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PhD Thesis

Social Centres, Anarchism and the Struggle for Glasgow's Commons

Dr John Crossan

University of Glasgow, School of Geographical and Earth Science

1st Supervisor: Dr David Featherstone

2nd Supervisor: Prof. Andrew Cumbers

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Abstract

This thesis charts the work of a group of people in their efforts to set up a social centre in Glasgow. A social centre is like our once prolific community centre but with an explicit political character and agenda. They are social and cultural hubs where people can take part in a variety of communal events (e.g. dancing, cooking, eating, game play or simply hanging around). They are also places that encourage political debate, organization and action. Crucially, users are encouraged to participate in the day-to-day running of the centres. Social centres have a rich history in European radical politics. While proponents of various political philosophies use social centres, they are most commonly associated with anarchism. Anarchism is a tradition of political thought and practice that aims to build a society based on mutual aid and mass democratic participation characterised by a rejection of all forms of human domination over other humans. In this work I explore a variety of political and cultural initiatives employed by anarchist-influenced activists in Glasgow as they struggle against the neoliberalization of the city. It is the intention of this thesis to highlight the totalizing impositions of neoliberal urban governance and anarchist-inspired alternatives to these impositions, which I argue, constitute a different way of knowing and engaging with the city. These alternatives are prefigured in the doing of social centre work.

Social Centres, Anarchism and the Struggle for Glasgow's Commons

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature:

Printed name:

Date:

Introduction

A Brief Introduction to the Fundamentals of Social Centre Activism

When I first became interested in social centres, or rather, when I first started to speak to others about my interest in social centres I found it difficult to explain what they are to people who had never experienced one. This was probably because, in part, I was over-thinking them, as I hadn't fully grasped their role and worth. I think it was also because I'd invested a fair amount of practical and emotional energy as a social centre activist and wanted to 'flower' them up as great centres of revolutionary thought and action placing political dissent and creativity in the hearts of our towns and cities. In short, I was playing the part of a propagandist. Today I am still a social centre propagandist of sorts but slightly more tempered in the promotion of my *counter-information* (and hopefully a better propagandist for a more composed approach).

Nowadays when I am asked what a social centre is my answer, on the face of it, seems pretty straightforward. A social centre is like our once ubiquitous community centre but with an explicit political character and agenda. They are social and cultural hubs where people can take part in a variety of communal events (e.g. dancing, cooking, eating, game play or simply hanging around). They are also places that encourage political debate, organization and action. Crucially, users are encouraged to participate in the day-to-day running of the centres. This DIY¹ ethic can be placed in a wider geography of *autonomous* political spaces, which include

¹DIY means 'Do It Yourself'. In socio-political terms the DIY ethic is most associated with the Anarcho-Punk movement, beginning in the late 1970s and found across Europe today (see Ch.2). Anarcho-Punks promote self-sufficiency and collective heuristic learning, amongst other things.

climate camps, blockades and occupations. However, unlike these “Temporary Autonomous Zones” (Bey 1991), social centres strive to achieve a greater degree of longevity in their locations. This thesis is about the relationship between social centres, a political tradition of practice and theory known as anarchism and a struggle between those who understand the value of maintaining a socio-spatial activity known as the urban commons and those whose primary task is to extract value from this experience. These issues are framed within debates about the changing nature of neoliberal urban governance and played out in the specific context of the city of Glasgow. At various points in the thesis I take a reflexive look at my politics and how it has been altered over the last few years of working with the Glasgow Social Centre (GSC). Before offering a brief explanation of the component parts of this thesis I want to begin this process of positioning myself in pages that follow.

I was born in 1974 in Paisley, a working class Scottish town, which like most provincial towns in northern Britain at the time was undergoing a period of long-term decline that continues to this day. The heyday of the great Paisley mills had long since past and Thatcher’s Britain was just around a corner soon to be laden with overflowing dustbins. My parents were working class people. Today some might call them middle-class, due to my father’s move to work in the Middle East during the mid 1990s and the marked increase in wages that came with it. Their political sensibilities, however, remain firmly rooted in working-class struggle. Both now retired, my mother was a mill-worker, a cleaner and market research interviewer; my father, before the opening-up of the Middle East oil industry, a panel beater in the automotive trade and rigger steel-erector in oil and gas. While there was never any shortage of love in the family, money was often short on the ground. My father, the main earner, spent long periods without work and my mother’s wage fell short of

what was needed to raise a family of five. Through their creative use of the benefits system and the informal economy, even during these lean times, my siblings and I wanted for nothing.

Politics was part of growing up. Whether hearing my grandmother shout obscenities at the television anytime a Tory came on to applaud that party's assault on working class people, or watch my uncle hold back tears at the news of another unemployed man's suicide, the anger, the fight and the sadness, *and the necessary life-affirming humour*, of working-class life was always on full view. Everyone, barring one or two uncles who had married into the family (and were Protestants!), was a Labour voter and member of the union. Some were active members of both, while others had taken a more militant stance by joining revolutionary socialist parties. The adults in my family seldom spoke directly to the weans² about politics but it was always there. It was not something remote, not something that happened in another place; it was part of the everyday ebb and flow of our lives. The politics that suited me best was not the aggressive masculine type, usually associated with the politically active industrial worker out on strike or at a union meeting. Rather, it was the domestic type, associated with the domain of women. Certainly not domestic in the sense of being tame, my mother, grandmother and aunts created a political space around their kitchen tables that was sharp, passionate and thorough. Although I wasn't aware of being politicised until later in my life, I think my anarchist sensibilities took seed in these kitchens. The politics on offer was emotional *and* rigorous; it was indignant *and* safe; and, crucially, it was relentless in its attack on all "liberty takers". Not just those found in the managerial wing of the factory or the corridors of Westminster. Anyone who dominated another, motivated by whatever

² Scots word meaning children.

prejudice, was in the wrong and while in the wrong should be given no quarter. At times in my life I have struggled to hold true to this political ethic but it remains my anchor.

Anarchism

Anarchism is a tradition of political practice and theory that aims to build a society based on mutual aid and mass democratic participation characterised by a rejection of all forms of human domination over other humans. Some people who *follow* this tradition (most adherents, including myself, fall far behind the ideal type) extend this rejection of human domination over other humans to include all sentient beings. Putting one's rejection of all forms of domination into practice is no easy task in a society saturated by all manner of exploitations and coercions. Like most politically active beings, those touched by the anarchist tradition argue over what strategies and tactics are most effective in this regard. Contemporary anarchism then is a highly contested collection of ideas and actions. Subsequently social centres can be equally contested places where anarchism(s) and other left-leaning ideas collide. Sometimes this collision acts as a catalyst enabling new forms of progressive socio-political practice or simply a better understanding of differing opinions and, as such, greater degrees of respect between participants. Sometimes this collision does no more than further exacerbate existing antagonisms. Landstricher (2004) captures the essence of anarchism's conflicted character in the following quote:

Anarchist intervention is a tightrope between living our own struggle in our daily lives and finding the ways to connect this struggle with all the exploited, most of whom do not share our conscious perspectives, a connection that is necessary if we are to move in the direction of social

insurrection and revolution. A misstep in one direction turns our struggle in on itself, transforming it into an individual radical hedonism without any social relevance. A misstep in the other direction turns it into just another political party (whatever name one might give it to hide this fact) vying for control of struggle. This is why we have to keep in mind that we are not seeking followers or adherents, but accomplices in the crime of freedom (Landstricher 2004: 5).

As Landstricher suggests, anarchist tensions can be found somewhere between the wish to ‘spread the word’ against the dogmatic directives of the pontificator; somewhere between the freedom of the individual against the power of the collective in whatever form this might take (e.g. the party, the state, social centre group etc); and somewhere between the wish to open-up one’s self to *the other* against the knowledge that in doing so you run the risk of weakening the walls of your fortified identity. These tensions and their implications for anarchist practice in the city are a key thread running through the thesis.

It should be noted that political activists who do not follow the anarchist tradition use social centres. For example, some centres, particularly on the European continent, are communist or social democratic in political character, while others nurture a more hybrid political identity (Piazza 2013). But in Glasgow at least, anarchism has been the driving political tradition behind social centre activism. Putting differences and attendant tensions aside for now, there are key principles that individuals and groups, who take anarchism seriously, follow. These are Anti-Authoritarianism, Decentralization, Mutual Aid and Prefiguration. What follows is a brief introduction to each.

Anti-Authoritarianism

Those of us whose lives are imbued with anti-authoritarian rationale are not against all forms of authority. As an anti-authoritarian I question the legitimacy of an

authority before freely accepting its directives. Evaluating the legitimacy of an authority includes assessing, as best I can, the authority's knowledge of the subject matter; the strategies employed by that authority by way of promoting its dictates; and the authority's record in terms of its treatment of those who respect its dictates and those who do not. I have heard of anarchism referred to as "the philosophy of the sceptic". While maintaining a healthy scepticism of authority is not particular to anarchism, it is a key principle – maybe even the first principle – required for nurturing an anarchist-inflected view of the world.

Decentralization

The principle of decentralization encapsulates anarchism's hostility towards the state. The state is an inherently centralized organizational system. There may be times when its bureaucratic apparatus and military hardware are in the hands of more progressive leaders than 'the last lot' but this still sees a great deal of power in the hands of a minority working to a very particular culture of rules and protocols. My point here is three-fold. Firstly, the organizational particularities of this centre of power too often conflict with the plurality of contemporary life. Secondly, easily corrupted individuals and groups too easily abuse this power. Lastly, the states remit to govern diminishes the ability of non-state actors to substantively participate in the decision-making process. Achieving equality of participation in the decision-making process is a key strategy in anarchist politics. For followers of the anarchist tradition the first step towards equality of participation is the decentralization of the decision-making process.

Mutual Aid

Mutual Aid should be understood as a form of *gift giving*. We gift others our knowledge, our time and our labour. In gifting our skills and knowledge to those around us, practitioners are equalizing the process of participation. This creates a horizontal mode of engagement that frees power from the ossifying constraints of vertical modes of engagement (employer/employee, leader/followers, ruler/ruled) characteristic of contemporary life. Mutual Aid should not be mistaken as a practice that emerges from a misplaced belief in the innate kindness of human beings. Anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), one of the first proponents of Mutual Aid, saw both virtue and vice playing a role in the path of human development. Today's anarchists are similarly realistic about the paths society may or may not take. To this end, mutual aid is best viewed as an *ethics of practice* and in it's doing we self-police our potential to dominate by concentrating on the needs of others.

Prefiguration

Of prefiguration Andrej Grubacic writes: “[This] means building the facts of the future in the present; not after the revolution but in the shell of the existing social order” (2013: 187). Anarchism is a distinct socialist tradition but crucially it must also be understood as an ethics of practice that requires the means of political action to be consistent with the ends. In a sense, in practicing the anarchist tradition we are collapsing the distance between the means and the ends. This is the purpose of a social centre. We want to live in a society where those most effected by certain decisions play a substantive role in the decision-making process so we practice participatory and direct forms of democracy when making decisions about the trajectory of the centre; we want to live in a society free of prejudice, so we open the centre up to all who similarly wish to be free of prejudice; we want to live in a more

equal society, so we share what we have with our fellow social centre participants. In short, an anarchist prefigurative politics is concerned with nurturing counter-hegemonic values in the here and now.

Struggle

As suggested above the revolutionary targets of traditional anarchism (capital and the state) remain important areas of concern for contemporary anarchism and subsequently social centre activists. However, practices of domination exist outside and in spite of central state dictates and the exploitations of capital. Racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, ableism, classism: the eradication of one form of prejudice should not be seen as more pressing than the eradication of another. This non-partisan rejection of all forms of domination is known as ‘total struggle’.

On the ground, the preferred³ form of struggle for activists continuing the anarchist tradition is direct action. Direct action, or rather what Ben Franks (2006) terms ‘ideal type’ anarchist direct action, should be prefigurative, in that the means employed must have some characteristics of the desired ends. Furthermore it must be carried out by the subjugated. Franks offers the following example. Homeless people squatting an empty property can potentially serve a dual purpose. This action temporarily alleviates their situation as people without accommodation. Secondly, if organised in an appropriate manner, it can raise awareness of their plight and the wider plight of homeless people confronted with inadequate social housing. Alternatively, constitutional action would involve lobbying members of parliament to

³ *In my experience anarchist influenced activists will participate in other forms of struggle, usually in solidarity with various subjugated groups who do not follow the anarchist tradition. This might include attending a demonstration, a political march or signing a particular petition.*

raise the matter of inadequate social housing in order to effect change somewhere down the line. From Frank's perspective, this is not direct action because it does nothing in a "synecdochic" sense and the primary agents of change are politicians, not homeless people (ibid). Other forms of direct action include: work-ins; prisoners leading strikes against their conditions and blockades. Importantly, direct action does not have to be carried out by hardened anarchist leaning activists. It involves multiple forms of subversive action – in the sense that they are not in keeping with formal political mechanisms – enough for all.

Building on the notion of autonomy Chatterton and Pickerill (2006: 730) describe "autonomous geographies" as spaces where people seek to constitute "non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation". This dual approach is a crucial component in social centre activism and anarchism more generally. On the ground it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the resistance and creation. Consider an occupation of an empty property by anarchist inspired activists. Motivated by a will to *resist* the normalization of private ownership, particularly in the form of monopoly landlords who have increased rents in a particular area, activists have spent a considerable amount of time organising and executing the occupation. This is in many respects an antagonistic form of resistance that shows no respect for the property rights of the owner. However, to enter into a well-organized occupation is to see participants involved in the *creation* of new systems of organization and attendant values that, while having a practical purpose, are also designed to question the legitimacy of monopoly landlordism and the laws that protect private property. These include, amongst other things, regular general assemblies of participants, an equal division of labour duties (e.g. cleaning, cooking,

shopping etc) and a series of outreach events, ensuring that the surrounding community understand the nature of the action. To spend time in such a space is to witness experiments in decision-making practices that are alternative to the command and control management structures of the corporate sphere and the representative politics associated with liberal democratic states. These emerging practices promote a culture of *openness* and *mutuality* through participatory democratic processes. This open, mutually reinforcing and participatory approach to political process and social organisation must be understood as simultaneously an act of resistance and creativity. It should be noted that many social centres have evolved out of temporary occupations of this kind.

Glasgow's Commons

When we speak of the commons we are usually referring to a piece of land that is not owned: meaning not in private or public ownership. In the UK the idea of the commons conjures up images of the rural idyll: a place where villagers share the common resource of the village green as a grazing space for livestock from their smallholdings or a place to wash and dry the family linen or maybe just a place to relax in commune with others. This romantic notion of a shared resource still holds true in the imaginations of many Glaswegians when they speak of the city as a 'dear green place'⁴. For example, Glasgow Green, the historical site of cultural and political

⁴ *The name Glasgow is a Gaelic word meaning 'Dear Green Place'. Today the city boasts over 90 parks and open spaces. This, according the Glasgow City Council, is the highest number of green spaces for any other city of similar size (<http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=3324>). It should be noted that a recent UK wide investigation by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) claimed council investment have slipped badly, leaving parks facing a funding crisis. According to the Scottish Community Alliance, "New business models" are being touted by some councils as the solution to the funding deficit (www.localpeopleleading.co.uk).*

assembly in the city is commonly referred to as “common land” (historical records tell us that it was once a site for common grazing and laundry washing).

The legal status of Glasgow’s commons today falls far short of these familiar idyllic imaginings. In Scottish law all assets that were once gifted to the territorial administration known as the Burgh – this includes, land, buildings and artefacts – are deemed common assets or goods. The 1973 Local Government (Scotland) Act abolished the Burgh system. This meant that the stewardship of all assets gifted to the Burgh was transferred over to district and regional councils. Further centralisation of municipal government was enacted in the 1994 Local Government (Scotland) Act, which saw regional councils abolished in favour of the now entirely unitary local authorities. These authorities are the legal stewards of the common assets of the old Burghs that fall within these new territorial boundaries. As stewards the local authority can, in legal terms, *appropriate*, *alienate* and *dispose* of common assets. To *appropriate* means that a local authority can use common good for another function where this does not involve a transfer out of its ownership. To *alienate* means to lease out. And to *dispose* means a transfer out of the hands of the local authority whether by means of sale, long-term lease or something that gives a third party rights of occupation (Blair 2009). Unsurprisingly, in times of economic crisis, common assets, like many public assets, are frequently alienated or disposed of.

The collective term for these extractive processes is *enclosure*. To enclose is to separate something – a resource, a service, a building or maybe a parcel of land – from that to which it was once a part of. It is to particularize, or more appropriately, privatize a commonality, placing it within the category of *property*. Property has long been the enemy of the commons. Running throughout the accepted logic of property is the need to expel or reconfigure, what Lee and Webster call the ‘awkward’

geometries of the commons: “awkward geometries” they write “lead to unpropitious geographies” (Lee and Webster 2006: 34). Here we see straight lines, walls and barbed wire fences legitimizing the dominant spatial narrative of private ownership: in effect creating ‘favourable’ and, for centralised management structures, more easily managed spaces.

For some, the commons continues to be viewed as “wasteful relics of the past that impeded modern progress” (Callander 2006: 78). This view, supposedly premised on a sound economic logic, is deeply political – invoking a variety of prejudices and inequalities. For example, the process of ‘rationalizing’ the ‘irregularities’ of the commons has always run concomitant with racist and sexist practices. Discussing colonial dispossession, Blomley (2006) writes: “The Americas, of course, were also imagined as female potentiality, awaiting masculine domination” (Blomley 2006: 145). Similarly, we see classism inherent in the dominant spatial narrative of property. Like the ‘wild lands’ of the native, the scheme, the estate and the banlieue must be tamed. These places do not conform to the level of fixity and stasis required in the practice of enclosure. They are problem spaces, needing improvement. As I will show in the following chapters, city officials in Glasgow have too often adopted this attitude, imposing their particular brand of neoliberal problem solving on the city and its inhabitants.

The composition and habits of the private property model favour a particular class and continue to exclude alternative understandings of property and claims to space and place. Yet despite the formidable forces that sustain this model – which include the landed aristocracy, the judiciary, the corporate and financial elite and consecutive ruling parties – alternative spatial narratives and organizational practices persist. The excluded, the dispossessed and the poor continue to enact legitimate

property interests in, and claims to, all manner of spaces: including streets, community centres, parks and much more. “This property interest” Blomley writes “is not one of alienation or transfer. It cannot be monetarized but is, rather, predicated on use, occupation, domicile and inherent need” (Blomley 2008: 316).

The commons, as ‘ideal type’ is both a user and producer space. That is the users and producers are one in the same. For example individuals and groups in need of particular services have long used disused land in the UK as food growing sites and recreational spaces. Similarly, derelict housing has been reclaimed by squatters and housing Co-operatives. The added dimension of *production* moves our understanding of the commons into more politically radical ground than the idea of a commons administered and managed by the state or any other external authority. Throughout his working life, anarchist Colin Ward argued that when people produce their own places (with all the complexities and contestations this inevitably involves) they affectively create their own histories and futures, with which they have a moral, material and psychological claim to (Ward 1976). For Ward the commons can be fertile ground for community self-valorisation and self-determination, putting people right at the heart of problem solving and planning. In this sense we see the commons as a process: what historian Peter Linebaugh, calls *commoning*. In creating a verb for the commons Linebaugh is describing a set of relationships between people, resources and organisational processes. He writes, “I want to portray it as an activity, not just an idea or a material resource” (Linebaugh 2008). The struggle for Glasgow’s commons is a struggle against forces – political and economic – that separate inhabitants from the management of the city’s resources. It is also a struggle against a liberal individualist ideology that dogmatically rejects our lives as social and political beings.

With these insights in mind, the core arguments made in this thesis are, firstly,

neoliberalism must be understood within a historical narrative that recognises that governance practices of the state before neoliberalism were top-down in character. This hierarchical model enabled the near saturation of the state complex with the logic of the market because it created and continues to sustain distance between the plurality of society and places of substantive decision-making powers. In other words, neoliberal spaces and processes exclude dissenting voices. Secondly, this thesis offers a deeper engagement with the anarchist tradition, as a counter to urban neoliberalization, than other geographical accounts of the subject. Prefiguring the key anarchist principles of anti-authoritarianism, decentralization and mutual aid in the here and now offers urban inhabitants a way out of the neoliberal urban condition. That being said, prefiguring anarchist politics is not unproblematic. As I will show in this thesis a range of external pressures negatively impact a collectives' ability to produce spaces and attendant values of their own. In addition, groups can and do present a range of inconsistencies and contradictions in their *prefigurations*. Even with these pressures the will to produce common spaces in the city persists. What this thesis shows is that a city constructed in line with the logic of economic growth, centralised government and top-down management structures is not the only city out there. There are different ways of knowing and engaging with the city. Citizen panels, neighbourhood assemblies, worker co-ops, consumer and producer councils, participatory budgeting, independent media and, off course, social centres – these are all examples of our imperfect experiments in creating a different urban experience.

Outline of Chapters

When I began this research the GSC had a home. As such my initial research questions focused upon the internalities of social centre life: Who was using the

space? What decision-making practices were they employing? What does the place look like? Approximately four to six weeks after my first visit the group was without a home and spent the next two years organising events in various locations in and around the city, always in search of a space within which to settle. This changed the nature of my research. Internalities remained important but they were no longer centred upon a particular place. The main focus of my attention became the social centre collective and the problems they faced in sustaining a social centre presence in multiple places in and around the city. The leading change in the direction of my work concerned the city itself. In order to understand a place one must develop an understanding of the places that surround it. Therefore, an analysis of contemporary Glasgow was always part of my research design. However, due to the nomadic life of the GSC, the city played a far greater role in this story than I had initially envisaged it would.

Over the two-year period from 2010 till 2012 my fellow activists and I visited all manner of urban spaces. During this time I developed a more nuanced understanding of the city. Abstract terms like ‘neoliberalism’, ‘socialism’, ‘the state’ and ‘power’ became attached to the very contours of the city’s streets, the languages of its inhabitants, the ebb and flow of city life. Sadly, to be as close to Glasgow, to see as much of Glasgow as I have, is to witness an unacceptable level of inequality. It is not within the remit of this thesis to trace the origins of Glasgow’s many inequalities but an investigation of a socio-economic ideology called neoliberalism is paramount if we are to understand why these inequalities persist. Furthermore, gaining some purchase on neoliberalism and its relationship to Glasgow helps us better understand the many problems faced by the GSC in their attempts to settle. Neoliberal practices on the ground, I believe, have established inequality as a given, an everyday

convention in the city that hinders not only the ability of some to live a decent life but also our capacity as a society to imagine that things can change.

Chapter 1 engages with the work of urban theorists writing about the neoliberalization process. I begin the chapter by asking the question, what distinguishes neoliberalism from other socio-economic programmes? My answer sets up a key argument made in the chapter and throughout the thesis. Neoliberalism is often associated with the notion of ‘market-orientated’ reform. I argue that it is better understood as ‘state-led market-orientated’ reform. I argue that for many urbanites today, new development and economic growth are conflated with the provision of services and facilities to the urban population. This comingling and neutralization of once distinct political ideas about how to govern a city could not have taken place without the top-down command and control structures of the managerial state approach being in place. In support of this position I detail a range of neoliberal urban regeneration tactics that have the effect of depoliticizing political process as a discursive and contested activity and sanitizing urban space as a social experience.

Chapter 2 reviews the writings of an eclectic group of theorists and practitioners grappling with the idea of autonomous political spaces and anarchist theory more generally. The chapter presents a genealogy of social centre activism in Europe and in doing so charts a history of struggle that connects people, places and events across a historical period beginning in the mid 19th Century until the present day and a geographical expanse that stretches across Europe⁵. The chapter then looks more closely at anarchism as “an ethics of practice” (Heckert 2005), which offers a ‘way out’ of the neoliberal city. Concentrating on key tensions inherent in the anarchist

⁵ *The anarchist tradition can be found across all of the Earths continents; subsequently social centres or similar spaces are also in use in various locations throughout the world. This reflects on the European social centre tradition.*

tradition (mentioned above in relation to Landstricher's (2004) quote) I consider anarchist notions of freedom – which, paradoxically, inextricably ties the individual to the group; on anarchist spatial practices, which, borrowing from a discourse of systems theory, are premised on openness (e.g. spaces that are open to the plurality of life); and finally on the practice of prefiguration, which I argue is the guiding strategy underlying social centre activism. Informed by theoretical discussions made in this chapter and its predecessor, the final section of Chapter 2 sketches out key areas of empirical and theoretical concern that inform the rest of my thesis.

Chapter 3 takes a methodological turn. Here I outline the 'nuts and bolts' of my empirical work. In summary, the methods I employed throughout the research adhere to a range of activities associated with what has been called *critical ethnography* (Thomas 1993, Smith 2002, Chari and Donner 2010). Ethnography proper uses a mixed method approach usually involving qualitative methods such as participant observation, discourse analysis, and semi or un-structured interviews but it can also be supplemented with archival work and even statistics (Bryman 2008). Crucially these methods when employed as constituent parts of ethnography are not simply tools with which to mine information. For Schostak (2006: 1) they are as much about "seeing a world – mine, yours, ours, theirs – as about hearing accounts, opinions, arguments, reasons, declarations". The application of ethnographic techniques has allowed me to not only see other Glasgow(s) but also, particularly through writing, give voice to these alternative urban realities. Borrowing from Ranciere's (2004) theory of the Police Order, politics begins with voicing, a "wrongness" in the "order of the sensible". This research has been a profoundly political experience because it involves challenging accepted understandings of city life and questioning future visions of Glasgow that are based on a particular way of

knowing the city: That is, as a profit making concern, a place from which to extract wealth.

Empirics primarily guide the next three chapters of the thesis. Using activist quotes, Chapter 4 uncovers what social centre participants understand the urban problematic to be. This chapter aims to ground neoliberalism in the very fabric of city life, therefore, once again, Glasgow plays a prominent part in the chapter's narrative. The theoretical arguments and neoliberal spatial practices considered in Chapter 1 are discussed in relation to actually existing spaces in Glasgow. My point here is to uncover and analyse the rationale behind social centre activism as a response to neoliberal urbanization. This response, as we shall see, constitutes the emergence of a language of the commons among participants; a way of thinking about the city that nurtures, an always present but undervalued, common way of *being* in the city. The virtues of commoning – which include personal responsibility, a willingness to listen to others and a tacit acknowledgement that problems posed by the neoliberal city are best faced together than alone – are discussed throughout the chapter. It should be noted that a particular line of questioning in the interview process guides Chapter 4. Questions here centre upon reasons for first participating in the GSC (i.e. “Why did you become involved with the group? What motivated your decision to participate?”). As such there is an imaginative quality to those responses that speak to the idea of the commons. This was intentional on my part. I wanted to get a sense of how initial imaginings measured with the actual reality of participating in the social centre.

Chapter 5 engages with the messy reality of the social centre experience. In other words, if the previous chapter's focus was on points of commonality regarding what the urban problematic looks like and how activists *imagine* an alternative city, this chapter explores the complex and contested nature of realizing an alternative in

the here and now. A key contribution made by the chapter towards the thesis is its emphasis on difference within the social centre and the wider anarchist movement. Attempting to gain some purchase on difference within the radical left is crucial because the main question posed by autonomy as a political idea is how do we organize difference while maintaining an egalitarian ethos? For those who follow the anarchist tradition the answer lies somewhere within the democratic process. As such, Chapter 5 details the form of democratic engagement favoured by GSC activists. Known as Participatory Democracy it is no exaggeration to say that social centre activists and anarchist groups more generally judge themselves and are judged by others on the organizational quality of their events, debates and meetings. By way of contributing to a vast range of literatures on Participatory Democracy, this chapter emphasizes the importance of *place making* as an interdependent relationship between people, process and space, in practicing democracy.

The final chapter of the thesis discusses a range of external structural pressures that work upon social centre activists. The first of these relates to the general socio-economic position of participants. Most GSC participants fall under the recently named category the *precarious class* – whom the Comité Invisible (2007) describe as the group “that has never counted on a pension or a right to work, let alone rights *at work*”. For the most part a condition of precarity should be understood pejoratively⁶. As evidenced in this chapter the “drifting” nature of the precarious worker can hinder an activists ability to commit to a particular project and, importantly for social centre activism, place. On the other hand, some commentators have argued that precarity produces a “new dangerous class” (Standing 2011) that

⁶ *The economic uncertainty that characterises precarity can lead to low self-esteem and depression (Santin et al 2009, Lewchuck 2008).*

will challenge the dominant neoliberal condition. For Ferrell (2012) – and to this we could add Negri and Hardt (2005) who in their book ‘Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire’ claim precarity is producing a more “intelligent” worker – in the precariat we find the possibility of revolutionary change. I am unconvinced by this argument. It feels like a rehash of romantic Marxist notions of the heroic proletariat. There is nothing in the day-to-day life of the precariat per se that prefigures a more equal society. There is nothing progressively transformative in living a precarious existence. That being said, from such an existence an anti-authoritarian ethic begins to emerge simply by the fact that dominant forms of authority (capital and the state) have created the conditions of precarity. This chapter, in part, considers the productive ways in which both aspects of the precarious condition introduced above impact upon social centre activism.

Chapter 6 then considers activists’ direct engagements with the apparatus of neoliberal governance – in the form of local government-planning department. For reasons that will become clear in the chapter, social centre activists in Glasgow had since Printworks (the first social centre in Glasgow), rented public owned properties in the city. Recent cuts in the public sector, blamed by local and central government on the global financial crisis in 2008, have seen public properties in Glasgow sold en masse to the private sector. This has resulted in social centre activists as well as charities, NGO’s and other not-for-profit organisations pushed into the private rent sector. This section of the chapter looks at social centre activist’s dealings with a planning department working to the logic of neoliberal governance. The language and protocol of the planning complex presents us with a very different Glasgow to that experienced by the social centre activist. In the former, post-political nomenclature – which speaks of a “dynamic, economically competitive” city (Glasgow City Council

Local Development Plan 2012) – coexists alongside a series of bureaucratic dictates, producing a shining example of neoliberal urban governance. The latter, as I have introduced above, sees debilitating inequality – political, social and economic – hinder the potential of Glasgow’s inhabitants to realize a city that practices common ways of living together.

A Very Brief Introduction to the Glasgow Social Centre (GSC)

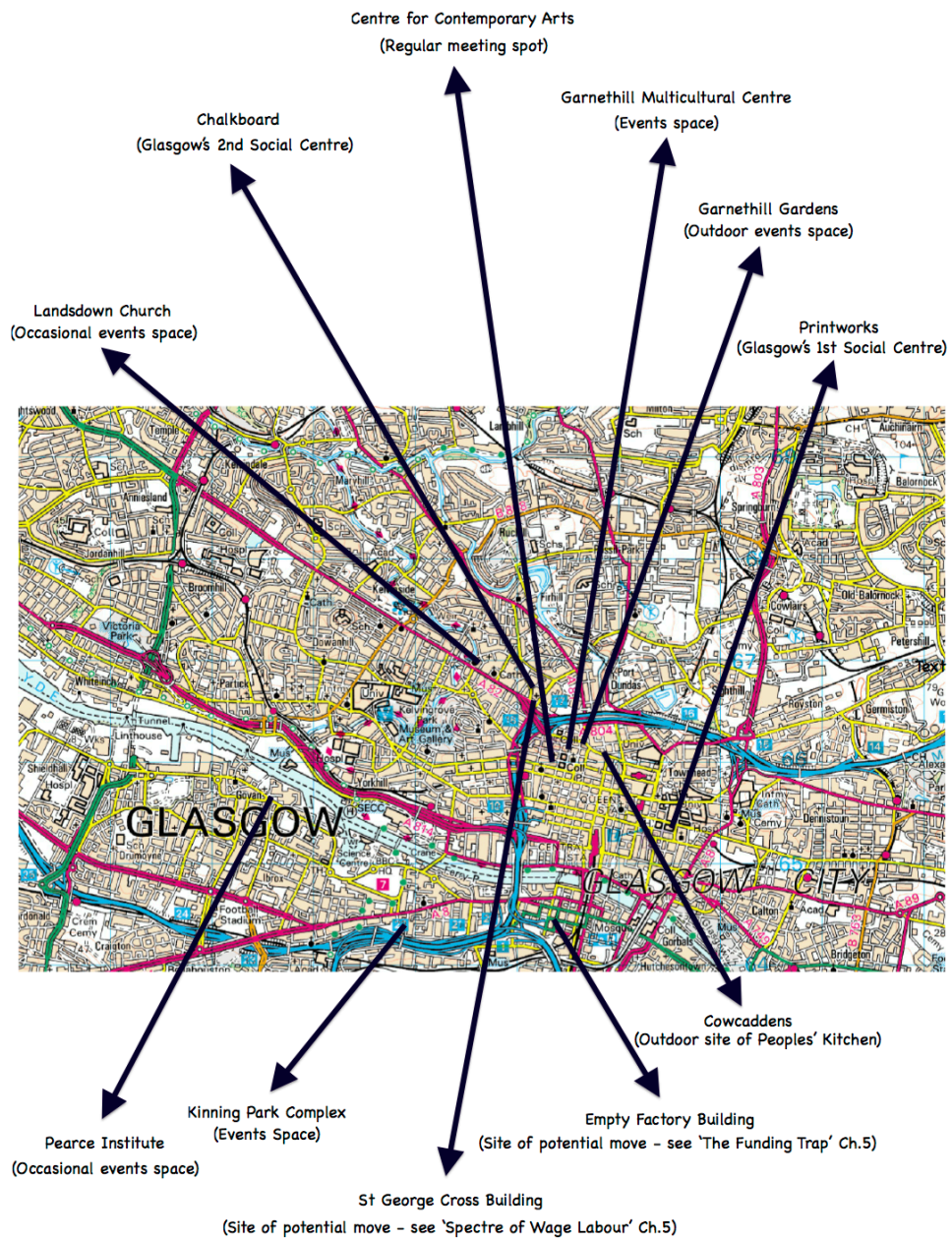
Of autonomous political spaces Wilson writes: “One of the driving forces behind autonomous politics is a desire to disengage from existing systems and institutions, therefore examining the physical places that exist for this exodus to occur is important” (Wilson 2013: 728). This thesis is, in part, an examination of social centre *places* in Glasgow. Social centres have existed in various locations within the city over the last 15 years. The first of these was known as the Printworks, which opened on Mayday 2004 and could be found in the city’s Merchant City. This centre lasted only five months. After Printworks, came the Maryhill Chalkboard, opened in October 2005 and situated in the city’s Northwest. Chalkboard was operational for about a year. Then came the Glasgow Social Centre (GSC) in July 2009. This thesis, although impacted upon by the knowledge of activists involved in the Printworks and Chalkboard centres, is primarily concerned with GSC activities.

Territorial autonomy can be temporary and shifting, leaving it open to a diversity of arrangements and models, acknowledging the realities of compromise and contingency (Wilson 2013: 728).

Wilson’s quote reminds me of the always precarious existence of the GSC. When I first began working with the GSC in the summer of 2009, the group had just begun its

life in the basement of the African Caribbean Centre in the Trongate area of the city. This subterranean residency lasted only six months and for the next two years until its dissolution in the autumn of 2012 the group lived a nomadic existence bringing their particular brand of autonomous politics to various locations in and around Glasgow (see map 1, p.27). The itinerant life of the GSC made opening up to a “diversity of arrangements and models” (ibid) a necessity for the group. As such “compromise and contingency” characterized much of our work. As we shall see in the pages that follow, this need to *negotiate* endeared us to some of our fellow autonomous activists and in the eyes of others diminished our radical potential as a transformative force.

After working with the group for the best part of three years, experiencing warts and all, I am convinced that our inability to find a place within which to lay down some roots was hindered not by our inconsistencies as a group but rather by the deepening apparatus of neoliberal governance of the city. As stated above the GSC has not been the only group to fall foul of the increasing commoditization of our urban lives. Charities, NGO’s and to this we can add homeless people, the poor, the unemployed and others continue to be faced with neoliberal urbanism’s walls. This undoubtedly creates a range of conflictual knowledges about Glasgow: It also speaks to struggles over different ways of knowing and engaging with the city. This thesis bears witness to the knowledges generated by a group of autonomous activists who challenged the dominant system through their imperfect experiments in commoning. Motivated by a mix of anger and frustration at the lack of a platform from which our voices might be heard and a genuine need-to-understand others, a diverse collection of activists, anarchists, feminists and “spontaneous whatever-beings” (source unknown) from Glasgow embarked on a project called the Glasgow Social Centre. I was one of them and this is what I learned.



Glasgow Social Centre Spaces

Map 1

Chapter 1

The Neoliberalization of the Urban Environment

Introduction

In the geography textbooks of my undergraduate years, neoliberalism was connected to the macro process of globalization. Both terms were often used in conjunction with one another. Depending on the tone of the writing in the book and the political disposition of the reader, Neoliberal Globalisation was either seen as a fixative for ‘failed states’ across the globe (what Francis Fukuyama (2004) called a process of state building) or an authoritarian and exploitative imposition from above. It was a term most associated with the workings of the supranational organizations the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Struggling states were offered financial assistance from the IMF, for example, on condition of implementation of certain policies. These policies were centred upon market orientated reforms and involved deregulation, privatization and export-led growth. Collectively known as a structural adjustment programme (SAP), such reforms, it was argued by neoliberal protagonists, would increase economic competitiveness at home, which in turn would make a country a more robust competitor in the global market economy.

It was not until later in my undergraduate life that I began to see neoliberal reform as more than a *problem* for people in the developing world. At some point the proverbial penny dropped and I realised that structural adjustments were taking place in the UK and those directing such ‘adjustments’ were much closer to home than

Washington DC (the headquarters of both the IMF and World Bank). The market-orientated logic of, what for a young working class man from an old industrial city were near mystical organisations, had saturated the politics of central and local government here in the UK. I, like many before me and many since, had made the mistake of thinking neoliberal globalization was something that happened to geographically distant others. The reality – which was etched into the crumbling walls of the boarded up building that was once the local public swimming baths; that stood arrogantly in the form of a shopping mall on a site that was once a wild urban green space; that had me working in a call centre for a wage barely beyond the minimum requirements of decent life with no protection from the whims of my employers – was that neoliberalization was having a profound, adverse and direct effect on my life and the lives of many of those around me.

In this chapter I engage with the work of theorists working on the neoliberalization process in the developed, or what used to be called, the First World. More specifically I look to those writing about *urban* neoliberalization, paying particular attention to urban geographers and other urban orientated academics researching the effects of neoliberalization in our cities and towns. I begin the chapter by asking the question, what is different about neoliberalism? My answer sets up a key argument made in the chapter: that is, neoliberalism is often associated with the notion of ‘market-orientated’ reform. I argue that it is better understood as ‘state-led market-orientated’ reform. Through engagement with post-political theory and key neoliberal urban regeneration tactics, I then show how such reforms are designed to depoliticize both political process as a discursive and contested experience and urban space as a social experience. I argue that for many urbanites today, new development and employment growth are conflated with the provision of services and facilities to

the urban population. This comingling and neutralisation of once distinct political ideas about how to govern a city could not have taken place without the top-down command and control structures of the managerial state approach being in place. The implications of this relationship for the doing of urban politics are profound. Mainstream politics in the UK has suffered from a lack of competition, with all three main parties offering slight variations of the neoliberal project. Voter numbers at the last three general elections have struggled to reach 35%. In Scotland turnout is slightly higher at local elections but the financial clout of the four main parties (with the addition of the Scottish National Party) ensures these big players crowd-out any substantive opposition to neoliberalism from the mainstream political arena⁷. With the force of capital and state behind them it is both remarkable and inspiring that real opposition continues to struggle. In Glasgow, on any given week, there are numerous demonstrations, protests and political talks taking place. Walk down Buchanan Street (main city centre street) on a Saturday and you will find, standing firm against a backdrop of vodaphone, RBS, GAP and Nike shop fronts, numerous committed, compassionate and angry activists surrounding Anarchist, Communist, Socialist, Freedom for Palestine and Anti-ATOS stalls. The literature I engage with throughout, although providing thoughtful analysis of neoliberal practice can tend to undermine the role of agency and resistance in shaping the processes discussed below. By way of addressing this I conclude the chapter with a discussion of actually existing alternatives to neoliberal orthodoxy. Here I argue that even with the full force of state and capital behind them, neoliberal protagonists must always respond to their detractors. The city then, contra attempts to depoliticize its spaces and processes, remains a highly contested place.

⁷ *The SNP has altered its message over the last two years. In order to sway traditional labour voters for the independence referendum the party have moved from promoting yet more variations of neoliberal influenced policies to becoming a consummate left-leaning social democratic party.*

What is Different about Neoliberalism?

If the 1940s represented the moment of the taming of the beast, and if in the 1950s the lion actually lay down with the lamb, then the 1960s was a period when this union was lustily and publically celebrated. It is only now, after the difficult birth of the 1970s, that the 1980s have revealed the true fruits of this misalliance: a creature to baffle our most experienced political teratologists, those experts in deformities and monstrosities. As we witness the Second Coming of political economy in our time, we may recall Yeats' 'The Second Coming', and with him wonder:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

(Blackwell and Seabrook 1985: 111)

Capitalism has long been appropriating the commons⁸. Its existence relies upon the continued appropriation of common resources. All non-capitalist spheres must fall under the imperatives of capital accumulation. For capitalists this is a matter of creating new markets to generate value (Harvey 2008). Today, as before, we see collective forms of ownership – land, buildings, services etc – appropriated in the pursuit of profit maximisation and private wealth (Cumbers 2012). How then might we answer the question alluded to in the above quote – what is different about our contemporary state of affairs? In this chapter I attempt to answer this question. I argue that capital's domination today marks the apogee of a complementary relationship between its protagonists and the political authority of the state. The name given to this contemporary comingling of free market and state forces is neoliberalism. To more fully elucidate my argument I begin by drawing out the main tenets of liberal theory, which as we shall see conflict with the political project of neoliberalisation.

⁸ While a 'true' commons is a resource or collection of resources managed collectively by those who use it and without ownership, I use the term here to mean both this and public goods. The latter is owned and managed by the state (on the public's behalf). Although, as I hope to show in this chapter, not all 'publics' benefit from said management.

The Persistence of Liberalism

In classical liberal theory only a competitive free market is capable of *nurturing* the diffuse powers of a modern industrial society. By ‘diffuse powers’ what I am referring to here are the effective capacities associated with the free exercise of individual self-interest: only the full expression of this, according to classical liberalism, can lead to the optimal collective good. The role of the state here is to defend this freedom. Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz explain:

The key concept of classical liberalism was ‘individualism’ [...] The sovereign individual in civil society, with his right to property and his liberties of action and movement, was the central ideological figure. Individual liberty was determined by the workings of the free market, sanctioned and protected by the rule of law. The role of the state was to oversee the free play of the market and thereby serve as the defender of individual liberties: it should assume the role of ‘night watchman’, intervening in the market economy as little as possible (Halls and Schwarz 1988: 99).

