agrarian communities have since been set up in reaction to the excesses of the Industrial Revolution and the prospects of a society without oil to work the land in an ecologically sustainable way. Echoing the sentiments of Winstanley, The Land is Ours group campaigns for the right to live sustainably on the land and promote living on the land as well as land squats (see [www.thelandisours.org](http://www.thelandisours.org)).

### **The European squatters**

At its height in the 1980s, the European squatting scene was a mass movement, with some 3500 squatted houses in the Netherlands, 9000 in Berlin and 31,000 in London. Motives varied from the right to decent housing, challenge the corporate takeover of cities and the desire to set up self-managed social services in the gaps left by the crumbling welfare state. But the urban squatting movement also reflected a much wider rejection of life, work and politics under capitalism. While squatting is today in decline, some spaces have survived to become almost self-governing cities, such as Christiania in Copenhagen, dubbed 'Freetown' after it declared itself independent of the Danish state. Barcelona is also a great example of how a network of squats has formed to jointly advertise events and co-ordinate support.

### **The Italian 'Centri Sociali' (social centres)**

Some of today's autonomous self-managed spaces take their cue from Italy's Occupied Self-Managed Social Centres (CSOAs) that emerged during the extreme social unrest and economic crisis of the mid 1970s. They were founded by a non-parliamentary youth movement seeking to challenge a lack of housing, services and casualised labour, but rejecting both 'capitalist work' and the socialist parties who had abandoned working-class struggles for a share of state power. At the same, conventional political meeting spaces were being wiped out as workplaces, schools and universities closed. Enter the CSOAs. Taking over unused or condemned buildings, a network of autonomous cultural and political gathering spaces have been created that have since become hives for experimentation with self management, independent cultural production





Figure 13.1 The Square Social Centre, London, UK

Source: Paul Chatterton and Stuart Hodkinson.

of music, 'zines, art and pirate micro TV and radio, publishing, and radical social services. Although the original social centres mainly died out in the repression of 1977, a new wave of 260 social centres emerged in the mid 1980s, the majority in Milan, Turin, Bologna and Rome. By 2001, this number had halved due to the dramatic shift towards neoliberal urban growth, while many of those that remained drifted into the mainstream as they became part of a normal night out for Italian youths and visiting tourists.

### **Travellers and ravers**

The traveller community, long criminalised as deviants for their nomadic ways of life, know only too well the importance of who controls space. Clashes with the police over the right to live and party, and violent evictions have been frequent, especially in the UK in the mid 1990s. The rave and free party scene which swept the Western world at this time played a crucial role, squatting old warehouses and rural fields to self manage huge music festivals and at the same time challenge the corporate control of music and lifestyles. However, laws like the 1995 Criminal Justice Act

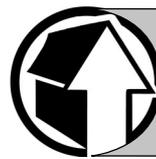
quickly legislated this growing movement out of existence, leading many to seek out freer spaces in southern Europe. Many others stayed and fought, such as the Exodus Collective in Luton who got involved in regeneration and turned around their local neighbourhood.

### **Anarchy in the UK: Punk, dole and the autonomy centres**

In 1980s Britain, a heady mix of punk, anarchism and high unemployment led to an intense period of creativity and experimentation in the form of 'autonomy centres'. These clubs emerged in Britain's big cities as unemployed claimants tried to take back control of their lives against Thatcher's attack on working-class people, the betrayal by the Labour Party and official trade unions, and the rise of fascist activity. Inspired by the anger and energy of the punk scene through groups like Crass, and brought together through the Unemployed Claimants Unions, dozens of clubs opened up, such as the Autonomy Centre in Wapping and the 1 in 12 Club in Bradford. People got together to put on gigs, make 'zines, music, organise benefit advice, do anti-fascist politics, and get to know each other.

### **Indigenous land squats in the global South**

Land squats, favelas, shanty towns, villas miserias – call them what you like – have become an everyday reality for indigenous peoples in the global South where access to land is a question of survival. They represent the growing insecurity of shelter and the normalisation of temporary and chronically poor slum developments for millions of people living on the edges of today's megacities. But some also represent living examples of how people can self manage their own communities even in extreme circumstances. In the 1960s there were over 1 million separate land squats, as revolutionary movements like the Sandinistas in Nicaragua made it their priority to redistribute and self manage land. In Brazil, the MST (Landless Workers' Movement) has occupied and distributed land for 150,000 families since 1984 in a country with one of the worst concentrations of land in the world.