By the late 19th Century the hegemony or social authority of this relationship between individual liberty, the market and the state was in crisis. Crisis, for Hall and Schwarz, came in the form of collectivism. That is, a process which saw the state as “representing particular collective interests, and thereby required to intervene positively in civil society on behalf of these, rather than holding the ring within which individual interests compete” (ibid: 105). Arguably, the primary motivation for the rise of collective interests in the arena of British politics came from below: most notably from the organized labour movement and the women’s movement (ibid). While these movements from below were centred upon calls for the expansion of democratic participation, not all collective interests by the end of the 19th Century

were as progressive. Hall and Schwarz tell us that competing with democratically orientated movements from below for control of the expanding apparatus of the state were new varieties of imperialism, liberalism and an elitist form of socialism known as Fabianism⁹. Nevertheless, whilst collectivist interests at this time were certainly not premised on shared objectives, the overall effect they had on the British socio-political landscape was profound: homo economicus had been knocked of his perch, so to speak.

It followed that the state should forsake its night watchman role and become more actively interventionist, regulating more directly the civic and private spheres of individual decision. This tendency, explicitly counterposed as it was to the liberal conception of the state, gathered pace [...] supported by a diverse and heterogeneous set of social forces. Some welcomed this drift to collectivism. To others, who feared the erosion of individual liberties, it was the cause for deep despair (ibid 105).

The crisis of liberalism during the aforementioned period, it could be argued, remains unresolved. The British political system throughout the 20th century has been defined by constant struggle between the competing theories of social rights and individual ‘liberties’. Homo economicus, although certainly taking a hit, never went away. By the mid 20th century his¹⁰ supporters (the neoliberals) had adopted a more pragmatic position when considering the role of the state in reasserting his dominance.

Theoretically, neoliberalism portrays itself as a political philosophy promoting limited state intervention in social and economic life. It opposes both the centralizing

⁹ I use the term elite here for two reasons. Firstly the early protagonists of Fabianism – Beatrice and Sydney Web, H.G Wells, George Benard Shaw amongst others – hailed from the leftist intelligentsia of the day. Secondly, from the outset Fabian socialism was conceived of as a form social democratic government from above. For example, other than a fleeting dismissal of Proudhon’s (1840) thesis ‘Property is Theft’, Shaw’s (1930) pamphlet titled ‘Socialism and Fabianism’ makes no reference to any form of socialism from below.

¹⁰ In both classical and neo versions of liberalism the freedoms accrued through property ownership are most commonly enjoyed by men. While blame for this gender imbalance cannot be laid squarely at the foot of liberalism, as a practiced political philosophy it has done little in addressing this imbalance.

practices of those economies associated with the Marxist tradition as well as those capitalist economies that practiced long-term economic planning strategies linked with, most notably, Keynesian demand management strategies – ideas that underpinned the post WWII social democratic compact between corporate and union power (Cumbers 2012). One of neoliberalism’s key protagonists, political philosopher Friedrich von Hayek (1899-1992) argued the state was incapable of managing the complex relationships between knowledge production, consumer wants and economic decision-making that characterises advanced industrial society. Hayek, Cumbers (2012: 64) writes, “disputed the ability of socialist planners to effectively organize an economy because of the limits to their knowledge about the everyday practices and conditions of economic life”. Attempts to *plan* the economy were equivalent to *control* over the economy. For Hayek, this was seen pejoratively as social engineering:

This application of the engineering technique to the whole of society requires ... that the director possesses the same complete knowledge of the whole society that the engineer possesses of his limited world. Central economic planning is nothing but such an application of engineering principles to the whole of society based on the assumption that such a complete concentration of all relevant knowledge is possible (Hayek 1942-44: 173, cited in Cumbers 2012: 187).

Cumbers writes, “Hayek’s basic arguments against socialism and planning are that they inevitably lead to the centralisation of economic power and decision making, and, as a result, the crushing of individual freedoms and even democracy” (Cumbers 2012: 63). Cumbers goes on to point out that neoliberal theory was not without its justifications. ‘First World’ propaganda aside, the failings of actually existing state socialisms in the twentieth century often resulted in tyrannical and authoritarian regimes of government. Additionally, the nationalisation projects of social

democracies, such as here in the UK, did little in addressing the democratic deficit with power remaining in the hands of political and industrial elites (ibid).

In addition to arguing that the centralising tendencies of strategically planned economies were economically impractical¹¹, neoliberal theorists viewed such practices as morally unacceptable. They were seen to constitute an assault on personal freedom, which resulted in increased social homogeneity, which in turn limited entrepreneurial creativity, which in turn ensured society remained subservient to the centralized power of the state. In response to this imposition, neoliberalism attempts to construct a “sphere of freedom”, Rose and Miller (2010: 298) write, “where autonomous agents make their decisions, pursue their preferences and seek to maximise the quality of their lives”. Under these alternative conditions, citizenship – once understood in terms of obligations, solidarities and universality deriving from membership of the citizenry – has been reconfigured in accordance with the entrepreneurial ‘spirit’, “as active agents seeking to maximise their own advantage [...] go freely about their business, making their own decisions and controlling their own destinies” (ibid).

Like the liberals of the 18th and 19th centuries, notions of freedom, for today’s neoliberals are intimately connected to one’s ability to create, buy and sell property. When we think of ‘property’ we are thinking about boundaries, lines of separation or enclosure. To enclose is to isolate something – a resource, a service or maybe a parcel of land – from that to which it was once a part of. It is to particularize, or more appropriately, privatize a commonality. In classical liberal terms, to privatize, is to make common (or waste) land productive! The act of that “which begins the property”

¹¹ *Although it is worth pointing out that neoliberal theorists were wrong on this point. Planned capitalism produced the greatest period of economic growth the world has ever seen – between 1950 and 1973 (see Cumbers 2012).*

(Locke 1988 [1681]: 289) then is synonymous with the act of walling. Liberalism's walls, for Hayek, are the result of self-determination, of struggle and achievement (Hayek 1960). Within the new spaces of liberalism 'ordinary' men might excel, might defeat the predeterminations of blood and birth (ibid). Liberalism, in this sense, is a social leveler, providing opportunity to he who is able enough to self-determine his world. And once he has claimed possession of his land, his domain, his self, he can begin to draw his lines in the sand. Here we see the *art of separation* coming into play, whereby the individual separates himself from the collective. For Hayek and his theoretical allies, past and present, this separation creates the base unit of modern notions of justice: the individual and his property (Walzer 1984).

Putting theory into practice is never a straightforward job. Theories, no matter how nuanced can never match or keep up with the messy and always shifting realities of everyday life. As we shall see in the following section of this chapter operationalizing neoliberal theory in the *real world* throws up a variety of conflicts and inconsistencies between neoliberalism as theory and neoliberalism as practice.

Neoliberalism and its Inconsistencies

Neoliberalism, its birth and formative years, was coextensive with the formation of collectivist ideologies (Hall and Schwarz 1988). For this reason, unlike their liberal forefathers who saw the role of the state as nothing more than a 'night watchmen', the neoliberals were far more pragmatic when utilizing the transformative potential of the state. With regards to Hayek's criticism of the state, this openness to state process is not as contradictory as it seems. Neoliberals, like many other interest groups had to work for control of the state and the social powers this afforded. Let us consider, for

example, the following quote by Lewis Powell (1907-1998), a prominent supporter of neoliberal policy in the US.

The time has come – indeed it is long overdue – for the wisdom, ingenuity and resources of American business to be marshalled against those who would destroy it ... Strength lies in organisation, in careful long-range planning and implementation, in consistency of action over an indefinite period of years, in the scale of financing available only through joint effort, and in the scale of political power available only through united action and national organisations (Lewis Powell, Supreme Court Judge addressing the US Chamber of Commerce 1971, cited in Harvey 2007: 43).

Various thoughts come to mind when reading Powell's words. Firstly, it reminds me of a Margret Thatcher quote: "Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul" (Margaret Thatcher 1981, cited in Harvey 2007: 23). Contra Hayek, both Powell and Thatcher are stating the need for some form of social (and presumably, for Thatcher, spiritual) engineering. Harvey (2007:43) writes that Powell's speech was nothing less than "an assault upon the major institutions – universities, schools, the media, publishing, the courts – in order to change how individuals think about the corporation, the law, culture, and the individual". In other words, contra theoretical postulations about the tyranny of social democratic long-term planning, neoliberal protagonists seem to have been involved in a fair amount of preparatory groundwork.

Secondly, my attention is drawn to the combative tone of the language. This sounds like a man representing a group that is under-fire, as it were. Put yet another way, this sounds like an appeal to engage in class war. To this end the timing of the speech is significant. It comes in the afterglow of those revolutionary moments of 1968 when a profusion of grassroots communities (students, rank and file workers, women, gays, ethnic minorities etc) tore up the ruling contract that existed between corporate and union power throughout the post war years. Here we have a diverse and

sometimes conflicting milieu of grassroots activists shaking the foundations of the dominant system. (It should be noted that in Italy during this period of near global unrest social centres acted as key locations in the organization of descent (Mudu 2008, Piazza 2012)). The plurality of this collective, for Gilbert (2012), marks the beginning of a new “democratic surge” that jeopardises the corporate/union social compact. This revolutionary call for societal institutions that would give full expression to the diversity of collectives that make up our society is the *threat* that Powell speaks of. State institutions, alongside civil society (e.g. media, universities, corporate sector), have played and continue to play a key role in containing this threat. Returning to Hall and Schwarz, they contend:

Even in the moment of its [neoliberalism] formation it was not simply an ideology whose adherents advocated a return to classical liberalism; with the eventual dominance of collectivist forces it became progressively less so. On the contrary the project of neoliberalism was systematically to contest and where possible to uproot the political conditions in which collectivism flourished. This called for a strong state [...] and a particular kind of interventionism, which could enforce free-market relations (Hall and Schwarz 1988: 120).

Here we are presented with a pivotal contradiction in neoliberal praxis: its supporters collectivize within both state and civil society frameworks in order to ‘uproot’ the political conditions in which collectivism might flourish. Put yet another way, neoliberalism as political practice requires its protagonists to work a socio-political system in the interests of a particular collective: the capitalist class.

Jeremy Gilbert (2012) in highlighting the difference between classical and neo forms of liberalism brings to the fore the nature of today’s reciprocal relationship between supporters of neoliberal policy and the state:

Classical liberalism thinks that we're all naturally competitive entrepreneurs who will behave accordingly if the state just stays out of our business; neoliberalism fears that this is not so, that left to our own devices we might degenerate into some sort of primitive communism, and that the state must therefore compel us to behave in accordance with liberal norms whether we want to or not, for our own good (Gilbert 2012: 7).

Gilbert's claim has echoes of Polanyi's (1886-1964) fear that the pure ideology of liberalism (and by extension, neoliberalism) could only be sustained by authoritarianism. To be sure, brute manifestations of authoritarian government are all too evident in 'First World' cities today (see the violent crack-down of the Spanish Indignados in Madrid and similar uses of excessive police force throughout the US occupy movement in recent years). What follows in this chapter however is not a study of the thug-like forces of urban governance. Rather I want to discuss the banal forms of authority that facilitate the neoliberalization of our cities. To do this, I first consider changing state formations during the last thirty years or so of neoliberal hegemony.

New State Formations in the Neoliberal Era

Changing state formation during the neoliberal era must be understood alongside changes in urban governance. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, capitalism has long been appropriating the commons. Neoliberalism as the apogee of the state/capitalist nexus continues this tradition of enclosure. The vast bulk of the world's population live in cities, which are rich in all manner of spaces, communities and processes that do not adhere to capitalist modes of production: what Lee and

Webster (2006: 34) call “awkward geometries and unpropitious geographies”¹² – all of which must be made profitable. Lee and Webster take a sympathetic view of private property’s ‘cleansing’ capacity. I am struck by how much the authors’ description of these awkward, out-of-place locations matches the general character and aesthetic of social centres I have visited over the last few years.

Harvey (2007) argues that neoliberalism’s task is to provide solutions to, as neoliberals understand it, the practical and moral problems of *embedded liberalism*, which sees market processes, entrepreneurial and corporate activities circumscribed by a nexus of social and political institutions (Harvey 2007). This task, he argues, was fulfilled by way of a shift in state formation. In his (1989) paper ‘From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation of urban governance in late capitalism’ he outlines the details of this shift. He contends that managerial practices of earlier decades “which primarily focused on the local provision of services, facilities and benefits to the urban population” have been replaced with a form of urban governance “that has become increasingly preoccupied with the exploration of new ways in which to foster and encourage new development and employment growth” (Harvey 1989: 3).

In the UK, neoliberalism – with Margaret Thatcher at the helm – saw the budgets of local governments trimmed, prompting city leaders to look elsewhere for funding sources to maintain service provision (MacLeod 2011). Many local governments began the strategy of *place-marketing*, designed to entice inward investment and increase economic efficiency of the urban realm: profit maximization became, somewhat contradictorily, a guiding principle of redistribution objectives. Already severely weakened by a lack of industrial strategy during the 1960s and 1970s in the UK and USA, the heavy industry and manufacturing base of these

¹² It should be noted that Lee and Webster take a pro-private property stance in their work on urban politics. For these authors “awkward geometries and unpropitious geographies” are those spaces as yet untouched by capital: privatization enhances such spaces.

countries buckled under neoliberal reform that allowed capital freedom of movement and directly attacked unions through new labour laws. The leaders of once industrial cities – some willingly, some begrudgingly – turned to *urban entrepreneurs* to look for new ways to entice inward investment. For a raft of cities across the world, cultural-led regeneration became the modus operandi of inward investment strategies. This had had a profound effect on material space and political process. MacLeod (2011), who amongst others has argued that much within Glasgow City Council policy over the last 30 years epitomises state-led place marketing, writes:

Deluxe landscapes coupled with a spirited branding of a city's image will purportedly attract globally mobile investors alongside a creative class of professionals and revenue-generating tourists (see Peterson, 1981; Florida, 2002). This received wisdom is emblematic of what has been labelled a 'new urban politics'. It has ushered in an instantly recognisable vocabulary— 'local boosterism', 'urban revitalisation', 'place marketing', 'growth coalitions', 'entrepreneurialism'—and has assumed considerable influence in academic and urban planning debates over the past three decades (Macleod 2011: 2632).

Zukin (1991) argues that while such strategies have achieved relative success in attracting new businesses, particularly in the service sector, and 'cleaning up' the urban aesthetic, they are however, the "worst-case scenario" of economic development: that is, when a region has little else to offer, cultural strategies "respond to the quality-of-life argument that people and investors flow to areas with the best amenities" (Zukin 1991: 229). The scaled up cumulative effect of these strategies produces what has been termed *competitive urbanism*, and abstaining from it, MacLeod (2011) points out, is neither an economic or political option. It is important to note that MacLeod's point here refers to political actors working in the mainstream political arena. Alternative forms of political agency, although always living a

precarious existence, do operate to a different logic and can exert influence up the ‘ladder’ as it were¹³.

A key point to make about ‘new urban politics’ relates to the diversity of actors involved in the decision-making process. Private, voluntary, non-profit and non-governmental agencies have all been enrolled into government. This process of *enrolment* is important as it emphasizes partnership between government and other agencies. Harvey’s theory of change in urban governance, in positing the idea of a shift from managerial to entrepreneurial forms of government, understates the dynamics of partnership and as a consequence the primary role played by state actors (central and local) in both facilitating organizational change and providing the political legitimacy for that change. Rolling back the unions, corporatist planning and (over)regulated labour markets etc, required strong central government. Rolling out and maintaining what Peck and Tickell (2002: 43) describe as “new modes of ‘social’ and penal policy making, concerned specifically with the aggressive regulation [...] of those marginalized or dispossessed by the neoliberalization of the 1980s” requires the political authority of central and local state.

An interesting debate has ensued about the changing scale of state power throughout the neoliberal period of partnership governance. Moving away from those who understand the state as the displacement of power upwards, MacKinnon (2000) through emphasizing wider extra-state dimensions of local governance under neoliberal reform has suggested that nowadays we see a higher level of local control. MacKinnon also makes clear that whilst this should be seen as a form of decentralization, in terms of altering the overall dynamic of class struggle “it has not

¹³ *A recent example of this is grassroots pressure put on companies in the retail sector involved in the governments workfare programme. Many companies have opted-out, stating that direct action from grassroots activists was having an adverse effect on the business.*

been accompanied by a corresponding shift of power and influence” (MacKinnon 2000: 310). This ‘levelling out’ or ‘softening’ of state authority is what neoliberal politicians such as David Cameron would have us believe when he speaks of the importance of “redistributing power and control from the central state and its agencies to individuals and local communities” (David Cameron at the Hugo Young Lecture 2010).

Allen and Cochrane’s (2010) analysis of new state geographies suggests that contra vertical notions of the workings of power, what states possess “*is reach not height*” (Allen and Cochrane 2010: 1073 original italics). In order to increase the state’s power – its height – it must become more pervasive. *Reach* in this spatial imagery refers to a strategy, where institutional authority of government reaches out beyond its traditional centres (i.e. Westminster, Whitehall, City Halls) into other areas of our public lives. Taking a similar position Rose and Miller (2010) contend that it is not a question of the power of the centralized state as such, “but of how, in relation to what mentalities and devices, by means of what intrigues, alliances and flows – is this locale or that able to act as a centre” (ibid: 282).

Ong’s (2006) notion of neoliberalism as an analytics of assemblage over an analytics of structure is also useful as an aid to my own understanding of neoliberal spatial practices. Here Ong emphasizes not neoliberal takeover but rather neoliberal colonization through a process of gradual “mutations not in the space of the nation-state, but in the space of assemblage” (Ong 2006: 7). Ong imbues neoliberalism with a mobile and “promiscuous” capacity to become entangled with “diverse assemblages” (ibid). I agree with much of Ong’s ideas here but I do think that in “tracking the diverse vectors” of *global* neoliberal form, she underplays the significance of the primary stage of mutation, highlighted in the Lewis Powell quote above (see p.9).

That is, existing structures of vertical control. The multiple advances of neoliberalism – ideologically or materially – begin with the colonization of multiple centres of vertical control that have for too long held sway in human society. Neoliberalism then is made mobile through its colonization of a constellation of existing hierarchical structures (notably, but not exclusively, those of the state). Crucially, the mobile nature of neoliberal politics does not erode state authority but rather extends the now colonized institutional hierarchies of the state further into the lived experience (Allen and Cochrane 2010). The important questions here are, who has access to these new assemblages of state power? Who gets to participate in the “active construction” (Dikec 2007: 27) of this new urban politics? And what are the implications of these new assemblages of state power for urban lives?

As we shall see in the next section of the chapter a whole range of experts working to the logic of neoliberal profit maximisation hold key positions of influence. Their expertise and the universalizing tenor of this logic serves to close down political debate, making it increasingly difficult to penetrate dominant urban practices that favour state-led market policies over any alternatives. In the case of the urban environment, this can be viewed as an attempt to depoliticize both political process as a discursive and contested experience and the urban sphere as a social experience. Depoliticization becomes both cause and effect of a dual process of political and social exclusion. In the first instance, certain publics and their ideas are excluded from the political process because they are deemed, either reactionary by ‘experts’ who tightly stage-manage the political process, or considered less valuable than the views of *other* publics. In the second instance, certain publics are excluded either through being displaced by the state to make way for private developers or by being pushed out because they cannot compete in the *market*, the dominant logic now defining

urban space. The following two sections of the chapter consider these processes in turn.

Post-Political Urban Governance

By way of initiating a more thorough investigation of the above claim concerning *political* exclusion, I turn to a body of work centred upon what has been termed the Post-Political thesis. This work is gaining currency in human geography, and across the social sciences more generally, as a way of conceptualising the implications of neoliberal governance ‘on-the-ground’. In short, the post-political thesis understands *new* forms of governance as practices that pre-empt political engagement by containing the decision making process within networks of experts and reducing democratic process to a consensus reaching affair that forecloses radical alternatives (Allmendinger and Haughton 2012). While this is a position I agree with and one that offers a great deal of valuable insight into new formations of governance, I argue that it may over-emphasize the *new* in contemporary governance practices, underplaying the role of *old* or more traditional forms of government in depoliticizing the urban environment and subsequently broadening the reach of neoliberalism.

The post-political condition is born out of what some perceive to be a definitive economico-political victory. “The ‘free world’” Chantal Mouffe (2005: 1) writes, with exultant sarcasm, “has triumphed over communism and with the weakening of political identities, a world without enemies is now possible. Partisan conflicts are a thing of the past and consensus can now be obtained through dialogue”. Mouffe, challenging this position, argues that the free world’s promise of a society “beyond

left and right, beyond hegemony, beyond sovereignty” is based on a “complete” lack of understanding of what is at stake in democratic politics (ibid).

This aspiration to a world where the we/they discrimination would have been overcome is based on flawed premises and those who share such a vision are bound to miss the real task facing democracy” (ibid: 2).

The task, for Mouffe, is to limit the antagonistic tendencies existing in society by creating an agonistic sphere of debate and contestation “where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted” (ibid).

For Jacques Rancière politics is a moment of disruption, a moment that unsettles that “system of sensible evidences” (Rancière 2000:13) that names, categorizes, assigns a value to all things and distributes roles accordingly. In unsettling the partition and distribution of the sensible we are challenging its order and in doing so we are asserting a position of equality: we are saying we are capable; we are well placed to challenge the consensus that the current order of things is reasonable. The post-political condition denies this task by sublimating alternatives through process of ‘dialogue’ and ‘deliberation’ that are themselves saturated in neoliberal nomenclature. Swyngedouw (2009) argues that *fuzzy* terms such as ‘smart growth’, ‘urban renaissance’ and ‘good governance’ are deliberately difficult to ‘pin-down’ and attendant practices are no less difficult to hold to account. Vagueness here has the effect of removing political debate from policy formation and application or rather everything is political, everything is open to consensus-brokering “but only in a non-committal way and as non-conflict” (Swyngedouw in Almendinger and Haughton 2010: 92). Based upon the ‘neutral’ insight of ‘experts’ in all things, we now find conflict has left the political arena. Swyngedouw writes:

The post political condition is one in which consensus has been built around the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism as an economic system [that is] a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that prevents the politicization of particulars [by mobilizing] the vast apparatus of experts, social workers, and so on, to reduce the overall demand (complaint) of a particular group to just this demand with its particular content (Swyngedouw in Paddison 2010: 20).

Swyngedouw's quote clearly connects the work of those experts concerned with service provision (notably managerial state sector experts) with the ideological maintenance of neoliberal capitalism. For Paddison (2010) the *local* state in this capacity, comes into its own, so to speak, through the application of *neo-populist* strategies. Whereas populist and liberal political strategy would have been considered ill suited in terms of state theory (maximal vs. minimal), within the framework of contemporary neoliberal hegemony – which as I argue in this chapter is reliant on the extensive authority of the state – the former (neo-populism) can be utilized in support of the latter (ibid)¹⁴.

Paddison, writing about the neoliberalization process in Glasgow, outlines two complimentary components of neo-populist local state strategy that support neoliberal hegemony. Firstly, in keeping with the tenets of competitive urbanism, a city government presents globalization as a threat in the sense that in the globalized economy, city governments must compete with one another for capital investment. This age-old tactic of *othering* creates a sense of unity within a city population, invoking a unified response to meet the challenges of globalization (ibid). Othering, Paddison argues, serves to displace the blame for social inequalities within a city

¹⁴ *Neo-populism has theoretical similarities with Stuart Hall's (1983) theory of Authoritarian Populism. Jessop et al (1984) have criticized the latter as being overly concerned with the media and politics as centres of ideological struggle to the detriment of "political and economic organization and the concrete reception of political ideologies within determinant conditions" (Jessop et al 1983: 37). Paddison's study of neo-populism avoids such a critique as it is concerned with the reception and reproduction of political ideology 'on the ground' at a specific site of struggle. In other words Paddison's use of neo-populism is sensitive to the variety of ways ideology is received and reproduced.*

away from the city's leaders and urban experts onto the complex process of globalization.

By constructing the latter [globalization] as the 'enemy' it lays the blame on a force that is external to the city and by implication diverts focus from the problems of marginalization, injustices or unequal power relations that define the inequalities of the city (ibid: 21).

The second component of neo-populist local state strategy takes its cue from the first. The chimera of unity in the face of adversity presents the idea of active citizens playing their part for the good of the city. Local government *invites* the population to 'play their part' by way of participation in the political process. For Andrea Cornwall authority-led invitations to participate constitute "policy moments where public space is open for deliberation or communication before being closed again as authorities return to business as usual" (Cornwall 2002: 2). For Paddison, the issues debated within such environments become "constrained to an agenda needed to pursue economic objectives" (Paddison 2010: 22). Paddison, following Laclau, highlights the use of *empty signifiers* in aiding this form of (pseudo)-participation:

What becomes critical is the language, the signifiers, through which developmental objectives become expressed; in Laclau's (1996, 2005) terms the use of empty signifiers - constructs such as the 'European city', the 'healthy city', the 'sustainable city', terms that are 'empty' in the sense of having one particular meaning but which are capable of alternative interpretation – become a powerful means of projecting visions of the city. As empty signifiers, their apparent inclusiveness – directly reflecting their ambiguity – defies the legitimacy of their being challenged (ibid).

Signifiers like those mentioned above take on greater powers of persuasion when complimented by a raft of professionally produced literatures: working papers, web pages, leaflets, car bumper stickers and "badges, badges, we don't need no stink'n

badges” (Gold Hat 1948¹⁵). The cumulative effect of language, literatures, images, and professional persons exerts a powerful pull on the subject, making any sense of critical engagement seem infantile or even malicious. In Chapter 6 I look at some of these state-led micro-spaces and practices of persuasion in more detail.

As stated at the beginning of this section, post-political theory does a lot of good work in exposing the ways in which neoliberal governing practices constrain and dictate the terms of political debate. However, when I consider the work of pre-neoliberal city government, particularly in its use of public participation projects, I find myself asking, in the context of *politics* as defined by the likes of Swyngedouw and Mouffe, when was it ever political? McCarthy (2013) takes a similar position when he suggests that the post-political thesis is nothing new¹⁶. Referring to his work on the history of US forestry management he argues that scientific knowledge production and bureaucratic management came together in such a way as to depoliticize practices of environmental governance in the late 19th century (ibid). Returning to the world of concrete, street lights and ‘Noj luvs Weegy’ tags¹⁷, there is evidence in the literatures of human geography and critical urban planning studies that suggests the managerial approach to governance most associated with the post-war social democratic compact was no less underhand in its attempt to manipulate and co-opt the opinions of an *active* public, than today’s neoliberal state practices. Of

¹⁵ ‘Gold Hat’ is a character in the 1948 movie ‘The Treasure of the Sierra Madre’ directed by John Houston.

¹⁶ McCarthy makes a second interesting critique of the post-political thesis when he asks, “Is the present really post-political?” Here, referring to his work in the field of environmental politics in the US, he bemoans the fact that “large sectors of the American public, including large percentages of professional politicians and the media, accept neither scientific expertise nor consensus, and regard both as deeply and intractably political” (McCarthy 2013: 23). McCarthy’s overall point is that politics plays out differently depending on the setting and subject. In my view the monopolization of politics by a scientific and bureaucratic elite characterizes the current state of urban governance.

¹⁷ It is common practice in Glasgow, at least, for some young lovers to express their devotion to one another by way of graffiti tags on bus shelters, lampposts, public bins and various other choice urban hangouts.

participatory urban planning projects in the 1960s, for example, Shapely (2011) tells us local authorities and developers viewed participation as “an information dissemination and gathering strategy”. To this end it was seen as a means of “reducing public opposition” to planning proposals by providing information and so increase understanding, rather than to actively feed opinion into the system (ibid). Shapely argues that while public awareness of political issues increased during this period, urban government became structured within increasingly hermetic partnerships between central government, local authorities and the private sector, further distancing the public from substantive involvement in decision-making processes. Common themes arise throughout public participation projects since the late 1950s. Haumann (2011) writing from a north American context, lists professional and state paternalism; co-optation and subsequent de-radicalization of community ideas and leaders; classism; racism and tokenism. These authors study some of the earliest attempts by local government at constructing a tight choreography of participation. For the most part, these early examples seem attuned to a modernist planning rationale and its preference for state guided service provision. Are we to believe that *the political* was any less foreclosed under the inevitability of social democracy with its centre-led politics and its top-down command and control management practices? The claims made by Shapely and Haumann here echo with North (2011) who writes of examples of participatory governance in our recent past:

The problem with the rhetoric of ‘partnership’ was that too often the policy-making playing field was not level. Local people were often not resourced to act as real partners with equality in decision-making. New Labour’s ‘New Deal for Communities,’ supposedly a resident-led approach to addressing entrenched inner city problems, became the ‘new deal for consultants’ (Lawless 2004; Lawless et al. 2010) as local voices were drowned out (North 2011: 822).

Today, the provision of service is increasingly coming via the private sector, but the state continues to play a crucial role as both the key organizational facilitator of these new forms of governance and as the political authority that gives legitimacy to them. My argument here is that whether motivated by a state-led social democratic agenda or the state-led profit-first maxim of neoliberalism, the knowledges of people on-the-ground have been misrepresented and/or marginalized. Henri Lefebvre (1996) understands marginalization as part of a *strategy* that ensures the “pre-determined finalities” of “the science of urbanism” pre-empt dissenting voices (Lefebvre 1996: 82). For Lefebvre it is capitalism that produces these finalities, as it must to survive, “by occupying space, by producing space” (Lefebvre 1979: 21 in Gray 2010). Post-political theory seems to be looking back nostalgically to a time when political participation was more substantive: nostalgia, as someone once said, is memory with the pain removed. I am unconvinced such a time ever existed, at least not in the modern period. Lefebvre writing about the urbanization process in Western Europe at various stages over the last 150 years or so makes the point that capitalism has always held sway. Undoubtedly social democracy tempered the excesses of capital accumulation and improved the conditions of the majority of working class people in the UK but this was more modification of the old barbarities than their gradual erasure. In short, the social democratic compact left untouched the central dynamic of state management of the processes of capital accumulation. Post-political theory certainly reaffirms a technocratic and managerial elitism but in doing so, ironically, also strengthens elitist political practices by undermining existing alternative ways of doing politics that nurture agonistic encounter.

Key Neoliberal Tactics in the Urban Realm

Foucault argued that a logic of governing that purports to govern ‘as little as possible’ is subterfuge for government that actually intervenes “all the way down through permanent activity, vigilance and intervention” (Foucault cited in Anderson 2012: 37). As Martin and Pearce have pointed out, the state’s role as a “*primary* instrument and enabling regulatory architect of neoliberal capitalism” (2013: 3, this author’s italic) is difficult to refute. The neoliberal trick was to conflate the social and the economic, transforming the market mantra of ‘economic growth’ into the sole motive for political intervention. The Scottish Executive’s urban policy document, *People and Place: Regeneration Policy Statement* (2006) highlights this point:

Growing the economy in a sustainable way is the number one policy objective for the Scottish Executive. Economic growth leads to prosperity and gives us the means to tackle poverty and disadvantage. Economic growth is the route to a fairer society, to social justice and to securing equal opportunities for all. Regeneration is a crucial part of growing the economy and improving the economy of Scotland...(Minister for Communities, Foreword, Scottish Executive, 2006).

Regeneration is inextricably tied to the built environment. Under the conditions outlined in the above quote, the built environment plays the crucial role of intermediary between the transfer of public wealth to the private sector. As intermediary it acts as both the material vehicle through which public wealth is appropriated and cultural channel through which the ‘appropriate’ signals are transmitted. In other words, “material space gives [capitalist] ideology currency and serves as its referent” (Lefebvre 1996: 312). What follows is a general introduction

(Chapter 4 offers a more thorough empirical investigation of neoliberal tactics in relation to Glasgow) to three *tactics* of neoliberal regeneration (or urban neoliberalization): *territorial stigmatization*, *revanchism* and *ambient power*. Each tactic has received attention from geographers and others in the past but it is worthwhile re-familiarizing ourselves with them because in Glasgow, as in many other cities, they have become prosaic and as such too often *appear* unexceptional so as to obscure their political motivations. These tactics, it should be noted, are not deployed in isolation of one another. Returning to Foucault's comments at the beginning of this section, when we understand neoliberal government's dual role as political facilitator of a program of enclosure and enforcer of attendant laws thereafter, each of the tactics discussed below can be seen as part of a full package of "permanent activity, vigilance and intervention".

Territorial Stigmatization

Drawing our attention to the uneven geographies of neoliberalization, Wacquant (2007: 67) argues that "advanced marginality" rather than being disseminated throughout working-class areas "tends to concentrate in isolated and bounded territories". For both outsiders and insiders these isolated *spaces* are perceived as "social purgatories" (ibid). These blemishes in an otherwise 'functioning' neoliberal city constitute both a scapegoat for the failings of the dominant social order and an opportunity for those individuals and groups adept at making a gain out of the tribulations of others.

Scapegoating comes in the form of vilification. Of the banlieues, projects, estates and schemes Wacquant sarcastically writes that "only the refuse of society would accept to dwell" in these "leprous badlands" (ibid). Vilification becomes, in a

sense, total. Policy makers, even the progressive ones, tend to view these districts as *problem* areas. The media accentuates the ‘broken society’ narrative with hyperbolic stories about ‘lawless schemes’ and ‘outlaw estates’. The surrounding populations tell their children to ‘stay away from those streets’! Even the residents of ‘those’ streets perpetuate this process of stigmatization. Petonnet (1982) in reference to attitudes of residents in the Parisian banlieues writes that living in these housing projects creates:

A muted sentiment of guilt and shame whose unacknowledged weight warps human contact” [...] “I’m not from the *cité*, me myself”, insists a young woman from Vitry-sur-Seine, ‘I live here because I have problems right now but I’m not from here, I have nothing to do with all those people over here’ (Petonnet in Wacquant 2007: 68).

Opportunity comes after a territory has been sufficiently stigmatized. This is because, as Wacquant points out: “The obverse side of this process of territorial stigmatization is the dissolution of ‘place’” (ibid: 69). A rich narrative of place, with its “shared emotions, joint meanings, supported by practices and institutions of mutuality” (ibid: 70) is replaced with the emptiness we associate with ‘space’. For Denis Smith (1987: 297) “spaces are potential voids ... possible threats ... areas that have to be feared, secured or fled”. Wacquant, echoing Smith, writes:

The shift from a politics of place to a politics of space [...] is encouraged by the weakening of bonds founded upon a territorial community inside the city. It is also fostered by the tendency of individuals to retreat into the privatized sphere of the household and by the strengthening of feelings of vulnerability arising in the course of the pursuit of security and by the generalized weakening of social collectives (Wacquant 2007: 70).

Now as empty spaces, problem spaces, spaces to be feared, the idea that ‘something has to be done about this’ becomes common-speak in bars, cafes and front rooms

throughout the city. This justifies state-led market interventions to fix the space. Of such interventions, Gray and Mooney write:

Alongside this economically and socially precarious situation has come *serial defamation* [...] the logic of defamation works to legitimize and justify ‘special’ measures and urban interventions, which can have for effect the *deepening* marginalization of local residents at the behest of deregulated labour markets and property development strategies [...] Thus, *political construction of place* can act as a neoliberal alibi for accumulation strategies led by the owners and managers of private capital. Meanwhile, the construction of place through territorial stigmatization tends to obfuscate fundamental structural and functional differences underlying neighbourhood effects, and displaces questions of culpability and collective responsibility away from the state and business sectors (Gray and Mooney 2011: 10, authors own italics).

The ‘alibi’ mentioned above, for Gray, constitutes a “deliberate strategy” of disinvestment and material neglect designed to aid “asset-stripping private investors” down the line (Gray 2010). Deliberate disinvestment is akin to planned obsolescence (Weber 2002), which transforms these once communal places into *other* spaces. In Glasgow, local state actors, as we shall see in Chapter 4, have become adept at designating what of common ownership is ‘waste’ and placing it the possession of capital.

As well as the displacement of blame and the priming up of an area for capitalist accumulation later down the line, there is another way territorial stigmatization serves neoliberalization. Such vilification augments the outsider’s image of an area as disordered, juvenile, and in need of discipline (Campbell 1996). Not only does this neutralize, as in depoliticize, a discourse of threat, crisis and security, it robs residents of any agency; it undermines their ability to define their situation and propose solutions to problems of their own designation; it supports the foundationless (and classist as well as racist) opinion that some publics lack the

expertise required to make informed decisions (Budge 1993). In short, it removes people from substantive political participation.

Revanchist Urbanism

Revanchist¹⁸ Urbanism has as its referent in the right-wing populist movement active in France in the mid decades of the 19th Century – Revanchism¹⁹. In its modern usage it refers to a raft of architectural features, planning strategies and attendant government policies that reconfigure public space as exclusionary and overregulated or depending on one’s viewpoint, safe, controlled (and ‘owned’).

Gordon MacLeod (2002) argues that a common denominator running in conjunction with *all* economic expressions of neoliberal hegemony, including the “new urban glamour zones” of the city centre or any number of flagship cultural festivals, is a concealed “brutalizing demarcation of winners and losers, included and excluded” (MacLeod 2002: 605). With shades of Harvey’s notion of a shift from managerial to entrepreneurial governance, MacLeod states that the lived experience of the neoliberal city expresses “a powerful geographic erosion of Keynesian ideals of full employment, integrated welfare entitlement and social citizenship” (ibid). In its place we find new initiatives that “appear to be ‘reclaiming’ public spaces for those groups who possess economic value as producers or consumers” (ibid). The winners here are those publics that adhere to, or rather can afford to adhere to, a particular

¹⁸ ‘Revanche’ is a French word translated in English as ‘revenge’.

¹⁹ Most notably in the work of Bonapartist State planner Baron Haussmann who set out to temper the “sordid but animated quarters of the workers” in 19th century Paris (Lefebvre 1968: 67). Gandy (1999) provides us with a thoughtful study of Haussmann’s intervention into Parisian life: “Under capitalist space and time the corporeal unity of the pre-modern city was to be irrevocably altered, exposing the innate tension between function and perfection in the design of second empire Paris. The reconstruction of Paris was founded on a peculiar political medley of state intervention, liberal deference for powerful economic elites and a mix of aristocratic and imperial visions for the French metropolis” (Gandy 1999: 36).

vision of a city's communal places. Larry Ford in support of this particular vision writes:

Downtowns are beginning to offer opportunities for pleasant strolls along the waterfront, shady places to eat lunch, interesting streets to walk, and inviting settings to meet friends and have coffee. Such urban settings fulfil some very basic human needs that were often ignored during the heydays of rapid industrialisation and automobile-infatuated modernism (Ford in MacLeod 2011: 2645).

Ford's 'pleasant' description of a revitalized downtown conjures up images of metrosexual urbanites enjoying their mocha coffees and listening to endless jazz music mixes. While this scene may well be appealing to many people it belies the counter experiences of an urban poor whose participation in the sanitized spaces of the city revolves around low paid employment or trying to stay one step ahead of the of state or increasingly, private security personnel. 'Reclaiming' public space in a revanchist manner can and does manifest itself in spectacular or imposing actions like a CPO (Compulsory Purchase Order) or an eviction, but it also comes in the form of more banal practices (See Plates 1-3).



Image shows employees of security firm 3GS walking the city centre streets of Leeds, England. Leeds City council hired the private security firm to aid city wardens in a campaign to make the city's streets cleaner. 3GS staff can issue fines of up to £75 for littering or dog fouling. The city council has not been charged directly by 3GS for this service, although the company will receive a percentage of every fine issued.



Image shows an ad hoc design detail fitted at the behest of the owners of a downtown building in Los Angeles. The spiked detail is to deter citizens from sitting on the wall. The photograph was accessed via online artists blog adaptivereuse.net. The blog referred to this piece of design as “inventive small-minded malevolence”.



Image accessed via the online blog of Labour Party Councillor James Powney, shows a piece of street furniture in Harlesden town centre, in the London borough of Brent. The councillor describes the piece as a “good example of a bench designed to discourage [...] ne’erdownells” (jamespowney.blogspot.co.uk).

Neil Smith, in his extensive study of gentrification and revanchism in New York, writes:

The revanchist city is, to be sure, a dual and divided city of wealth and poverty ... But it is more. It is a divided city where the victors are increasingly defensive of their privilege, such as it is, and increasingly vicious defending it ... The benign neglect of “the other half,” so dominant in the liberal rhetoric of the 1950s and 1960s, has been superseded by a more active viciousness that attempts to criminalize a whole range of “behavior,” individually defined, and to blame the failure of post-1968 urban policy on the populations it was supposed to assist (Smith 1996: 227).

Although not using the term Revanchism, Amoore recognizes a collection of regulatory powers at work in the neoliberal city. She understands this bank of forces as a coming together of “the mundane and the prosaic calculations of business, the security decisions authorized by the state and the mobilized vigilance of a fearful

public” (Amoore 2009: 50). Helm (2008), in her detailed study of security measures adopted by Glasgow City Council in relation to city centre space, contends that together these groups constitute a network of regulators, whose ‘watching’ work moves us away from an understanding of the police as a formal agent towards “policing as a practice undertaken by a range of agents and involving a set of activities beyond crime control” (Helm 2008: 108). The result is a disciplinary society of surveillance in which “the range of what activities become policed and monitored is widened” (ibid: 180).

Revanchist policies make life more difficult for economically and socially marginalized groups. (Of course, the targeting of these people is in large part based on their inability to participate as *good* consumer citizens. They are ‘more-than-welcome’ as ‘good’ minimum wage workers). But there is something else going on here. The material effects of these sanitizing practices are inextricably tied to the formation of political subjectivities. In other words, through a collection of authoritative interventions in the lived spaces of a certain public, this network of regulators is attempting to homogenize the urban experience. Together these interventions construct an urban order, which in its essence is concerned with universalizing a particular understanding of what is ‘normal’ and what is not. Abnormality, Anderson argues, “is fabricated as threat that must be corrected or regulated” (Anderson 2010: 32). ‘Correction and regulation’ constitutes the exclusion of these abnormalities from public places, manufacturing what on the face of it looks like an uncontested environment, an environment without conflict – a depoliticized environment.

Revanchist policies, in excluding the urban poor, sanitize and doing so attempt to depoliticize the city. However, in highlighting the difficulties for the urban poor, revanchist theory perhaps underplays the effects of neoliberalization on those publics

subject to its ‘benefactions’. For political philosopher Jacques Rancière authoritative directives are not solely issued by ‘experts’ or bureaucrats or only experienced by the subject when she interacts with easily recognized forms of authority. Rather, authoritative directives are ‘everywhere’. Rancière refers to this idea of constant, expansive authority as the ‘Police Order’ (Rancière 2010). For Dikec, Rancière’s Police Order is based on the principle of saturation: that is “determined spaces with everything and everyone in their ‘proper’ order” (Dikec 2007: 70). In drawing attention to Rancière’s theory, I am suggesting that in the neoliberal city, it is not only the urban poor who are being regulated, whose affective capacities are preempted. In the following section, borrowing from the work of John Allen (2006), I show how the sanitized and depoliticized spaces of the neoliberal city work upon those inhabitants who, to varying degrees, are able to partake in neoliberalism’s benefactions.

Ambient Power

The preeminent discourse of territorial stigmatization and revanchism is one of exclusion and displacement. Although John Allen (2006) acknowledges such practices and the diminishing effects these have on the public realm, in his theory of ambient power he offers us a different twist to the familiar narrative of privatization and urban enclosure. Ambient power, Allen writes:

is a modest form of power which, in mall-like spaces works through the suggestive pull of the design and layout, offering choices around movement and patterns of interaction, yet at the same time limiting those movements and interactions in broadly skirted ways (Allen 2006: 445).

Ambient power *suggests* rather than *directs*. The author continues:

By ambient power, I mean there is something about the character of an urban setting – a particular atmosphere, a specific mood, a certain feeling – that effects how we experience it and which, in turn, seeks to induce certain stances which we might otherwise have chosen not to adopt (ibid).

There are a few key points we can extract from Allen's comments. Firstly, ambient power resides in those privatized and semi-privatized places we associate with spaces of consumption (high streets, shopping centres and alike). Secondly, ambient power is fuelled by a dual strategy of *inclusion* and *seduction*. In other words, ambient power is made operative by our presence in and participation with it. Although there is no singular response to the cues, prompts and encoded meanings present with the space, our choices and possibilities are restricted (Allen 2006). This is because of the pre-determined nature of the place. Embryonic tastes are always already there, but they are fixed, closed off to idiosyncratic manipulation. Because alternative practices are closed down, interactions with these spaces are routinized but nevertheless inclusive.

A seductive presence, writes Allen:

is apparent from the combination of suggestive practices, experiences and spaces laid out for temptation. In open urban spaces [Allen uses the Sony Centre in Berlin's Potsdamer Platz as his example but we could extend the notion of ambient power to a variety of consumer spaces] what goes on within it – how people move and interact – is arguably closed down by degree – a process of inclusion rather than exclusion" (ibid: 448).

We are seduced as much by the familiarity of the place as by the spectacle of consumption. Its symbols, cues and prompts are our realities, our desires, our needs, albeit reflected back on us after a process of reconfiguration and modification. The presence of those around us – other members of the public – participating in the space further normalizes its seductive practices. The result is a hyper-public space that

cannot be defined as either open or closed. Rather, the primary character of these spaces is centred upon a geography of circumscribed agency designed to unleash a near uncontrollable level of consumption. A controlled geography on this scale is akin to, what Lefebvre (1996) has called, an *operational rationale*. Lefebvre writes:

It [operational rationality] begins from a most detailed methodological analysis of elements – productive operation, social and economic organization, structure and function. It then subordinates these elements to finality. Where does this finality come from? Who formulates and stipulates it? How and why? This is the gap and failure of this operational rationalism. Its tenets purport to extract finality from the sequence of operations. Now, this is not so. Finality, that is the whole and the orientation of the whole, decides itself. To say that it comes from operations themselves is to be locked into a vicious circle: the analysis giving itself its own aim, for its own meaning. Finality is an object of decision. It is a *strategy*, more or less justified by an *ideology*. The notion of *system* overlays that of strategy. To critical analysis the system reveals itself as a strategy, is unveiled as decision, that is, as decided finality. (Ibid 1996: 82).

Ambient power is the affective component of a ‘decided finality’ that cannot accommodate difference because its diameters are always already set: “Here is the context, the setting, the means of your happiness. If you don’t know how to grasp the happiness offered so as to make it your own – don’t insist!” (ibid: 84). Here we are consumers or we are nothing at all. The tight choreographies of consumer spaces, not only exclude matter that is ‘out of place’ (i.e. those unable to consume), they also limit our ability to think these social places could be anything other than what they have become. Like Benjamin’s (1969) remarks on the nineteenth century Parisian arcades, the ambient power of these post-modern city spaces works to suppress our critical awareness, again manufacturing a depoliticized environment.

In 1970 Richard Sennett published a book titled ‘The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life’. The book is both a damning critique of practices that

attempt to homogenize the urban experience and a celebration of our “dense, disorderly and overwhelming cities” (Sennett 1970: 29). Whilst there is a tendency in the book to romanticize the modern metropolis, Sennett also offers up some useful insights about the relationship between the material environment and social control. In the previous two sections of this chapter I have shown how the state/capital nexus works upon political process and the built environment to exclude difference in an attempt to sanitize and depoliticize the city. Sennett’s theory of the *purified identity* is useful in giving us some purchase on how such an environment might affect the urban dweller. For Sennett the purified identity creates a condition in which the individual denies the idea of history: “that a society will come to be different than it expected to be in the past” (Sennett 1970: 8). This refusal to accept the messy reality of history, the author argues, has consequences for the construction of self, community and urban space. The individual defends herself from the diversity of possible identities available by reifying what she has so far experienced into the myth of a coherent identity and in doing so limits future experiences:

The effect of this defensive pattern is to create in people a desire for a purification of the terms in which they see themselves in relation to others. The enterprise involved is an attempt to build an image or identity that coheres, is unified, and filters out threats in social experience (ibid: 9).

The physical enclosure of place, the exclusion of difference, the depoliticization of the city, for Sennett, is replicated the in self-enclosure of identity. These multiple-enclosures restrict the possibility of *being together in difference* (Young 1990) and in doing so fortify neoliberalism’s walls. They constitute capital’s capture of both place and subject as use-value and the states ongoing collusion in this process of dispossession (Gidwani 2008).

Emancipation through Democracy and the Expansion of the Commons

Concerning the discussion thus far, where, you might ask, is there room for resistance? Gidwani's comment, for instance, suggest absolute saturation of neoliberal logic. This, thankfully, is not the case. Paddison (2010: 35) is right to argue that the post-political thesis, for all its insightfulness, "undervalues the role of human agency and of resistance in being able to challenge" the contemporary political condition. For example, various forms of mutual aid go some way in making life bearable in the territorially stigmatized places of the city (see Chapter 2) and the continuous need for city authorities to conjure up ever-more inventive examples of *small-minded malevolence* to deter those individuals and groups who cannot or refuse to follow the predetermined finalities of neoliberal urbanization point towards the persistence of human agency and the will to resist and challenge orthodoxy.

Simon Springer (2012: 539) writes, "All groups, whether subaltern or dominant, cannot constitute themselves unless they produce a material space" (ibid: 539). This suggests that, in spite of its increased neoliberalization, public and social spaces more generally remain sites contested by multiple groups who do not adhere to the tenets of the dominant system. These groups and individuals realize that failing to make even a temporary mark on space would see their ideas, as Lefebvre puts it "lose all pith and become mere signs, resolve themselves into abstract descriptions or mutate into fantasies" (Lefebvre 1991: 416). The urban environment then remains a highly contested arena.

Consider, for example, the Occupy movement, the Spanish Indignados, Syntagma Square in Greece. To these spectacular urban displays of a collective will

to resist and a need to find alternatives to the dominant system, we might add innumerable, localized, small-scale ventures aimed at producing a more equal process of resource management and distribution (e.g. Local Economic Trading Systems, local currencies, community gardens, and of course, social centres). These examples undoubtedly differ in scale and structure and are most certainly not without their own contradictions and conflicts. Connecting them is experimentations in direct and participatory democratic practices: experiments that, for De Angelis and Stavrides (2010) and Shantz (2013) amongst others, reawaken a realization of *common* ways of being in the world that promote notions of self-help and mutual aid.

McCarthy (2005) outlines what he sees as the defining attributes of the commons as “genuine participation in decision-making by all or most members of the community in question and relative equality among commoners” (McCarthy 2005: 20). In invoking the act of participation, we begin to see the commons as process. An emphasis on commonality in socio-political life promotes the idea that all human persons are equal in fundamental worth therefore the act of “commoning” (De Angelis 2010) strives to equalize the process of political participation. De Angelis writes:

Commoning is not only based on pre-existent values, pre-existent “ethical” choices. The commoning we seek is also and most importantly *a field of production of values*, and the precondition for this production is that a wide range of different ethics, different cultures, different lifestyles that participate in the co-production of new systems of values, of producing what is of common value together (De Angelis 2010: 958, authors own italics).

Supporting this notion of inclusivity, Blomley (2011), invoking the language of rights and justice, makes a concrete distinction between private and common property

regimes: “Whereas private property confers the right to exclude others from the benefits of a resource, ‘common property’ might be understood as the right to not be excluded from the use of a thing” (Blomley 2011: 207). Blomley’s work shows how dispossessed groups often use the values and principles that underpin private property (habitation, use, investment) to legitimize their claim to collective rights over particular lands and properties (Blomley 2004). We might then say that for Blomley, commoning is premised on the *right* of access and participation.

The existence of these group-based property principles, however, have led some scholars to call for ‘collective private property rights’ in place of traditional municipal zoning (Nelson 2005). Such calls do little to address the exclusionary nature of private property ‘thinking’ and underpin the spatial logic and political legitimacy of club-based²⁰ organization of public space, exemplified in the gated communities of rich urbanites (see Lee and Webster 2006). Here, the notion of the commons serves the powerful. McCarthy (2005) sees this form of the common turn as perpetuating a sort of neoliberalism from below, in which the state is the primary tyranny. Here the market takes on “near-magical powers to which we must defer” (McCarthy 2005: 18). This for McCarthy marks a worrying move away from the state as a potential solution to the ever-increasing problem of enclosure. He writes:

Is it [anti-state sentiment] a result of a long collective learning process that has led to truly radical and counterhegemonic imaginaries that can think beyond the state? Or, is it due to the subtle but largely successful elevation of neoliberal ideas into ideological hegemony, resulting in oppositional movements that participate in actively undermining their most promising avenue of resistance? (Ibid: 19).

²⁰ This refers to Buchanan’s (1965) ‘Economic Theory of Clubs’, which informs Webster’s (2003) theory of meso-neighbourhood scales of organization. In the club example, the emphasis is less towards municipal mutual societies and cooperatives with their socialist leanings than the exclusive spaces associated with walled neighbourhoods and complexes of private condominiums.

While I question McCarthy's suggestion that the state may be our "most promising avenue of resistance" (ibid), his question is nevertheless an insightful one. It hints at the degradation of a long living history of socialisms from below – decentralized and anti-hierarchical – at the hands of vanguardist and reformist socialisms, which, history tells us, to borrow from Springer (2013) become "as twisted, mangled, and barbarous as any other Leviathan". Of these old, but no less relevant, socialist antagonisms Ward (1985) writes:

The most depressing thing about the ideological mess we have made for ourselves [...] is that whenever someone in a political platform eulogizes self-help or mutual aid half the audience stop listening since they regard these words not merely as conservative platitudes but for a smokescreen to conceal the abdication of governmental responsibilities. I cannot imagine how these phrases became to be dirty words for socialists since they refer to human attributes without which any conceivable socialist society would flounder (Ward 1985: 27).

For Ward these human attributes can only flourish from the bottom up as undamaged as possible by the authoritative impositions of the state/capitalist nexus. Decentralized, bottom-up forms of political expression, Ward argued, put people right at the *heart* of problem solving and planning, countering the heuristic disruptions of technocrats and market-worshippers alike (ibid). This is a position shared with many activists living and working in the neoliberal city today. However, bearing the warnings implicit in McCarthy's question in mind, if the emancipatory potential of these decentralized practices are to be realized, eternal vigilance is required at the level of democratic participation 'on-the-ground' to ensure that privilege and authority do not prevail. Similarly, emancipatory potential lies with the ability of each component part to forge solidaristic trans-local links with other parts, thereby countering neoliberalism's penchant for separation and competition: what

Featherstone et al (2011) have termed ‘progressive localism’. If these things can be achieved, these experiments in cooperation move from a position of defence, in the sense of being resilient under difficult conditions, towards being productive of new values between places and social groups (Featherstone et al 2012). For example, this thesis, as well as providing what I hope is a constructive critique of the social centre as an experiment in commoning, is also a celebration of one example of people creating a commons in solidarity with others involved in similar acts across the globe.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by asking the question, what is different about neoliberalism? I argued that although liberalism in its various forms has always utilised the political authority of the state in order to maintain or advance the central dynamic of capitalist relations, under the specificities of neoliberalism the state/capitalist nexus has never been so pervasive. Echoing Lefebvre’s speculative 1960s hypothesis that capitalism was replacing industrialization with urbanization as its main mode of accumulation, I have tried to emphasize throughout this chapter the importance of the built environment to the ongoing neoliberal project. Through engagement with post-political theory and key neoliberal urban regeneration tactics, I then explained how neoliberal urban reforms depoliticize both political process as a discursive and contested experience and the urban sphere as a social experience. Again I stressed that these reforms could not have taken place without the top-down command and control structures of the managerial state being in place. I concluded the chapter by way of addressing a bias in the literature that tends to focus on a top-down or centre(s)-out political dynamic. This bias I argued underplays the agency of resistance in shaping

the contemporary political landscape. As we shall see in the following chapters our cities are awash with alternative urban imaginaries that actively struggle in the here-and-now for an urban experience beyond the impositions of neoliberalism.

In the previous section I briefly introduced some key concepts that I return to throughout the thesis: resistance, participation and commoning. In various guises these concepts motivate the actions of social centre participants in Glasgow and beyond. These are highly contested concepts, both theoretically and empirically: how effective is this or that form of resistance? What organizational methods make for good participation? How effective are these experiments in terms of providing people with a glimpse of what another world might look like? The following chapter, by way of theoretical engagement, considers in more detail the particularities of social centre activism as a form of resistance, participation and commoning.

Chapter 2

Anarchist Influenced Social Centres and Pre-Figurative Politics

Introduction

Given a common need, a collection of people will . . . by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of the situation – this order being more durable and more closely related to their needs than any kind of order external authority could provide (Ward 1973).

My route into radical politics began in a social centre. Almost a decade ago, whilst walking down an inner city street in Amsterdam, I noticed a woman spray painting a door. The image on the door was part of a much larger mural that covered the entire façade of the building. We chatted for a while and she invited me into what was a squatted social centre. I spent a couple of hours with people who lived in and/or used the space, eating food, talking politics and being fascinated by the *strange* order of things. There was something peculiar about the place: the irregularity of the décor and the variety of different ages and looks all mingled to produce in me a sense of fascination, excitement and, at moments, discomfort. To put yet another way, the place was in conflict with my normative experiences of urban life, which might be characterised as regulated, tidy, mechanized, maybe even predetermined (see Chapter 1). So what are social centres? Where have they come from? What purpose do they serve?

In the following chapter I attempt to answer these questions in order to show the social centre as an alternative space within the neoliberal city outlined in the previous chapter. That is, a space that nurtures substantive democratic participation in the ongoing evolution of the space. I begin by discussing the history and geography of

the European social centre movement. Here I argue that social centre activism over the last hundred years or so clusters around what I consider to be three waves of social centre activity. Each wave is discussed in turn. I contend that the most prominent political tradition motivating social centre activism is anarchism. A discussion of anarchism then follows. This focuses on anarchist notions of freedom, which, counter the negative freedom offered by neoliberalism, inextricably ties the individual to the group thereby opening up the collective power of the group to its component parts (i.e. each individual member); on anarchist spatial practices, which, borrowing from a discourse of systems theory, are premised on openness. That is spaces that are open to the plurality of the social world; and finally on the practice of prefiguration, which I argue is the guiding strategy underlying social centre activism and wider anarchist political praxis. Rather than focus only on anarchism's many virtues I want to explore the complex and contested nature of practicing anarchism in the neoliberal city. A key aim throughout this chapter and thesis more generally is to push the anarchist tradition to the forefront of contemporary politics. I believe that this can only be achieved if we face, head-on, the problems that arise between thinking anarchism and practicing anarchism on-the-ground. As a researcher and writer documenting contemporary anarchist struggle, I want to explore the difficulties we face as we struggle with our enemies and our own inconsistencies. Informed by theoretical discussions made in this chapter and its predecessor, the final section of the chapter sketches out key areas of empirical and theoretical concern that inform the rest of my thesis.

A History and Geography of the European Social Centre Movement

Social centres have sprung up all over Europe at different times over the last century or so and each centre has its own particular story, very much related to the towns and cities they are found in. I do not or could not cover them all here. What follows is a short history and geography of the social centre stories I am most familiar with: these are to be found in Spain, Italy, Holland and the UK. I explore, in turn, what I consider to be three waves of social centre activity over the last hundred or so years. In summary, the first wave of social centres, or more appropriately the forbearers of the social centre, sprang from the “no-government system of socialism” (Kropotkin’s term 1927) prominent in the early 20th Century, which included various socialist orientated movements such as the cooperative movement and the early syndicalist unions. The second wave is most associated with those non-parliamentary leftwing-groups that came to prominence across Europe during the struggles of the 1970s. In part an internal leftist revolt against the mainstream political leanings of the then dominant Marxist-Leninist political tradition, this second wave prioritized the “micro-physics of power” (Foucault 1975), focusing their actions in specific sites of struggle – *a factory, a school and the home* (Mudu 2004). The third wave emerges out of the mass demonstrations of the alter-globalization movement throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Here the pluralistic politics and participatory practices of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (See Bey 1991) are given a semblance of stability within social centres across Europe. Each wave summarised here should not be viewed in isolation. In my experience of contemporary social centres, the memories of those who came before loom large in the imaginations of their descendants.

The First Wave: Socialism From Below

Social centres today are the descendents of a libertarian socialist current that has utilized factory buildings, farmhouses, churches, bars, and schools, which stretches across Europe going back to the early 20th century. Schmidt and van der Walt (2009: 185) write about the Libertarian Athenaeums in the early years of last century “that existed in every district and village of anarchist strength in Spain”. A type of anarchist community centre, the athenaeums, with their plays, picnics, dances, language classes and more, were, the authors argue, a critical component of the Spanish syndicalist unions. During the same period, the Bourses du Travails (labour exchange) in France were used by revolutionary syndicalist Fernand Pelloutier (1867), amongst others, as centres of radical libertarian counterculture (Jennings 2012). It is important to understand these community spaces as one arm of a dual strategy employed by anarcho-syndicalists in Spain and France respectively: the other arm operating in the workplace. This dual approach points towards recognition by anarchist-syndicalists of the importance of struggles taking place outside the factories in the *sphere of reproduction*. For Rocker (2004 [1937]) it was here the ongoing “educational work [...] directed toward the development of independent thought and action” would make “clear to the workers the intrinsic connections among social problems”.

While the content and aims of each space differed in line with the particular political context of the users (consider for example the different terrains of struggle of the industrial worker and the rural peasant), these early examples were very much rooted in a culture of mass participatory democracy and community self-determination. Furthermore, these ideas were not on the fringe of revolutionary politics at this time, rather they were the main thrust of it. Eric Hobsbawm, writes:

In 1905-1914, the Marxist left had in most countries been on the fringe of the revolutionary movement, the main body of Marxists had been identified with a *de facto* non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or at least much closer to the ideas and mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical Marxism (Hobsbawm in Schmidt and van der Walt 2009: 158).

Crucial to this period and *form* of revolutionary struggle were the centres mentioned above. These were spaces of political education and the development of radical popular counterculture. Alongside the strike, sabotage and the printed word they formed the weaponry of those no longer willing to accept their lot under conditions set by an industrial bourgeoisie protected by the liberal state.

The libertarian socialist movement in the UK during the early 20th century, unlike the Libertarian Athenaeums of Spain or the Bourses du Travails in France, had nothing resembling a recognized centre of action and learning. Anarchists and other working class political actors without party affiliation certainly populated the Working Men's Club, prominent across Britain's industrial regions from the late 19th century until the 1980s, but their influence in these spaces remains under researched. The Working Men's Club originates from a very different ethos to that of the forbearers of today's social centres. Rather than socialism from below, the Working Men's Club sprung from the paternalistic ideology of the Victorian middle class progressives and their attempts to 'civilise' the working classes (Price 1971). Jones (1974) argues that while radical artisan ideas about republicanism and I.W.M.A (International Working Men's Association) teachings on Internationalism were prevalent in the clubs throughout the 1870s and 1880s, by the 1890s any sense of the clubs nurturing a radical socio-political response to industrial capitalism and Victorian middle-class sensibility was replaced by an "enclosed and defensive working-class conservatism" (Jones 1974: 462). That being said, Ward (1985)

contends that from within these and other working class spaces, numerous projects centred upon the ideas of community self-help and mutual aid were imagined and enacted. From the working class money clubs of Nottingham designed to “enable builders to erect small houses for club members” to Freehold Land Societies that “acquired land for subdivision into plots for their members” (Ward 1985: 27), such mechanisms were conceived of and managed by people wanting to free themselves from the authority of employers, landlords and rent (ibid).

There is no overarching narrative that describes the demise of these early forerunners of the European social centre. The rise and subsequent victory of fascism certainly suppressed libertarian socialist activities in Spain and Italy (Schmidt and van der Walt 2008). After World War II, the defeat of fascism in Italy and Germany and the subsequent social democratic contract, large numbers of leftwing political activists across Europe looked to political parties and unions for support and guidance (Mudu 2004). By this time socialism had moved upstairs, so to speak, and its primary protagonists were now *representatives* of the subjugated classes and not the subjugated classes themselves. This shift from a radical socialism from below to a socialism that feels at home in the high corridors of political power, did not sit well with those groups perennially on the outside of institutional politics.

The Second Wave: Reclaiming the City

Influenced by the student and working-class revolts of 1968, in the 1970s we see a second wave of social centres springing up across Europe. Many of the voices in the revolts of 1968 spoke out against not only the ‘rebirth’ of capitalism post-1945 but also the revolutionary torpor of political parties claiming to represent the working classes during this period. Political anti-establishmentarianism was somewhat

mirrored in a renaissance of culture with political folk music and counter-cultural literature enjoying a wide audience. The OSCs (Occupied Social Centres) in Italy, for example, utilised empty buildings and public spaces as counter-cultural hubs in their struggle against the state, capital and the paternalism evident within the political left at this time. Montagna (2007: 296) tells us that the OSC movement was rooted in the “antagonistic juvenile social movements” of this time in Italy. Disillusioned with ‘capitalist work’ and the socialist parties (whom they felt had been de-radicalised by their pursuit of state power) “groups of young people started a process of ‘claiming the city’ through widespread squatting” (Ruggiero in Montagna 2007: 297). For Mudu the Italian centres at this time were part of a critical response to what was seen by many on the left as the development of both a crude workerism within the Italian communist movement and, supporting Montagna’s claim, “a drift towards more moderate institutional political programmes” (Mudu 2004: 919). In short, for the mainstream left, the workplace and the high corridors of political power came before the sphere of reproduction as important arenas of struggle (Katsiaficas 2006). Unsurprisingly then, woman played a key role in challenging the paternalistic character of workplace and institutional politics. Silvia Federici’s (2012) paper ‘The reproduction of labour-power in the global economy, Marxist theory and the unfinished feminist revolution’ details the extent of women’s revolt throughout the 1970s. The social centre became the conspicuous platform from which these voices of dissent were given public hearing. Making this link between the OSCs and an emerging radical feminist politics in Italy, Mudu writes:

The emerging movement for women’s rights was drawing attention to the perennial rift between private and public life; instead of waiting for the promises of a post-revolutionary society to come true in a highly improbable future, women preferred to voice their criticisms in the

political arena of everyday life issues (Balestrini and Moroni 1997). In particular, backed by increasing sectors of the movement, they found fault with the typical Marxist–Leninist assumption that the revolution in private relations should be deferred until after the rise to power of the working class and reorganization of the economic order and pressed for a reversal in priorities. The favourite subjects discussed within the antagonistic movement in Italy were the collective needs of women and working class youths, the marginalization of entire neighbourhoods in metropolitan areas and the surge in heroin abuse (Mudu 2004: 920).

Critical to understanding what goes on in social centres is that while they facilitate a politics of refusal, such as that outlined in the above quote, the centres are also spaces of emergence where different ways of doing politics, different social relations can develop. Of Italy’s OSCs, Mudu goes on to tell us that “aims and practices prefigured a glimpse of the modes of life and social relationships that the “new society” of the future was expected to vouchsafe” (ibid: 921). This idea of *prefiguration* will feature in discussions later in the chapter. For now let us continue in our historical and geographical jaunt around Europe’s social centre scene.

The Dutch social centre movement emerged in the 1980s. Although influenced by social centres across Europe, understanding the workings of the Dutch social centres and their relationship to wider Dutch society is enhanced by an appreciation of its predecessor the Kraaker (or Squatter) movement. The 1980s saw the modernization of many Dutch cities through vast amounts of capital investment. This urban regeneration program took little notice of those citizens who – due to economic status, freewill or both – disagreed with the gentrification of their urban homes (Katsiaficas 2006). The Kraaker movement thrived²¹. As in all social movements, internal differences played a key part in shaping the Kraaker story. Some people were

²¹ Dutch squatting history goes back further than the early 1980s but during this period, in response to the impositions of neoliberalism, squatting became a strategy associated with the left-wing counter-culture movement. Across the literature and in the accounts of older activists I met during fieldwork carried out in the Netherlands, this period is seen as the heyday of Dutch squatting.

squatting simply as a response to inadequate housing services, while others linked such place-based crisis with the wider irrationalities of global capitalism, using squatting as a visible tactic in their push towards radical societal transformation. During the 1980s, when housing concerns were particularly acute, Dutch society, in general, sympathized with the Kraakers. However, the neoliberal propaganda machine worked on various points of contestation within the movement, painting a skewed picture of its internal dynamics. Misrepresentation together with repression and internal strife resulted in bad decisions being made. Public support quickly morphed into resentment and mistrust²².

Nowadays, authorities in the Netherlands prefer concession rather than repression as a tactic designed to eliminate the practice of squatting. With one time squats achieving the less precarious position of rented or cooperatively owned social centre, today's centres work hard at re-establishing libertarian left politics as something open and doable. Nevertheless, this transition from squatting to, what Leontidou (2010: 1180) calls a "cosmopolitan social movement" has not severed the Dutch social centre movement from its Kraakar past. Older residents and users of centres tell stories about episodes that took place during the heyday of the Kraakers, giving reverence to particular dates and places. "There is both a sense of pride and regret in their words" (notes from author's field diary, June 2010).

Not dissimilar to the Dutch experience, the first UK centres established in the 1980s were in large part influenced by the squatter scene. Not a homogenous group,

²² Katsiaficas (2006) comments that throughout the 1980s, the state, the far-right and football hooligans, using violence and other acts of repression, all played their part in turning what was an outward looking inclusive movement for change into a much smaller and more secretive counter-culture group. For example, 'Hardcore' kraakers published a pamphlet titled 'Pearls Before Swine' which listed about 200 individuals who they deemed as traitors. While some of these individuals were no doubt guilty of traitorous acts (i.e. becoming police informants) the pamphlet arguably served to increase the Kraakers marginalization and paranoia.

the squatters in the UK, broadly speaking, fell into two categories: the reformers who viewed squatting as part of a wider campaign for more efficient use of council residential stock and the revolutionaries or the *guerrilla architects* (Franks 2000). Unlike the reformers who, Goodman tells us, did not threaten the given framework of administration, the guerrilla architect movement set out to address the problems of homelessness and poor housing and, through alternative experiments in communal living, land use and dwelling construction, challenge the accepted logic of the established spatial order.

A coming together of the radical leftwing politics of groups such as the guerrilla architects and the DIY counter-culture ethos of UK Punk's second wave saw the emergence of Autonomy Clubs in the 1980s. Key political struggles here revolved around the setting up of Claimants Unions, organizing anti-fascist and animal liberation actions (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006).

Set up and run by collectives of anarchists or communists and strongly politicized anarcho-punk bands like Crass and The Apostles who helped fund their existence, Autonomy Clubs mixed live music with 'book fairs, fanzine conventions, discussion groups, films, debates and political workshops' (Martin in Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006: 306).

The oldest of the UK social centres, Bradford's 1 in 12 Club set up in 1986, emerged from activist experiences of Autonomy Clubs. The webpage of 1 in 12 Club provides an excellent archive of events held in the centre throughout the 1980s. Punk, Reggae and Ska nights abound, as do unemployed workers support and strike solidarity events. These early UK social centres (discussed in more detail below) were very much part of a combative working class movement responding, politically and culturally, to the brutalities of Thatcher's Britain.

This more militant strain of social centre activism was not unproblematic. Fighting aggression with aggression usually wears down the good folk first. We might say that these brutalities got the best of some activists, who exchanged political organizing for more narcissistic and nihilistic pursuits. Writing about the 3rd wave of social centres that replaced the autonomy clubs of the 1980s, Alessio (2005) writes:

Almost gone are the days of the pissed up punk drinking special brew whilst his/her stereotyped dreadlocked brethren rolls another joint. In come mother and baby groups, packed out cinemas, good quality food, well-organised concerts and political mobilizations. This consistency becomes easier the more people become involved, not looking for a subculture to indulge in, but a place of social interaction that presents and communicates ideas (Alessio 2005: 33).

The Third Wave: Re-Territorializing Struggle

The late 1990s saw the much wider alter-globalisation movement informing a third wave of social centres. The politically plural message behind terms like ‘one no, many yeses’ and the participatory democratic tools developed in the temporary autonomous zones of protest camps and mass mobilizations such as the G8 summit in Seattle (1999) and Genoa (2001) achieve within social centres a degree of stability in the streets of our towns and cities. Glasgow’s social centres were part of this 3rd wave (see Introduction).

This claim is somewhat fruitless in terms of trying to gain an understanding of the political subjectivities at work within the third wave of social centre activity. The alter-globalization movement has within its ever-shifting ranks a vast array of political opinions on display. The term ‘one no, and many yeses’, used to capture a plurality of political subjectivities, doesn’t go far enough. For example the alter-globalization movement is populated with Marxist and Leninist groups as well as

International NGOs such as Green Peace and Friends of the Earth. To this constellation of organizations (and ideologies) we can add numerous anarchist-influenced groups (e.g. anarchist-communists, anarchist-feminists and the infamous Black Block) who work to the organizational logic of the *network*. It should be noted that there are at least two profoundly conflicting rejections within the movement: (i.e. ‘no to vertical channels of control’ versus ‘no to horizontal organization’). Juris (2005) provides us with some insight into these differing organizational logics:

While the command-oriented logic of parties and unions is based on recruiting new members, building unified strategies, political representation, and the struggle for hegemony, network politics involve the creation of broad umbrella spaces, where diverse movements and collectives converge around common hallmarks, while preserving their autonomy and specificity. Rather than recruitment, the objective becomes horizontal expansion through articulating diverse movements within flexible structures that facilitate maximal coordination and communication (Juris 2005: 256).

Juris goes on to argue that whilst a networking logic holds sway within the alter-globalization movement, it is never completely dominant and “always exist in a dynamic tension with other competing logics, often giving rise to a complex cultural politics of networking within particular spheres” (ibid). This position chimes with Routledge, Cumbers and Nativel’s (2007) work on the decentred global justice network ‘People’s Global Action’. The authors write: “Conflicts between networking and more vertical operational logics may generate constantly shifting alliances as activists alternatively participate within, abandon, or create autonomous spaces with respect to broader social networks” (Routledge et al 2007: 2577).

Further highlighting the complex reality of organizational difference within the movement, Adams (2011) employs the metaphor of a night sky constellation to

describe the relationships that exists between political tendencies. Interestingly, Adams sees his constellation metaphor as an alternative organizational form that works alongside network and vertical command structures within the movement. A constellation of political actors has a slapdash character in that its formation, disbandment and re-formation are only ever partially organized. Adams writes, “in contemporary interlinked social movements, formal organization, to the extent that it is a factor, is usually only a momentary, incidental aspect and not a solidified central feature” (ibid: 131). He contrasts this with the network, which he states relies on “a prioritizing of formal, organizational forms, which then form the nodes of the network” (ibid). He calls the former partially organized form “The Constellation of Oppositions”. ‘Oppositions’ here has a double meaning. In one sense it refers to the conflicting internal structures utilised by particular groups. In another sense ‘opposition’ takes on a more positive hue, referring not to a clash of competing internal configurations but rather the opposite: “a manifestation of autonomy-within-solidarity” (ibid: 134). This is solidarity in opposition, where relationships form not between organizations per se, but “through individuals, ideas or properties” (ibid). In this sense people (not organizations or ideologies) are standing together, not solely against wage slavery, or patriarchy, or racism, etc, but against an entire topology of contemporary dominations. Under these solidaristic conditions it is difficult to sustain universalistic pretensions about one antagonism or another, just as it is difficult to see a particularistic constituency as anything other than a constituent part of a much larger constellation of struggle (ibid).

How does this notion of a “constellation of oppositions” play out in shaping the character of social centres in the UK? In attempting to answer this question I will briefly introduce two UK social centres – Brighton’s Cowley Club and Bradford’s 1

in 10 Club. Social centres are self-directed organizations in the sense that those who participate in them shape the *feel* and direction of the centre; therefore there is no ‘one size fit all’ model for social centre activity. These two centres have been chosen because they offer examples of how differing political subjectivities fashion the social centre experience. The following insights stem from my analysis of a key document for those interested in the study of social centres in the UK. ‘What’s this place: Stories from Radical Social Centres in the UK and Ireland’ (Multiple Anonymous Authors 2007) is a collection of stories, poems and more about social centres and by social centre activists from across the UK and Ireland. Compiled as part of a research project initiated in 2005 by Paul Chatterton and Jenny Pickerill at the University of Leeds, this document is a rich source of witness-generated information.

The 1 in 12 Club

The 1 in 12 Club²³ is the longest established of Britain’s social centres. Formed in 1981 around Bradford’s Claimant Union, the collective offers social service support and a “social scene” for both the employed and the out of work. From the outset of the 1 in 12 Club chapter within the aforementioned document we see explicit references to the club’s anarchist identity:

From their earliest incarnation, this anarchist collective provoked a hailstorm of controversy as they exposed council corruption, brought out their own music labels, fought racism and raised funds for strike groups (Chatterton & Pickerill 2005: 7)

Fighting racism and fascism has been a major concern of the club throughout its history. Their fight has always involved raising awareness through outreach projects but the chapter also makes reference to more combative forms of direct action.

²³ *The name of the club refers to government statistics of the day, which claimed that 1 in 12 unemployed claimants defrauded the state.*

Interestingly, club members view the community outreach approach as a necessary strategy in the face of what they understood as Bradford's ongoing de-politicization throughout the 1980s:

When we first started we entered a quiz league and it may sound miniscule but it meant we tied in with our local culture, we didn't lose touch with the city. [...] Other examples where that we took on three allotment sites, started a football team, a lot of activity which allowed people with different interests to express themselves. It allowed me to get a handle on what I perceived to be my political aspirations (1 in 10 participant in Chatterton and Pickerill 2005: 12).

This last sentence hints at a reflective time for the member. Free from the immediacy of 'ideal type' direct action politics, they began to assess their role in the wider social and political landscape of the city. Nevertheless, the chapter is strewn with references to a more traditional and militant form of anarchism that has roots firmly placed in working class struggle. The chapter makes clear the club's long standing connections with the radical publications *Black Flag* and *Class War*²⁴. However, the club seems to traverse with relative ease between working with revolutionary and more conventional organisations associated with working class politics, for example the TUC.

²⁴ *As the title of the latter suggests, these publications are associated with class struggle anarchism.*



Entrance to the 1 in 12 Club makes clear its Anarchist intentions

The Cowley Club

The Cowley Club was formed in 2001 and occupies a space on Brighton High Street, giving it a visible presence within the town centre. Although opening only three days a week the club organises a dizzying array of events, mainly geared towards serving the local community, but also recognising the plight of others outside of Brighton²⁵. The Cowley Club chapter, once again written by club users, describe the centre as an “inclusive space” and an “autonomous space”. There are a couple of references to anarchism, but unlike the 1 in 12 Club, anarchism’s connection with the Cowley is more implied than explicated. There is no mention of trade unions, political publications or the ‘working classes’ throughout the chapter. However, alter-globalisation politics plays an important part in the life of the club and the core group who run it. This is evident from the latter half of the chapter, which begins with the sub-title *Does the Cowley Club suck energy away from real activism?*

²⁵ These services and events include: a vegan/vegetarian café, Migrant English Project (MEP), women’s self-defence classes, independent cinema nights, prisoner support groups and much more.

Are we all wasting our time running a space when we could be focussing on more urgent struggles? And do people get involved with the social centre as their contribution and so not create more confrontational actions or projects? Behind this we have to ask what is the relationship between having the social centre and movement/activist activity in the area? What is real activism and do people get distracted from it or drawn to it by a social centre? (Cowley Club participant in Chatterton & Pickerill 2005: 35)

‘Real activism’, is understood here as those methods that involve more traditional political strategies and tactics. Later in the piece the author suggests some of her fellow anti-capitalists see social centres as “an easy option” for those who might otherwise “be involved in campaigning and direct action”. It should be noted that the chapter in no way paints a picture of the centre as a lacklustre political space with little or no radical edge. The following quote points towards the centre providing, what I consider, an invaluable service to marginalised groups within the community:

Dedicated “activists” have to take on responsibility, learn to negotiate difficult personal challenges and act out of solidarity. [...] Working at the Cowley Club brings me into contact with many people that I would not otherwise meet and helps break down the idea of activists and everyone else. There is no guaranteed path from one thing to another but being part of working in the club can be a really valuable part of the mundane, everyday revolution (ibid).

Crucial as everyday revolutionary moments are, there is still a sense here that Cowley Club participants feel the centre redirects their energy away from more subversive and disruptive forms of direct action. This concern, as we shall see later in this chapter is not uncommon among social centre activists and anarchists more widely. Getting the right balance between what Gordon (2007) would call anarchism *as confrontation*, anarchism *as outreach* and anarchism *as prefiguring alternative strategies for living* is an ongoing concern for all anarchist-influenced social centres.



The Cowley Club entrance gives away very little in terms of its political motivations

What then can we say about this third wave of social centres in the UK influenced by a diverse and highly contested alter-globalisation movement? If we consider the diversity of the movement along with the particularities of each social centre location, it becomes clear that any attempt to generalise would be absurd. Similarly, the open and informal character of membership/use of the centres makes it difficult to establish vital statistics. As we can see from the examples above the life span of social centres varies considerably as does the number of active and passive users of the spaces. Bearing these difficulties in categorisation in mind, to conclude this section I offer a brief introduction to the political subjectivities at work within the social centre scene in Glasgow over the last ten years.

On the conflict of internal organization, social centre activists in Glasgow verge on the side of the horizontalists. Participatory democratic practices, for the most part, have informed the decisions taken by those involved in social centre activity (see Chapter 5). In keeping with horizontal modes of organization, Glasgow activists

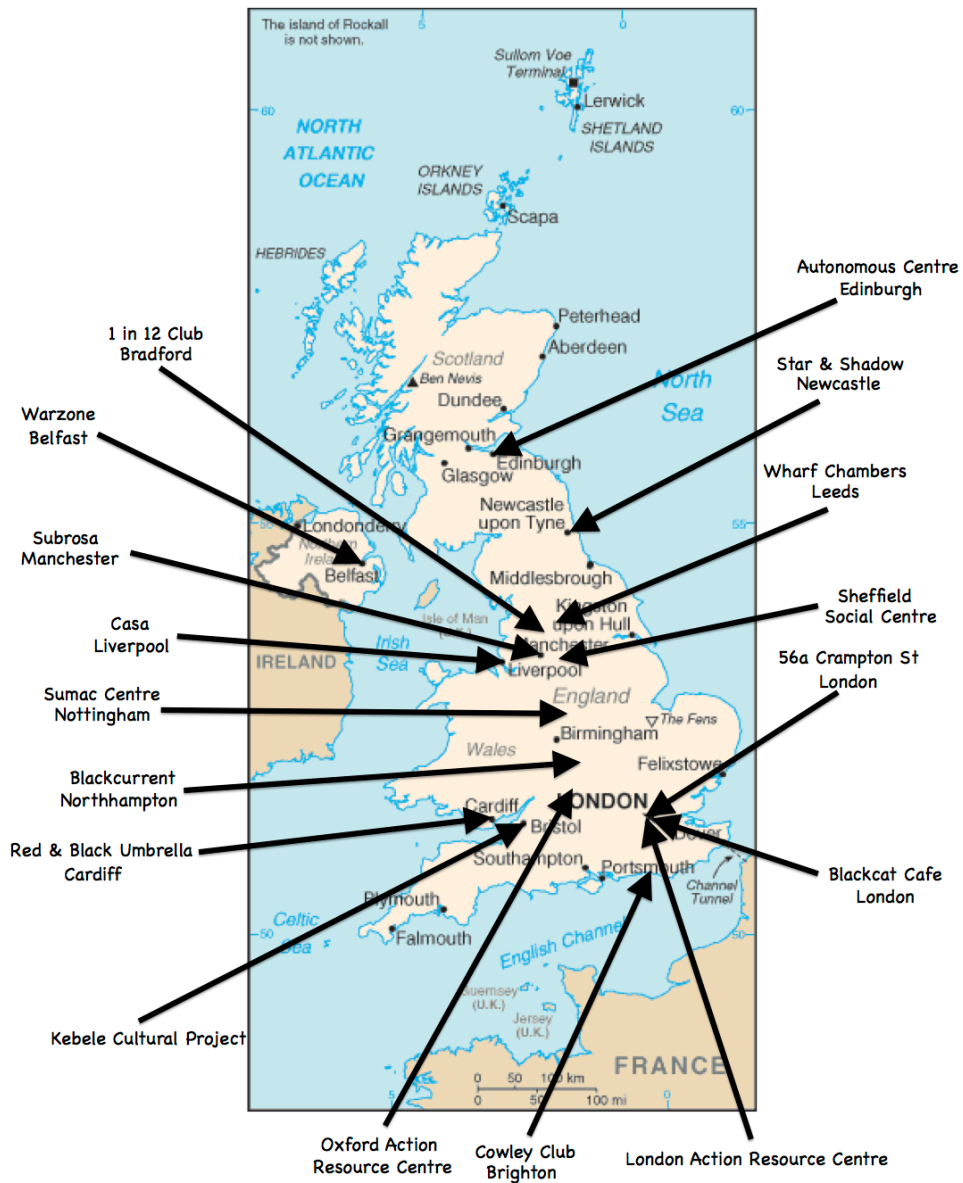
communicate within a network of social centres, info-shops and radical bookshops across the UK (See map 2, p.85). Like the OSCs in Italy, Glasgow activists reject the crude form of workerism associated with dominant forms of working-class struggle (i.e. unions and parties), preferring to contest a wider terrain of domination involving racism, patriarchy, animal liberation as well as classism. Like the autonomous clubs of the 1980s, social centres in Glasgow have promoted counter-cultural activities that aim to provide respite from, what for many is, the drudgery and boredom of a precarious working life in a neoliberal city. Although aiming to be non-hegemonic, Glasgow activists have had to take a pragmatic position when dealing with the hegemonic institution of capital and state – Scottish law offers no legal protection for squatters so all three of the city’s social centres over the last ten years have been located in rented premises. Furthermore, in our age of precarity and austerity social centre activists often apply to various funding streams relating to, in particular, outreach and alternative living activities. These include, for example, funding for educational workshops (i.e. bike maintenance, up-cycling etc).