### **Protest camps and convergence sites**

During the 1980s and 1990s, a broad direct action movement emerged in northern Europe around protest and peace camps determined to halt the expansion of roads, motorways, airports, military bases and nuclear weapons. The battles of Newbury and Twyford Down in Britain are famous for their dense resistance networks of tree houses, benders and mini camps, and their promotion of living, self-managed, ecological alternatives to the growth machine. A recent Camp for Climate Action

outside the Drax Power station, the UK's largest emitter of carbon dioxide, highlighted workable solutions to climate change. Peace camps, such as at Greenham Common and Menwith Hill, have confronted the war machine at its front door and spurred a whole generation of peace activists to peacefully resist nuclear missile programmes. More recently, 'No Borders' camps have taken place on immigration borders under the banner 'No one is illegal'. During the summits of global and economic elites such as the G8, IMF and World Bank, large convergence centres and activist villages have been set up under names such as 'Inter-galactica' and 'HoriZone'.

### **Autonomous workers factories in Argentina**

Argentina has been in crisis since 2001 when the country defaulted on its huge international loans, the government slashed the value of the peso, money and food ran out, and the rich took their money overseas. In response, many Argentinean workers reclaimed factories and businesses ranging from 5 star hotels and pastry factories to metal works. Most organise using assemblies and flat structures to make decisions and have formed legally recognised workers' co-operatives or sought nationalisation through government expropriation. Many of the reoccupied factories are co-ordinated through the National Movement of Recovered Factories, which has 3600 workers across 60 factories, and the National Federation of Workers' Co-operatives in Recovered Factories, which has 1447 workers across 14 factories. In a country where 60 per cent of people live below the poverty line, reclaiming a factory or business, running it autonomously and horizontally, and everyone getting fair wages is empowering and essential.

## **the role of autonomous spaces in today's resistance**

What these selective episodes demonstrate is that when people work together they can challenge the status quo and start to take back control of their lives from the rich and powerful. We can also see, however, that the struggle for autonomous spaces and reclaiming the commons, whether land, housing, water, even the genetic codes of life, is never finished. The heyday of Italy's social centres has now passed, the recovered factories in Argentina face constant attempts by the bosses who abandoned them to seize them back, and squatting opportunities have become squeezed, especially in cities that have been rediscovered by rich elites as places to live, work and play. But efforts to set up self-managed autonomous spaces continue undimmed. Since the late 1990s, for example, the UK has seen the growth of a network of self-managed spaces and collectives (see Figure 13.2) broadly linked to the social centre idea, especially

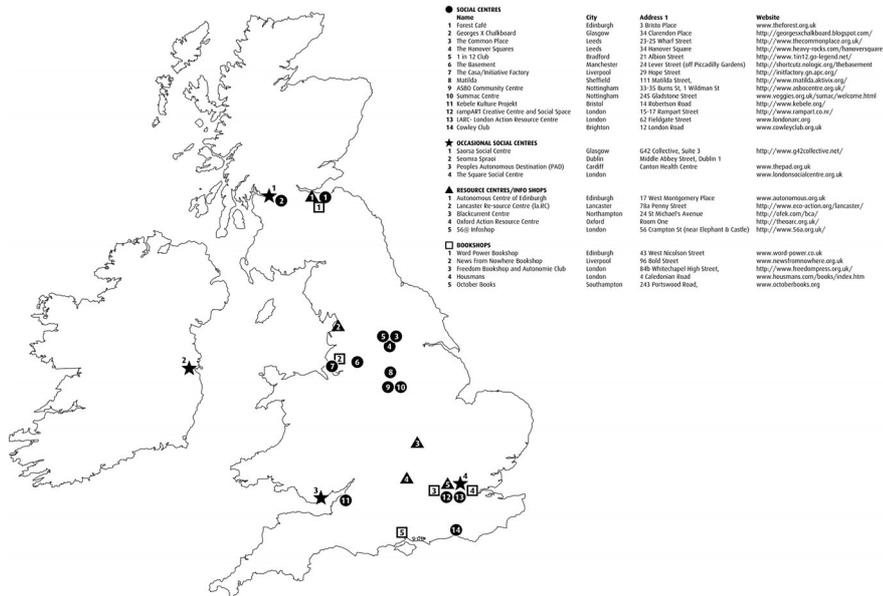


Figure 13.2 Autonomous spaces in the UK and Ireland

Source: Paul Chatterton and Stuart Hodkinson.