To conclude this section on the third wave of social centres I want to draw attention to an important critique of the alter-globalization movement. Routledge, Cumbers and Nativel (2008) argue that the ephemeral, transitory and to this we might add de-stratified role (‘belonging to no class’) of the alter-globalization activist fighting on the streets of Seattle and Genoa, defending the forests of Oregon and Ecuador is a position open only to a privileged few. For most people struggling against capitalism, patriarchy, ableism etc, the parameters of a stratified existence places limits on their geographical horizon. Juris (2008) suggests that an unintended effect of such actions was to de-territorialize struggle, positioning it in the ‘out-of-reach’ imagined geographies of the global. The 3rd wave of social centres, of which

the GSC is part of, although influenced by sections within the alter-globalization movement, should be seen as a critique of, and response to, these more exclusionary practices. Social centres are firmly situated in territorial struggle – the territory in question being the city.

As one might expect from a socio-political process that promotes participatory democratic practices, the political typology of the social centre scene in Glasgow has altered many times over the decade. In many respects the Glasgow scene is as complex as the alter-globalization movement itself. That being said there is a particular political philosophy that both acts as “the hidden referent” (Newman 2010) behind many of the groups within Adams’ constellation of oppositions and can be found influencing, more than any other political idea, Glasgow’s social centre activists: that is anarchism.

UK Social Centres 2014



Map 2

Anarchism

Anarchism is a highly contested political philosophy. Cohn and Wilber (2007: 4) for example write, “Anarchist history is a terrain occupied by materialists and mystics, communists and mutualists, nihilists and scientists, progressivists and primitivists alike”. To be sure, many who have claimed the mantle of ‘anarchist’ have missed the point completely, mistaking it for and using it to legitimise all manner of absurd, violent and exploitative behaviours. Contra a wealth of misreading, misunderstandings and deliberate acts of deceit by its detractors, anarchism proper means a society based on mutual aid and mass democratic participation characterised by the absence of domination of human beings over other human beings. Some anarchists extend this absence of domination to human relations with all sentient beings. Others extend this further to include plant species that are under threat as a result of human action. If only it were so simple! Even anarchism proper comes in a variety of forms. In order to more fully understand the contemporary social centre scene in the UK a discussion of these must take place.

The following section is split into three sub-sections. Firstly, I provide a brief overview of the evolution of anarchism from its conception in the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. The second section, titled ‘Freedom’, distinguishes between anarchist and liberal notions of freedom. In doing so, I introduce the principle of *autonomy*, which as we shall see, although counter-intuitive, is reliant upon collective engagement. The third section looks at anarchist spatial practices, which, guided by a commitment to political decentralization, subverts the institutional spatial practices of territorialization (and bordering).

A Brief History of Anarchism

Needless to say, anarchism was not born perfect and complete in 1840. It has evolved, developed and changed based on changing objective circumstances, current events and new developments (McKay 2008).

The above quote is useful for beginning this brief history of anarchist thought and action for a couple of reasons. Firstly, Joseph Proudhon first used the word anarchism in a positive sense in his 1840 work, *What is Property?* Social and political sensibilities before this period employed ideas and actions that would later be associated with anarchism and indeed have played a role in shaping anarchism over the years – e.g. direct action, self-determination and mutual aid – but anarchism as a recognized political tradition of thought and action was born in the mid-nineteenth century. Returning to Proudhon's early use of the term, he wrote in *What is Property* that “the worker has sold and surrendered his liberty” to the owner who appropriates their “collective force” (2007: 72). He argued that “the right to product is exclusive... the right to means is common” (ibid), therefore property should be abolished. This is the rationale informing, arguably, Proudhon's most famous comment “Property is Theft”. In response to his analysis of the exploitation of workers – agricultural and industrial – he advocated industrial democracy. This is important because we see from anarchism's conception that this political tradition has always been concerned with furthering the democratic project – an insight concealed by its detractors who often equate it with disorganization, chaos and structurelessness.

The above FAQ quote is also useful because it presents anarchism as a flexible and fluid political tradition. This is to be expected from a political tradition that promotes grassroots organization and self-determination, although it makes the task of

writing even a brief streamlined history of anarchist action impossible. What follows then is a summary of key events and thinkers in anarchist history and how these events and people have shaped subsequent anarchisms.

It was the Russian revolutionary Michael Bakunin who popularized the term ‘anarchy’ as a movement against both capital and the state. By all accounts a charismatic figure, Bakunin’s speeches and writings did much to forge the identity of the anarchist movement. Although somewhat overstated by Marxist and Anarchist historians, his disagreements with Marx, beginning at the 1864 First International of the International Working Men’s Association (IWMA), played a significant role in defining the early anarchist trajectory. Of this infamous split in the formative years of the socialist movement Michael Lowy (2014) writes:

For Marx, the reasons for the split are Bakunin’s Pan-Slavist tendencies and his anti-democratic, conspiratorial fractionalism. According to Bakunin, the division resulted from Marx’s Pan-German orientation, as well as his authoritarian and intolerant behaviour. In spite of the obvious exaggerations, both accusations contain some truth, and the wrongs can hardly be placed only on one side (Lowy 2014: 107)²⁶.

Bakunin’s important contribution in terms of tending the first stems of Proudhon’s work was to argue that the “natural organisation of the masses... is organisation by trade association” and “for the International to be a real power, it must be able to organise within its ranks the immense majority of the proletariat... of all lands” (Bakunin in Working Class Politics and Anarchism 2011: 53). This organizational call to action was supplemented with the idea of the general strike, which he considered “a great cataclysm which forces society to shed its old skin” (ibid). In this dual strategy we see the two associations of the term anarchism: “the widespread

²⁶ Lowy’s paper ‘A common Banner: Marxists and Anarchists in the First International’ offers a refreshingly new analysis of key texts of the time, showing that there was more agreement between the groups than historians have hitherto documented.

discord of social revolutionary upheaval” and the “stable social order of freedom and solidarity that would follow” (Marshall 1992: 69).

Arguably the most referenced of the anarchist wing of the IWMA is Russian exile Peter Kropotkin. Kropotkin’s major contribution to anarchist thought is his book *Mutual Aid: a factor of evolution* published in 1902. In part a response to social Darwinism and in particular to Thomas H Huxley’s nineteenth century essay *The Struggle for Existence*, *Mutual Aid* draws on Kropotkin’s scientific experience as a geographer to explore the phenomenon of cooperation in human and non-human animal life. Kropotkin has been accused of being guilty of the “grossest misrepresentation and disregard for truth” (H.M Hyndman in Adams 2011:67) in his historical analysis of humanity’s potential for cooperative forms of social organisation. Adams contends that although the “breadth of the brushstrokes he [Kropotkin] applies to his panorama of human history is problematic” (Adams 2003:68) Kropotkin does not take an evolutionary view of history perceiving an anarchist utopia at its end, as Hyndman and others suggest. In spite of his broad brushstrokes – a style in keeping with many of his contemporaries – Kropotkin had a more nuanced understanding of history stating: “history is not an uninterrupted natural development, but a process subject to perpetual change” (Kropotkin in Adams 2003: 69). Kropotkin saw both virtue and vice playing a role in the path of human development. To this end, his theory of mutual aid is best viewed, not as an idea structured in concordance with historical truth or destiny, but rather as an ethics of practice with which individuals can guide themselves through and beyond their vices. Along with *Mutual Aid: a factor of evolution* and other prominent works, Kropotkin is the most famous exponent of anarchist-communism. Following on from the works of Proudhon and Bakunin the logic of anarchist-communism is straightforward: “if means were

common (as Proudhon and Bakunin had stressed) then so should the products created by them” (McKay 2013).

The late *nineteenth* and early *twentieth centuries* were, for the most part²⁷, the highpoint of anarchist theory and practice. Across Europe and the US anarchism was informing and in turn being informed by tens of thousands of workers active in the revolutionary syndicalist movement. Syndicalism, in short, is an industrial based form of economic organization in which industries are owned and managed by workers. While not exclusive to anarchist practice *revolutionary syndicalism*²⁸ can be seen as anarchism in the workplace (Schmidt & van der Walt 2009). The French revolutionary syndicalist Pierre Monatte (1881-1960) commented that syndicalism reminds “anarchism of its worker origins” while anarchists’ have “contributed in no small way to dragging” the unions “along the revolutionary path” (Monatte [1907] in Anarcho 2011). This flourishing period of anarchist ideas was cut short by WW1, which saw vast numbers of workers slaughtered in the brutality of trench warfare.

In the decades between the wars anarchism became marginalized in many countries. Duped by what Berkman termed *The Bolshevik Myth* (1925) and no doubt attracted to communist parties in western Europe riding high on the funds the USSR provided, many radicals turned away from anarchist teachings. In other countries, anarchist movements were crushed by fascism. The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) is a case in point. There is not the space here for me to focus on the defeat of anarchists by the fascists or what is considered by many as the betrayal of the Spanish workers and democracy by both the USSR and the social democracies of the west during this

²⁷ A small but significant number of people influenced by anarchism carried out a series of high-profile assassinations in the late nineteenth century. Targeting prominent members of the political, aristocratic and capitalist classes and known as ‘Propaganda by the Deed’ this violent but relatively short episode in anarchist history (reaching its peak in 1892-4) has done much to paint anarchism as an essentially violent ideology.

²⁸ Syndicalism is the French word for (trade) unionism, hence the prefix ‘revolutionary’ used by the militant arm of the European union movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

period in European history. What I think is more important for this summary of key events and people in the ongoing history of the anarchist tradition are the achievements of working men and women in Spain before and during the Civil War.

When people ask me for ‘real-life’ examples of anarchism I begin by offering up all manner of everyday forms of self-determined resistance (e.g. foot-dragging, poaching, desertion) and creative alternatives to the dominant state/capitalist nexus (e.g. housing coops, time banks, community land-buys). I begin with these examples because I think it’s important to impress anarchism’s dual approach (disruption and creation), it’s contemporary relevance and it’s everydayness as a form of political expression. However, these examples are seldom enough for people who feel more comfortable with a solid historical example. By way of offering such an example, I speak about the Catalonia of the years before and during the Spanish Civil War. Much has been written about this important time and place in European history. I can’t do it justice in the space I have here. I will instead turn to George Orwell who witnessed it first hand and documented his experience in his 1938 book *Homage to Catalonia*:

Above all, there was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom (pp 4-6). Many of the normal motives of civilized life – snobbishness, money-grubbing, fear of the boss, etc. – had simply ceased to exist. The ordinary class-division of society had disappeared to an extent that it is almost unthinkable in the money-tainted air of England; there was no one there except the peasants and ourselves, and no one owned anyone else as his master [...] One had breathed the air of equality. I am well aware that it is now the fashion to deny that Socialism has anything to do with equality. In every country in the world a huge tribe of party-hacks and sleek little professors are busy ‘proving’ that Socialism means no more than a planned state-capitalism with the grab-motive left intact. But fortunately there also exists a vision of Socialism quite different from this [...] As far as my purely personal preferences went I would have liked to join the Anarchists (Orwell 1938: 104-106)²⁹.

²⁹ I suggest that all referenced accounts of Orwell’s time in Spain should come with the following caveat, written by him: “I hope the account I have given is not too misleading ... consciously or unconsciously everyone writes as a partisan ... beware of my partisanship, ... and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events. And beware of exactly the same things when you read any other book on this period of the Spanish war” (Orwell 1938: 291).

Since the Spanish Civil War and WW2 anarchism has, as the opening quote to this section implicates evolved, developed and changed based on changing objective circumstances, current events and new developments in social and political life. Our previous discussion on the history of European social centres has many parallels with changes in anarchist thought and attendant actions, particularly those centres I associate with what I have termed *the second wave: reclaiming the city* (see p77). Two important extensions of anarchist ideas during the post-war decades are those offered by Murray Bookchin (1921-2006) and the political theorists Colin Ward (1924-2010) and Noam Chomsky. Bookchin's work has arguably done more than any other in bringing the ecological aspects of anarchism to the fore. Ward and Chomsky, although very different in their style of writing, have etched out what some would call a *pragmatic anarchism*. On this pragmatic approach Nathan Schneider in his introduction to *Chomsky on Anarchism* (2013) writes:

He sees no contradiction between holding anarchist ideals and pursuing certain reforms through the state when there's a chance of more free, more just society in the short term; such humility is a necessary antidote to the self-defeating purism of many anarchists today. He represents a time when anarchists were truly fearsome – less because they were willing to put a brick through a Starbucks window than because they had figured out how to organize themselves in a functional, egalitarian, and sufficiently productive way (Schneider in Chomsky 2013: xi).

As this quote suggests with reference to tensions within contemporary anarchist practice (i.e. bricks through a Starbucks window) anarchism remains imperfect and incomplete but perfection and completeness have never been the aims of those folk who have acted in the name of anarchism. As Kropotkin argued *vice* and *virtue* will

always play their part in shaping human history. What the anarchists do is experiment with alternative strategies for living that are designed to facilitate virtue and limit vice. I believe these imperfect experiments in cooperation remain humanities best hope in realizing a more equal and freer society that we have hitherto experienced. Taking a more theoretical turn the next section of this chapter will focus on the key concepts of *Freedom* and *Autonomy* within anarchist thought before considering the anarchism as a set of spatial practices.

Freedom

Ben Franks writes “anarchism is a fluid assemblage of political concepts that alters according to geographical and historical contexts” (Franks 2007:127). Because its practices and concepts are fluid, being both historically and geographically contingent, anarchism, Franks argues, is difficult to define or rather difficult to ossify into a coherent whole. Anarchism has a cogent set of core concepts but their emphasis alters in different contexts (ibid). Franks references John Quail in identifying these as “a rejection of the state and quasi-state forms, a rejection of capitalism, and an egalitarian concern for the interests and freedoms of others, usually viewed in the phrase, ‘until all of us are free then no one is free’” (Quail in Franks 2007:129).

It is worthwhile considering Quail’s words in more detail for *freedom* is the fuel of anarchist thought and action. In the previous chapter I outlined (neo)liberal understandings of freedom as a condition centered upon a particular relationship between the individual, the state and the market. I argued that neoliberalism, although always premised on the extension of *free* market values, must utilize the apparatus of state in pursuit of this extension. In doing so it does not diminish state authority but rather reassembles it in terms of spatial reach (Allen and Cochrane 2010). As well as

co-facilitator, along with organisations in both civil society and the corporate sector, the state is chief protector of what Rose and Miller (2010) call the liberal ‘sphere of freedom’ and without the state, individuals might, to borrow from Gilbert, “degenerate into some sort of primitive communism” (Gilbert 2012: 7) or, borrowing from Hobbes (1588-1679) and his theory of the social contract, “descend into anarchy”. (Neo)liberal freedom then is conditioned upon individuals ceding part of their liberty to the sovereign power in order to enhance their individual *security* (Bottici 2013). This is sometimes called ‘negative freedom’.

Freedom, for anarchists, is something profoundly different from the summary given above. Whilst there are certainly conditions to freedom, as understood by anarchists, these conditions are not set by a sovereign power. Benjamin R. Tucker explains:

Anarchy does not mean simply opposed to the *archos*, or political leader. It means opposed to the *arche*. Now, *arche* in the first instance, means *beginning, origin*. From this it comes to mean *a first principle, an element*; then *first place, supreme power, sovereignty, dominion, command, authority*; and finally *a sovereignty, an empire, a realm, a magistracy, a governmental office* (Tucker [1926] 1973).

Anarchy then is opposed to the *archos* (the political leader) in the sense that it breaks with the logic of the *arche* – the presupposition (or first principle) that a “determinate superiority is exercised over an equally determinate inferiority” (Rancière 2010: 30). What then are the conditions of anarchist freedom and who sets them if not a supreme power?

One condition of anarchist freedom is *autonomy*. Some anarchists, and some of their detractors, continue to mistake autonomy for freedom. Although partially overlapping, they are in fact different conditions. Autonomy can exist without freedom, but the inverse, under anarchist notions of freedom, is not possible. Autonomy means

‘autos’ – ‘nomos’, to give law to oneself. This is not freedom in anarchist terms as the *self* here acts as a sovereign entity. Anarchism asks us to go beyond freedom as autonomy by presenting our subjectivity as one of collectivity. This overlapping of the two is expressed in the term *Libertarian Socialism* – a less emotive term for anarchism. Colson writes:

[a]narchist autonomy refers to the forces constitutive of beings, to their capacity to develop in themselves the totality of resources which they need in order 1) to affirm their existence and 2) to associate with others, and to thus constitute an ever more powerful force of life” (Colson in Ince 2012: 1654).

Bakunin (1814-1876) helps us further understand this relationship between autonomy and freedom. Freedom for Bakunin consists “in the right to obey nobody other than myself and to determine my acts in conformity with my convictions, mediated through the equally free consciousness of everybody” (1996: 81). In the first part of this quote we are presented with the condition of autonomy (i.e. “the right to obey nobody other than myself and to determine my acts in conformity with my convictions...”). *Freedom* comes into play in the latter part of the sentence, when the autonomy of one’s convictions is “mediated through the equally *free* consciousness of everybody” (ibid). Anarchist freedom then seems some way off from our current position of marked societal inequality, for it requires each of us to recognize, engage with, and when necessary defend the liberty of others. To borrow from Bottici (2013) in order for an anarchist freedom to be realized we must reverse the liberal motto ‘your freedom ends where that of the others begins’ into ‘your freedom begins with that of everybody else’.

How do we achieve such an upturn in our fortunes? Firstly, it is important to grasp that anarchist notions of freedom are not as far off as they might seem. Colin Ward (1924 – 2010), for example, once wrote that such freedoms are:

like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices, nationalism and its suicidal loyalties, religious differences and their superstitious separatism....far from being a speculative vision of a future society, it [anarchism] is a description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society (Ward, 1973: 11).

Community gardens, tenant and workplace organizing, open source learning, Local Economic Trading Schemes, Social Centre activism – these are some of the everyday ways in which we can and do operate in spite of dominant authoritarian trends. Ward's anarchism has been termed a 'gentle' form of anarchism and features later in the chapter. Recognizing and engaging with the freedoms of others can also take on a more *heated* quality, particularly in the doing of politics. I look to another condition of anarchist freedom to more fully elucidate this claim.

Quail's impassioned statement – 'until all of us are free then no one is free' – makes explicit this condition: that is, one person's freedom is conditioned upon the freedom of all of humanity. Why is this so? In the following quote, heavily influenced by the work of Bakunin, Malatesta argues that individual freedom is a delusion without the freedom of all humanity:

No man can achieve his own emancipation without at the same time working for the emancipation of all men around him. My freedom is the freedom of all since I am not truly free in thought and in fact, except when my freedoms and rights are confirmed and approved in the freedom and rights of all men who are equals. It matters to me very much what other men are, because however independent I may appear to be or think I am, because of my social position, were I Pope, Tzar, Emperor, or even Prime

Minister, I remain always the product of what the humblest among them are: if they are ignorant, poor, slaves, my existence is determined by their slavery. I, an enlightened or intelligent man am, for instance – in the event – rendered stupid by their stupidity; as a courageous man, I am enslaved by their slavery; as a rich man I tremble before their poverty; as a privileged man I blanch at their justice. I who want to be free cannot be because all the men around me do not yet want to be free, and consequently they become tools of oppression against me (Malatesta 2006).

In light of Malatesta's words we can see that anarchy goes beyond a revolt against the supreme power, in the form of the *archos*. This form of revolt might be considered the easy part. Far more difficult is to revolt against the *arche* and its more subtle manifestations of authority that we, each of us, to varying degrees, reproduce everyday in our most mundane interactions (consider, for example, our participation in the production of a shopping mall's ambient powers mentioned in the previous chapter). Bakunin refers to this less easily identified enemy as the 'tyranny of the society'. That is the tyranny exercised through "customs, sentiments, prejudices, images and habits" that work upon both our "material and intellectual life" (Bottici 2013: 17). A revolt against this enemy is paradoxical, as it amounts to a revolt against ourselves, for we are its products (ibid). However, following Rancière (2010) we might see this revolt in positive terms, for it constitutes *the political moment*: "What is specific to politics" Rancière writes "is the existence of a subject defined by its participation in contraries" (Rancière 2010: 28). This is how we achieve the upturn in our fortunes mentioned above. Although certainly a "paradoxical form of action" (ibid) by *being political*, an individual recognizes that her freedom begins with that of everybody else. In other words, in contestation with another, we set the conditions of our liberty by extending those liberties to the other. Referring to arguments made in the previous chapter regarding the neoliberalization of the urban realm, this is why the maintenance of the neoliberal city requires the homogenization of public space. To quote Rancière

‘politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible [we might also say the spatial as visibility is a condition of spatial form] and the sayable’ (2010: 37), therefore, *not* to exclude difference (or *contraries*) threatens the chimera of depoliticized normality that currently saturates so much public space. Freedom then, for anarchists, is not something that can be given to the individual by a higher power: freedom cannot be mystified. It is a condition – *a material reality* – an ongoing process that emerges from our participation with one another in the ongoing organization of the everyday spaces we inhabit.

Anarchist Spatial Practices

In a recent special edition of the *Antipode* journal a group of human geographers set about the task of re-establishing Anarchism as a serious and legitimate political philosophy that offers society a way out of the “impoverished binary” (Ince 2012) that is the free market versus state regulation dualism. This special edition is a timely intervention. Today many people of the developed world, for example, find themselves struggling to live even a decent life, due to yet another crisis of capitalism’s making. The responses from mainstream political opponents and from much of the left within the academy struggle to get beyond variations of state-regulated capitalism (Springer et al 2012). For the contributors to the *Antipode* special issue these responses leave them with a “sense of disappointment” (ibid: 1593). They write:

The selective memories of humanity’s past, the impoverished dialogues of the present, and the static visions of a supposedly predetermined future that pervade both academic and popular discourses are a testament to the paucity of the political imagination in the current conjuncture (Springer et al 2012: 1592).

For the anarchist, such imaginings fail to address the root of the problem. That is, to turn to the state for solutions to the failings of the free market makes little impact on the central dynamic of capitalist accumulation. Whether in its reformist form (i.e. social democracy) or its more radical variant (i.e. state socialism), empirical evidence makes clear that state-centred solutions do not substantively threaten the conditions necessary to ensure a minority lives very well, off the day-to-day drudgery of a majority.

Of anarchism Springer et al write:

we understand anarchism as a branch of political thought and action that promotes the collective, egalitarian, and democratic self-management of everyday life. For anarchists, this necessarily requires the dismantling of unequal power relations in all their forms, and is manifested through practices of voluntary cooperation, reciprocal altruism, and mutual aid (Springer et al 2012: 2).

From the outset, ‘the dismantling of unequal power relations’, for anarchists, constitutes a profoundly spatial and scalar type of politics. Under the conditions of the current dominant political system, to enact a process of collective democratic self-management is to begin a process of political decentralization. This involves multiple communities constituting themselves, through direct and participatory democratic practice, as substantive political decision-makers within the places in which they live and work. In the following quote Toscano (2013), referencing Reclus (1830-1905) makes the geographical character of anarchist-influenced decentralization explicit:

The political belief in the desirability and viability of a “vast federation of autonomous self-governing communities” and the emphasis on free and spontaneous development against arbitrary territorial authorities translates into a ‘profoundly geographical’ and highly decentralized thinking linked to self-management, community control, ecological sensitivity and respect for freedom (Toscano 2013: 161).

As a mechanism designed to empower the many, to decentralize, is to simultaneously flatten (or horizontalize) in a scalar sense the vertical lines of control that define the dominant political condition. To be sure, horizontality has long been the goal of the left. The communism that Marx and Engels wrote of was a world without hierarchy that would be realized after a proletarian revolution and subsequent ‘withering away of the state’. More recently Harvey has written that horizontality “is an excellent objective” (Harvey 2012). For Springer, this Marxist analysis of decentralization/horizontalization illustrates ‘a politics of waiting’ for a time when the representatives of the oppressed seize state power and begin the process of dismantling that power on behalf of those they represent (Springer 2013). To decentralize before these conditions are in place is anathema to many proponents of the Marxist political tradition. For anarchists, horizontality is not an end; it is both the means and end, which begins in the here and now: social centre activism is a material expression of this logic. Social centres “simultaneously politicize the very act of reclaiming private space and opening it up to the public” (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006) so that people might experiment with horizontal forms of organization. This is part of a conscious refusal of and alternative to neoliberalism and its spatial practices. A fuller discussion of the micro-practices associated with horizontality features later in the chapter.

Notions of decentralization and horizontality are not specific to anarchism. Neoliberalism, as discussed in the previous chapter, in theory promotes a version of decentralization. However, here substantive political power has not been more evenly distributed among the populace. Rather, the top-down command and control culture of state apparatus, which are today saturated in the nomenclature of free market logic, are extended across multiple sites (see Allen and Cochrane 2010). Similarly, notions

of horizontality have been deployed notably by ‘globalization guru’ Thomas Friedman (2005) in his book *The World is Flat*. Here *horizontality* serves as a metaphor for the free market as a ‘level playing field’. For anarchists, decentralization is a collective endeavour, which begins with extending the liberty you wish for yourself to the other: “this is a flattening of the political imagination into more horizontal arrangements, where we no longer maintain our dependency on the structures of hierarchy and support the idea of sovereign rule” (Springer 2013). It is most certainly not about levelling the playing field so that fairer competition over resources might take place.

The space and scale of anarchist political engagement should not be seen as a by-product of relations between individuals and groups working in an anarchic fashion. Rather, to borrow from Featherstone’s work on solidarity within the alter-globalization movement (2013), specific places – climate camps, social centres or anywhere else anarchist politics might be enacted – *shape* the alternative political imaginaries fostered by participants: “Such spatial relations” Featherstone (2013: 192) writes “are not a fixed backdrop to activist practices but are shaped through them and in turn can be reworked”. Understanding this interdependent relationship between politics, *the* political and the environment is crucial to understanding notions of anarchist spatial politics. In short, for anarchists, the formation of each does not happen in isolation. In this sense anarchy is always immanent and emergent. This is a profoundly empowering political philosophy as it promotes an understanding of *change* as something that begins wherever we find ourselves. Taking a more pessimistic view, anarchism, for many, is difficult to accept because of its intimate connection to everyday life and everyday places. As the principle of the *arche* and the attendant logic of *enclosure* (see Chapter 1) become more commonplace, for some it

becomes increasingly difficult to imagine an alternative life centred upon openness and equality could ever emerge.

By way of countering the above fatalism I turn to Ince's (2012) work on anarchism and *territory*. Through analysis of current geographical work that emphasizes the contested and processual nature of territorialisation and attendant bordering practices (see Marston 2000, Allen and Cochrane 2007, Valentine 2007), Ince subverts a static orthodox conception of territory, re-configuring it as a space that is always contested, in flux and co-constitutive of the multiple relations that take place within it, across it and outside it. Using case studies (rank and file industrial action and social centre activism) Ince details the ways in which workers and activists alike materially and symbolically re-appropriated everyday places from the impositions of an employer and the interests of private property respectively. Echoing the above discussion on anarchist freedom and Featherstone's notion of a relational politics of space, Ince presents us with an inspiring subversive vision of territory:

Self and other are directly co-constitutive, and are produced through immanent relations and practices that develop over time. If we run with this idea of the immanent co-constitution of self and other, then we can begin to build an idea of what an anarchist vision of territory might look like by expanding this "relational" view to incorporate the way we see territory (Ince 2012: 1654).

Ince underlines the gradual ways in which these relations are formed. Like Ward, another gradualist, this suggests a *gentle* type of anarchism that develops over time "through the constant creation and adaption of revolutionary practices and relations in everyday life" (ibid). Ferrell (2012) throws some light on the character of these relational territories. Democratically anarchic urbanism (Ferrell's term) is characterized by "open public space, unregulated occupation of it and interaction

within it [and] unfettered movement through it” (Ferrell 2012: 1689). In this sense democratically anarchic urban spaces are conduits for difference, possibility, maybe even revolution. Of revolution and social centres, Christopher Wellbrook (2008) of the Anarchist Federation (AFED) writes:

Social centres have the potential to be the face of class struggle, to present an easy point of access to others in the community, to encourage communication, education and confidence within the class. Workingmen’s clubs, Union clubs and public houses have in the past typically represented a forum for agitation and organization amongst workers. Commercialisation of these social spheres represents yet another barrier to the self-emancipation and the working class. Social centres can reclaim this legacy, to act as a focal hub of organization and struggle. This also represents an important step in taking class struggle out of the confines of the workplace and into every aspect of community life. It has the potential to act as a source of class power outside the industrial relationship, to unify struggles under a broader banner and fight for the extension of self-managed space into every community and workplace. Social centres must seek to destroy as much as they create (Wellbrook 2008).

Wellbrook’s comment directly links social centres with revolutionary class struggle, although a gradualist position is hinted at with reference to encouraging “communication, education and confidence within the class” (ibid). Furthermore, he highlights the importance of working in the here and now when he writes of class struggle politics entering into “every aspect of community life” (ibid). Lastly he reminds us of the anarchist commitment to horizontality and decentralization in his call for the extension of “self-managed space into every community and workplace” (ibid). For this author, Wellbrook outlines the main tenets of anarchist prefigurative politics, of which the social centre plays a key role in facilitating.

Not all anarchists – social centre activists or otherwise – are as comfortable with anarchism’s relationship to class struggle politics. Wellbrook is a member of AFED (an anarchist-communist federation of groups). A focus on class struggle for

this network comes before all other antagonisms as a potential source of revolutionary change. For other anarchist influenced groups and individuals, anarchism that places class struggle first loses much of its emancipatory potential. For example, taking a poststructuralist-inflected approach, *post-anarchist* theorists Saul Newman and Todd May, amongst others, are attempting to unshackle, as they understand it, anarchist theory from its *classical* past and the dogmatic politics of contemporary anarchist-syndicalism and anarchist-communism. This poststructuralist turn, they argue, makes anarchism relevant to a contemporary terrain of domination that extends beyond class antagonisms (May 1994, Newman 2007). I understand anarchism as a heterogeneous collection of emancipatory tactics loosely structured around a commitment to forwarding ideas of anti-authoritarianism, decentralization and mutual aid through direct action. Anarchism has always been difficult to ossify into ideology because, to quote Adams (2003: 8), “like the world in which it exists it is always in a perpetual state of flux [...] a nomadism that never settles down, never completely hardens into one particular shape and in which the “past” eternally returns in new and unexpected ways in the present”. Although I agree poststructuralism has much to offer anarchism, I do not see the former as anarchism’s liberator, as the post-anarchists have suggested. It simply makes anarchism better³⁰. Engaging with the tensions that exist between classical and new forms of anarchist praxis plays a prominent part in the social centre experience. In Chapter 5 this dynamic is discussed in some detail by way of empirical analysis of specific debates had within and tactics employed by GSC activists.

To summarize this section on anarchist spatial practices, it is important to understand that, at all scales, such practices are premised on the notion of inclusivity.

³⁰ *Anarchism in turn, it has been argued, enhances the poststructural position. Poststructuralist intellectuals, Adams contends, have, with some justification, been denounced as apolitical and obscurantist. Anarchism, he suggests, has re-aligned them with their insurrectionary past. Schmidt (2008) makes a similar argument.*

Open spaces of contemporary social life are crucial for the expansion of freedom, which, as I argued earlier in the chapter, is a material reality that emerges from our participation with one another in the ongoing organization of the everyday spaces we inhabit. The European social centre movement has played a key role in the theoretical and more importantly corporeal development of these ideas. This is because the social centre experience allows anarchists to employ their ideas in real time and space. Surrounded by, for the most part, the counter logic of capital and state forces the application of anarchic ways of being in the city is not straightforward and effects a number of contradictions. Nevertheless, the social centre is ‘designed’ to open up a space in the neoliberal city within which *anarcho-curious* people prefigure the processes and contours of another world. In the last section of this chapter I want to look more closely at the practice of prefiguration. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, this is the principle strategy in contemporary anarchist politics.

The Prefigurative Politics of the Contemporary Social Centre Movement

How could one want an equalitarian and free society to issue from authoritarian organization? It is impossible (Guillaume in Franks 2012: 11)

Guillaume’s quote sums up the rationale motivating the prefigurative approach practiced by the contemporary social centre movement in the UK. This rationale rejects the authoritarian top-down organizational processes favoured by mainstream party politics and other institutions and in doing so attempts to construct alternative organizational forms. The simultaneity of both *rejection* and *emergence* here initiates the prefigurative approach. For social centre participants the task is to prefigure the

world they want, when and where possible, in the here-and-now. For Sitrin (2006: 4)

prefigurative movements are:

movements that are creating the future in their present social relationships [where] social change isn't deferred to a later date by demanding reforms from the state, or by taking state power and eventually instituting these reforms.

Change, for proponents of prefiguration, emerges from small openings of experimentation, which offer a pre-glimpse of what a future society might involve. This should not be seen as a response to crass criticisms of hypocrisy ("you say your anti-capitalist but you shop in ASDA, you say you're anti-statist but you're signing on the brew"³¹). Rather, participants are *learning* how to live in a society beyond the exploitations of capital and are *developing* processes of political participation they hope will replace liberal representative democracy (Maeckelbergh 2011).

Prefiguration is about collapsing distances: the distance between the means and ends of political action, the distance between political theory and practice (in the sense that we don't theorize from afar) and the distance between 'the political' (understood as the relational process of political subject formation) and 'politics' (the organizational protocols used to facilitate both political subject formation and decision-making). Franks (2007) suggests this collapsing of distance foregrounds a politics of responsibility in its call to 'be the change, you wish to see'. In doing so it also braids our effective capacities with the material world: they inform one another; they become mutually inclusive.

Maeckelbergh (2011) contends that being braided to the *messy* reality of the material world makes prefigurative politics seem less programmatic than, for example,

³¹ *Scottish colloquialism meaning, Unemployment Services: one 'signs on' to receive financial assistance and job searching expertise from staff.*

the politics of representation associated with liberal democracies. With a focus on contingency planning as opposed to following a predetermined programmatic linear sequence towards an intended goal, the prefigurative approach has been viewed as distinct from political strategy. This distinction is based upon particular understandings of strategy and prefiguration³² that Maeckelbergh (2011) argues are outdated. She writes:

This dominant view has assumed that strategy necessarily has to involve hierarchical and fixed organizational structures in the pursuit of a predetermined and singular political goal. Prefiguration on the other hand is thought to be cultural, unorganized, and without any goal beyond the enactment of new cultural relations in the here and now among movement actors. Even if these definitions of strategy and prefiguration held true for movements of the long 1960s and into the 1980s, the alter-globalization movement gives us plenty of reason to question if this is still the case today (Maeckelbergh 2011: 6).

Although not aligned to the instrumental rationale of fixed organizational structures mentioned in the above quote, it is in the word ‘multiple’ we begin to see some semblance of prefiguration as strategy. For Maeckelbergh only at the most abstract level of creating “(an)other world(s)” (ibid: 2) can we assign any notion of a singular goal or identity to this movement of movements. What we can say is that in attempting to create (an)other world(s), forces of domination within the existing world must be challenged. Dutch anarchists refer to this strategy as *total struggle*. The strategy is to challenge these forces on multiple terrains. These challenges often take on the form of mass mobilizations, occupations, blockades and acts of industrial/corporate sabotage. These actions are successful in the sense that they shine a light on a *global* system of enclosure, unfettered accumulation and increased capital and state collaboration. By highlighting the geographical scale of the *problem* they

³² *Understandings that are in no small part fuelled by left-wing sectarian positions on both sides of the libertarian/Leninist divide.*

present it as something more than a local phenomenon and in doing so help create important lines of solidarity that stretch across territorial boundaries (Featherstone 2013, Routledge 2006).

However, although inspiring and relatively effective in terms of momentarily disrupting the flow of capital, such actions are not unproblematic. They serve to create what has been termed the 'activist bubble', separating an elite activist community (mainly middle-class Westerners) from the larger mass of the politically and/or economically disenfranchised, who for a variety of reasons are unable or unwilling to participate in these *moments* of dissent (see Juris 2008, Routledge, Cumbers and Nativel 2007). Social centre activity in the UK over the last 15 years can be viewed as an attempt to address these legitimate criticisms by extending what is good about the prefigurative politics of the protest camp or blockade into the heart of our urban worlds. So what is good about this type of politics? To answer this question we must ask what type of politics is being prefigured?

As stated above, prefiguration is simultaneously a process of *rejection* and *emergence*. To understand this claim we must look beyond the seemingly endless, sometimes creative and playful but often contradictory, messages and slogans espoused by the libertarian strands of the alter-globalization movement to the organizational processes favoured by participants. What we then begin to see is the emergence of decision-making practices alternative to the command and control management structures of the corporate sphere and the representative politics associated with liberal democratic states. These emerging practices promote a culture of *openness* and *mutuality* through participatory democratic processes. This open, mutually reinforcing and participatory approach to political process is what is being prefigured.

Openness

From the outset the term openness invokes the idea of space: a particular notion of space. The term ‘open space’ is often used in conjunction with ‘Social Centres’ emphasizing their role in confronting narratives of enclosure associated with neoliberalism. For the most part, informed by radical feminist experiments in organizational techniques in the early 1970s and put into practice in the anti-capitalist direct action camps in the late 1980s and 1990s this concept has become common currency in the libertarian left over the last twenty years. With protest events such as Occupy, the Spanish Indignados and Syntagma Square in Athens achieving global media recognition in recent years, the term open space has become more prevalent across a variety of discourses. While these events somewhat differ in context, content and aims, there are important similarities that converge around an idea of open space. At the material level of physical space these protest events were centred upon and spread out from city squares. Sen (2010) tells us that the city square might be understood as an open space: in a physical sense it is outside and therefore accessible to a variety of publics. However, open space understood as a social and political concept is much more than the sedentary environments envisaged here. Open space should be seen as process rather than a thing in itself. Central to this idea of *openness* as a verb are the organising principles and strategies that determine what goes on within the space.

Sen (2010) identifies three key characteristics of open space. Firstly, those who initially create and/or manage a space do not determine its character: users of the space do this. Therefore the city square per se is not an open space because its character, in the first instance, is determined not by its users but by an external (or separated) authority (i.e. representatives of the users). Secondly, open space should

not be seen as an end itself, rather it is “an instrument, a vehicle, a transitory stage” (Sen 2010: 1006). For Sen, this is where its liberatory potential lies in that it disrupts the banality of enclosure characteristic of neoliberal urbanism and from these moments and spaces of disruption *emerge* the potential for alternative orders to evolve. A third characteristic of open space, which begins to tease out some of its contradictions, is that it is neither without a structure nor for that matter without authority. Rather, it constitutes a temporal and spatial complex of alternative organizational structures geared towards establishing a different type of authority with different protocols and rules to that of the current order. According to Graeber (2002: 70) this temporal and spatial complex is nothing short of a profound transformation of our everyday lives:

This is a movement about reinventing democracy. It is not opposed to organization. It is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organization are its ideology. It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties, or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy. Ultimately, it [...] aspires to reinvent daily life as a whole.

While an open space will have a group of initial organizers, these organizers are not *inviting* others into a predetermined programmatic environment. Rather, they are creating discursive spaces of convergence where humans exchange information about their world(s) in a *horizontal* fashion. To gain a fuller understanding of what is meant by *horizontal* here we must consider the complimentary to openness: that is mutuality.

Mutuality

Surrounded by the exclusive, fleeting and often brutalized interactions promoted in the chain stores and designer bars of the corporate city, social centres play an important role in re-thinking and re-making ‘citizenship’ by bringing people together in spaces whose very *raison d’être* is to question and confront the rampant individualism of everyday life (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006: 311).

One of the first proponents of mutuality (or mutual aid) was anarchist and geographer Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921). Although Kropotkin believed that revolution would “mark the dawn of a new epoch in human history” (Kropotkin 1902:113) he added that there was no reason to believe a more destructive form of authoritarian rule would not develop. As stated above (see p.96) Kropotkin sees both virtue and vice playing a role in the path of human development. To this end, mutual aid is best viewed as an *ethics of practice* with which individuals can guide themselves and one another through and beyond their vices so that virtues (which include, amongst others, empathy, sympathy, courage, love, caring) come to the fore. In nurturing these virtues social centre participants are attempting to bring people together so that, as Chatterton and Hodkinson put it they might “question and confront the rampant individualism of everyday life” (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2007: 311).

We might understand mutuality as *gift giving*. We gift others our knowledge, our time and our labour: this act of gift giving foregrounds a different take on the politics of difference. Participants (or gift givers) recognize people do not possess the same strengths and abilities. People come to a social centre, for instance, with different privileges and in gifting what they have to others who do not have, participants are keeping check on these differences to ensure they do not further entrench existing asymmetries of power. Mutuality then counters authoritarianism, which ossifies the transformative nature of power by limiting its reach or reduces the

power web through demanding *blind* submission to a particular set of knowledges: in other words, an authority. Under these conditions, power is locked into fixed hierarchical structures. Mutuality is a distributive process that disperses concentrations of power. Graeber (2009) calls this ‘counterpoint’:

In egalitarian societies, counterpoint might be said to be the predominant form of social power. It stands guard over what are seen as certain frightening possibilities within the society itself: notably against the emergence of systematic forms of political or economic dominance ... Institutionally, counterpoint takes the form of what we would call institutions of direct democracy, consensus and mediation; that is, ways of publically negotiating and controlling that inevitable internal tumult and transforming it into those states (or if you like, forms of value) that society sees most desirable: conviviality, unanimity, fertility, prosperity, beauty, however it may be framed (Graeber 2009:12).

Social centre activism is, as suggested above, in large part, about recognizing our privileges. In doing so participants understand the inevitability of hierarchy but in promoting mutual modes of engagement they are *impeding the institutionalization of hierarchical structures*. This is not to say that within social centres hierarchies do not evolve. On the contrary, individuals and groups are encouraged to take the lead in particular situations but this comes after a period of learning from others who have experienced taking the lead in similar situations. This is effectively a rotation system and is designed to prevent any form of over-accumulation of individual power: in other words, fixed hierarchies. This is what is meant by the term horizontality. Through sharing skills and knowledge, participants are equalizing the process of participation. This creates a horizontal mode of engagement that counters the normalization of vertical modes of engagement (employer/employee, leader/followers, ruler/ruled) characteristic of contemporary life.

So mutuality is a *learned* process characterized by the act of *sharing* or gift giving; a non-hierarchical process geared towards the re-distribution of power. As a counterpoint to systemic forms of political or economic dominance we see mutuality as effective in terms of building and nurturing a community of respect and negotiation. Like ‘Open Space’, mutuality might be read as a verb and in it’s doing we self-police our potential to dominate by concentrating on the lives of others.

In all this talk of inclusivity, mutuality and equality of participation one would be forgiven for thinking these ideas are no more than an advancement of failed socialist utopian imaginings that naively view humanity as inherently good and subjugate individuality to the authority of the collective. On this first point Kropotkin’s acknowledgment of human *vice*, Graeber’s recognition of humanities *frightening possibilities* and the *brutalized interactions* experienced in urban life mentioned by Hodkinson and Chatterton above, should dispel any notions that the proponents of prefigurative politics are under any pious illusions about the innate capacity of human kindness. Contra social mystifications, an *ethics of practice* centred upon openness and mutuality marks a deliberate attempt by participants to create political spaces that make accountability and responsibility systemic to the very doing of politics. This is a direct challenge to the paternalistic and competitive politics of the mainstream, which, as Benello (1992) states, too often facilitates vice and self-interest.

Benello (1992) throws some light on the second critique concerning the loss of self in the ‘dark matter of the collective’. For Benello the fear of group organization is omnipresent in people subject to liberal-individualistic conditioning. He writes, “the notion that groups can contribute to, rather than detract from freedom, is not familiar” (Benello 1992: 52). Cities are the ‘harbingers’ of modern culture from which major

social trends such as privatization and bureaucratization evolve (Oxford 2010). As such they are often regarded as fearful, dangerous places characterized by communities of mutual mistrust. For Benello, this serves the illusionists of centralized order who claim that without such order the city would be unmanageable. In reality most urban dwellers find themselves involved in all manner of communities whose modes of self-regulation are often quite specific to the community: communities of origin (e.g. ethnic communities); communities of place (e.g. neighborhood communities); communities of circumstance (e.g. workplace communities) and multiple communities of choice (e.g. social centres). Within these groups we find face-to-face connection, social connection, which is as much about finding difference as it is finding similarity. Oxford writes: "... reaching out to others involves a loss of faith in the autonomous self" (Oxford 2010: 40). If we understand the 'autonomous self' as a puritanical myth, a symptom of the sanitized real-spaces and headspaces of the modern city (see Chapter 1), we might then begin to see our subjectivity as one of collectivity.

Prefiguring an open and caring politics in today's metropolis is not without its tensions and contradictions. These include, amongst others, cross-generational misunderstandings, the emergence of 'would-be' leaders and, particular to the case of social centres, difficult relations developing between activists and external visitors (Mudu 2004) or detractors. In short, inequalities can be reproduced in prefigurative political spaces. For example, Featherstone (2013: 185) explores various tensions that exist within the World Social Forum (WSF), an "influential hub of different social and political movements opposed to globalization". The WSF while promoting prefigurative politics has been criticized for "lacking in openness, transparency and account- ability" (Waterman in Featherstone 2012: 206). Importantly, criticism comes

from within: that is from various bodies actively contributing to the forum. Featherstone tells us that Feminist groups, in particular, have been influential in reworking “dominant left organizational cultures at the WSF” (ibid). This he writes “emphasizes the ways in which feminist engagements can rework the conduct as well as the content of alternative politics in productive ways” (ibid). Prefigurative politics then, is always in a state of becoming; its practices are always open to critique and change. This means authoritarian forces struggle to embed their practices in the culture of the group for significant lengths of time. These tensions and inconsistencies, and the ways in which social centre activists negotiate them are discussed in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by discussing the history and geography of the European social centre movement. I argued that social centre activism over the last hundred years or so clusters around what I consider to be three waves of social centre activity. The 1st wave of social centres, or more appropriately the forbearers of the social centre, sprang from the “no-government system of socialism” (Kropotkin’s term 1927) prominent in the early 20th Century. The 2nd wave is most associated with those non-parliamentary leftwing-groups that came to prominence across Europe during the struggles of the 1970s. The 3rd wave, I suggested, emerged out of the mass demonstrations of the alter-globalization movement throughout the 1990s and 2000s. I then argued that the most prominent political philosophy motivating the European social centre movement, past and present, is anarchism. A discussion of anarchism then followed. This focused on anarchist notions of freedom, which I argued was a

collective and material experience, and on anarchist spatial practices, which I stressed are premised on the notion of inclusivity. I then discussed prefiguration as the principle strategy of social centre activism and anarchist politics more generally. I argued that what is being prefigured by social centre participants is a politics of openness and mutuality. I end this chapter by summarizing four key areas of empirical and theoretical concern and attendant questions that can be gleaned from the theoretical positions discussed in this chapter and the last that are developed in the coming empirical chapters.

1. In Chapter 1, borrowing from the work of Lefebvre, I argued that what we are dealing with in the neoliberal city is a closed system of ‘pre-determined realities’ that struggles to accommodate (or is hostile towards) difference. In what ways do urban managerial and entrepreneurial practices clash with and undermine the work of social centre activists attempting to realize an urban commons?
2. In recent years much has been written and proclaimed by political theorists and practitioners alike about the need to connect the *high* politics of state with *real* politics on the ground. The ‘return to community’ ethos propagated in the language of New Labour’s *Active Community Unit* (ACU) or a more recent David Cameron sound bite “we’re all in this together”, echoes a language of community self-help and mutual aid – albeit a distant echo. How do social centre participants enact a more radical form of democracy hitherto not offered by mainstream political process whether in its social democratic or neoliberal form?

3. In aligning myself with the practices of, what Ferrell (2012) calls *democratic anarchic urbanism*, I cannot but acknowledge its inconsistencies and tensions. As in any open systems approach, space must be provided for strains and fluctuations to play out. For example, even though the social centre experience is profoundly influenced by anarchist praxis, not all social centre participants identify themselves as anarchists. While difference produces possibilities it can also create tensions. How do social centre participants manage these tensions and are they successful in turning tension into progressively transformative action?
4. Finally, I aim to make explicit the assertion that any success for counter-hegemonic movements relies on their ability to effect substantive change in the urban environment. With this in mind, drawing on the urban imaginings of social centre activists, I tentatively begin to map out what type of city anarchist-influenced prefigurative politics might produce. To this end I take seriously the possibility of normalizing a socio-political system centred upon the rejection of all forms of domination.

Chapter 3

Doing Anarchist Research: the politics of action-orientated research with social centres

Introduction

This work takes an anarchist inflected approach to democratic practice, asking what anarchism has to offer those of us committed to the continuing democratic project. Motivated by the key areas of concern outlined in the last chapter this chapter details the methodological considerations informing my research into social centre activism in Glasgow. This chapter is about the doing of anarchist inspired research methods: how an anarchist theoretical perspective can be grounded in empirical enquiry. From the outset I want to draw attention to the practice of ongoing critique in academic enquiry. If nothing else, anarchism's incessant quest to uncover and abolish all forms of domination places ongoing critique of received *wisdom*, *technique* and *self* at the forefront of scholastic endeavour.

I begin by introducing the locations in which the research took place and a brief discussion of the research methods employed. I then foreground my dual role as an activist and academic in this research. The chapter then moves on to consider a

form of research favoured by many critical geographers, including myself, known as *action-orientated* research. Before discussing issues specific to particular methods used as part of a wider ethnographic approach, I reflect on my reasons for choosing such an approach. Drawing on the term ‘critical ethnography’ (Burawoy 1989, Thomas 1993, Maddison 2004), I argue that as a mixed-method approach that moves academic work beyond the academy, it is well suited to action-orientated research. The chapter concludes with a discussion about some of the problems (ethical and practical) I encountered throughout the research process.

Research Locations and Methods Employed

The research took place over a period of approximately thirty months from 2009 to 2012. As discussed in the introduction of the thesis the Glasgow Social Centre, for the bulk of this time, were a group without a home. The group operated out of a variety of spaces in the city. Regular Monday night meetings were held in an office space within the Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA). Events and general gatherings, which included fundraiser nights, book launches, film nights, cooking and political education events, took place in a variety of venues around the city. These included a church community hall, two community centres, an occupied building within the University of Glasgow campus and various open-air locations within the city of Glasgow. In addition to GSC specific events, research took place during events that GSC activists attended but did not organise (at least not in their capacity as social centre activists). These included the Occupation of Glasgow’s George Square (this was part of the global Occupy movement in 2011), an Anarchist Federation (AFED) event (the GSC provided the catering), and a blockade at the UK Borders Agency

headquarters in Glasgow in solidarity with the city's asylum seekers. What we can see from these varied research locations is that the GSC cultivated a relationship with various campaign groups active in the city, notably those groups who associate themselves with the libertarian arm of alter-globalisation movement (i.e. groups with no allegiance to political parties). Indeed both the core organisers of the GSC, numbering 8-12 people, and regular and occasional participants came from 'the ranks' of this libertarian milieu. From the outset of the social centre project the GSC's informal recruiting tactic exploited an already emerging network of 'like-minded' activists living in Glasgow. As I will argue later in the thesis the social centre project was seen as an opportunity to provide for this geographically disparate collection of activists a place for regular assembly, facilitating both cross-fertilization of ideas and a visible counter-presence in the city's neoliberal landscape.

Another important aspect of the research was how the GSC intersected with the state – notably the city planning and licensing departments and private sector. As such, some of the research is focused upon what Cornwall (2004) has termed invited and closed democratic spaces. That is those state sector spaces the group encountered by way of accessing funding and buildings. Importantly, these spaces should not be seen as backdrops to socio-political interactions between individuals and groups. As we shall see throughout this thesis, the street, the community hall, the city square, the meeting room and the council building play an active part in influencing the outcome of interactions between people. The role of space as an active player in shaping social relations is at the core of much human geographical enquiry (see Harvey 2000, Massey 2005, Allen 2006, Featherstone 2013 amongst many others) and this thesis is grounded in that tradition. In a sense this research occupies a space between the

actually existing state of these everyday urban spaces and their imagined form: how do we get from one to the other?

Guided by ethnographic work for my Master of Research dissertation, carried out in the summer of 2008, which looked at the internal workings of a Dutch social centre, I used a mixed method approach throughout the research process (a more detailed analysis of my reasons for choosing ethnography are discussed below). I use the term ‘mixed method’ not in the traditional sense of the application of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Ethnography can utilize both but in this research I employed only qualitative methods. The methods used were: participant observation and attendant field notes (used over the three years of my involvement with the group); discourse analysis of literatures produced by the GSC (again used throughout my time with the group); and semi-structured interviews (conducted in the autumn of 2012). Eighteen interviews were conducted. Ten of the interviewees were regular attendees of GSC meetings (I sometimes refer to this group as the *core group*). The other interviewees were individuals who, while not regularly attending meetings, were either active volunteers or regular attendees of events run by the GSC. It should also be noted that some of the interviewees had been active participants in one or more of Glasgow’s previous social centres – The Printworks and The Chalkboard – and their testimonies of social centre life at times reflect these older experiences. Again, a more detailed discussion of methods used in the field features later in this chapter.

Activism and the Academy

In 1992 I was accepted onto a Product Design honours degree course at the Glasgow School of Art. In the summer of 1996, after taking a year out between 1st and 2nd year, I was on the dole. I had failed my 3rd year and had been kicked off the course. I learned a few things at art school however. I learned about injection and intrusion forms of plastic moulding (as was befitting a potential product designer); I learned how to roll a joint and I learned that I was working class. On this last point it is more appropriate to say that during my time at art school I first began to *feel* like a working class person out of place. That is, I felt lesser than those around me, the vast majority of whom being middle class. They looked like art students, I looked like a ned³³. They spoke confidently and eloquently about their work, I seldom spoke about mine. They all seemed much taller than me. In the aftermath of art school I went through a period of reflection that guided me towards socialist literatures – Tressell, Marx and Engels, Morris and others. Although I struggled with much of the language and ideas offered by these writers, I was in effect going through a period of politicization and my experience of art school was the catalyst for this awakening of sorts.

Nine years after leaving art school I went back to university as a mature student to study Geography. In terms of work, for the most part those nine years in between higher education were spent on the dole or in soul destroying temporary positions the unemployment services demanded I took. Thankfully, the upsides of that period in my life far outweighed the impositions of capital and the state. As well as joining a band (as is expected of a failed art student) those years were a time of protest. It was the 1990s and early 2000s. Anti-Capitalists, it seemed, were popping-up everywhere – forests, fields, motorways, airports, industrial sites and urban centres – and within the plurality of this movement I was drawn to a strain of messages that

³³ *NED* is a modern Scots term meaning *Non-Educated Delinquent* – Scots equivalent of the English Chav.

spoke of *actual* equality, of the dissipation of all forms of domination, of anarchism. Whilst in those days I was not a member of a branch of a federation or part of an affinity group, I attended as many marches, protests, blockades, raves³⁴ and meetings as I could (not only those organized by anarchists I should add). Those years as a young activist were the catalyst propelling me back to university. I wanted to better understand the ideas that were evolving all around me. I wanted to make a better contribution to those ideas. I wanted to better inform my arguments when debating with others. In short, I saw a university education as a means to make me a better activist.

As such, my work as an early career researcher thus far falls under the category of action-orientated research as practiced by academics in the field of critical geography (see Fuller and Kitchin 2004, Kinden et al 2004, Gibson-Graham 2008). My choice of subject matter and the research methods I employ are designed to reduce the distance between the two worlds I inhabit as an academic and as an activist. There are two practical reasons for this. Firstly, I want the skills I have acquired during my years at university – writing skills, presentation skills, listening skills – to directly aid the activists I work with. Secondly, these groups of activists – the spaces they inhabit, the language they use, and the organizational processes they practice – fascinate and, on the whole, inspire me.

Action Orientated Research

The vibrancy and diversity of the sub-discipline critical geography has brought about significant academic and political gains (Castree 1999; Mitchell 2003) with some of

³⁴ *At that time we raved as much as a point of protest as a reason for having a good time – primarily because the state had begun demanding that we better have a good reason (i.e. a licence) for having a good time.*

geography's most cited academics being practitioners of the critical approach (David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Neil Smith, Michael Watts and Don Mitchell). However, other commentators have argued that such professional and institutional successes have coincided with significant losses for leftist theory and, more worryingly, action (Castree 1999; Chatterton 2008, Springer 2013). These academics, amongst others, take the view that radical thought has become deeply embedded within universities – institutions that are themselves purveyors and protagonists of the dominant ideologies critical geography set out to critique. For these reasons they argue that an action-orientated approach focused on rekindling the links between the academy and community is well suited to those geographers who wish to further the development of emancipatory geographic knowledge. This idea chimes with Erik Olin Wright's (2009) more general call for an emancipatory social science:

Emancipatory social science seeks to generate scientific knowledge relevant to the collective project of challenging various forms of human oppression. To call this a form of social *science*, rather than simply social criticism or social philosophy, recognizes the importance of systematic scientific knowledge about how the world works for this task. The word *emancipatory* identifies a central moral purpose in the production of knowledge – the elimination of oppression and the creation of the conditions for human flourishing. And the word *social* implies the belief that human emancipation depends upon the transformation of the social world, not just the inner life of persons.

To fulfil this mission, any emancipatory social science faces three basic tasks: elaborating a systematic diagnosis and critique of the world, as it exists; envisioning viable alternatives; and understanding the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of transformation. In different times and places one or another of these may be more pressing than others, but all are necessary for a comprehensive emancipatory theory (Wright 2009: 8).

Wright's ideas remind me of the need for researchers to develop a position of *critical proximity* (term borrowed from Routledge 2008) as opposed to *critical distance*, in terms of our relationship with the subject matter of the research. We might also look

to Negri (2007) for further support within academia for the need to *activate* research. Negri writes about the “logic of immersion” where knowledge and action converge “in the construction of the commons” as a moral imperative (Negri 2007). As social scientific researchers we cannot maintain a position of distance throughout the research process if we are to better understand “the obstacles, possibilities and dilemmas of transformation” faced by our research subjects. Immersing ourselves in the day-to-day lives of our research subjects is not without risk. In this type of work the researcher cannot but develop strong sympathies and/or solidarities with research participants. Although we use the term *insider status* to describe much of our work with research participants, remembering that we are not accurately insiders and our relationship with the group is, to a degree, staged, is crucial for retaining a professional critical edge. These ideas necessarily require a reduction in the distance between the researcher and participant(s). These ideas also suggest the need for a flexible methodological approach that is capable of coping with the contingencies of social existence. A *toolbox* of methods becomes more critical when researching phenomena as-it-happens. Whilst certainly not specific to action-orientated research, researchers in this mould often employ ethnography as a qualitative research design because it involves multiple methods. The next section considers ethnographic work in more detail.

(Critical) Ethnographic Work

Critical ethnography is conventional ethnography with a political purpose

(Thomas J 1993)

An ethnographic rationale is relatively straightforward. The ethnographer aims to reduce the physical and emotional distance that lies between the researcher and the researched. The ethnographer attempts to get close to those she is researching. The little things are important, the banal everyday relations between people, structures and space: this is where the ethnographer gathers information and constructs knowledge. But unlike the early ethnographer most notably associated with the field of anthropology – observing and recording the lives of non-western others in such a way as to ferment and maintain division between peoples (Clifford 1986) – ethnographers today recognise and even celebrate the cross-fertilization of values and ideas between the researcher and the researched. This research embraces this notion of a two-way learning process and, like the quote above, has a political purpose.

Broadly speaking, this research is concerned with forms of agency and resistance within the city. As such the meta-theoretical concerns motivating me are centred upon relations between space, structure and agency. Smith (2002) draws our attention to the usefulness of an ethnographic approach when considering these relations:

...ethnography's radical move ... is that of pulling the organisation of the trans- or extra-local ruling relations – bureaucracy, the varieties of text-mediated discourse, the state, the professions and so on – into actual sites of people's living where we have to find them as local and temporally situated activities (Smith 2002: 19).

Ethnography focuses on the “actualities of everyday living” (Smith 2002: 18). This is not to say that ethnography is confined to descriptions of agency within a particular locality. Although such descriptions are important, indeed crucial, to ethnographic enquiry, the *holistic* character of ethnographic research allows for the inclusion of external generative mechanisms at work in the shaping of a place, structure and actor

(Smith 2002). As a holistic form of scientific research, ethnography necessarily utilizes a variety of methods. This mixed approach usually involves qualitative methods such as participant observation, discourse analysis, and semi or un-structured interviews but it can also be supplemented with archival work and even statistics (Bryman 2008). These methods when employed as constituent parts of ethnography are not simply tools with which to mine information. For Schostak (2006: 1) they are as much about “seeing a world – mine, yours, ours, theirs – as about hearing accounts, opinions, arguments, reasons, declarations”.

In many of the social science textbooks on methods, ethnography is neatly split into three sections: the process of observing and recording data (the fieldwork) followed by analysis leading to written description of the study subject. In reality this is neither feasible nor desirable. Data gathering cannot be so easily separated from analysis and write-up. Gibson-Graham argues that to separate these components implies “residual loyalty to the modernist separation of theory and practice – that conception of knowledge/theory existing separate from and/or prior to change/politics” (Gibson-Graham 1994: 214). The methods employed in ethnography then are done so interdependently.

Introducing the prefix *critical*, Chari and Donner (2010: 76) argue that *critical* ethnography “seeks not just to describe but to transcend existing inequalities”. As such, critical ethnography moves from, as Madison (2005) puts it, ‘what is’ to ‘what could be’. White and Drew (2011) move us further from the objective pursuits of positivist science when they admit to their shared feeling of unease at the realisation that data is not just there to be collected or captured but rather it can be “created, or generated, through the approaches used, and the relationships developed” between the researcher and the participants (White and Drew 2011: 4). In this sense we see critical

ethnography as a collaborative project whereby researcher and participants construct their own narratives, participating in “a kind of fiction” (ibid: 9), that tries to place alternative, marginalized and forgotten stories into the collective imagination. Creativity is not a virtue often associated with geographical thought or for that matter political practice. Creativity is what society expects from its writers, its painters, its marketing executives and its accountants. But creativity is required of those researchers who place themselves and their work *in, against and beyond*³⁵ contemporary forms of domination.

The Insider-Outsider Dichotomy and other ‘Wicked’ Methodological Considerations

In this section of the chapter I want to outline in more detail my use of each of the methods employed in the research and the practical and ethical problems I faced. I begin with Participant Observation, as this was the most prevalent form of data gathering method used. Referring to Gold’s (1958) classification of participant observer roles, I would come under the category of *participant-as-observer* as opposed to *observer-as-participant*. This simply means that I was an active participant in the social centre before I took on the role of academic observer recording my actions and the actions of others. Before looking at my *activist/researcher* status in more detail I want to briefly outline the data recording process I adopted during participant observations. When in the field I carried with me

³⁵ Term borrowed from the title of a conference I presented at in March 2012 in the Scottish Trade Union Congress building, Glasgow. The full conference title was ‘In, Against and Beyond Neoliberalism’. The term probably originates from the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979 ‘In and Against the State’, CSE Books, London. See: <https://libcom.org/library/against-state-1979>.

a field notebook. This was used to record on-the-spot ideas of my own and comments by participants that I felt were relevant to my research questions. The field notebook was supplemented with a diary. The diary was not used in the traditional way. By this I mean there were no inserts going through the motions of the day. Rather, it provided a means to extend my thoughts on particularly interesting observations noted in the field notebook. For example, the following quote extracted from my field notebook draws attention to the conflicting worlds of the urban activist and the city planner, of the amateur and the professional, of the idealist and the pragmatist:

Just left the planning department meeting with a motley group of fellow GSC folk. Not really sure how the meeting went. I don't think we fit the usual client type. Felt awkward, out of place. A couple of our folk expressed similar feelings of discomfort. Maybe we should have been more professional? (Field notebook extract, February 2010).

While this field notebook quote is not repeated verbatim in the thesis it was the catalyst for a collection of 'diary thoughts' about feelings of inclusion/exclusion within different 'official' spaces in the city. This particular train of thought foregrounds a discussion in Chapter 6 about the affective capacities of what I call 'Planning as Inscription' and 'Planning as Invitation'. This highlights the value of diary extracts for capturing reflections about experiential aspects of different social spaces.

Insider status had many benefits. Firstly there existed a relatively high level of trust between the others in the group and myself: enough trust for them to agree to the research. Secondly, having some knowledge of the character of the individuals within the core group allowed me to more effectively manage the subtleties of social engagement as a study subject. In other words, recognising when someone was having a good day or a bad day was invaluable when considering his or her words and

actions. At a more practical level, knowing the protocols of the group meant that I went into the research with a great deal of basic understanding of group organization, social relations, etc in place.

Insider-hood is not unproblematic. Consider the following quote by a researcher carrying out work in which she had similar insider status to me:

If insider-hood was the basis for data collection, it had to be replaced by outsider-hood as soon as possible afterwards; only then could the ‘truth’ of the site be represented in a theoretical package to further the enlightenment of future academics (Humphrey 2007: 14).

Humphrey here is referring to pressure applied on her by her thesis supervisors to produce a “doctoral thesis” and not a “political manifesto” (ibid). My own supervisors have had a far more progressive understanding of knowledge production as a process that is never neutral. In other words, the core values held by the producer(s) will always inform the work. However, some friends and family took similar positions to Humphrey’s supervisors when I spoke with them about my research. The activist and the academic, according to these positions, inhabit two different worlds. This is not a position I entirely reject but the suggestion here that a close relationship between the two would result in the contamination of the latter was not borne out in my work. As stated above, this was action-orientated work, therefore it was envisaged beforehand as a political manifesto of sorts in the sense that I was embarking on a project that in part describes the *aims and policies* of an anarchist-influenced organization but also aims to understand the problems this group face from an activist stance, as much as an academic one. It should also be noted that as someone committed to contributing to a vast movement of ideas and actions geared towards living in a world without

domination, I would be doing the GSC and countless other activists past, present and future a disservice by mythologizing libertarian leftist praxis as seamless.

Bearing this commitment in mind, one might ask why I did not adopt what Jeff Juris (2007) calls *militant ethnography*? To be fair to myself much of the critical ethnographic work I was involved in over the three years of the project mirrors the type of research engagement posited by Juris. The GSC group of which I was part did engage in “collective reflection and visioning about movement practices” and “collective analysis of broader social processes and power relations” as well as “collective ethnographic reflection about diverse movement networks, how they interact and how they might better relate to broader constituencies” (Juris 2014: 172). Where I think Juris’s notion of militant ethnography and my work differ is that the collective endeavours mentioned above were seldom initiated by me. This, I believe, was due to my relative inexperience as a researcher and therefore lack of confidence in becoming both researcher and activist. Whilst I do think there is potential for both to compliment one another, I struggled to achieve such synergy this time around. In other words my abilities as an activist suffered due to my concerns as an academic. On reflection, I too often held back with my contribution to the group for fear of creating a condition in which I was ultimately researching my own ideas. There were times when I would conceive of a potential action or event, imagine who in the group might want to be involved, how it might play out and then if it might make for an interesting chapter in the thesis.

The upshot of such considerations was to keep those particular ideas for actions that would make for a juicy read to myself, banking them for a purer period of activism in the future. There were also times when I opted out of the more legally dubious actions due to my responsibilities as a representative of the University of

Glasgow. One of these ideas involved a symbolic one-day squat of a prominent vacant city centre shop unit. The action was designed to raise both the profile of the GSC and the issue of diminishing community buildings in the city. After a period of reflection I decided not to approach the wider group with the idea. Although the illegal nature of the action influenced my decision to hold back, a bigger concern at the time was my thoughts on how such an action might play out when written-up. It occurred to me that I was considering a risky action for, in part, the wrong reasons. Concurring with Chatterton (2008) and Routledge (2008) amongst others working in the area of action-orientated research, inhabiting the dual world of activist and academic creates an insider-outsider dichotomy that is not easily managed.

Alongside participant observation I conducted a series of semi-structured open-ended interviews – eighteen in total, eleven male and seven female. This type of interview allowed for a degree of flexibility in which informants assisted what Beardsworth and Keil (1992) refer to as an “iterative process of refinement”. At all times the processes of participant observations and interviews were placed in dialogue with each other to facilitate a wide-reaching understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The interviews started with general questions concerning the ‘why’ and ‘when’ of peoples’ involvement with social centre activism, and went on to explore the nature and role of social relations, organising structure, connections/disconnection within the group and the difficulties in enacting these relations in the neoliberal urban environment. These inquiries provided insights into how informants formed experiences of contemporary urban space in dialogue with their social centre activities. Through an iterative process across and within the data gathered initial categories were modified to reveal key relations: for example, it became clear as the research went on a distinction was being made by informants between what I termed *external*

(e.g. lack of affordable space in the city) and *internal* (e.g. different degrees of experience with practices of consensus decision-making) tensions impacting on the group. Although such tensions are not mutually exclusive this distinction provided me with a useful analytical tool with which to design the interview guide (see Appendix for Interview Guide). Interviews were between 1.5 to 2 hours long. Replies to questions contained what I refer to as ‘buzz’ words and terms related to the following themes: organizing practices, points of conflict within the group and tensions with outsiders and direct engagement with spatial practices. These were probed after initial replies to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals felt the wider group collectively managed these areas of concern.

Interview analysis followed the traditional practice of transcribing and coding, whereby the particular themes mentioned above were grouped (see Crang 1997). Again, coding went through periods of *iterative process and refinement* during which I would return to interview transcripts to confirm my findings. On a few occasions I would notice points of interest that I had previously missed. This would often require codifying a new strain of interest. For example, the use of the term *commons* was so ubiquitous among GSC participants, myself included, that it was taken for granted and as such time hidden from view. Only after later engagements with interview transcripts did it occur to me that there was a need to explore the various uses of the term by GSC participants (see Chapter 4).

While the interview process proved to be extremely useful to my research, it was not without its problems. From a practical perspective it proved difficult to *pin down* those who agreed to being interviewed. Furthermore, I got the impression from two of the interviewees that they were holding back on their replies. Particularly when space for criticism opened up. This may have been because of my position as an

insider, which made them uncomfortable with making negative remarks³⁶. A second dilemma regarding interviews relates to the sample selection. Although my main focus was on the most active participants, I felt that some interviews with people on the outskirts of the core group might prove useful. I never interviewed as many of non-core group participants I had initially planned. The reasons for this are as follows. As stated above the GSC at the time of my research was without a building of its own. This limited the amount of events we could run, resulting in relatively low attendance numbers at general meetings and event organising meetings. Throughout our search for a new building we also aimed to increase membership. I felt interviewing those on the cusp of becoming more active participants would have been a hindrance to their increased involvement. The social centre experience can produce complex social bordering practices (see Chapter 2). Furthermore it requires a level of interaction that is more intense, or at least different, than what is required in neoliberal space. These are communal spaces that contrast sharply with the atomizing spaces of the neoliberal city. Within a social centre individuals are encouraged to directly engage with the thoughts and feelings of those around them. I felt interviews ran the risk of constructing a barrier between potential new recruits, delineating me more as a researcher than a comrade/fellow traveller. That being said, on reflection I think the overall thesis would have benefitted from more interviews with non-core members.

I remained, throughout every stage in the research, attentive to the following ethical considerations. The aims and objectives of the research were made clear to all participants prior to data collection. This was supplemented with a personal biography. Smith (1988) suggests that this provides participants with a better understanding of the researchers 'positionality', "making clear possible sources of bias or special insight"

³⁶ *These particular interviewees shied away from questions and prompts within the interview process that in other interviews with different participants provided critical reflection.*

(ibid). This raises the issue of confidentiality: by way of a resolution, I used pseudonyms throughout. The core group have had the opportunity to view the completed thesis to verify my conclusions. There have been no issues raised regarding the possibility of amendments of written work before publication. I aim to make available online the final draft to the wider GSC group. The GSC disbanded organically as the search for a space of our own became increasingly more difficult as rents increased across Glasgow and local government subsidised peppercorn rent agreements were cut back in the name of austerity (see Chapter 4). Leaving the field was made easy because of this. That being said, it was suggested to me by a GSC participant that it might be a good idea to get the group together to discuss the thesis once everyone has had a chance to read it. This is something I am keen to see happen although in practice it might prove difficult tracking down a now geographically disparate group.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined some of the challenges I encountered in the doing of anarchist inspired research methods that aim to reduce, as much as possible, the distance between the researcher and the researched. I began by introducing the locations in which the research took place, highlighting the significance of these spaces as important mediators of the social and political interactions researched. I then discussed my position in this project as an activist and academic. This led me to adopt a form of research favoured by many critical geographers known as *action-orientated* research. Before discussing issues specific to particular methods used as part of a wider ethnographic approach, I reflected on my reasons for choosing such an

approach. Drawing on the term ‘critical ethnography’ (Burawoy 1989, Thomas 1993, Maddison 2004, Chari and Donner 2010), I argued that as an approach that moves academic work beyond the academy, it is well suited to action-orientated research. The chapter concluded with a discussion about some of the problems (ethical and practical) I encountered throughout the research process.

Walking, we ask questions, not from the perspective of the theorist removed and separate from organizing, but rather from within and as part of the multiple and overlapping cycles and circuits of struggle (Shukaitus et al 2007:10).

As stated at the beginning of this chapter I am interested in the confluence of anarchist and democratic theory and practice. The contribution made by anarchists throughout the history of labour movement struggle, struggle within the sphere of reproduction and wider democratic struggle have been somewhat neglected and undervalued by theorists in these fields. Relative to other political philosophies and practices, little has been written about anarchism. In ‘bearing witness’ to the struggles of contemporary activists engaged in anarchist informed practices, I hope to play my part in addressing this imbalance. The following chapters are empirically based. In effect they put the methodological issues discussed above into practice. Following this idea of ‘bearing witness’ the following chapter is primarily concerned with the social centre activist’s conception of the neoliberal city. As such, much of the data used was gathered from interviews. However, occupying the dual role discussed above – which I see as an example of the overlapping cycles and circuits of struggle mentioned by Shukaitus et al (ibid) – *my* observations of the city as a social centre activist and action-orientated researcher also inform the pages.

Chapter 4

The Appropriation of Glasgow's Commons and the Seeds of Rebirth

Introduction

I begin this chapter with an extract taken from my research diary. The extract was written in February 2012 – two years or so into my social centre experience. I want to draw attention to the variety of places, in and around the city, I regularly visited as a social centre activist.

I was looking back over my field notebooks today. (I need to find a better way of organizing the info contained in each. It's difficult to find certain bits of information. You can't really pre-categorize the pages: an electronic notebook would solve that problem!). What I did notice was the range of places across the city I've ended up in with social centre folk. In the last few months alone I've been at a demo outside the UK borders Agency in Govan; I've been on two recon excursions (both on bikes): one in the Southside looking for potential future social centre venues and the other in the east end measuring mobile advertising billboards for a subvertising³⁷ action [REDACTED] and I are planning; I've been in a meeting in the City Council buildings with planning department officials; been to view various empty city centre properties, again as potential future social centre venues and visited the Blochairn Fruit and Vegetable Market for the first time to raid their skips for food for a People's Kitchen action (not skips as such, just large piles of food going to waste).

Since working with the social centre and the wider activist network, my relationship with the city has changed. I've not only seen more of it, I've experienced more of it. What I mean here is, as a participant I don't just end up in these various places: I think about them – what goes on in them, how do they connect with the surrounding city, how might they connect

³⁷ Subvertising is a portmanteau of subvert and advertising. It refers to the practice of making parodies of corporate and political advertisements. Subvertisements usually take the form of an alteration to an existing image or icon, often in a satirical manner.

with the surrounding city, how does my idea of a social centre relate to these spaces, what has changed since my last visit? Although I've developed a more critical approach to these sometimes banal spaces, I've also developed a more intimate relationship with them. Social centre work, anarchist-influenced activism more generally, is very hands on, corporeal and embedded in the city. I cannot but develop a strong affinity with the place (Extract from Author's Research Diary).

I use this extract to give the reader a flavour of the multiple geographies involved in social centre work. While this extract certainly says something specific about change in my socio-political outlook over the last three years, I think it also says something more generally about the type of information collected and knowledge produced by social centre activists. As part of a network of grassroots activism across the city these individuals hold a wealth of information: who owns this piece of land; who the contact is for that community group; how to gain access into this or that enclosed site; what print shop will give you a good deal on posters; what actions are taking place; where and why these actions are taking place; where you can source a van, pallets, free food, a projector, paint and a variety of other useful things. In short, social centre activists know Glasgow. Their activist life sees them venturing out beyond their life at home, at work and at leisure. This results in a rich and varied geographical experience of the city. As such, I value their perceptions of the city.

Their knowledge of the city differs from that presented by marketing company slogans extolling the virtues of bringing your business to Glasgow or from the totalizing bureaucratic proficiency of some state institutions. For those of us wishing to play our part in affecting a city politics that values democracy, we must start listening to these and other alternative voices. For many people, this necessarily involves walking into unfamiliar territory, listening to ideas that may seem threatening, asking and answering difficult questions – but this is what real democracy entails. The alternatives are already with us and while many of us in the developed world are

somewhat cushioned from the brutalities of the state/capitalist nexus, nothing lasts forever.

Crucial to my argument in this chapter is that neoliberal forces re-construct key urban activities and places as politically neutral when they are not. Re-construction takes on a variety of forms but, importantly, in Glasgow these different forms are authorized by the local state. As discussed in Chapter 2, the social centre network, although diverse, can be broadly seen as an attempt to energise direct and participatory democratic process in the urban environment. Social centre activists, as we shall see, understand politics as active participation within the spaces we live and work. Active participation involves being seen and heard in these spaces and having access to the decision-making processes that determine the materiality of these spaces. These ideas are incompatible with neoliberal state practice.

Using activist quotes taken from interview transcripts and my own diary extracts this chapter discusses social centre activists' perceptions of the city. I began each interview with the question, 'Why do you think Glasgow needs a social centre?' All answers were variations on the same two themes: what is lacking and what is far too prevalent in social life (and space) in the city. In the first part of the chapter I concentrate on the latter theme: what, according to activists, is far too prevalent in urban life? Activists understand the continued appropriation, through privatization, of the city's common wealth – its buildings, lands and services – as both prevalent and deleterious to any realization of a farer more equal city. By way of empirical analysis of key planning strategies and local government policy relating to public space in Glasgow's city centre – the site of two previous social centres – I advance these ideas. I show how the key tropes of urban neoliberalization – territorial stigmatization, revanchism and the creation and maintenance of ambient power (see Chapter 1) –

work upon the city and its inhabitants in such a way as to naturalize the appropriation of our common wealth. The chapter then turns to look in more detail at *common* ideas and practices. In part an emerging reality and in part aspiration, this section explores the idea of the *commons* or *common space*, which, although loosely defined, can be described as a space that facilitates community self-help initiatives and the practice of mutual aid (as discussed in Chapter 2). Commoning, as I will show, constitutes a form of political participation that involves an interdependent set of relationships between people, organizational processes and place making. Equality is, in keeping with prefigurative politics, the condition and aspiration of the commons. Before concluding the chapter return to our discussion in Chapter 1 on the post-political condition, providing empirical examples of mainstream politicians *invites* the population to ‘play their part’ by way of participation in the political process. Here I argue the language of the commons had been co-opted by mainstream politics and reduced to a set of *empty signifiers* (see p50). Importantly, GSC participants were aware of mainstream political misappropriation of a discourse of the commons and, setting up the discussion in Chapter 5, continued their attempt to establish a space in the city that valued and practiced common ways of living.

Capital and Glasgow: A Process of Urban Colonization

In the following section I assess the claim made by GSC activists that too much of the city’s resources – its buildings, lands and services – are being appropriated by private concerns. Social Centre activists argue that appropriation hinders grassroots community initiatives in a practical sense, leaving communities without places to assemble and organize. Without these places, referencing Lefebvre, such initiatives

“lose all pith and become mere signs, resolve themselves into abstract descriptions or mutate into fantasies” (Lefebvre 1996: 416). This, I argue, results in the wider societal devaluation of the kind of hard work put in by these groups, as ‘authorities’ favour profit-making and rent-yielding interests over egalitarian concerns.

What follows is a grounded, empirically based analysis of how the devaluation and subsequent appropriation of Glasgow’s common wealth is facilitated through those processes of urban neoliberalization discussed in Chapter 1 – revanchism, territorial stigmatization and ambient power. Together these processes constitute what might be understood as hard and soft forms of discipline. By *hard* I am referring to the physical control and often exclusion of those publics that cannot participate in the benefactions on offer in a neoliberalized city: namely the poor. By *soft* I am referring to more subtle but no less effective forms of discipline that work through a process of ideological saturation, whereby the symbols, prompts and cues of the dominant ideology are everywhere inscribed into the contours of city space. Saturation depoliticizes the mechanics of the city, the exclusion of the *other* and the process of appropriation. The following quote starts to speak to some of these claims:

Why is it all of our decisions are based on economy and economics and bringing like money to the city? This has an impact on the people that live in the city and that means that the people that live in the city are drawn to shopping, to consuming everything. That’s what their life is about and that’s what they need: what they want is like the next new thing. Glasgow is now built for that kind of shit (Andrew GSC Activist, Oct. 2012).

In Chapter 1, influenced by Lefebvre’s speculative 1960s hypothesis that capitalism was replacing industrialization with urbanization as its main mode of accumulation, I argued that the built environment today plays the crucial role of intermediary in the transfer of public wealth to the private sector. As intermediary it acts as both the

material vehicle through which public wealth is appropriated, and cultural channel through which the ‘appropriate’ signals are transmitted. Andrew begins to touch on this argument when he states, “*Glasgow is now built for that kind of shit*”. Other activists make similar points when asked about public space in the city. In the following quote Sally makes a direct correlation between a lack of common space and the proliferation of consumer and private space:

The problem we face and other community groups face, not just political type groups, but lots of community groups is that we can't get access to spaces and it's not as if there's not enough space. There are many unused buildings in the city. But the rents are too high for groups that are not about making profit. The problem with this place [Glasgow] is that it's built to benefit moneymaking companies. Glasgow City Council wants big moneymaking companies to take over parts of the city rather than community groups. So what we have is a whole lot of public buildings and plots of land turned into more shopping centres or more flats people can't afford (Sally GSC Activist Nov. 2012).

The following quote by Susan echoes the sentiments made above but importantly begins to foreground the effects of neoliberal urbanization on the population:

To be in the city centre without any money or very little money is really not a nice experience. Have you ever been in that position? It's really depressing. If you're measuring everything in terms of money, like how much money you spend or need then so much of what you might want to do in the city is not really valued. Like I might want to go and just hang about in the park; maybe sit on the steps at the top of Buchanan Street and talk with friends; or just do a bit of people watching or something. But that wouldn't be beneficial to the economy at all; do you know what I mean? There would be no positive economic impact from my activities (Susan GSC Activist, Nov. 2012).

Sally's quote speaks directly to the practical problems faced by a number of community groups operating under a process of urban neoliberalization. Quite simply,

they struggle to access the space they need to carry out their work. Susan makes two related points. The first and most obvious is that the city centre is an unpleasant place for people with little money. The second and less obvious point relates to ways of being in public space; what is expected of people when they enter public space; what is considered normal or more appropriately abnormal behaviour in public space. For Sally, Susan and the other activists public space is being configured in such a way that it is becoming difficult to imagine it could be anything other than a material referent for capitalist ideology. In other words, rather than facilitate communality, public space for social centre activists too often privileges an atomizing middle class world of consumption. This is not to say the city does not have spaces within it that facilitate forms of social interaction that do not adhere to the logic of profit: it does. Public parks and community gardens are examples of other types of spaces on offer in Glasgow and, like most cities across the world, the city has its fair share of citizens who take pleasure in using urban spaces for purposes unforeseen by planners and property developers. The suggestion made by GSC activists and supported in the following pages, is that these places and pastimes are less visible, less easily accessed and less valued as the neoliberal city continues to take form. I consider these claims in more detail below.