in downtown areas that have become more expensive, privatised and corporately owned, and places to meet. Big civil society convergences outside the summits of global political and business leaders at Cancun, Seattle, Gleneagles or Evian, for example, have seen renewed interest in setting up temporary autonomous villages for discussion, action and putting alternatives into practice. The importance of self-managed autonomous spaces for resistance and creating alternatives to capitalism cannot be understated. Below, we identify a number of key roles that autonomous spaces can play in building resistance to capitalism.



**Directly confronting the logic of capital**

The first and most important role of self-managed autonomous spaces is that by reclaiming private property and opening it back up to the public as non-profit, non-commercial zones, they act as a direct ideological and material confrontation to the commodifying logic of capitalism and the process of enclosure. Taking over empty and abandoned buildings like warehouses, factories, garages, schools, shops, clinics,

pubs and bars, and turning them into places for politics, meetings and entertainment creates an immediate social and physical barrier to further corporate takeover. Just as the collective organisation of workers into trade unions often forces capital to change course and make concessions on wages and working conditions, the collective reclaiming of public space forces local neoliberal elites to rethink their strategies of gentrifying urban areas by replacing free or cheap places for people to meet and socialise with corporate entertainment, chain stores and luxury flats. For example, V for Housing, V for Victory is a movement in several Spanish cities operating out of autonomous spaces demanding the right to housing for everyone, and under the banner of the 'Popular Assembly for a Dignified Place to Live' in September 2006, 15,000 people took to the streets of Barcelona as a show of strength against speculation and gentrification. Autonomous spaces thus constitute a new claim to how we live – a demand that land and property be used to meet social needs, not to service global, or extra-local, capital.

By challenging the very logic of capital, and the assumed right of the capitalist class to monopolise space, autonomous spaces will inevitably face efforts to repress, shut down and reclaim them. However, when enclosure is directly experienced it can often lead to the radicalisation of whole swathes of people and the creation of confrontational politics to defend what is theirs.

*Box 13.1 ABC No Rio. Social Centres East Side style, USA*

*Long-term squatting for public spaces is not on the agenda in most of the USA, although there are a few exceptions such as ABC No Rio in New York's Lower East Side. Its origins date to the Real Estate Show, New Year's Day 1980, when 30 artists occupied an abandoned building, and mounted an exhibition addressing New York City housing and land use policies. That show was quickly shut down by the police and artwork confiscated. The City was forced into negotiations with the artists and offered them the storefront and basement at 156 Rivington Street. That space became ABC No Rio. It is now collectively run and known as a venue for art activism with gallery space, zine library, darkroom, silkscreening studio and public computer lab (see: [www.abcnorio.org](http://www.abcnorio.org)).*

**Creating spaces in which self-organisation, solidarity and mutual aid can flourish**

In the individualised, competitive rat race of capitalist society, self-managed autonomous spaces can become environments in which people are genuinely able to relate to and treat each other as equals with solidarity and mutual respect. Core to this is the practice of 'self management', which rests on a number of key ideas: horizontality (without leaders); informality (no fixed executive roles); open discussion (where everyone can have an equal say); shared labour (no division between thinkers and doers or producers and consumers); and consensus (shared agreement by negotiation). These ideas create a 'DIY politics' where participants create a 'social commons' to rebuild service and welfare provision as the local state retreats. For example, autonomous social centres provide free or by donation meeting spaces, a radical bookshop or library, a cheap cafe, cinema and gig rooms, free shops and internet access. Some will put on computer lessons, benefits advice, language classes, bike workshops and crèches. Several also provide temporary refuge for the homeless, international activists and destitute asylum seekers. But this social commons should not be about recreating traditional public services on the cheap – it is instead about inventing alternative, and parallel, economic models to capitalism based on need, not profit, and respect for the planet.

Putting into practice the horizontal politics of autonomous movements in the everyday, self-managed spaces can contribute to developing a politics based on: the freedom to make our own rules collectively and non-hierarchically without the state telling us what to do; alternative ways of living based on solidarity and mutual aid; and the ability to be who we really are through the rejection of discrimination and domination.