Neoliberalization is always contingent upon a variety of political, social and cultural particularities. Although certain ‘family resemblances’ can be identified amongst neoliberal urban practices across the globe, no two are the same. Boyle (1997), for example, argues that the North American neoliberal strategy of bypassing local government in favour of local business, failed to materialize in any substantive form in Glasgow because private-sector participation at the early stages of neoliberalization was ‘disappointing’ (Boyle 1997). This has seen local state agencies

act as the main vehicles through which neoliberalization is imposed on the city. Gray (2010: 39), referring to Glasgow as “a paragon of neoliberal urbanism”, deconstructs the myth of capital’s entrepreneurial risk-takers, showing how neoliberal urban development in Glasgow is “almost without exception state-led and heavily state-financed”. “This fact” he writes “is now a banality” (ibid: 41). Gray unpacks numerous regeneration projects, most notably the 1982 formed *Glasgow Action* – “the first clearly defined public-private partnership in Scotland” (ibid: 38). Glasgow Action’s marketing line at this early stage of the city’s neoliberalization was fully immersed in the speculative rationale of the day. Of Glasgow Action, Gray writes:

Typical of later entrepreneurial private/public growth coalitions, Glasgow Action was almost exclusively composed of local business personalities with direct ties to local banks and other property related institutions. Their agenda unsurprisingly reflected the bias of that constituency (ibid).

Glasgow Action sprung out of the 1981 Glasgow District Council established Economic Development and Employment Committee, whose remit was to generate employment and reverse economic decline (Boyle and Hughes 1994). This state-sponsored committee adopted market orientated strategies that saw cultural rebranding as the primary step towards fixing our ‘broken’ city (see discussion of *territorial stigmatization* in Chapter 1). Competitive advantage was sought through government policies – subsidies, tax breaks and other economic incentives – that didn’t exactly *create* high-quality goods as *rebrand* existing public goods and services. ‘Glasgow Miles Better’ was the first of such exercises, with a glut of others soon to follow. Along with large-scale cultural events such the 1988 Garden Festival and designations like the European City of Culture in 1990, Glasgow’s working class heritage was being ‘billboarded’ and ‘sound-bitten’ out of existence, replaced with the utopian

middle-class world of expensive coffee shops and designer retail developments. As Edward Soja correctly points out, such *uber-urban-chic* locations are part of:

... an archipelago of normalized enclosures and fortified spaces that both voluntarily and involuntarily barricade individuals and communities in visible and not-so-visible urban islands, overseen by restructured forms of public and private power and authority (Soja 2000: 299).

It is important to note that the language of neoliberal urbanism is profoundly *utopian* in that it is suggestive of an end point where the middle-class urban experience is available to all as long as the ‘trickle down’ effect promised by the commodification of our social lives remain unhindered by local antagonisms. As we shall see in the case of Glasgow, planning initiatives and political policies have tried to design out and expel such antagonisms. Success here has, thus far, only ever partial. The struggle between a dominant urban order that tries to extract maximum profit from the city and those inhabitants who refuse to be commodified continues, ensuring the urban experience, at least for now, is “in a process of being shaped, reshaped and challenged by the spatial practices of various groups and individuals whose identities and actions undermine the homogeneity of contemporary cities” (McCann 1999: 168). The Glasgow Social Centre is one such group and the tactics they employ by way of resisting and creating alternatives to the dominant system will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 5. For the time being let us concentrate on the problem, as understood by these activists.

I'm really worried and pissed off about the privatization of public spaces. Glasgow used to be good for its public spaces. The first time I noticed it was years ago: when they first opened the St Enoch's Centre [city centre shopping mall opened in 1989]. That must have been in the eighties. I went in and saw this old guy that was sitting sort of slumped asleep. I don't think he was pissed or anything. I think he was just an old guy who was

keeping out of the cold. The security guards came up and moved him, chucked him out into the cold. He probably used to sit on park benches on Argyle Street and occasionally got 'awright Jimmy' and stuff like that. We're not allowed to do that anymore because it has all been taken inside. A few years later I went leafleting in Princes Square [another city centre shopping mall opened in 1986] in part just to wind people up I think. I got chucked out. (Drew, Social Centre Activist, Oct. 2012: speaking about his memories of city centre urban change in the 1980s and 1990s).

The above quote highlights the beginning of a period of urban governance in Glasgow that MacLeod (2002) understands as Revanchist Urbanism. Not only is 'publicness' here shaped by the need of a minority – managerial and entrepreneurial urban elites – to maximise the monetary value of a space, it also serves to legitimise the punitive exclusion of 'undesirables'. Revanchist urban policies result in, Smith writes (2002: 259) "security obsessed architectures" that are "increasingly supplemented with authoritarian legal measures and policing tactics designed to regulate the very spatial practices of the urban poor". Those individuals and groups who do not or cannot participate in neoliberalism's 'benefactions' are seen as a threat to the 'sensible order of things' (here I am paraphrasing Rancière 2006). This chimes with Peck and Tickell's theory of *roll-out* neoliberalism:

No longer concerned narrowly with mobilization and extension of markets (and market logic) neoliberalism is increasingly associated with the political foregrounding of new modes of 'social' and penal policy making, concerned specifically with the aggressive regulation, disciplining and containment of those marginalized or dispossessed by the neoliberalization of the 1980s (Peck and Tickell 2002: 43).

Cleaning up or masking the 'undesirable' consequences of 'less government' is, arguably (and paradoxically), performed best by those cities whose local administrations maintain a strong vertical hold over the population. Glasgow is a case

in point. As an example of revanchism in Glasgow, MacLeod draws our attention to the perfunctory but no less brutish ‘cleaning out’ of homeless people from the George Hotel on Glasgow’s main shopping street in 2000. This hostel, offering cheap and sub-standard accommodation, was situated directly across from the Buchanan Galleries (yet another city centre shopping mall opened in 1999). City Council officials, the local press and police, MacLeod contends, viewed homeless people as ‘matter out of place’³⁸ (ibid). “Beggars Are Damaging City Centre” wrote the Evening Times (2001:8 in Macleod 2002: 613), a local paper that also called for “concerted action ... involving the police” (ibid). George Sneddon, the then director of the Glasgow City Centre Partnership (GCCP)³⁹, advocated “swift action” on the matter of “beggars scaring away city centre shoppers” (ibid).



The new façade at the top of Buchanan Street that was once the George Hotel

³⁸ It should be noted that the city then, as now, has a chronic shortage of services for homeless people.

³⁹ A private sector led public/private regeneration partnership set up in 1999 to promote central Glasgow as a shopping attraction disbanded after three years for failing to deliver on its overall vision (Herald Scotland 2003) and replaced with a council-led public/private partnership City Centre Action Plan.

Of course we must not forget to add to the above list of *regulators* the Chamber of Commerce. The needs of the business community play a key role in the disciplining of our city. Stuart Patrick, the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce chief executive, has recently singled out beggars (those perpetual pariahs of city centre life) as worthy of exclusion from ‘public’ space. Twelve years on from the ‘class cleansing’ of Buchanan Street the language remains the same:

Begging is a very serious issue. Aggressive begging can be acted on, but general begging can't, and it's giving a bad impression of the city centre, impacting on all businesses including retailers, hoteliers and onward investors.

The city centre is our front room; our showcase and we are letting ourselves down. We know that there are problems in dealing with general begging and we'd like the Government to look at how legislation can help deal more successfully with it – especially as there may be links to organised crime (Stuart Patrick, Chief Executive of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, 2012, Evening Times).

As one might expect, Mr. Patrick’s version of a community safety initiative completely bypasses the private sector as a potential threat to members of the public: consumer protection and workplace safety are not on the remit of his initiative (Helms 2008). It is important to note here that it is not just the ‘usual’ urban pariah – the homeless person, the beggar – who is considered matter out of place by city officials. Consider the following quote, taken from a BBC Scotland news report in 2007, by the then councillor – now council leader – Gordon Matheson. The market he is referring to is the now closed Paddy’s (second hand goods) Market, which prior to its closure in 2009 traded for two hundred years.

The market’s nature has changed and there are now real concerns about the amount of crime associated with it. It used to be a respectable working

class market where people would go to cloth their family. Now there is drug dealing and selling of contraband like alcohol, cigarettes and music ... Slums and outside toilets are part of the history of working class Glasgow, but we're not going back to that ... It [Paddy's Market] is a crime ridden midden⁴⁰ (Gordon Matheson 2007, Evening Times).

Matheson's quote exemplifies the sort of comments associated with the process of territorial stigmatization discussed in Chapter 1. The 'lawless' character of the market is made clear by his reference to "drug dealing and the selling of contraband". Similarly he makes an obvious association with the market and *dirt* – i.e. "Slums and outside toilets". In referring to the market as a "midden" – meaning a refuse dump – there is the suggestion it is not fit for human habitation or maybe those who inhabit it are less than human? This position is juxtaposed by the following quote taken from a YouTube video clip interviewing a woman who was a frequent visitor to the market.

The loss of Paddy's Market has had a very bad effect on a lot of people because a lot of people now are left very lonely: they have nowhere to go and no people to talk to. I spoke to a woman the other week who started crying when we spoke about Paddy's because they shut it down ... because that was where she met people, a big part of her social life (Frequent visitor to Paddy's Market 2011).

Another Paddies regular commented that the closure of the market was "a tragedy for the people of Glasgow". He pauses "well the poor people of Glasgow anyway. There's still a lot of need for a market like this because there's still a lot of poverty in this city" (Frequent visitor to Paddies Market 2009 taken from YouTube Video Clip). The pause in this comment is significant as it highlights the group of Glaswegians that lose out when the 'grand' visions of the likes of Gordon Matheson and Stuart Patrick are inscribed on the urban environment. One commentator, with irony, summed up

⁴⁰ *Midden is a Scots word meaning Refuge Dump.*

the closure of the market deftly when she wrote: “It was where the poor went to trade their chattels. Messy, ancient and authentic: the place was asking to be wiped out!” (Lewis 2009).



Paddy's Market 2007 before its closure by the Glasgow City Council in 2009



Shipbank Lane today, the site that was once Paddy's Market

The Chamber of Commerce, city council officials and other powerful urban stakeholders are attempting, through the manipulation of law and the media and subsequent application of policy, to inscribe upon our urban lives their vision of the city. In doing so they are imposing their particular understanding of what is wrong with the city; what is a crime; what we should fear; and what the right trajectory for the city is. The 'right' trajectory here favours a particular type of urbanite – those that can afford to participate in public spaces designed to extract profit from its users. In doing so it excludes those who cannot participate or do not wish to participate in this urban vision.

As I argued in Chapter 1, territorial stigmatization and revanchist policies serve to both exclude the urban poor and sanitize and regulate public space. But it is not only the urban poor who are being regulated; it is not only the urban poor who are being excluded from *substantive participation* in Glasgow's public spaces. Consider

Ranciere's notion of the *Police Order* as discussed in Chapter 1. This refers to the idea of a constant, expansive authority that saturates all aspects of modern life. In Chapter 1 I applied John Allen's theory of *Ambient Power* to the *Police Order* by way of grounding Ranciere's insights in physical space. Allen uses the layout of a shopping mall as an example of how space transmits authoritative directives by offering a series of "choices around movement and patterns of interaction yet at the same time limiting those movements and interactions in broadly skirted ways" (Allen 2006: 445). The tight choreographies of such consumer spaces are celebrated in Glasgow, which is promoted around Britain and further afield as one of the best retail centres in the country. Glasgow's main shopping district has been named 'The Golden Z' (referring to the plan of three main streets – Argyle, Buchanan and Sauchiehall Street). This name conjures up images of religious reverence. It serves to *mystify* the ambient power of this particular urban vision that now dominates the city centre.



The St Enoch Centre stands in the heart of the city like a sacred building

Of the Golden Z the ‘Visit Glasgow Website’ says:

The psycho-geography of the place is consumption inducing ... Shop windows are arranged with brightly coloured objects ... one cannot walk without bumping into people or their big bags ... Senses are monopolized by such stimuli. The motto of the city, hammered right from the arrivals escalators at the international airport is ‘Glasgow: Scotland with Style’ ... This is a consumer paradise (Visit Glasgow Website).

The *uber-urban-chic* of the Golden Z is a façade that obscures the harsh realities of Glasgow’s neoliberalization. We can add to the ‘class cleansing’ initiatives proposed by city officials discussed above a raft of other negative associations that too often go unnoticed by the citizen consumer, such as rent-racking, displacement, further increases in the precarious labour market, land grabs and public asset stripping (Anderson et al 2013). On this last point Anderson et al write:

In 2008, the council’s offices occupied 950,000 square feet in the city centre; by April 2011 that had shrunk to 350,000 square feet, as part of a plan to “rationalise... and dispose of effectively” council-owned property across the city (ibid: 7).

Said ‘plan’, while serving private property developers well, has been detrimental for community groups across the city looking for affordable property to rent. The organization that ‘effectively’ disposes council owned property is an Arms Length External Organization (or ALEO) called City Property (Glasgow) LLP. It is worthwhile looking at City Property (Glasgow) in more detail as its existence has had a negative impact on the GSC. Before doing so I want make clear that in acknowledging the *seductive* qualities of ambient power I am not suggesting people are without agency. I am, however, suggesting that interaction with these highly regulated consumer spaces undermines alternative subjectivities by restricting the

expression of those subjectivities. For social centre activists substantive political participation in our city requires that we be seen and heard on our own terms. The tight choreographies of consumer space limits this potential.

City Property (Glasgow) is of particular interest to the Glasgow Social Centre, as the GSC had been struggling for nearly three years to find an affordable building in the city within which to open a new centre. In the past, activists and community groups alike would utilize publically owned community centres and other *non-profit* run spaces across the city, for free or at a nominal rent. Such spaces are in sharp decline. City Property (Glasgow) is responsible for the management and sale of the council's 'non-operational' property assets and management of the council's major ground leases (Shipbank Lane, the site of the old Paddy's Market included). Formed in 2009, the ALEOs task is to deliver these properties to the market. A cursory glance at their website shows all manner of buildings and land in various conditions ranging from an ex-nursing home in the city's *up-market* west end to numerous ex-community centre's and schools located in the city's schemes and older inner-city residential areas. It is interesting to note that when looking for information about properties in the ALEO's portfolio, interested parties must contact commercial property management company Ryden Commercial Properties. The following quote by a GSC activist explains the group's connection with City Property (Glasgow) LLP.

When we left Osborne Street, I was feeling really positive about the whole project. Osborne Street was good but it wasn't ideal. So a few of us had been looking at a whole load of empty public properties in the city that were going for cheap, like peppercorn rents. Then all our discussions with the council property people broke down, like almost over night. One minute we're dealing with people who seemed pretty responsive to our plans and ideas; the next minute we're dealing with Ryden Commercial Properties, who aren't interested in community initiatives, social justice or peppercorn rents. It turned out to be really bad timing loosing Osborne

Street. It became really difficult for the group to find a new space (Simon, GSC Activist, Sept. 2012).

Simon's quote echoes a claim I made earlier in the chapter concerning the state as a vast organization where people with little love for neoliberal policy can be found. Prior to the setting up of the ALEO social centre enquiries about potential properties dealt with individuals within local government who were receptive to many social centre related ideas relating to issues of social and environmental justice. But what influence these individuals have over key public policy initiatives is negligible when working within the top-down management structure of a local state, whose councillors voted to remove concessionary rents in commercial properties for third sector organisations in 2010 at a meeting of the Executive Committee. In numerous occasions over the last three years I have spoken privately with local state actors who bemoan the direction the city council has taken regarding its stewardship of public assets. But, as we shall see by way of the example of buildings, these assets continue to be sold off to private concerns. In setting up the ALEO, for example, the council transferred the rights to 1,400 income generating commercial properties in return for a loan of £120m from Barclay's Bank, "ostensibly in order to fill a funding black hole" (Gray 2010: 39). This deal runs parallel with an "elaborate system of political patronage" (Scottish Herald 2009) with councillors involved in the ALEO management structure sharing 'top-up' payments of £400,000 (ibid). Once privatized, these properties and lands either sit disused or are transformed into some form of rent-yielding concern. Concerning similar processes that have taken place across the US, Michael Hudson writes:

The bulk of this *rentier* income is not being spent on expanding the means of production or raising living standards. It is ploughed back into the purchase of property and financial securities already in place – legal rights and claims extracted from the economy at large” (Hudson 2006).

Monopoly rent creation, such as this, amounts to a *free lunch* for the private sector. Barclay’s enjoy a 66% interest rate over the period of their loan deal to Glasgow City Council; private sector investors pick up prime real estate at ‘highly competitive’ prices, further increasing their fixed capital portfolio, while simultaneously opening up additional revenue streams via monopoly rent sources associated with the locations of these urban properties. Harvey writes: “...capitalism cannot do without monopolies and craves the means to assemble them” (Harvey 2000). In Glasgow, local state agencies continue to facilitate these assemblies of private wealth and power.

The properties mentioned above are often in a dilapidated state by the time they are *fed* into the market. Under investment by local government insures that the private sector gets the property well below its *real* market value: Gray notes: “disinvestment is often a *deliberate strategy* to lower asset values, making it more profitable for asset-stripping private investors” (Gray 2010: 40). For some of the people who live and work around them, these properties hold significant cultural relevance. Generations of families were taught in the old school building, for example, or weddings, anniversaries and wakes were held in the community centre. Consider the comments above made by traders and buyers of the old Paddy’s Market. They speak of a social world that goes far beyond exchange relationships or consumption. I do not wish to over-sentimentalize such *common* places. My point here is that these buildings and spaces, in various conditions, provided a much-needed service, both as material structures and significant places in the collective imagination so crucial to the

social fabric of a community. And then the fencing goes up, sometimes supplemented with barbed wire mesh and security cameras, ushering in privatization.



Public land for sale: Note City Property (Glasgow) LLP sales board. The city is now peppered with this fencing and signage.

Based on empirical evidence that charts various local-government led urban regeneration projects in Glasgow over a the last 35-40 years, I have shown that GSC participant's concerns about the continued appropriation, through privatization, of the city's common wealth are well-founded. In Glasgow powerful local government agencies have taken the lead in implementing a series of neoliberal urban strategies that have seen a raft of public assets transferred to the private sector. This process of market mobilization and extension goes hand-in-hand with a collection of penal and exclusionary policies 'rolled-out' across the city. Targeting the marginalized and dispossessed these policies attempt to *purify* public space so that the most visible signs

of poverty and struggle are hidden from view. Hard forms of discipline, such as these, play into a softer form of public regulation in which the symbols, prompts and cues of the dominant ideology saturate public space. Saturation depoliticizes the process of appropriation and the exclusion of the *other*.

In the following section I discuss GSC participant's response to urban neoliberalisation. Which is, in short, to politicise the city by creating spaces that make visible the ongoing and active process of collective decision-making that determines the materiality of these spaces. In part an emerging reality and in part aspiration, this ongoing and active process is situated in the discourse of the commons, which, although loosely defined by GSC participants, can be described as a living practice that facilitates community self-help and the production of what I will refer to as *equality-as-tactic*. Paying close attention to GSC participant's use of this discourse is critical to understanding the complex role they envisage the social centre playing in the politicisation of everyday public spaces in Glasgow.

Remembering, Recognising and Imagining Glasgow's Commons

Early on in my empirical work it became clear to me that activists felt something was lacking from their urban environment. That 'something' is broadly understood here as *common space*. For example, Paul, when I asked him the question, "Why do you think Glasgow needs a social centre?" replied:

There isn't much common space for all sorts of people just to commune, just to cook and eat food, just to talk about what is going on, to be aware and I think that is an important thing for our culture and for our society to be able to deal with the problems we have got to deal with right now and the social centre is part of that (Paul GSC Activist, Oct. 2012).

Other social centre activists used this term *common space* or *a commons* when explaining what the city lacked. Some referred to this notion of a commons as something lost, or something still evident but barely existing. All saw the commons as something to strive for. Activists see a social centre as a place where common ways of being in the city might be nurtured. But what are these *common ways of being*? Common space, although loosely defined, is understood by activists as a material environment and set of attendant organizational processes that are in some way different from normative notions of public and private space. Susan, an occasional social centre participant, when asked why she participated in social centre activities replied: *“I’d like to have more spaces like that [the social centre] everywhere, where people could just gather together, not just as consumers or like to pass each other on the way to work, but to be involved in alternative ways of living in together”* (Susan GSC participant, Nov. 2012). One activist, speaking about other social centres she had visited, told me, *“they’re [social centres] different from what goes on in the rest of the city ... more social I suppose ... I mean ... they’re less hectic. People have time to talk”* (Sally GSC Activist Nov. 2012). GSC participant Robert asked *“why can’t we have spaces in the city that are not about competition for a job, or money, or a house? What about having more places that are about talking to each another and caring for each other?”* (Robert, GSC Activist, Sept. 2012). *“Living together”, “caring for each other” “time to talk”* to one another – these actions are arguably most associated with the private domestic sphere, but the commons, as discussed in Chapter 2, is conceived of, at least in the first instance, as *open*: meaning shared by many different groups and attendant identities. In a normative sense these spheres of existence are at variance with one another. If we pay closer attention to Paul’s comment above, we can begin to make some sense of this inconsistency of ideas. For example, Paul conceives of

“cooking” as something more than an activity associated with the private domestic sphere. It is an activity carried out in “commune” with “all sorts of people” – in other words, others out with one’s immediate community of family and friends. Paul’s understanding of common space is in conflict with normative notions of public and private space as separate spheres.

Conceptions of common space here seem to occupy a world between the public and private, where some of the most positive aspects of the latter are brought into the former as a direct challenge to public space, as perceived by activists, as too often consumerist and competitive in character. These ideas chime with radical feminist re-evaluations of domestic nurturance and maternal qualities. For instance, bell hooks (2001: 41-9) sees the “home place” as a site of resistance against racism and as a refuge from society’s many hostilities. Ruddick (2006: 130) states, “that the material world, seen under the aspect of caring labour, is organized in terms of people’s needs and pleasures” and Dunbar (1970: 499) argues, “the maternal traits conditioned into women ... are desirable for everyone, not just women”. Verter (2013), reflecting social centre activists observations of what the city lacks, asks why these understandings of care and social nurturance should not be extended into the public realm to “subvert the hierarchical and antagonistic logic of the political?”. These notions of place, whether expressed by the above theorists or social centre activists, carry a double meaning. Place is understood here as both a site of refuge from domination – as expressed above in the notion of the commons a caring place. It is also understood as a productive site within which alternative values are nurtured. These differing notions of place are not mutually exclusive but overlap and one can negatively impact on the other. This tension is discussed further in the following chapter, which focuses on the inner-life of the social centre experience. For now I want to focus on the commons and its

progressively productive character.



Commoning urban space. The People's Kitchen, as shown above, was a regular action that offered free food and chat on the street to anyone that wanted it.

Paul's use of the words 'common' and 'commune' in the same sentence is important for our understanding of how common spaces are perceived by GSC activists. Common spaces should not only be popular spaces, in the sense that they should accommodate the everyday differences in character we expect to find in the city; they should also facilitate communal activities between those who assemble in them. That is, activities which promote a sharing of possessions, skills, responsibilities and space. Borrowing from the work of Melucci (1989) on contemporary social movements, this mixing of 'commons' and 'commune' presents us with a profoundly productive spatial politics. *Sharing* space as opposed to simply *being in* space involves a process of continuous negotiations and tensions. For Melucci the potential product of our engagement in these negotiations and tensions is a collective identity. The implication made by GSC activists that the city lacks common spaces is that the private and public spheres of contemporary urban life inhibit the formation of meaningful collective identities. Meaningful, whereby individuals have the opportunity to participate in a

process that allows them to evaluate the environment, recognize themselves as part of a collectivity (or not), form solidarities and alter the environment accordingly. Thinking about collective identity formation in Melucci's terms, that is formation through negotiations and tensions, chimes with more recent work by Featherstone (2012) on solidarity formation. He writes:

Solidarity has often been understood as being about likeness. This approach obscures the importance of solidarities in constructing relations between places, activists, and diverse social groups. This can involve cementing existing identities and power relations, however" [and echoing Paul's wish for spaces that facilitate the coming together of *all sorts of people*] "it can ... as frequently be about the active creation of new ways of relating" (Featherstone 2012: 5).

At the beginning of the chapter I stated that *equality is both the condition and aspiration of the commons*. Our current discussion begins to throw some light on this comment because I and other GSC participants believe that lasting and effective solidarities are premised on the condition of equality. Consider the following quote by social centre activist Stephen. When asked why self-determination was important to him he answered:

There is a real problem with people trying to organize themselves in a society that really dominates them. So the two kinds of classic reactions to that is either to be submissive or to be dominant back. When you have got those as the two kinds of accepted models of practice, you don't have people learning to cooperate, learning how to be assertive about what they want without imposing their views on others. When the language and the behaviour of the society is steeped in practices of domination to start participating in a way that is kind of egalitarian and encouraging new people to open themselves up to one another is really hard.

I continue on thinking that equality should be a tactic, that if we can succeed in getting lots of people to be empowered together and working on an equal basis, that becomes an advantage for day to day organizing. It is not something positive we want further down the line, it could be real good for us just now. One of the problems with the way that equality is viewed,

is it is seen as almost an unattainable ideal, something that you should be striving for and not putting into practice. But that's what we must do. What other options do we have? We need to start organizing together on an equal level (Stephen GSC Activist, Nov 2012).

In the above quote self-determination is inextricably tied to *cooperation* and *learning*. (This position echoes Bakunin's notion of individual freedom as a collective pursuit, discussed in Chapter 2). Furthermore, Stephen's notion of self-determination is synonymous with my discussion about prefigurative politics in the same chapter, whereby the means (*the condition*) and the ends (*the aspiration*) of political action are one and the same – in this case *equality*. For Stephen equality is achieved through self-directed practice. For Stephen equality is achieved through acting differently to the “accepted models of practice” – i.e. *submission* and *dominance*. For Stephen the idea of equality is not understood as a utopian folly. Rather, it is something that is attainable in the here and now, something that we must understand and utilise “as a tactic” (ibid). This notion of equality-as-tactic is useful and important even if, at the moment, somewhat vague. To give some clarity to the idea of equality-as-tactic I now turn to the work John Holloway (2005), in particular his notion about power in society as something not to be attained but given-up. In his book ‘How to Change the World Without Taking Power’ Holloway presents us with alternative take on the relationship between power and revolution.

The notion of capturing positions of power, whether it be governmental power or more dispersed positions of power in society, misses the point that the aim of the revolution is to dissolve relations of power, to create a society based on the mutual recognition of people's dignity (Holloway 2005).

I want to consider equality-as-tactic in relation to Holloway's comment "the aim of revolution is to dissolve relations of power" (ibid). Enacting equality-as-tactic is a social activity and, as we shall see in later chapters, it is not easily achieved. It requires trust between those involved and high degrees of both *confidence* and *humility*. Such requirements take time and need space. This time and space allows the individual to recognise what she lacks (in terms of skills and knowledge) – producing humility; and what she has (in the same terms) – producing confidence. What we have we can give to others and vice versa. This process of exchange takes on a communally productive character when we consider Holloway's notion of the *social flow* "in which the precondition of my doing is the doing (or having-done) of others, in which the doing of others provides the means of my doing" (Holloway 2005). The social flow, in advanced capitalist society is not a collective process. As Holloway argues, under capitalism the social flow is fragmented, therefore we must begin the task of reconnecting people with one another, and with the knowledges and skills we each hold. Equality-as-tactic then can be seen as a recognition of *power* within each that can be enhanced through consciously and actively becoming part of the "social flow" – a *sharing* of knowledge and skills for the purpose of enabling a series of actions – a collective *power-to-do*.

Where Holloway's ideas about revolution and Stephen's and other GSC member's ideas on the subject differ is in the formers rejection of "capturing [...] dispersed positions power in society" (ibid). The GSC, as an expression of the commons, is about dispersing power but this should be seen as unlocking the transformative nature of power from the logic of hierarchical organisation (see Chapter 2). In sharing what we have, in terms of knowledge and skills, we are dispersing concentrations of power: not dissolving power or giving it up but reconstituting it *in*

place. For example, for the GSC group to gather, constitute itself and take over the management/control of a resource requires a significant degree of organisation and commitment by those involved. This multifaceted process is, in effect, the construction of a power source. The aim is to gain power. Not absolute power but “power-to-change” (ibid) key sites of struggle – a piece of land or a building in your community and/or influence in determining the trajectory of particular policies around, for example, immigration, welfare rights or land access (all areas of engagement for GSC participants). If we are rejecting anything here it is not power per se, but false power or illegitimate authority: that is, the impositions of externally positioned commanders or to use Holloway’s term “the non-doers” (ibid). This rejection is crucial to understanding the dynamics of prefigurative politics, which reduces the distance between the means and the ends of political action, which sees power in the hands of the doers.



Plate 10: The doers in action. GSC participants aiding a community centre group in the construction of a community garden on the community centre grounds.

From this discussion on equality-as-tactic, as expressed by GSC activists as the condition and aspiration of the commons, we can see the social centre conceived of as a place autonomous from the formal authorities of the state and/or private sector. To put another way, activists felt that the internal workings of this common space should not be subject to direct influence by state officials or private sector land/building owners. When I asked Robert to comment further about his understanding of the type of spaces he thought Glasgow lacked, he replied: *“Spaces that are actually run by the people that are actually using them is an important principle for me, rather than it being run by some kind of top-down management thing or officially sanctioned thing”* (Robert GSC Activist, Sept 2012). This was an important tenet for all the social centre participants I interviewed. When asked why self-determination was an important component of common space, activist responses were less combative than I anticipated. What I mean here is that their replies were not as influenced, as I thought they might have been, by the ‘us and them’ binary (political activist versus local state bureaucrat) that often characterizes autonomous leftwing political discourse. To be sure, this divide is evident in other aspects of autonomous activism (i.e. demonstrations, blockades, occupations) but in terms of conceiving of the type of spaces activists want to experience in the city, self-determination is important in a productive and conciliatory sense. Remembering the importance of humility in producing common ways of being conciliation and reasoned debate cannot but play an important role in generating the commons because no individual or particular group has perfect knowledge.

Social centre activists are involved in the co-production of alternative values and attendant practices to those of the dominant socio-political system: solidarity over competition; participatory decision-making practices over vertical lines of command

and control; collective concern over individual detachment. These alternative values can be situated within the language and practice of the commons. The commons as space and process is the antithesis of the dominant political culture of the “barracks community” (Hartsock 1982: 283), which promotes competition, hierarchy and sectarianism. Unlike the neoliberal city described earlier in the chapter the commons does not promote blame, stigmatization or exclusion. Common ways of being begin not with mistrust but rather acceptance and strive to nurture virtues such as empathy, courage, solidarity and care. In practicing the commons participants are acknowledging the value of others and crucially reaching out to others. Here, the reality of human dependency is confirmed and celebrated rather than being dismissed, ignored or belittled as it is in capitalist and other masculine socio-cultural narratives (Hartsock 1982, Verter 2013). To practice the commons involves participants, as Chatterton and Hodkinson (2007: 311) put it, confronting “the rampant individualism of everyday life”.

It is important not to romanticize the potential of common space, as understood by social centre activists. As other researchers have noted, many community groups, who claim to adhere to similar ideas, reproduce existing asymmetries of power (Freeman 1970, Cooke & Kothari 2001, Routledge and Cumbers 2009). For example, the most confident speakers, those with particular knowledge and skills, bullies and members of the in-group can and do dictate proceedings and outcomes (these and other expressions of domination are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5). It should be noted that these expressions of domination are certainly not specific to such communities but neither are these groups immune to them. Common spaces in and of themselves cannot counter all forms of domination but they can nurture equality through striving to equalize the process of participation. When individuals choose to

participate in collective initiatives they do so with a tacit acknowledgement that problems are best faced together than alone. This is a pragmatic way of saying all human persons have something to contribute to the pre-existent values of a community and the subsequent production of new values and attendant practices. This genuine openness to the ideas of the plurality – in which the ideas of people at the grassroots shape the trajectory of urban life – cannot be evidenced in the neoliberal city. The shapers of neoliberal Glasgow adhere to an abstracted political logic, detached from its deleterious impact on too many urban lives.



Another example of the commons in action. The GSC often cooked group meals for its members and friends, utilizing different locations around the city. This is the main hall of the Kinning Park Complex in the southside of Glasgow.

Neoliberal Co-optation of the Commons

Before concluding this chapter I want to draw the readers attention to what I consider the co-optation of the language of the commons by neoliberal political elites. This

section empirically grounds discussions in Chapter 2 on the *post-political condition*. It is not only social centre activists who speak of the societal value of self-help and caring communities. The ‘return to community’ ethos propagated in the language of New Labour’s *Active Community Unit* (ACU) or more recent ideas from the current UK Coalition Government (see ‘Big Society’ and David Cameron’s deception “we’re all in this together”⁴¹) echoes a language of community self-help and mutual aid – albeit a distant echo. Consider the following quote:

The best ideas often come from within the community. They know the gaps and failures in services in their area. Service improvement and innovation comes best in response to pressure from demanding, informed and confident consumers. To make sure community consultation and involvement is improved across Scotland and that people have a voice in decision-making in their own communities we are finding new ways to give communities influence over the delivery of local services. We are emphasizing empowering communities so that people have the means to influence, to manage and to deliver success (Scottish Executive: Social Inclusion Action Note, 2000).

This quote ticks all the boxes in terms of appealing to a public disenfranchised by and disillusioned with the mainstream representative political system and a public who have long understood the importance of community in their lives. But for many researchers working in the areas of democratic practice, public engagement and critical planning, ‘community consultation and involvement’ is too often a one-way process framed by pre-determined decisions made by officials (see Jupp 2012, Shapely 2011, Haumann 2011, Mitchell 2003). These theorists and others are critical of public engagement initiatives that adopt a participatory democratic discourse but in practice do little to address the professional paternalism characteristic of top-down command and control management structures. For example Mitchell (2003:18),

⁴¹ David Cameron at the Conservative Party Conference on the 6th of October 2010

commenting on the struggle to democratize public space in New York writes, “more and more of the public spaces of the city are being produced for us rather than by us”. At best such initiatives might be described as public consultations but this is something very different from actual community participation in the decision-making process. Bearing in mind our discussion of neoliberal urbanism and Glasgow at the beginning of this chapter, particularly the emergence of City Property Glasgow and the subsequent shrinking of the city’s public owned property portfolio, it is difficult to see how mainstream political rhetoric about community empowerment can get us any further than the ‘consultation’ rung of Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizenship participation. Rung number four of eight in Arnstein’s typology of participation in urban planning, *consultation* constitutes a “window-dressing ritual” (Arnstein 1969: 219) whereby ‘urban experts’ present a data gathering and information dissemination event – designed to promote pre-determined planning decisions – as meaningful participation. Too often, the upshot for a wealth of community driven ideas is that the democratic praxis implicit in these ideas is reduced to a collection of words without substance, empty signifiers (mis)informing a profusion of policy documents and political speeches (see the discussion on the post-political condition in Chapter 1).

In addition to these criticisms of official/professional-led participatory projects I argue that the political elite brand of community self-help serves well the proponents of austerity budgeting. As public sector services are subject to funding cuts, who better to fill the service gap than the community?

The first step is to redistribute power and control from the central state and its agencies to individuals and local communities... That way, we can create the opportunity for people to take responsibility. This is absolutely in line with the spirit of the age - the post-bureaucratic age... This decentralisation of power from the central to the local will not just increase responsibility, it will lead to innovation, as people have the freedom to try

new approaches to solving social problems, and the freedom to copy what works elsewhere (David Cameron 2009, Hugo Young Lecture).

Here a sort of DIY strategic state replaces the paternalism of the welfare *state*. The substitute helps “to stimulate social action” and “helps local actors exploit new opportunities” (ibid). This ‘big society’ rhetoric involves a folding of ideas about community resilience and free market economics. Goulding (2011) has argued the result of ‘big society’ policy too often creates a ‘David and Goliath’ bidding competition for the delivery of social services between small community groups forced to embrace a free market logic and larger private sector service provision companies well versed in said logic (see Serco, G4S, ATOS): “Rather than facilitating community control of public services” Goulding writes “competition has caused power to pass directly from the state to private businesses”. Aiken (2014:10) understands this as “governance-through-community” as opposed to “governance-by-community”. Concurring with the work of Clayton, Donovan and Merchant (2015), which looks at the state of Third Sector in the current climate of what they term “austerity localism” (Clayton et al 2015: 1), mainstream political policies supposedly designed to enhance democracy at the grassroots level too often produce a “sense of increased disconnect, distrust and distancing from local authorities” (ibid: 14). What we see in mainstream political misuses of the language of the commons is the post-political condition in action (see Chapter 2), whereby the knowledges of people on-the-ground have been misrepresented and the value terms such as *community*, *self-help*, and *together* have been reduced to empty signifiers.

McCarthy (2005) sees what we might call the *community turn* within mainstream political discourse as perpetuating a sort of neoliberalism from below, in which the state is the tyranny. Proponents of this view, he argues, understand the

community as “the most reliable source of social innovation and protection against market failures” (McCarthy 2005: 18). This for McCarthy marks a worrying turn away from the state as a potential solution to the ever-increasing problem of enclosure. He writes:

Is it [anti-state sentiment] a result of a long collective learning process that has led to truly radical and counter-hegemonic imaginaries that can think beyond the state? Or, is it due to the subtle but largely successful elevation of neoliberal ideas into ideological hegemony, resulting in oppositional movements that participate in actively undermining their most promising avenue of resistance? (Ibid: 19).

Although pragmatic about what they can achieve as autonomous actors, social centre activists are, on the whole, wary of the state and its involvement in social and political life. Some activists are explicit in their antithesis towards the state: “*A more equal society would be without a state. Of course capitalists are also a major problem but the state protects them*” (Simon, GSC Activist, Sept. 2012). Others seem more sympathetic towards state practices but no less sceptical about what the state can achieve for the betterment of society: “*Why should I expect the state to make the right decisions for my community? Oh aye, there are good people working for the state no doubt, but they can’t compete with its old boy hierarchies and bloated bureaucracies*” (Jim, Social Centre Activist, Feb. 2012). These statements are not unproblematic. State agents can and do make good decisions that impact positively on people’s lives and while I sympathize with Simon’s ‘less state = more equality’ equation, it is dangerously simplistic at a time when Jim’s acknowledgement of the “good” state continues to buckle under pressure from the forces of capital. That being said, anti-state sentiment in this old industrial city is not without solid foundation. As discussed at the beginning of the chapter local government-led neoliberal policies in Glasgow

exemplify what can be ‘achieved’ by state and private sector elites working to a neoliberal logic. The state is a vast organization and within its corridors and meeting rooms preside people with little love for neoliberal policy. However, like Jim, I am sceptical as to whether these individuals in their capacity as civil servants can effect long-lasting structural change. Paraphrasing Peter North (2011: 825) it seems to me that the rhetoric of partnership and increased community autonomy propagated by local and central government in the UK is “in the short term, a cover for cuts... and in the longer term, for privatisation”. Social centre activists, myself included, believe ‘the most promising avenue of resistance’ comes from below but an ethos of bottom-up organization is certainly not exempt from cooptation by political elites – as Cameron’s comments about Tory notions of decentralization being “absolutely in line with the spirit of the age” (Cameron 2010) testify to.

Importantly, GSC participants are alive to co-optation by state and party political actors, as the following quote makes clear. When asked to expand on a comment he made about government austerity measures, William, relating such measures to privatization, replied:

Well this is something that goes on all the time these days. Public property and services and our free time are made servants of business. This is what the public good should be, a servant to the market. This is really what the big society line is all about: ‘help your community’, ‘help out in your community’. We’re told that it would be a good thing to do because its about ‘togetherness in a time of crisis’ or some rubbish like that, but really its just to service big business and fix an economy they messed up. I find that kind of stuff from politicians quite repulsive (William GSC Activist Oct 2012).

William and others within the social centre scene in Glasgow are able to separate their work as social centre activists from the *community turn* evident in mainstream political discourse. The reasons for this are two-fold. Firstly, for many participants

social centre activism is supplemented with, what might be considered, more radical political activist work within other groups (organizing blockades, demos and other more *incendiary* actions); Secondly, as stated in the introduction to this thesis, social centres are explicitly political spaces. Like the radical feminists mentioned above who speak of the virtues of the domestic sphere and the need for such virtues to inform public life, social centre activists are attempting to inject a type of sociality into politics. Sociality in this instance is inextricably situated in *place* – more specifically for this discussion, the urban environment. For social centre activists, the social, the political and the city are not distinct spheres. This is a very different understanding of civil society to the liberal and conservative mainstream.

Conclusion

Following on from theoretical discussions on neoliberal urbanism in the opening chapter of the thesis, I have shown in this chapter how key neoliberal governance strategies – revanchism, territorial stigmatization and ambient power – impact on contemporary urban life in Glasgow. In the first instance I used the example of Paddy’s Market (an outdoor second-hand market, used by the some of the most economically marginalised groups in the city) to show how revanchist policies of physical exclusion are operationalised and legitimised through the continuous stigmatization of locations in the city that do not adhere to the *uber-urban-chic* imaginaries of urban elites. I then turned to the seductive qualities of ambient power to show how the contemporary urban environment regulates even those publics that are not subject to the penal policies of neoliberal urban governance. Using the ‘Golden Z’ shopping district of the city as an example I argued that the tight

choreographies of consumer space obscure the harsh realities of, amongst other things, rent racking, displacement and public asset stripping. This first section of the chapter concluded with a discussion about City Property (Glasgow) LLP. An arms length external organisation (ALEO) tasked with the management and sale of the City's 'non-operational' property assets and major ground leases. Here I showed how the ALEO, working to the logic of profit maximization, is selling off public property, and through rent increases, pricing out a raft of charities, social enterprises and other grassroots community groups, including the GSC. Crucial to my argument here is that neoliberal forces re-construct key urban activities and places as politically neutral when they are not. Re-construction takes on a variety of forms but, importantly, in Glasgow these different forms are authorized by the local state. My analysis of contemporary urban governance in Glasgow supports claims made by GSC activists that the city lacks *common spaces* and what common spaces remain are under threat.

The chapter then turned to the imaginations and experiences of GSC participants in order to gain purchase on this notion of *common space*. Here I argued that common space seems to occupy a world between the public and private, where some of the most positive aspects of the latter are brought into the former as a direct challenge to public space, as perceived by activists, as too often consumerist and competitive in character. Common ways of being in the city, I contended, begin not with mistrust but rather acceptance and strive to nurture virtues such as empathy, courage, solidarity and care. In practicing the commons participants are acknowledging the value of others and crucially reaching out to others. From this discussion I explored the idea of equality-as-tactic. This is a process of sharing what we have, in terms of knowledge and skills. In doing so we are dispersing concentrations of power: not dissolving power or giving it up, but reconstituting it *in*

place. Of fundamental importance to the commons, as conceived of by GSC participants, is community autonomy. The commons works as a heuristic and collective learning environment therefore it should not be subject to direct influence by state officials or private sector land/building owners.

The chapter then highlighted the abuse of the language of the commons by mainstream political actors. Echoing previous discussions on the post-political condition, I argued that mainstream political uses of terms like *community*, *self-help* and *together* are too often couched within the logic of austerity budgeting and as such reduce these terms to a set of empty signifiers. This misuse had not gone unnoticed by GSC participants and, if anything had made them more indignant towards mainstream politics, and committed to establishing a place in the city that values both the language and practices of the commons. In the next chapter I look to the internal workings of the GSC. Here, through detailing the organisational processes employed by the group, I consider a range of tensions and inconsistencies that exists between imagining the commons and practising it in the contemporary urban environment.

Chapter 5

Inside the Glasgow Social Centre: Organizing Difference, Building Solidarities

Introduction

The previous chapter focused on points of commonality between GSC participants. All participants were concerned about what they understood to be a process of appropriation, through privatization, of the city's common wealth – its buildings, lands and services. In an attempt to be a part of something that begins to counter this appropriation these individuals became social centre participants. This is because they understand the social centre as a common space: that is a space that facilitates the practice of direct and participatory democratic form, mutual aid between participants and community self-help initiatives. The implication here is that *change* is best achieved or at least initiated and directed from the bottom-up: that is at the level of individual and local community.

This chapter focuses on diversity and difference within the GSC community and the wider autonomous left network in Glasgow. In practicing direct and participatory forms of democracy, as most within the autonomous left and certainly social centre participants do, they are both acknowledging difference within the wider community and attempting to organise and harness the creative potential of diversity. Furthermore, and this point is crucial for gaining some purchase on what this group of people understand the commons to be, they are attempting to equalize the process of participation. This is because of recognition by GSC participants that difference –

within any community – is not simply a matter of conflicting opinions but also refers to individual abilities and privileges. As discussed in Chapter 2 (see section on mutuality) individuals come to a social centre with – for example, different levels of formal education, local knowledge, time – and in *sharing* what they have with others, participants are keeping check on these differences to ensure they do not further entrench existing asymmetries of power.

Bearing this in mind, I want to suggest in this chapter that democracy here is better understood as an on going *practice* as opposed to an *end point*. In an absorbing paper entitled ‘Politics without Politics’ (2009) Jodi Dean contends that the left fetishizes democracy – “despite all our problems with [it]” – as “the solution to all our problems” (Dean 2009: 20). She argues that democracy is an inadequate expression of left aspiration because, firstly, the right “voices its goals and aspirations in democratic terms” (for example, one of the main reasons given for the invasion of Iraq was the goal of bringing democracy to the Middle East) and secondly “contemporary democratic language employs and reinforces the rhetoric of capitalism: free choice, liberty, satisfaction, connection, communication, diversity” (ibid). These two observations are difficult to refute but voicing *goals* in democratic terms says nothing of the *means* employed by way of achieving these goals and, as shown in the previous chapter with regards to mainstream political use of a discourse of community, the *rhetoric* of capitalism (i.e. the *art* of persuasive speaking) bears no semblance to the reality of capitalist relations on the ground, where “liberty, satisfaction, connection” etc are experiences seldom realized by large sections of society. Democracy, for those who take it seriously, is not only a collection of words and ideas. It is also series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end: freedom for all. For GSC participants, the distance between the means and ends is collapsed because the steps

taken are as important as decisions made. As we shall see, in performing participatory democratic *process* we create space for voices to be spoken and heard. Democracy as *tactic* is about breaking down all forms of fixed hierarchy by empowering people to question the naturalization of these hierarchies. Democracy here should be understood as a pedagogical activity where individuals learn how to speak and listen, where we learn about one another's views and ideas and learn where there is synergy between those ideas and where there is not. This chapter is in the main concerned with the democratic practices employed by the GSC.

In the following pages I aim to show that contra romanticized and misleading notions of its goal of achieving *absolute* inclusivity, democracy, in its participatory form, paradoxically, involves exclusion. The first and most obvious of those groups and individuals excluded from GSC activities are those who wish to maintain existing hierarchical relations but there are others. As we shall see in this chapter consensus is not always achievable. As such individuals become unsatisfied and exclude themselves from the group. Furthermore, attempting to overcome some differences risks diminishing the radical potential of the centre as an alternative to state/capital relations. In such circumstances this can lead to minority self-exclusion or a majority excluding a minority. In short, diversity cannot always be creatively harnessed to produce progressive points of bifurcation – some differences are too great. This however does not preclude the building of solidarities – an action that requires an understanding of your enemy.

The first part of the chapter explores diversity within the wider autonomous left community in Glasgow. Borrowing from Routledge (2003) we see the social centre here as a convergence space for autonomous left orientated groups involved in a variety of actions across the city. I then discuss the role of the centre as cultural hub,

which aims to cater for what I refer to as Glasgow's autonomous *scene*. Using the term scene, I argue, captures a range of cultural tropes that link this collection of groups and individuals. However, a scene in the cultural sense should not be mistaken for a politically homogenous group. Using Wayne Price's 2009 paper 'The Two Main Trends in Anarchism' as a guide, I discuss the range of political sensibilities at work in the GSC. The chapter then takes a distinctly spatial turn looking at how the act of place making serves as a means to unify this disparate group of activists. Here I introduce the notion of *ritual* as repetitive organizational acts carried out by the collective as a practical means of actively creating new bonds and solidarities. The second part of the chapter is devoted to the participatory democratic practices employed by the GSC. I analyse the consensus model adopted by the group, explaining how this model is operationalised in the decision-making process. Again this section focuses on difference within the GSC. Looking at an actually existing point of contestation within the group I consider the political effectiveness of consensus decision-making as utilised by participants. Whilst engaging with tensions this section considers more positive readings of this experience through linking to arguments for the need for a robust form of participatory democracy in urban governance and Gibson-Graham's arguments about diverse economies.

The Autonomous *Scene* in Glasgow: Its Satisfactions and its Discontents

I spent the summer before I began my PhD candidacy in the Dutch city Nijmegen living and working in an Anarchist influenced social centre called De Grote Broke (meaning, for reasons unknown, The Big Pants). De Grote Broke is the centre of anarchist activity in southeast Holland and is one of the longest established social

centres in the country. With a café bar, live music venue, workshop, meeting rooms and resident accommodation the social centre was a busy place. Adorned with slogans and images the interior walls of the building exuded a counter-cultural character and the many conversations that took place within the centre revolved around instigating a radical transformation of city living, anarchist style! During my first few days hanging around the place I decided to reacquaint myself with Colin Ward's (1976) 'Anarchy in Action'. My routine in those first few days involved getting up, cooking and eating breakfast with my Dutch comrades, attending to various chores and around eleven-ish heading to my favourite coffee shop for some quality time with Colin (coffee shop of the bean variety I hasten to add). On my return to De Grote Broke, after a caffeine laden session, a fellow social centre activist pointed at the pocket of my green cargo trouser leg, where Ward's pamphlet sat revealing the word "Anarchy" in the title, and said "scene points".

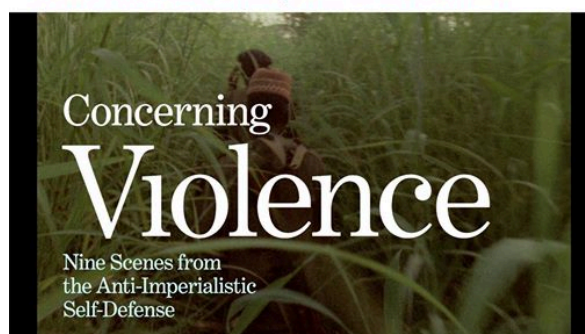
Scene points were acquired when certain tasks – mundane or sensational are carried out or life changes implemented. For example, an anarchist festival I visited during my stay in Holland is an integral part of the Dutch Anarchist experience and attendance carries with it points. Progressing from vegetarian to vegan represents another positive step in terms of points. Points can also be gained through demonstration and protest: the more subversive or antagonistic the behaviour the more scene points acquired. The practice of scene points was, for the most part, tongue and cheek with no actual recording of individual tallies taking place. While respect was shown by the group to individuals who excelled in their role as a member of the anarchist community, speaking the term 'scene points' is probably best understood as a healthy form of community self-deprecation – a mechanism of sorts insuring the Dutch anarchist scene doesn't take itself too seriously.

Anarchism, as discussed in Chapter 2, is an ethics of practice and as such it extends well beyond the confines of traditional political debate into social and cultural aspects of our lives. It is therefore no surprise that anarchism should be associated with a ‘scene’ in the cultural sense. The scene in Glasgow is not as easily identified as it is in Nijmegen – maybe because we’ve never had an established social centre – but it’s there. Ruggiero (2001: 112) describes a scene as groups and individuals “participating in the same events and, at times, sharing specific places and spaces in the city [including] small ‘alternative’ restaurants, coffee shops, bookshops [and] bars”. This description fits with Glasgow’s autonomous left milieu. It is impossible to pin down the number of people involved in the Glasgow scene because a scene is not a static entity. Rather it is dynamic or as Creasap (2012: 184) puts it “a scene is always a work-in-progress”.



Glasgow Social Centre presents...

Double film screening and meal
at the Fred Paton Centre (19 Carrington Street, G4 9AJ)
28th March 3:30-6:30pm - free/donation



GSC Flier



GSC Flier

The Glasgow scene with its cultural particularities does not preclude politics. As discussed in the previous chapter, for social centre activists politics cannot be easily separated from other aspects of life. From the outset the GSC was conceived as a practical political space providing shared office space, meeting rooms and acting as an activist resource centre facilitating a variety of actions, events and campaigns:

People came together from various different campaigns: we were coming from campaigning on asylum seeking grounds, or environmental justice grounds, or from anti poverty grounds. There was a whole load of reasons

why we felt the need to speak to one another and it was essential that we had the space to do that (Jim, Social Centre Activist, Feb. 2012).

Taking a similar view of why a social centre was needed in the city, the following quote highlights the importance of political debate and, where appropriate, cross-pollination of ideas.

I wanted a place for people to get to know each other, to be more aware of what's going on with one another's work. I kind of found that a lot of the time there were people doing very similar things in different areas that could have pooled their resources and been more effective. (Simon, GSC Participant Sept. 2012).



Talk and discussion about animal testing in the UK Pharmaceutical Industry

We can infer from the above quotes that the social centre is a political space. It is conceived as a nodal point in the city's activist network: a place where individuals and groups active in various campaigns around the city might come together to share their stories, learn from one another and in doing so enhance their political campaigns. For example, as the quotes make clear, the social centre provides a physical space for

activists to meet and organize actions. Bearing in mind our discussion of urban neoliberalization in the previous chapter, the provision of this service is no small matter. The commercialization of social spaces in the city makes finding a free (or affordable) and inclusive⁴² place to meet and talk openly a difficult task. The social centre also provides a communal storage space for banners, leaflets, paints, various tools and other artefacts a group may need to enact direct action politics. Talks, book launches and reading groups are common in social centres and, more often than not, they revolve around explicitly political concerns. The GSC, for example, held an evening of discussion on the enclosure of common land and buildings in Glasgow; a book launch of a Solidarity Federation publication entitled ‘Fighting for Ourselves: Anarcho-syndicalism and the class-struggle’⁴³; and operated a stall at various events around the city selling a range of radical political literatures, from books about classical anarchist theory to pamphlets dealing with practical issues concerning best practice consensus decision-making. Our best seller was a comic promoting a healthy dislike for the rich entitled ‘Buffy the Anarcho-Syndicalist’, which begins with the caption:

Its Saturday Night at the Sunnydale Country Club – here the rich and powerful gather. In safe distance from the poor and uneducated masses, they feel safe to talk freely. Little do they know, they have a spy in their midst ... (Extract from comic Buffy the Anarcho-Syndicalist, Sutton 2004)

My point here is to highlight the role of the social centre as a political place – that is a centre of explicitly political organization and education. In the above cases the type of politics promoted by the social centre is defensive and often combative – a blockade

⁴² By ‘inclusive’ I am referring to spaces that can accommodate all potential social centre participants. Pubs, for example, are often not suitable for parents who wish to bring their children to meetings and/or events.

⁴³ This particular book launch was organised in partnership with Glasgow AFED.

at the UK Border Agency designed to stop a potential dawn raid; an afternoon occupation of a branch of RBS protesting bankers bonuses; the distribution of literature like *Buffy the Anarcho-Syndicalist*. For many involved in Glasgow's libertarian left scene, the social centre – its talks, book launches, online blog, facebook page etc – acted as point of information and organisation for such forms of political action. As Stephen puts it “*the social centre is an access point for people to talk about all kinds of political ideas*” (Stephen GSC Participant, Nov. 2012). But, it is much more than this.

When you're involved in this type of politics – you know, like direct action politics – it can be pretty intense. A place where we can organise actions is a good idea but all that political organizing is intense. It's easy to burnout, a lot of people do. The social centre, well its political, but its more than that. It's a space were we can come together as friends. We can put on our own events – bands or DJs we like, comedy nights, film nights, whatever. The social stuff is really important because people can relax with each other (Mark, GSC Participant, Oct, 2012).

Mark's quote highlights another characteristic of the social centre as a place of social and cultural convergence. The GSC facilitated many social and practical DIY events. For example, each year we organised a Winter Solstice party involving live music and comedians; we organised up-cycling workshops, 'non-political' film nights and more, all with varying degrees of success. As Mark suggests, these social gatherings were important events. In one sense they provided respite from the serious world of meetings and actions – spaces for people to unwind and get to know one another on a more intimate level than an action, meeting or political talk can offer. Of course, politics never really goes away. On this point one activist commented “*A lot of the really good [action orientated] ideas come out of conversations that take place at a gig or in the pub after a meeting*” (Andrea GSC Participant, Oct. 2012).

At this point it is important to point out that anarchists and the libertarian arm of the wider alter-globalisation movement can and do create spaces that make many people in ‘mainstream’ culture uneasy. Of UK Climate Camps Hopkins writes:

At protest movements, we take up a position outside of mainstream culture, use language, dress codes, behaviour and forms of protest which at best bewilder and at worst enrage mainstream society, yet we expect them to see the error of their ways and the validity of ours and embark on a radical decarbonisation (Hopkins in North 2011: date needed)

It should also be noted that a sense of unease felt by newcomers in such spaces is not only due to different dress codes or forms of protest. The libertarian left is not immune to bully tactics or more simply bad manners. That being said, in my experience of these protest spaces and counter-cultural places bullying tactics and poor manners don’t last long. Open democratic debate with good facilitation (see below) usually disables the dominators. I also want to make clear that the GSC worked extremely hard at welcoming newcomers. For some this desire to want to create a welcoming and inclusive environment comes from experience of past mistakes.

It’s really important not to like make a place where it’s easy for people to just bevy or smoke weed all day. And you don’t want it too aggressive politically either. That just scares people away. I’ve been there. On both sides I mean. I’ve been the pissed guy hanging about a social centre at like 2pm on a Tuesday while people are running a workshop in another room in the building. And I’ve been the guy getting too heavy and aggressive at a meeting. I’ve also felt like an outsider, like not in the proper hard-core group, you know? All that stuff (Tommy Social Centre Activist, Dec. 2012)

An important tactic geared towards limiting past mistakes is running ‘non-political’ events. These social events give newcomers an easier first point of contact with the group than a protest, occupation or even a general meeting. They constitute the

production of what Harvey (2012) would call “cultural solidarities” and “collective memories” that also allow longer-term GSC participants to further cement friendly relations, aiding the group in overcoming tensions.

We can infer from this discussion on the socio-cultural role of the social centre that these events are in part geared towards strengthening the relationships that evolve in an already existing *scene*. We could say ‘*network*’ – and I do from time-to-time – but *scene* I suggest better captures the particular cultural tropes that link this collection of groups and individuals. When engaging with Glasgow’s autonomous left particular symbols, prompts and cues become more noticeable – black hoodies; dreads; one leg of the trouser tucked into a sock (better for bike riding); copious amounts of hummus; veganism; freeganism; world music; trance music, anarcho-punk bands, stickers and badges. The scene foregrounds the idea of inclusivity – those that are part of it and those that are not – but writing as someone who was once on the outside wanting in, conscious border control in Glasgow’s autonomous left was unusual. Anarchists, in particular, are seldom the clandestine hard line politicians they are often made out to be. Even though infiltration of anarchist circles by the police and other detractors takes place, most anarchist-influenced groups I have experienced realize that closing the doors to newcomers results in a debilitating introversion that is ultimately counter-productive (see discussion in chapter 2 concerning the Dutch Kraakar movement). From the outside looking in, a scene always looks more homogenous than it actually is. This is as true for Glasgow’s autonomous left scene as any other. In the following section I discuss the different political sensibilities that are regularly enacted in Glasgow’s autonomous scene.

Different Political Sensibilities at Work in the Scene

A scene is never as uniform as it might appear from the outside. Strip away the aesthetic layer of the libertarian left in Glasgow and a variety of differing political sensibilities emerge. Price's (2009) distinction between the 'small a' (or new school) and 'capital A' (or old school) activists within the anarchist movement is useful in understanding the two poles of political *sensibilities* on offer. Before discussing this distinction I want to inject a note of caution. In my experience of the libertarian left in Glasgow, individuals cannot be easily bracketed into 'capital A' or 'small a' groups. Rather, they seem to move between the two poles over time as events, big and small, influence their thoughts and actions. This is why I refer to each as *political sensibilities* – *sensibility* expresses a pliant political subjectivity.

The 'small a' constitute a vast array of groups, which are committed to collective and horizontal modes of organization but are unlikely to be seen waving the red and black flag – similarly, individuals within these groups are unlikely to call themselves anarchists. A politics focused upon *red for the workers* and *black for the revolution*, represented in said flag, is not the main motivation behind their actions. There are multiple overlapping particularities motivating this group: feminism, queer politics, environmentalism, and animal liberation amongst others. Uri Gordon (2008) sees this mishmash of self-organizers and everyday radicals as the beating heart of a vast anarchist revival, writing "Its euphemisms are legion: anti-authoritarian, autonomous, horizontalist [...] but you know it when you see it, and anarchy is everywhere" (Gordon 2008: 10).

What identifies this group as anarchists is the belief that a better society is one where no human being dominates another. The absence of domination is achieved through the practice of mutual aid and direct democratic engagement. For Gordon

(ibid: 41) this is “anarchy as culture”, without working towards a revolutionary goal. Gordon writes, “anarchists today do not tend to think of revolution – even if they use the term – as a future event but rather as a present day process” (ibid). As such, a community-organized potluck can be as anarchic as an opencast coalmine blockade. Concurring with this view, in my experience the language used in new school sensibilities is seldom couched in the wider rhetoric of anti-capitalism, anti-statism and class struggle. Consider the following quote by a GSC activist:

The thing I like about the Glasgow Social Centre is that it covers all sorts of things. If I go to an event or we do something [an action], then I get to learn from people who have a different perspective. I might not really agree with their perspective on things, but I would have had no idea about – like environmental problems somewhere or activism in other places – if it wasn't for the social centre (Jo, GSC Participant, Dec. 2012).

Jo was attracted to a variety of “different perspectives” to her own. She was interested in the pedagogic and cultural character of the social centre. She told me that up-cycle craft workshops, gig nights and other social events were as important to her social centre experience as more politically overt events. Emphasizing our previous discussion on learning from past mistakes in terms of producing a welcoming environment, for Jo, accommodating the plurality of urban life is important and these social events provide that accommodation. For new school sensibilities, community self-management of a social centre was, in a sense, seen as the means and end of political involvement. This position tends not to promote Anarchist ‘movement building’ rhetoric, in the sense of struggling against and beyond the state/capitalist nexus. Rather the key concern was to set up and maintain a counter-cultural space that practices participatory democratic decision-making in Glasgow.

This could be viewed as a pragmatic approach, which sees change as an incremental process that happens at the local scale. The main object of change is individual behaviour and participation in the social centre community can bring this about. Deeply autonomous in character this position places high value on the terms ‘community’, ‘local’ and ‘grassroots’. Any notion of expansion comes via the informal construction of a critical mass. That is, when the optimal amounts of local communities have initiated similar practices, behavioural change will have reached a point where societal change is imminent. This emphasis on “ego corrective” (Aiken 2014: 7) measures (i.e. behavioural change) is reminiscent of our discussion in Chapter 2 concerning Bakunin’s ‘Tyranny of Society’. To struggle against a tyranny that is exercised through “customs, sentiments, prejudices, images and habits” that work upon “intellectual life” (Bottici 2013: 17) is in large part a struggle against ourselves, for we are its products. In this sense we can see the social centre as a *local* pedagogic space where individuals gather and, in commune, attempt to sensitize themselves to the impositions of domination – that is recognize how domination impacts on them and the part they play propagating practices of domination. While I understand and support the need for this individualised, bounded and behaviour-oriented form of struggle, which can be cathartic, it is important to point out its flaws.

Socialists cannot accept some of the political claims that are often made by people for their scene or lifestyle ... Nor, unfortunately, is it possible under capitalism to create permanent havens of alternative ways of living. It could not be done by Robert Owen and the utopian socialists of the 19th Century. It could not be done by the hippy communes in the 60s or by workers' cooperatives in the 70s and it cannot be done by traveller convoys or squatting communities today. Such alternative communities are never a practicable option for a large majority of working class people, and even for the minority who join them they are seldom viable in the long term. The pressures of the capitalist economy are too strong, too pervasive and too insidious to be resisted indefinitely this way (Molineux 1994)

The suggestion here is that there is a need for a more nuanced analysis of contemporary forms of exploitation than ‘lifestyle’ socialism can offer – an analysis that would have to develop a better understanding of class relations in shaping the character of contemporary urban life⁴⁴. I agree that the organisational forms mentioned by Molineux can become overly bounded and introverted and as such add very little to wider struggles against domination. However, where they can and do offer a progressive contribution is in the area of small scale organising and in building solidarities between different groups. Writing about the organisational successes of anti-capitalist groups in the Bolivian city El Alto, Harvey (2013) argues that the “collective class consciousness” of industrial workers “when coupled with practices of local democracy” partially produced “the subjective conditions for creating alternative political associations”. Echoing Hardt and Negri’s (2001) notion of the multitude as a plurality of contemporary political subjectivities all struggling and resisting in various ways the impositions of neoliberalism, my point here is that there is much revolutionary potential in today’s ‘alternative communities’ – if, like the *alteños*, we can overcome what is often a self-imposed political marginalisation.

Capital ‘A’ or ‘Old School’ anarchism, while recognizing the need to confront one’s ‘inner demons’, places more emphasis on structural change. Here the idea that if we choose to act differently society will transform into a world without domination is viewed as insular and politically naïve. For example, few if any urban communities are homogenous entities. They are undercut by a variety of structural inequalities that cannot be adequately addressed through altering local practices alone, no matter how progressive. Furthermore local groups acting autonomously have limited power in the face of state/capitalist coercion and, referring to a previous discussion about the local

⁴⁴ See also Bookchin’s (1995) ‘*Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*’ for a more specific critique of Lifestyle Anarchism.

as a site of *governance-through-community* as opposed to *governance-by-community* (see Chapter 4), local solutions are often co-opted back into the dominant system, giving the latter further legitimacy. This last point is a key concern of those activists displaying ‘capital A’ sensibilities. They promote *translocal* alliances between subjugated groups. This is seen as a tactic that helps groups collectively defend against co-optation through building solidarity networks that share ideas and resources.

‘Capital A’ sensibilities promote a revolutionary position and see social centres as one component within a multitude of tactics utilized by, to quote Price (2009: 5) “a vast movement of the oppressed and the exploited” that “must rise up and smash the state and dismantle the capitalist economy and all other forms of oppression”⁴⁵. In the following quote a GSC activist expresses ‘capital A’ sensibilities when considering the role of social centre in wider emancipatory politics:

During the nineties in some ways, what had been traditional working class communities all but gave up on radical left politics. They were convinced by New Labour Third Way politics that was generating lots of jobs: the economy was expanding. So for a lot of the radical left, they got sucked into the other problems with capitalism and the environment or around global injustice.

I think the whole movement needs to be doing a collective re-imagination of the terms that we talk about the world. Just now we are really not any good at engaging with people: with the majority of people on our doorstep. There was a reprieve in class warfare and maybe we need to make it explicit again but it needs to come a long way. It needs to come a long way and we need to make it relevant. The social centre is a place we can learn how to do that and I think it could be a good place for getting our position out there (Stephen, GSC participant, Nov. 2012).

⁴⁵ That being said, GSC old school sensibilities tend to take a more pragmatic position when dealing with the state/capitalist nexus. Scottish law offers no legal protection for squatters therefore all attempts to start up and maintain a social centre involves engaging with capitalist organizations involved in the private property industry and state sectors such as Planning and Licensing departments. In addition, in order to apply for grants – needed to sustain rented properties – whether from the third sector or what might be considered more progressive elements within the state sector, social centre activists have had to participate in a number of ‘new-start’ business courses.

We can draw a few key points from the above quote in relation to understanding differing political sensibilities within Glasgow's autonomous scene. There is a suggestion the alter-globalization movement, in some way, served to de-territorialize struggle, positioning it in the 'out-of-reach' imagined geographies of the global⁴⁶. Considering the alter-globalization movement's 'fondness' for all things local, the inference made by Stephen is that this global-local relationship omits any mention of intermediary scales. While "*people on our doorsteps*" could be construed as others in the same locale, I think Stephen is talking about reaching out beyond the confines of the social centre and the libertarian left scene more generally. In this sense Stephen's comment speaks to the insular character of the 'local solutions to global problems' approach. For Stephen, struggle against the state/capital nexus should take the form of an alliance of those groups subject to the impositions of that nexus. In other words, the particularities of each group should fold into an overall strategy. Stephen's politics are informed by class struggle analysis; therefore the group he is most concerned with are workers. He recognizes a need to make class struggle relevant and the social centre is seen as a place where he might "learn" the skills to do this. Crucially he understands the social centre as potentially useful in terms of movement building; as evidenced in the line "*I think it could be a good place for getting our position out there*" (*ibid*). Although certainly not rejecting autonomous action, old school sensibilities promote a formal networked organizational logic in which groups are connected through a series of regular temporal and spatial assemblies (e.g. branch meetings and AGMs). This does not conflict with a commitment to anti-hierarchical practice, which they share with the wider anarchist church. Rather, what is being promoted here is a federalist

⁴⁶ *This position is supported by social movement theorists who warn us of the privileged professional activist (usually white and middle-class) playing the part of the Deleuzian nomad, attending actions in various locations across the globe (see Cumbers, Nativel and Routledge 2008, Juris 2008).*

model in which branches organize in a non-hierarchical fashion working with one another on an equal footing.

It is in the question ‘how can we expand our ideas and practices?’ that we find the key distinction between old school and new school anarchist sensibilities. For the former, if anarchism is to become more than, to borrow from Ward (1973), “a seed beneath the snow” its practitioners must up-scale the mutual modes of engagement nurtured in their immediate localities. Up scaling is best achieved through a formal systemic organizational model. For example, like the anti-capitalist Bolivians of El Alto mentioned earlier, up scaling might involve a nested council structure involving place-bound organizations, sectoral associations of various groups (e.g. small businesses, unemployed, disabled groups) and more traditional industrial unions. For the latter this notion of up scaling evokes some form of macro organization that would threaten the autonomy of its component parts. It suggests an uncomfortable level of bureaucracy that holds the frightening potential of a vanguard of sorts – professional activists who, in their role as liaisons between the component parts, acquire extra knowledge and privilege and the political power that comes with it. Up scaling for this group is an organic, or better still spontaneous, process that resists formalization.

As stated above individuals active in the GSC and the wider libertarian left seldom hold onto one sensibility for the duration of their activist lives. The tensions discussed above between behavioural and structural change, between formal and informal organizational models, between *doing* anarchism and what some consider as *preaching* anarchism, loom large in Glasgow’s scene.

In the following section I want to focus on GSC events. More specifically I want to explore the importance of ritual and place making in social centre events,

which can serve to ameliorate difference by aiding the forging of solidarity between people. In a 2009 paper entitled ‘Social Space and the Practice of Anarchist History’, Tom Goyens claims anarchists experience their political identity in more spatial ways than socialists “because the latter live and experience their ideology *also* on a temporal plane with the preparation and anticipation of elections [...] and office term limits” (Goyens 2009: 442). An anarchist ethics of prefiguration (see Chapter 2) sees anarchists place a great deal of importance on the *here and now*: that is the very spaces in which anarchist practices take place, for, as Goyens correctly points out, “they are the new society in miniature” (ibid). Ideally this new society does not try to ignore difference but rather celebrates it and where and when necessary attempts to organise difference in politically progressive ways.

Rituals, Place-Making and the Forging of Solidarities

The GSC, as I have shown, was set up as a group that *facilitated* an existing scene. By way of unpacking what I mean by facilitation, I want to apply the notion of *ritual* when thinking about social centre events. The notion of ritual is particularly significant for the GSC. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the group – for the bulk of time in which they operated – did not have a place of their own. They worked out of various locations within the city. Organising these locations for GSC events – seating arrangements, artwork, cooking and serving food etc – took on ritualistic qualities that allowed the group to claim some sense of ownership, albeit temporary, over a space. The following diary extract details one such ritual performed by GSC activists:

■■■■ and ■■■■ worked the bookstall at the anarchist fair yesterday. The stall did well: one guy bought three books and a load of pamphlets. They

were meticulous with the layout of the stall, taking great care to separate the classical anarchist texts from the social centre texts from the pamphlets from the miscellaneous: all neatly positioned in columns with the top of one book overlapping the bottom of another. They took as much care packing them back in the bags. We have a new banner that can be fixed to hang along the bottom of the table or on a wall, as it was yesterday. The banner reads Glasgow Social Centre in the usual font with F.T.B written in the corner with a black marker. [REDACTED] wrote it. It means 'Fuck Them Both' as opposed to the usual F.T.Q ('Fuck the Queen') or F.T.P (Fuck the Pope). It made for a good icebreaker with people who visited the stall. [REDACTED] thinks we should join the stall up with The People's Kitchen to "Give ourselves a real visible presence on the streets (Researchers Diary Extract, 11/12/2011).



GSC Book/Pamphlet Stall

Colins defines ritual as “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention, producing a momentary shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership” (Colins 2004: 7). To this I would add that it is the regularity of certain tasks performed before, during and after events that give them a ritualistic quality, which in turn acts as a place-making tool. For GSC activists and

anarchists more generally, understanding the connections between ritual, place and solidarity is integral to political praxis. The primary catalyst for the autonomous scene is politics but the doing of politics can often be isolating for small political groups who are not part of a consolidated whole (i.e. the party or the union). When thinking about GSC related tasks as place-making rituals what I am suggesting here is that activists are involved in producing a collective memory of place in the city. One activist explains:

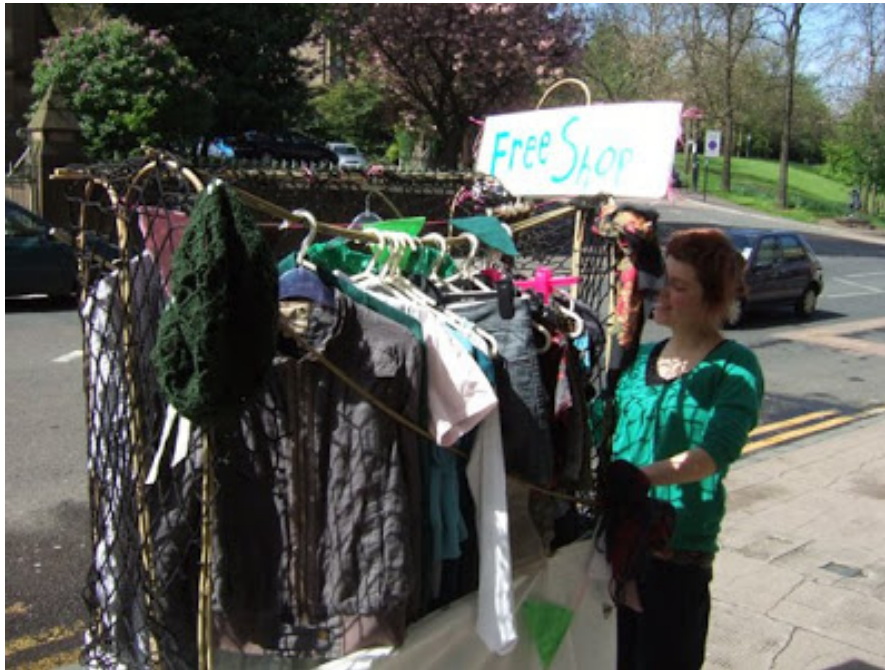
Working with a small number of people can be really effective for getting things done but it can also leave the group feeling very marginal. Events like a potluck or a gig bring all the different groups together. I think that is at the core of why a social centre is used (Sally GSC Participant, Nov. 2012).

Similar sentiments were made by all of the social centre activists interviewed and I have experienced the sense of solidarity induced by something as simple as, for example, communal cooking and eating with social centre participants. A ritual has an organizational quality and a repetitive quality and within the context of a social centre event, a collective quality. These qualities begin well before the end event. For example, in organising The People's Kitchen – which was effectively a mobile soup kitchen run collaboratively by the GSC and other individuals – a small group of participants would have the task of sourcing food. This was usually skipped therefore bike rides around various 'good spots' in the city would precede the event. Another group would be on cooking duty and a few more to wash up after the meal. Referring to the type of work sketched out here as *commensality*, Bargu (2013: 42) writes "an important aspect of commensality is that it does not simply indicate existing intimacy, it also actively creates it, acting as a practical foundation for the forging of new bonds and filiations". This idea echoes our discussion in the previous chapter concerning activists' understanding of the commons. Activists highlighted the importance of

users producing common spaces. Production here is as much about creating new solidarities as it is strengthening existing bonds. I am reminded here of our discussion in chapter two concerning anarchism as an ethics of practice. Taking a similar position when he describes anarchism as an “ethics of direct relationships” Heckert writes:

My proposal here is an ethics with neither origin nor conclusion, ethics which are continually produced in the present, in being present. Ethics here are not simply about relationships: distant, objective and cool. They are born of relationships, of relating: directly, intersubjectively and warmly (Heckert 2009).

This is evidenced in my own observations of GSC meetings, which are discussed in more detail in the next section of the chapter. The most active participants across all areas of the social centre experience made for the better practitioners of participatory democratic methods. By ‘better’ I mean those who are most attentive to the views of others, those who can voice their opinion, even if it contests with others, in a confident but nonaggressive manner. In participating in common rituals of production, we learn about one another, we open up to one another and ultimately we become better at collectivizing (or maybe simply sharing) what skills, what power each of us has. Social centre events, which took place in various locations within the city, constitute a consolidated expression of this anarchic form of organization. Like Goyen’s German Anarchists in New York at the turn of the 20th Century, these locations were not simply “box[es] of unchanging space” (Goyens 2009: 451) in which GSC activists convened. Instead GSC activists transformed them, albeit for a limited period, into uniquely social centre places. In this sense, the potential of the social centre as a disrupting element in a neoliberal landscape of hierarchy, of atomized persons, of separation is realized in the coming together of production, place and people.



The GSC Free Shop is a good example of the group subverting overly commercialised public space into a GSC space. Although for the most part symbolic as a form of direct action it proved to be a successful tactic in disrupting the everyday landscape of "fast fashion" consumption that Glasgow city leaders takes 'pride' in. The Peoples' Kitchen had a similar effect.

Thus far in this chapter I have discussed the cultural tropes on view and different political sensibilities at work within Glasgow's autonomous scene, arguing that the social centre acts as a convergence space for these differing perspectives. Acknowledgement by those involved in the libertarian left scene for the need of a social centre should also highlight the existence of commonality at work in shaping the trajectory of the scene in Glasgow. As discussed in Chapter 4, commonality can be found in a critique of neoliberal urbanism and of the state/capitalist nexus more generally. Furthermore, commonality can be found in a broad support for a socio-political process that attends to the plurality and complexity of urban life. In attempting to 'attend' to such complexities the libertarian left favours a decentralised scale of decision-making: this scale being closer to the action, as it were, therefore better to understand the details of complexity. Whilst I have stated that politics plays

an integral role in social centre activities, thus far I have mainly emphasized the socio-cultural role of the GSC in facilitating the wants and needs of this heterogeneous political milieu. Heterogeneity precludes general political theory therefore it is difficult to discuss politics in the normative sense of competing universalisms when exploring the libertarian left scene. Politics for this ‘mixed-bag of sweeties’ is a question of *process*. The particularities of political process here are never more evident than in the setting of a meeting. It is no overstatement to say that anarchist and libertarian left groups more broadly are judged and judge themselves by the quality of their meetings. Well-run social events and political actions require numerous well-run meetings but the meeting itself should also be understood as an expression of a better future in the here and now. The next section details GSC protocol during meetings and some of the tensions that arise in this emotive arena.

Meetings and Consensus Decision-Making

Meetings are a crucial component of social centre work. In the early days of the GSC, meetings were held once per week in an office space in Glasgow’s Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA). As tasks began to dissolve or decentralize into smaller organizing groups, full group meetings became less frequent, becoming fortnightly and eventually monthly. By ‘smaller organizing groups’ I mean semi-autonomous event or organizing committees within the wider collective. During my time with the GSC these included: MISLabelled – a women’s group; The People’s Kitchen – a vegan friendly food collective operating in a manner not dissimilar to Food Not

Bombs⁴⁷; and Event groups – who, as the name suggests, organized events ranging from gigs to craft workshops to book launches and more. Each group arranges their own agenda but meetings always followed the same format of consensus decision-making. It should be noted participants can take part in more than one group and this was often the case for the GSC.

It is within the setting of the meeting, as much as the protest or social event, that solidarities are forged between the differing subjectivities at play within the libertarian left scene because consensus decision-making is about finding common ground and solutions that may not always be ideal but are at least acceptable to all involved. The benefits of this are twofold. Firstly, consensus creates a platform for all who wish to speak to do so. Secondly, it is hoped that if common ground is reached individuals are more motivated towards achieving the aims of the decision – although, as we shall see, consensus is not always reached. The key to good consensus practice is active participation in the decision-making process. It is through participation that individuals learn not only the relevant subject matters regarding particular issues but also important skills such as public speaking and listening. These skills are essential components of participatory democratic practice. For all social centre participants, political apathy is a symptom of democratic inactivity. As one GSC participant puts it, *“why should I care about a system [parliamentary democracy] that’s shut off to me?”* (Robert, GSC Participant, Sept 2012). In consensus all participants have the potential to make changes in the system: in short, the system is of the groups making. Figure 1

⁴⁷ Heynen describes Food Not Bombs as a “fast growing (anarchist) social movement” attempting to “redefine urban anti-hunger politics in the US” (Heynen 2010).

shows the consensus model most commonly employed by the GSC.

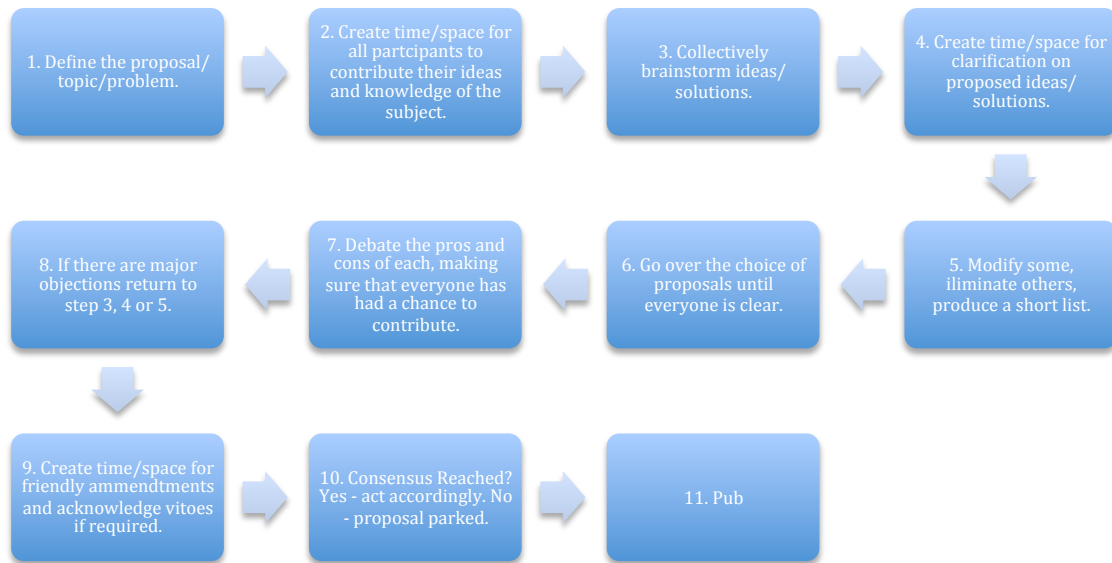


Figure 1: consensus decision-making model used by the GSC

There are a few points to make about this diagram. Firstly, consensus utilizes some of the tools we would expect in most decision-making models: for example, minute takers and timekeepers are used. Good consensus practice requires a good facilitator. If new participants with little or no experience of consensus are present the facilitator should begin by making clear the consensus process. The facilitator may, depending on the nature of the topic discussed, refrain from offering an opinion. If groups adopt this facilitator model it is crucial that the facilitator role is rotated for each meeting (best practice consensus would see this role rotated regardless, in order that the key skill of facilitation is offered to all interested in learning). The role of the facilitator is to ensure the debate runs as smoothly as possible allowing all who wish to speak the opportunity to do so: in effect, equalizing participation. Agenda points are organized at the beginning of the meeting or online prior to the meeting (who facilitates and who takes minutes are also decided at this stage); a ‘go-around’ or ‘ice breaker’ – short

informal introduction and statement by all in attendance also usually precedes the main body of the meeting (statements involve light hearted subject matters such as favourite something or other or best moment of the week, etc). New participants are welcomed if necessary and then points on the agenda are discussed in turn. Other direct democratic tools may be employed at a meeting such as hand signals (see figure 2); and stacker – individual aiding facilitator whose main task is to note down list of participants wishing to speak. The use of such tools is contingent upon the characteristics of the meeting such as location, timeframe and number of participants.