**Spaces for uniting social movements, strengthening activism and thinking 'strategically'**

As clearly defined places for anti-capitalist organising and non-hierarchical politics, autonomous spaces tend to naturally act as hubs for an array of local campaigns and activists to hold meetings, plan actions, create new networks, publicise their campaigns, produce banners, write pamphlets and raise vital funds to keep going. In fact, many are consciously set up for this purpose as the possibilities for holding free meetings in pubs, community centres and church halls diminish. It is also hoped that such spaces will contribute to strengthening local grassroots movements by bringing people together from different autonomous groups and walks of life in order to create interaction, break down boundaries, create links and community across activist/non-activist divides, and make a locality's autonomous scene into a larger, more



coherent and stronger movement. So autonomous spaces can play an important role in reaching out beyond the 'activist ghetto' into the local community and respond to the problems of people in their communities – be it housing, education, property speculators or racism.

Over time, the 'hub' effect often breaks down barriers between existing groups, creates obvious links across what appear to be single issues and introduces new people to radical politics in ways that don't scare them away. Autonomous spaces, and particularly social centres, thus bring the various threads of social struggle together in one place where a process of dialogue, contamination and greater unification can take place. Crucially, these are environments in which people are able to talk through and debate political tactics and campaigning strategies. Autonomous spaces thus create what the Free Association (2005) has called 'safe spaces' for people to retreat to after an intense campaign or large-scale mobilisation; where they can regroup, experiment and enable those going at different speeds and coming from different directions to 'compose together'. If self-managed autonomous spaces can help to link up grassroots struggles, campaigns and activists locally, then they can also connect with each other across cities, towns and communities, and across national boundaries to create a global network of decentralised resistance. Key here is what has been called the 'electronic fabric of struggle' (Cleaver 1998) where the internet can mobilise networks, international solidarity and action.

### issues, problems and challenges

We have set out some ideas about how self-managed autonomous spaces can play essential roles in the struggle against global capitalism. As with any political entity, however, these spaces are political experiments that must confront numerous challenges, tensions and even contradictions in their everyday existence. Many simply reflect the reality of practicing radical, self-organised politics simultaneously 'in and against' capitalist society, and the difficulty of putting into practice the values of anti-authority, horizontality and solidarity.

#### **To squat or not?**

The biggest and most divisive issue has been the question of 'legality' – to squat or not to squat. Critics suggest that the bureaucracy and paperwork associated with legal autonomous spaces divert a huge investment of activist energy and resources away from grassroots activism and radical social change. Any project or group goes through a process of institutionalisation and professionalisation: activists become

managers of 'social enterprises' or stand in local elections, former squats become licensed and regulated. For many, only through confrontational occupation, not in compliance with the law, will radical politics grow. While squatting is the most risky and short term, it clearly allows people to break free from the constraints and compromises of obeying the rule of private property, avoids paying rent to profiteering landlords and avoids engaging with a system (through licensing laws etc.) they are trying to undermine.

But squatting has its own problems. Some ex-squatters have grown tired, frustrated and burnt out by constantly having to move, finding the very act of squatting itself increasingly difficult in many major cities. Many activists want to put down roots, and make their politics more open, accessible and identifiable. A legal space offers more control. This desire to create more 'stable bases' as a reaction against the ghettoisation of radical/libertarian politics goes hand in hand with the conscious strategic move to create more open and accessible spaces to get people involved in challenging neoliberal policies and strengthen confrontational social movements. Buying or renting private buildings might be far less confrontational than militantly occupying them, but it is often a tactical compromise with the property system towards the same goal of recollectivisation. In any case, all political activity requires some compromises and acceptance from the state, even squatting. Often, squatted and legal places are connected, feeding off each other in a network for autonomous politics.

However, squatting does remain an important act in its own right. In spite of certain dangers and legal implications, squats still need to be undertaken for important political reasons – to directly confront property speculation and evictions, and to quickly raise important issues in the local community or media. Illegality gets things noticed and provokes responses and passions. The Pure Genius land squat along the Thames in central London, for example, raised the issue of how a derelict piece of land was to be turned into a supermarket and car park, while the occupation of the recently evicted Tony's cafe in Hackney, London was undertaken to highlight rampant corruption of the local council. Squatting is also a vital response to the scandal of empty houses and homelessness in cities across the world. Through squatting networks of support and solidarity can often form as people learn and struggle together.



### **Sustainability**

One of the biggest issues in self-managed, not-for-profit projects is that responsibility falls on the shoulders of a small number of people. We all need to take on board the lessons of self management – that doing it ourselves means doing it together, and that

without leaders many more people have to play a role. There's also the issues of how precarious finances often are and how these projects, which don't receive money from the state, often stumble from month to month just being able to pay rent and bills. The reality is that despite their widespread use, often it comes down to a committed handful to actually make that space happen, which can cause problems of burnout, resentment and inefficiency. A particular weakness is the tendency for projects to close during the day as those involved balance their input with other commitments, such as jobs, other forms of activism, family and friends.

### **Tyranny of structure, tyranny of structurelessness**

As living, breathing spaces of relatively unregulated social interactions, autonomous spaces routinely face the challenge of how to put horizontality into practice through structures and participation. Direct democracy often becomes fertile soil for 'the survival of the fittest'. Running such complex entities through mass open meetings can lead to unstructured, draining discussions which is unwelcoming to newcomers. Paradoxically, the desire to avoid specialisation and role hierarchy by making everyone responsible for everything means ultimately no one is accountable for anything, and spaces can rapidly either fall apart as essential tasks remain undone or those with more resources and/or commitment take on more work. What Jo Freeman (1972) coined the 'Tyranny of structurelessness', where hierarchies form around those with more experience or knowledge, tempered through the creation of collectives responsible for running certain aspects (bar, cafe, finance, maintenance), but also creating a new layer of bureaucracy (see <http://struggle.ws/pdfs/tyranny.pdf>). Dealing with incidences of theft, violence or sexual harassment in the space, for example, can also be difficult and time consuming, and requires commitment from the larger group to work together and find solutions. On the flip side it is often the case that groups who have worked together in building a collective to run the space have also examined issues of power and gender relations which are so often sidelined or ignored.

### **Who, and what, is self management for?**

Many activists involved in self-managed projects wish to 'break out of the activist ghetto' to connect their politics with 'ordinary people' and create welcoming, accessible public spaces attractive to a wide diversity of groups, especially from working-class and ethnic communities. In reality, however, projects are at risk of becoming ghettoised around fairly similar identities (middle class, white, subcultural). At times the aims and ideas of self management are poorly explained to the public and there is often a breakdown in language. Furthermore, are autonomous spaces

really up to the job of creating inspirational and parallel circuits of goods, services and welfare to challenge the profit-driven economy, a centralised state, wage labour, consumer society and environmental devastation? Important problems to face up to include using these projects as springboards into the formal economy, and being recuperated and co-opted into mainstream politics. And what are the implications of the services we provide through self-managed ventures? Are they providers of basic welfare services, filling the gaps the state used to occupy as it retreats, where participants support and offer services to the growing numbers of marginalised people in big cities (the homeless, refugees, migrants)? If this is the case, then such service provision should also inspire us to get involved in managing our own lives and not simply reproduce the dependency culture of welfare services.

### future strategies

We have presented a picture of the ongoing story of self-managed spaces and their role in resisting enclosure and dispossession, and reclaiming the commons. Whether they are large social centres, small info shops, ecovillages or protest camps, such spaces continue to mobilise and inspire people to get involved in taking back control of their lives from capitalism. The contribution autonomous spaces make to wider social change, however, is unclear as they remain relatively weak social actors and are largely unconnected from each other and wider civil society. A key priority is building alliances and fighting on more 'bread and butter' issues, such as welfare cuts, job losses, casualisation, housing privatisation, gentrification and hospital closures. It also means developing from being relatively closed 'activist hubs' to open spaces encompassing more traditional social movement actors if broad, popular coalitions against neoliberalism are to emerge. They remain, then, only glimpses of how the future might be, but hold enormous potential to directly confront the logic of capital, create spaces in which human solidarity can flourish, strengthen local activism, pull in greater numbers of people to radical politics and unite grassroots struggles across the world.



*Paul Chatterton and Stuart Hodkinson are both involved in the Common Place social centre in Leeds, UK, which since its launch in 2005 has become a vibrant and important self-organised political and cultural hub in the city centre (see [www.thecommonplace.org.uk](http://www.thecommonplace.org.uk)). We are indebted to activists from across the UK social centre movement who told us their histories and perspectives in January 2006.*