Meetings can be highly emotive experiences. The sense of empowerment through achieving consensus on an issue or action is palpable or as Jo puts it “*when it’s [a meeting] well organized and things go well the sense of collective achievement is a buzz* (Andrea, GSC Participant, Oct. 2012). It is also the case that one can leave a meeting feeling deflated due to consensus not being reached on a particular issue or because the correct process wasn’t followed or because the facilitator didn’t do their job properly allowing one position or person to dictate proceedings. The following quote by Drew highlights some of these frustrations. It should be noted that Drew, more often than not, displayed ‘capital A’ sensibilities so his comments touch the appropriate nerve in regards to our previous discussion:

Every fucking week, you first had to spend about half an hour setting the ground rules for how you were going to have a meeting, you know, waving hands, consensus stuff. I wasn’t used to that. I was used to, “this is what’s on the table, who votes, aye, who votes no?” Now it’s waving your hands around, consensus decision-making. Now, consensus decision-making is one thing but it can go to far and nothing gets done.

You can’t have every fucking week, somebody coming in a meeting and saying, “Err, I don’t think this should be our aim and I don’t think this should be the way we have a decision-making process.” And everybody was, “Yes ... let that person have their say, we need consensus on this”.

I think certain things need to be in place: “These are our aims, these are our objectives, this is how we work, this is how we agree things, this is our ultimate goal.” Anyone that agrees with it can come and join and support these aims and objectives. Anyone that doesn’t agree can’t come and join and by a fucking consensus decision-making process change the nature of the organization, which is what we saw happening every single week in the social centre. Somebody could just turn up and go, “I think we should be chasing unicorns” you know. There’s a lot to be said for the old fashioned authoritarian left way of doing things; “No, these are the rules laid down by Comrade Lenin. If you don’t like it, fuck off.” (Drew, Social Centre Activist, Oct. 2012).

Drew’s grievances with consensus decision-making highlight a broader political point about political effectiveness versus democratic deliberation. For Drew, some social centre participants often fetishized consensus decision-making – or more correctly, democratic inclusivity. There is a sense of urgency in Drew’s politics that an inclusive process of consensus decision-making cannot accommodate. Drew highlights the tyranny of a participatory approach where new individuals are accorded perhaps too much respect in ways that can disrupt earlier group consensus and cohesion. We might also say that inclusivity makes consensus inefficient in the sense that more immediate political tasks are not being met due to a lack of ideological coherence within the group. Drew’s concerns are borne out in the following story.

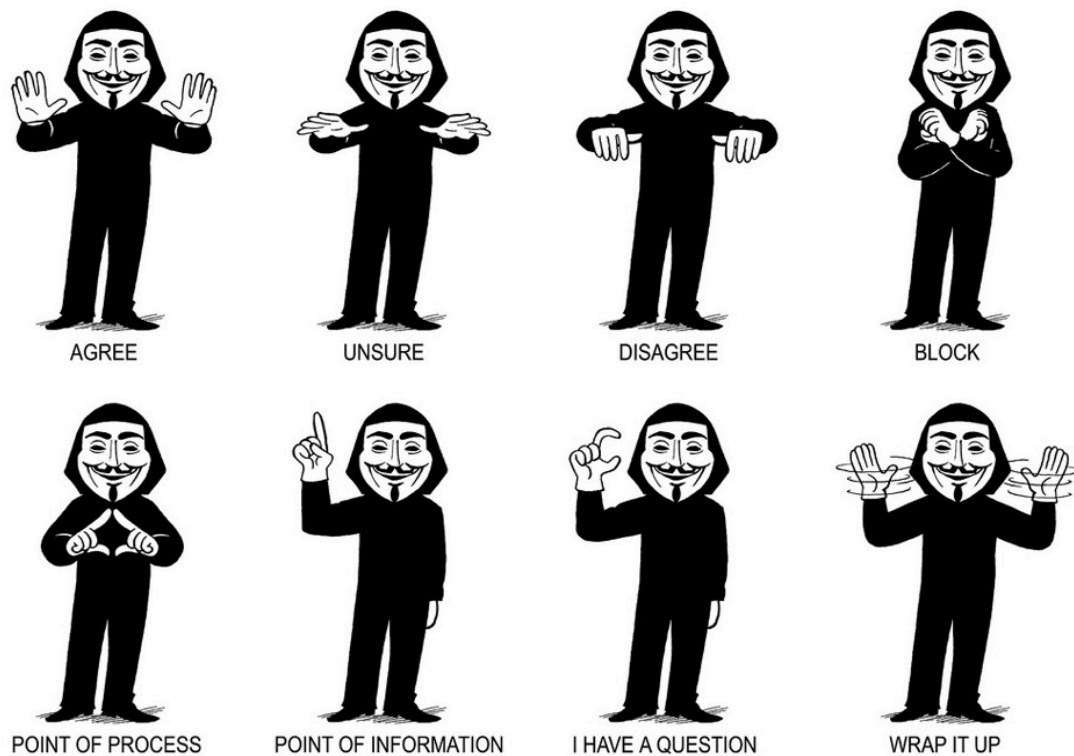


Figure 2: schematic depicting hand signals used in direct democratic process (Source <http://boingboing.net/2011/12/17/occupy-wall-street-hand-signal.html>)

The Spectre of Wage Labour and Fixed Hierarchy

In the winter of 2010 a series of GSC meetings were dedicated to establishing a set of ‘ground rules’ regarding a potential new site for the social centre. The core group (people regularly attending meetings) had increased in numbers due to interest in the potential move⁴⁸. The group felt that pre-move organising meetings were essential to both the success of the move and the initial period of establishing the social centre in the new location. These were open-meetings, and all users and friends of the GSC were invited to take part. Much debate took place and consensus was reached on a variety of matters. For example, consensus was reached on how we would utilize each

⁴⁸ *Regular meetings varied in terms of numbers of participants attending. Over the three years of my study the average numbers of participants present at meetings was 8. During the pre-move organizing meetings in question the average number of participants present was 12. These low numbers reflected the relatively low moral of the wider GSC group as it was without a regular location for the bulk of the three years I worked with them (meetings and events were held in a variety of locations around the city). During a period of stability where the GSC operated out of a single fixed location (Osborne Street) meeting numbers regularly reached the high teens and above.*

of the three levels of the property; consensus was reached on the need to run monthly club nights to help pay the rent; consensus was even reached on a potentially volatile no alcohol policy (other than on said club nights). However, consensus was not reached on a proposal put forward by a participant about the potential of hiring a paid member of staff to oversee the general management/maintenance of the space (in effect a janitor). While few participants had initially expressed a definitive position on the proposal (three certainly did) through observing nods, comments and hand signals, it became apparent during the course of what became a heated debate a division between participants had surfaced.

Both sides of the divide were attracted to the proposal's practical reasoning. The new building was a considerable size and would therefore hopefully see social centre use increase. A general maintenance manager was seen as neutral of the multiple groups and individuals using the space and could therefore diffuse potential conflicts between users about such things as room bookings and assigning cleaning and maintenance tasks. Accord here, in terms of recognizing a practical need, was arrived at through deliberation. The issue, for what I will call the 'no camp', concerned both a maintenance manager's *fixed* position of authority and their position as a waged labourer. For the no camp, an ideal-type social centre should prefigure a world without fixed forms of authority and waged labour. Through open discussion a compromise, made by a participant receptive to the no camp position, was suggested. This was to rotate the position of a general manager around individual users. This would be a volunteer role. Open discussion and compromise highlights the transformative capacity of an agonistic and deliberative political space where all participants are free to air their positions. However, those supporting the initial proposal felt that a more secure position would provide a greater level of efficiency and stability. Furthermore,

some of them took the position that if the social centre achieved a level of income that would allow them to employ staff, “*why not provide well-paid work to those who want and need it?*” (Robert, GSC Activist, Sept. 2010). This debate raged on for the greater part of three meetings and was eventually parked (to be re-considered after a period of reflection).

‘Parking’ the debate did not resolve the issue. Over the course of a few weeks the issue festered and became, for two participants, a motivating factor in their choice to leave the group some weeks later. Ideological incoherence within the group made finding consensus around this issue an extremely difficult task. In trying to reach consensus on this issue the group was, in a sense, denying its internal differences. The no camp was uncomfortable with the GSC taking on the role of employer. They offered a compromise in the form of a rotating (volunteer) position of general manager, but some within the yes camp saw this as impractical, allowing a dogmatic adherence to prefigurative principles get in the way of a more pragmatic approach to running a successful centre.

Reaching consensus on the above issue became an exercise in frustration. An almost militant commitment to consensus by the group saw both sides of the debate use the process as a means of subtle (and at times not so subtle) persuasion. Deliberation, *from this perspective*, undermined political effectiveness. Some participants saw the radical potential of the centre to prefigure an organizational form qualitatively different from the hierarchical and wage systems characteristic of the neoliberal city undermined. Others saw a prefigurative commitment to ‘abolish wage labour’ as impractical and ultimately detrimental to setting up and maintaining what all agreed was a much-needed social centre in Glasgow.

It would be incorrect to say that from the outset the fault lines here mirrored the two poles of political sensibilities discussed in the previous section. It is correct to say that debates such as this were instrumental in pulling political subjectivities in one direction or the other. As this debate raised the issue of long-term strategy, I am inclined to say that the no camp were displaying ‘capital A’ sensibilities in arguing their position. Without committing to a prefigurative ethic that counters capitalist relations, they argued, tactics employed by the group will always be open to recuperation by the dominant system. In this sense there was nothing radical about the position of the yes camp. To put another way, while the social centre community was making their own decisions about the direction of the centre, those decisions held the potential of reproducing oppressions characteristic of the dominant state/capitalist nexus. The group was never tested either way on this issue as the potential move fell through due to the property failing an acoustics test and ultimately bringing an end to our *Change of Use* proposal (more on this in the following chapter). My point here is to draw attention to tensions that arise when groups create open democratic forums and practice participatory methods of decision-making. Within such a forum these tensions are unavoidable and, as we have seen, often result in some form of exclusion: in this case self-exclusion by two members of the group who felt the radical potential of the centre was compromised by those individuals keen to employ staff.

I now want to turn to another contentious situation GSC participants experienced when operating consensus. In the following example a temporal mismatch developed between the consensus process and the financial needs of the group. Financial pressures, in this case in the form of meeting funding deadlines, resulted in a deleterious misuse of consensus by some GSC participants.

The Funding Trap

The funding trap is a well-documented snare community groups, politically orientated or otherwise, fall into. For example, contracts between grassroots groups and funders can serve to produce a culture of path-dependency within certain groups. Aiken (2014: 15) warns that these relationships can result in the “governmentalisation of community at the local level”. In the neoliberal city, where profit must be extracted from every nook and cranny, few things are free – certainly not land and buildings. The GSC spent much of its time filling out forms to access mainly third sector and occasionally government funding schemes designed to aid *non-profit social enterprise start-ups* (in the formal world of funding applications and business ‘gateway’ schemes this was the groups ‘official’ status). The *trap* is when those members of the group issued with the task of writing funding applications become overly dedicated to that task. For some GSC participants (myself included) zealous adherence to finding a suitable funding stream, on occasion, undermined the collective cohesiveness and moral integrity of the whole group. My argument in this next example is that the temporal mismatch between reaching consensus on whether or not to apply for to a particular funding body and meeting the deadline of the funding application, facilitated a deleterious conflict between those issued with the task of finding funds (fund-finders) and the rest of the group.

The funding scheme in question was a Scottish Government initiative called the CCF (Climate Challenge Fund) and was open to non-profit community groups “wanting to tackle climate change and make community improvements by reducing their carbon emissions” (Climate Challenge Fund website 2013). The GSC discussed the viability of starting up a second-hand clothing collection and community up-cycling facility. The idea was that through our existing network we would setup

clothing deposit and collection sites across the city. GSC participants would regularly visit sites and all clothing deposited would be collected and transported to an up-cycling facility in the city. The application made to the CCF covered the cost of transport and the rent of a small warehouse facility in Glasgow's Southside for one year (approximately £9,000 in total).

Discussions over the design and viability of this project followed the pattern of the consensus decision-making outlined in figure 3. However, the group could not get past step 8. The majority objection was concerned with what was perceived by some as a paucity of volunteers at the time of the discussions. The GSC had been without a space for six months. This resulted in many participants losing interest, with only a core-organizing group of 6 -12 participants regularly attending weekly meetings. It was felt by most of this group that this number was not sufficient enough to take on the responsibilities associated with the CCF proposal. Debate on this matter continued across six weeks of meetings. In an attempt to reach out to the wider network of activists the GSC, by way of its email list and blog, called a general meeting to gauge people's opinions on the matter. This meeting was poorly attended. As such the issue was once again parked.

Those issued with the task of writing the funding application took it upon themselves to apply for the money regardless of no consensus reached on the matter. The reason given was that the application deadline was fast approaching. This point was put to the wider group at prior meetings but it did not hasten the consensus process. The GSC was awarded the full amount from the CCF (£9,000). When those who made the application communicated this 'good' news to the group, the response was not positive. The majority group, who had legitimate concerns about the viability of the GSC taking on the responsibilities of the project, felt that their opinions had

been pushed aside by the perceived need to access funding in order to move into a property (the small warehouse). More inimically, it was felt the fund-finder group had effectively excluded the wider community from the decision-making process and as such had undermined the collective organizing ethos of the GSC. As one participant put it: “it was dangerous to get fixated on money. It wasn’t what a social centre should have been about... some people became disheartened and left after that episode” (Susan 2013). As one of the fund-finder ‘culprits’ my following diary extract gives some sense of the groups emotions at this time:

The group was taking too long to make a decision on the CCF thing so Susan, Simon, Robert and I decided to apply. Bad idea. The rest of the crowd were raging when we told them. Andrea and Paul were particularly angry. I’m feeling pretty shit about the whole thing. Everyone is. After eating a lot of humble pie we apologized and all agreed that the money should be knocked back. Robert was visibly gutted at that but acknowledged the severity of compromising the decision-making principles of the GSC. Hopefully we can move on (Researchers Diary Extract 11/06/11).

Looking back over my diary notes it becomes clear that a profound misuse of consensus had taken place over the many weeks of meetings concerning this matter. Rather than being used to open up a discussion of the issues at hand so that informed participants might make a decision (one way or another) the fund-finders used consensus in an attempt to co-opt (or coerce) the dissenters into consent. On this matter one objector said: “*It felt as if we were holding everything up because we thought that it [the CCF application] was too ambitious. There was a lot of pressure put on us I think. It wasn’t good for the group*” (Andrea, Oct, 2012).

The fund-finders, frustrated at both the GSC’s position as a social centre group without a space and their inability to reach consensus on a funding proposal that would have afforded the GSC a years rent on a property, took measures that compromised the

integrity of the wider group's organizing principles. A toxic mix of pound signs and deadline dates saw the fund-finders undermine what for many within the wider group was a far more important GSC aim than moving into our own space: that is, the equalization of participation in the decision-making process.

The implications of the fund-finder group's actions are important in understanding and working through the tensions that exist between 'ideal-type' participatory democratic process and the realities of our urban existence. The fund-finder group's actions highlight what some might perceive as the inefficiencies of consensus decision-making. The plurality of our urban existence, with all its tensions and inconsistencies results in a messy politics that is often at odds with the 'ideal'-type' way of doing things. Outside influences play their part in determining the course of decisions a group might take. To this extent some might view the actions of the fund-finders as defensible.

In taking another approach to this problem we might ask the question, 'How flexible should our aims and objectives be?' If aims and objectives are formulated in such a way that they can adapt according to the plurality of a given urban community how can they be expected to question the hegemonic order that permeates through the lives of all urban inhabitants? The core ideal of the GSC, regardless of the plurality of political opinions present, was to equalize the decision-making process. In this respect the fund-finder's actions cannot be defended because they excluded others in the group from this process: they effectively created the very conditions of hierarchy and exclusion that consensus is supposed to preclude. Throughout the six weeks of debate on this matter the GSC, once again, found themselves participating in an exercise of frustration that constituted a push, by some, to close down dissent. Only after a period

of reflection was the wider group able to come together, work through the problem and move on.

Democracy as a Learned Process

Is there a positive slant to these stories? Maybe. In a recently published book entitled ‘Two Cheers for Anarchism’ James Scott writes:

If there is one conviction that the anarchist thinkers and non-demagogic populists share, it is a faith in the capacity of a democratic citizenry to learn and grow through engagement in the public sphere (Scot 2013: 122).

One of the key questions of this thesis is how do we halt the increasing neoliberalization of our urban environment? In Chapter 1 I argued that depoliticization has become both cause and effect of a dual process of political and social exclusion inherent in neoliberal urban governance. The previous chapter provided an empirically based account of the ways in which neoliberal governance constructs Glasgow. Social centre meetings are the antithesis of this condition as they court *meaningful* political debate. Consensus decision-making can be politically ineffective, but only if we measure political effectiveness according to the amount of short-term aims achieved. Considering the depoliticizing strategy of neoliberal urban governance, should we not take a longer-term view of what counts for political success? Thinking politically in this way raises an important question: What type of citizen does participatory democracy foster in the long-term? Consider the following quote:

To find a method of operating politically that is not about adherence to one ideology, but about common practice, is very meaningful. I think that is at the core of why I like the social centre. It's a way of expression and engagement that is not about pushing one position disconsolately. It's not about pushing a position: it's about pushing an exchange of views (Stephen, GSC Activist, Nov. 2011).

Here we see democracy as a tactic designed to open up the terms of debate by bringing in other voices. The protocols of consensus decision-making must be learned and developed in accordance with the needs of the collective over time. It is not easy to unlearn patterns of behaviour in which asserting one's position of privilege or uncritically accepting one's perceived position of subordinate is the norm. Participation in what is effectively a learning process cannot be overstated in practicing consensus. To put yet another way, "we seek to find meaning in the journey, not merely the intended destinations" (Curious George Brigade 2003⁴⁹). The consensus process – making it visible and accessible – is an important part of the social centre experience or as Pickerill and Chatterton (2006) put it: These places [social centres] are grounded in the idea that "the process (of resistance) is as important as the outcome of resistance". I contend that lasting solidarities are best forged in an environment that facilitates difference such as the democratic spaces created by social centre activists.

At a GSC meeting a couple of years ago a new participant, who had been previously involved with a social centre in Sheffield (The Black Rose Centre), told the GSC group she enjoyed GSC meetings she attended because "*they were always welcoming, not too stressful and well organized*" (Sally, GSC Participant, 2011) suggesting there was space for people to voice their opinions and for the group to get things done. The following diary extract records the response by activists to this praise:

The look of pride and satisfaction on the faces of Paul, Susan and Simon (the more seasoned activists) was palpable. I'm tempted to say it's the little things that matter but learning and teaching good practice at

⁴⁹ Curious George Brigade are an anarchist collective based in Queens New York. This reference is taken from a piece called 'The End of Arrogance: decentralization and anarchist organization' and be accessed at <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/curious-george-brigade-the-end-of-arrogance-decentralization-and-anarchist-organizing> on 05/03/2012.

meetings is no small thing” (Researchers Diary Extract 2011).

Anarchist and Feminist theorist, Martha A. Ackelsberg writes that what attracted her to “the anarchists” was that they “understood the problem” better than most. That is, “the challenge of finding commonality while acknowledging diversity”. She writes “they may not have worked out a solution” but at least “they tried to imagine a society which values both community and diversity, connectedness as well as distinctiveness and difference” (Ackelsberg 2009: 267). This is undoubtedly a huge challenge but I think meeting it begins with creating a space where people feel confident enough to voice their opinions, even when those opinions challenge a perceived unity (or rather, *especially* when those opinions challenge a perceived unity). GSC participants, in their *imperfect experiments* with consensus decision-making models, worked hard at meeting this challenge.

A further positive slant of the social centre story can be developed through a conversation with the theory of *diverse economies* as proposed by, amongst others Gibson-Graham (2009). In aligning this work with social centres I argue that the explicitly political character of social centres, particularly their focus on collective action, could provide *some* diverse economic practices with a much-needed radical political edge, thereby furthering their progressively transformative potential.

Diverse economies are those “marginalised, hidden and alternative economic activities” that “contribute to social well-being world-wide, in both positive and unsavoury ways” (Gibson-Graham 2009: 615). They include alternative market transactions such as ethical fair trade markets and co-op exchange markets; alternative forms of waged labour such as self-employment and work for welfare; and alternative forms of capitalist enterprise such as state and non-profit capitalism (ibid: 617). Diverse economies also involve non-market forms of exchange such as gift giving,

unpaid labour such as housework, as well as non-capitalist forms of production such as communal enterprise (ibid). Social centres, arguably, constitute an example of the more positive expressions of diverse economic activity. For example, they rely on volunteers; a form of gift giving plays a prominent role in social centre life (see Chapter 2 section on Mutual Aid); and they are non-profit enterprises. Where they differ from activities associated with diverse economies is in their explicit political content. The majority of social centre participants in Glasgow were and continue to be involved in a range of diverse economic practices. But their reasons for joining the social centre I contend speak to the short falls of diverse economic endeavours in offering a substantive political challenge to the status quo.

The social centre was seen as a convergence space where groups involved in community gardening, cooperative work practices, social volunteering and the many other practices we associate with the diverse economy, might come together and be something more than the sum of their parts. This ‘something more’ was a political force. In other words, offering a direct political challenge to the mainstream, what Rancière calls ‘the order of the sensible’ was viewed as a key role of the social centre. In the previous chapter I detailed various events and actions the GSC organised or were involved in. One regular event was the GSC bookstall, which we took around various locations in the city. When I asked one GSC participant why he thought the stall was important he replied: “its important that people are given access to radical political literature. They’re not getting that type of stuff on TV or in the papers, so we need to show them that these radical ideas are out there, that people are putting them into practice” (Robert GSC participant, Sept. 2012). The radical ideas mentioned here, covered in detail in the many books and pamphlets on offer at the bookstall, are practical solutions to the many problems we face as urbanites, involving issues around

new forms of collective ownership, community food production and consumption, cooperative business models and more – all practices we might expect to see in a diverse economy. However, the point here is that these practices, although certainly diverse are also economically atomising and can be socially alienating – particularly when such practices are subsumed by a dominant neoliberal economic logic. As such they lack the collective capacity required to mount a challenge to the status quo:

People seem to be doing good stuff all over the city. I meet different people all the time with good ideas and working on excellent projects it can be really frustrating. We need to be working more together. Like if someone in the east end wants to start up a community bike workshop they could talk to us. If there was a need for a refugee support group in Maryhill they could talk to Unity in the south side. This is happening but not to the extent that it should. We need to be more together if we want things to happen. The social centre brings all these groups together (Jo, GSC Participant, Dec 2012)

Jo's comments here suggest that without a substantive collective voice of some sort, diverse economic networks lack political bit 'on-the-ground'. In this sense the GSC project and many other social centres can be viewed as the continuation of a process of bringing to the fore and making more visible the latent political potential residing within many of the people and organizations we associate with diverse economies.

Conclusion

GSC meetings together with political events and social gatherings constitute a pedagogical experience embedded in the complexity of urban life. Here theory cannot exist in a vacuum, people and ideas and the physical environment cannot be easily separated from one another. Echoing the work of Paulo Freire, among others, a substantive democracy cannot exist without educated citizens. The GSC and social

centres more generally, could be viewed as nascent radical public pedagogical spaces. Bearing in mind the discussions in Chapters 1 and 4 concerning neoliberal hegemony as a form of saturation, which targets all life – people, process and environment – as a component of the market, radical public pedagogical spaces such as the GSC are important for forwarding and concretizing emancipatory ideas such as, for example, those associated with progressive forms of diverse economic practice. Borrowing from cultural theorist Henry Giroux (2004) the difference here is one of *spectator* and *participant*. In the neoliberal experience the vast bulk of citizens are spectators in the on going construction of their urban lives by financial, industrial and political elites “whose aim is to produce competitive, self interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain” (Giroux 2004: 74). In the social centre experience the spectator becomes a participant within a collective whose aim is to create a fairer society grounded in egalitarian notions of political and economic equality. Crucially, the social centre itself, its social gatherings, its political debates and its meetings are only part of the solution for enacting wider social change but they are an important part. Wider social change requires nurturing our egalitarian ideas through practice and debate. The social centre provides the space for this. But change also requires us to take these ideas out beyond the confines of the centre into our other spaces. Most notably, our working lives. Making connections with industrial and service sector workers actively struggling against the impositions of neoliberalism was something the core group aspired to but we never did enough outreach in this area. In part this was because we spent so much of our time running pop-up events and trying to find trying to find an established location for the group. However, I believe this was also because we undervalued the revolutionary potential of others and ourselves as workers. Other than our own internal dispute about waged labour discussed above, I have very

little empirical evidence in this regard but the lack of debate on the matter of worker power gives some credence to this position.

In this chapter I have tried to give some sense of what social centre activism means in practice. Putting ‘the commons’ into practice, I hope to have shown, is no easy task. Bearing in mind our discussions on difference and diversity within the GSC and wider autonomous left community throughout this chapter we might say, paradoxically, that *commoning* is in large part about organising and catering for difference. But as we have seen, this is also about understanding how much difference an individual or group can accommodate. Often one outcome of commoning is the exclusion of others. At times this is unavoidable and justifiable, as in the dispute over wage labour. In trying to prefigure the commons activists can also reproduce exclusionary practices that cannot be justified in any way, as in our funding trap story. My fellow GSC activists and I went through many trials and tribulations as we attempted to establish a social centre in Glasgow (probably more trial than tribulation). In the face of much adversity we committed a great deal of time and effort to the task. Even though we made mistakes we still managed to forge a sense of solidarity between the most committed participants. To my mind the core group of 8 to 10 participants who regularly attended meetings⁵⁰ were developing knowledge of the city and of one another that could have resulted in laying the foundations of a well-run social centre. It is with some sadness and disappointment that we never fulfilled our task. Ultimately we failed: but despite any internal issues we were up against external pressures, in the form of the neoliberal city, that in retrospect we might have underestimated. Spurred on by the type of positivity induced when finding

⁵⁰ *Events where better attended. Depending on the type of event (e.g. live music nights where always better attended than reading group nights) numbers would vary between 10 and 200 people.*

comradeship and a common enemy, we did not fully understand just how much of the city has been captured by this enemy.

In the following chapter I discuss these external pressures in more detail with particular reference to the social centre's dealings with the Glasgow City Council Planning Department. Here I show how *affective atmospheres* (Anderson 2010) informed by neoliberal logic and generated through the proficient and functional operations of the local state limited the potential of a vibrant social centre scene in Glasgow. In other words the coming together of state protocols-and-regulations and market economics were articulated through the workings of the planning department. As such the chapter demonstrates that any recognition of diverse economic practices, public-professional participation in planning or democracy outside of the mainstream political process, is little more than a marketing campaign designed to, at best garner support for decisions already made, or worse sublimate alternative voices modifying them so as to seem in line with dominant practice.

Chapter 6

The GSC and the City Council Planning Complex: Two Different Ways of Knowing the City

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the difficulties of constructing social centres in the context of deepening neoliberal urban governance in Glasgow. This chapter locates the internal contestations discussed in Chapter 5 in relationship to external pressures. I consider, firstly, the general economic position of GSC members. I contend that participants fall under the socio-economic category the “precariat” or “precarious class” popularized by economic theorist Guy Standing (2011). This class (or condition) is marked by instability – aborted careers, part-time service work and zero hour contracts – that results in a life of “drift” (Ferrell 2012). After considering two different takes on precarity found in the literature on the subject and analysing them in relation to my own empirical work, I suggest, paradoxically, a precarious existence acts as both a catalyst and hindrance to social centre activity. The chapter then turns to another key obstacle in constructing a social centre in the context of deepening neoliberal governance in Glasgow. This relates to a series of meetings between GSC activists and the local government-planning complex. By *complex* I mean not only normative understandings of a planning department but the full gamut of bureaucratic and expert-led interventions that decide whether or not a person or group is ‘capable’ of *partially* determining the shape and function of their living/working environment. In order to effect material change in the city, local inhabitants must necessarily

consult and seek permission from a variety of professional bodies, most notably, local government in the form of planning and attendant licensing departments. Negotiations between these *centres of governance* and GSC participants are interesting because they constitute an interface between two different ways of knowing and engaging with the city. I conclude the chapter by discussing the ways in which these difficulties are negotiated through social centre activism.

Precarity and the GSC

The autonomous left, particularly the anarchists, have been criticized by some quarters in the left as having a predominantly middle-class membership. As such – the criticism goes – they can lay no claim to understanding working class struggle. There may be some legitimacy in this critique if the working class was understood only in terms of an industrial proletariat. It is not. Reductionist understandings of the working classes have been rightly criticized by, in particular radical feminists, who argue that it diminishes the agency and undermines the sacrifices of other groups oppressed by capitalist relations (see Federici 2008, hooks 2000). Glasgow Social Centre participants, as we saw in the previous chapter, are not a politically homogenous group. Political heterogeneity extends to the economic status of individual participants or rather the economic status of individual members is so erratic as to be anything other than heterogeneous in character. Certainly most participants come from a family background that would be considered traditional middle-class – parents were/are teachers, engineers, skilled tradesmen and alike. But the children of these *baby boomers* have had far less stability in terms of employment opportunity. They

fall into the recently named category the *precarious class* – whom the Comite Invisible⁵¹ (2007) describe as the group “that has never counted on a pension or a right to work, let alone rights *at work*”. This is a socially heterogeneous class with, as yet, no single political affiliation. As stated in the introduction this class is marked by instability that results in a life in flux or what Ferrell (2012) calls “Drift”. Drift here implies a spatial dynamic. People drift between cities in search of work; people drift between potential workplaces; and people drift from one neighbourhood to the next in search of decent affordable rented accommodation. Susan Banki (2013), calling to mind the image of the “noncitizen”, calls this spatial dynamic a “precarity of place”. Morini (2007), although acknowledging the negative aspects of a precarity of place, links it with:

...the idea of re-questioning, of becoming, of the future, of possibility, concepts which together contribute to creating the idea of the nomadic subject without fixed roots ... The precarious subject has no fixed roots and does not want any. He/she is always forced to seek a new sense of direction, to construct new narratives and not take anything for granted (Morini in Farrell, 2012: 1697).

The idea here is that drift brings us into contact with difference and in so doing creates a political subject with a “holistic, comparative understanding of the city’s spaces that has the potential to undermine the more settled understandings of the sedentary” (Ferrell 2012). Bearing in mind my introduction to Chapter 4, which provides the reader with a flavour of the multiple geographies involved in social centre work, there may well be some truth in Morini and Ferrell’s position. As a social centre activist and long-term member of the precariat, the uncertainties and

⁵¹ *Comite Invisible* is an anonymous group of radical left wing writers/activists who have published a range of anti-capitalist works. This reference was taken from ‘The Coming Insurrection’ and was accessed at <https://libcom.org/tags/invisible-committee> on 12/5/2014.

irregularities of a precarious working life has seen me at times having time to participate in essential social centre work – postering, handing out flyers, cooking food for large numbers of people, skipping etc. It should be noted that the irregularities of precarious work do have an adverse effect on a participant’s ability to participate in activities. Seldom was the group represented in full at meetings or events. GSC activities have taken me and other activists all over the city and at times well out of our comfort zones. Contingency planning, that characterises much social centre work, inevitably *forces* participants to “seek a new sense of direction, to construct new narratives and not take anything for granted” (Morini in Farrell, 2012: 1697). While this undoubtedly helps create solidaristic bonds between participants, we cannot ignore that we are being *forced* to keep on the move by a complex of neoliberal urban governance that continues to squeeze us out of urban space. Running a successful social centre, I argue, needs more stability than a life of drift can offer. My argument here centres upon a need for time and space enough to allow social centre activists to develop both relationships of trust and in-depth local knowledge of people and place. This need is seldom met in a condition of precarity. I will return to this position later.

Taking a different approach to precarity Andrew Wallace (2014) talks about the “precarity of neighbourhood restructuring” in the UK that results in “forgotten estates”. Wallace invites us to consider how spatial injustice is aggravated “not only by rational, unstoppable forces of eviction, erasure and gentrification, but by the limbos, uncertainties and abandonments wrought by entwined market-led dismantling and renewal agendas” (ibid). This moves our understanding of precarity beyond a feature of contemporary *working* life (e.g. the precarious worker, the precarious class) to the very contours of the urban environment. An experience of *precarious places*

has been a catalyst for social centre activism in Glasgow. Glasgow's many derelict spaces are described by GSC activists as: "*wasted spaces that communities could put to good use*" (William, GSC Activist, Oct. 2012) or as "*the dark side of Glasgow's regeneration projects*" (Mark, GSC Activist, Dec. 2012). Wallace's ideas and the comments made by GSC activists speak directly to previous discussions in Chapters 1 & 4 about the neoliberal urban strategy of territorial stigmatization. As discussed, particularly in relation to Chapter 4, countering such strategies and attendant socio-spatial outcomes by promoting practices associated with the commons, is a major motivation behind people's engagement with social centres. What I want to suggest here is that social centre activism and commoning more generally are attempts by participants to counter the uncertainties and irregularities of precarity by creating stability in their lives. Crucially, participants, not an external authority, define stability. Definition is enacted through the ongoing production of a particular place – the social centre – that is envisaged as somewhere fixed, for a significant period of time, into the ever-changing neoliberal urban environment.

I want to concentrate on my claim here that precarity as a life of drift is more detrimental than beneficial in setting up and maintaining a social centre. This is important because in much of the literature on anarchism and new social movement theory we find a celebration of nomadic life, fluid processes and temporary autonomous zones (Ferrell 2012, Bey 1991, Deleuze and Guatarri 1988). While, as suggested above, I recognise this intermingling of movement, politics and place can nurture a sense of openness and becoming in one's political endeavours, I see this type of political production as a survival tactic. In the face of the neoliberal onslaught this is undoubtedly necessary, but for GSC activists the social centre was very much about putting down *radical* roots. In order to give a fuller account of this position I

must explain the rationale behind the GSC's choice of location. In the previous chapter, during a discussion about the importance of ritual in the making of places, I alluded to the GSC's use of various spaces around the city as temporary social centre locations. These included the basement of one community centre, the main hall of another, a workshop within an arts and cultural centre, a church building no longer used for services, various pubs, participants homes and various outdoor locations (public parks and street pavements). It is important to reiterate that organising 'pop-up' events, which never lasted more than a day or two, was not done through choice. Rather it was done out of necessity. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis the GSC had an informal temporary lease agreement with the head leaseholder of a property in the city centre for the first six months of the group's existence (Osborne Street). The end of this arrangement coincided with the establishment of City Properties (Glasgow) LLP and subsequently a cut in the amount of concessionary rents offered by the city council to charities, social enterprises and other not-for-profit organizations wishing to use underused public properties in the city (see Chapter 4). This was in many respects a hammer blow to the GSC, who spent the next two years of their existence living a nomadic life in the city, moving from one location to another. Our pop-up social centre strategy allowed us to maintain an alternative presence in the city. The pop-up events, to quote the GSC blog, "[were] intended to increase our collective confidence through sharing our stories and ideas... [Were] intended to produce practical actions that defy the possessive logic of capitalist greed" (glasgowsocialcentre.blogspot.co.uk⁵²).

⁵² <http://glasgowsocialcentre.blogspot.co.uk> - accessed 15/09/2014.



GSC Pop-up event at the Pearce Institute

Events were usually well attended and the feedback we received was always positive. But organising events in different locations around the city is a difficult task for a relatively small group of volunteers: sourcing appropriate venues, sometimes incurring venue hire costs, dealing with the dos and don'ts of particular building caretaker/managers. We undoubtedly learned a great deal but too much of our energy was spent on these tasks and ultimately we never significantly increased our core volunteer base during this time. This differential access to space further exacerbated GSC participant's differential access to time, caused by our precarious working lives. In looking for a fixed location, preferably in the city centre, we were not just trying to make our politics more visible – we were trying to find more time and space for the group by developing *a place* in the city.

The GSC decided early on in their initial set-up meetings to focus on finding a location as close to the city centre as possible. The reasons behind this choice of location provide us with some interesting insights into the complex geographies of

political activism in Glasgow. Firstly, the city was seen as a central location, where a geographically disparate collection of activists could converge. As discussed in the previous chapter the GSC was seen as a nodal point for Glasgow's activist scene, therefore the city centre was understood to be a neutral location, in the sense of not favouring one group over any others. Some of the more seasoned activists I interviewed, for example, spoke of past territorial "cliques" that emerged when provincial city locations became important convergence points for the wider network. These memories were shared at early organizing meetings and taken on board by the group.

More combative political sensibilities also influenced the group's decision to locate in the city centre. One activist spoke of wanting to locate the GSC in the "*heart of the machine*"⁵³ alluding to the city centre as a key location in the wider neoliberal programme. Another activist spoke of being "*closer to the action*"⁵⁴ in terms of organising effective actions against, for example, the RBS⁵⁵, which has a large branch in the city centre or ATOS⁵⁶ who has its Scottish headquarters there. In these instances the social centre is imagined as having a subversive character that serves to disrupt and challenge the everyday world of consumer and financial capitalism. Again I want to reiterate that *disruption* has a dual meaning in social centre activism. It refers to combative forms of political action but it also means making alternatives to the status quo visible. For example, various attendees at social centre meetings spoke

⁵³ This quote was taken directly from my field notebook not from an interview.

⁵⁴ As above.

⁵⁵ Royal Bank of Scotland

⁵⁶ ATOS is a large healthcare service provider that conducts independent assessments of a person's fitness to be available for work on behalf of the UK Government's Department of Work and Pensions. Since the outsourcing of this assessment service to the private contractor, the number of successful claims have dramatically decreased, many of which are then upheld after appeal. This has raised concerns among many social justice groups that, firstly, ATOS staff are not adequately qualified to make assessments and, secondly, due to costs incurred through the appeal process the service has become a drain on the public purse.

about the need to challenge what they perceived to be the city's culture of alcohol misuse by offering alcohol free activities for various groups and individuals who feel threatened by the city's night economy. Here the social centre is imagined not only as a "safe" place for vulnerable groups but also as place that appeals to certain publics who are less well represented in the city centre than after-work office parties and other night time revellers. GSC activists spoke of their wish to see more parents and young children in the city, along with a greater number of elderly people and people from black and minority ethnic communities. Once again we see the GSC as a common space, or more appropriately for this particular discussion, a *commoning* space, attempting to make the city centre more representative of the diverse publics living in Glasgow.

Another reason for choosing the city centre presents us with more than a little irony when we consider this notion of the city centre as the "heart" of the neoliberal programme. In a perverse twist of logic social centre activists saw the city centre location as more stable than the various provincial city areas within which activists were based. This brings me back to my criticism of those theorists who present precarity as a revolutionary condition. Neoliberalism's assault on the welfare state and public sector employment has certainly created a level of forced migration unseen since before the Keynesian period, but the implication here that precarity will foster a truly radical response feels more like a misplaced leap of faith than a new revolutionary class politics in the making. In terms of establishing a social centre, precarity (or drift) can be a hindrance to radical political organization. This is not to say that as *drifters* we do not learn invaluable lessons that can enhance political endeavours, but as drifters we limit the capacity to develop a range of, what I believe are, the key building blocks needed to successfully set up a social centre. These are:

trust between participants, particularly the initial set-up group; in-depth local knowledge of people and places; and the ability to regularly commit one's time to one another. A few years ago I attended a talk by social centre activists from Athens Greece. They claimed that the most successful centres were those run by long-term residents of the neighbourhood community. This was because individuals knew one another well. That is, they grew up together going to the same schools and youth clubs. They knew one another's families; they worked together in the same factories and offices. In short, they had a collective history. Within such an environment, trust is more easily established and local knowledge of people and place is a given.

Glasgow activists took a similar position to the Greek group mentioned here. They understood the importance of community ties in creating robust and healthy counter-hegemonic practices. This was their point and aim in trying to establish a social centre. Many times over my period of research individual activists bemoaned a diminished volunteer base because people had left a neighbourhood in search of work or an affordable room to let. A seasoned activist in Glasgow told me that he believed so many of our ideas and actions “fizzle out” not just because of burn-out, but because people don't stay in the one place long enough to see things through: *“Students are here for however long their course is and then they're off. Workers are all on short-term contracts so seldom settle anywhere for the time that's needed to make a difference in a community”* (Dave, occasional GSC participant, Aug. 2012). To these we can add a shortage of affordable rented accommodation in any one neighbourhood. All things combined, it makes settling in a community for a significant amount of time a difficult task for the precariat subject. This had obvious practical implications related to the day-to-day running of a volunteer centre but it also undermined connections between people and location. Contra Morina (see above)

fixing *roots* in a place is a key objective of social centre activism. The city centre was seen as a more stable location in this respect. Individual activists may well move from one area of the city to another but a city centre location was seen as a centripetal force pulling activists into one place regardless of their precarious working lives and living arrangements.

In this section I have argued that GSC activists fall into the category of the precarious class as described by Standing (2011) and Ferrell (2012) amongst others. Introducing Wallace's (2014) notion of "precarious neighbourhood reconstruction" I have also argued that precarity is a condition not only associated with individuals but with actual places. Precarity as an individual condition effects a life of drift. As a condition manifest in the physical environment it gives form to the wasteful practices of neoliberal regeneration where neighbourhoods and workplaces become surplus to requirements. Paradoxically, both manifestations of precarity act as a catalyst for and hindrance to social centre activities. On the one hand a precarious existence contains potentialities that spring from our refusal to accept the dominant order over our spatial and temporal lives. On the other hand our efforts to define our own space and time is hindered by the actualities of precarity: that is an ever-decreasing amount of time and space we can call our own. Despite all of these adversities GSC activists persisted with their goal to establish a social centre in Glasgow.

The following section explores the nuts and bolts of the groups work, particularly in relation to the local government-planning complex. What we see here is a clash of different ways of knowing the city. On the one hand we have the city planning complex, which knows the city as a series of, what Lefebvre (1976) calls, "pre-determined finalities" set by the conditions required to maximize profit (see Chapters 1&4). On the other hand we have a group of people influenced by their own

precarious lives and motivated by a will to achieve a sense of stability in their lives through the promotion and production of common spaces. In this section I've begun to demonstrate the tensions that exist between precarity and activism. In the following section I want to explore negotiations between precarious activists and the city council. In arguing that the city council planning complex is primarily geared towards accommodating the private sector I show how local government has little space for the ideas of a motley group of precarious activists.

City Planning and Licensing Departments as Centres of Governance

The following discussion focuses on points of interaction between Glasgow Social Centre (GSC) activists and local government officials. This discussion is informed by empirical observations made over a period of three to four months during the winter and spring of 2010. At this time the Glasgow Social Centre was involved in negotiations with the Glasgow City Council Planning Department concerning a proposed 'Change of Use' application for a property in the St Georges Cross area of the city centre. The discussion makes a distinction between two forms of municipal governance as experienced by social centre activists in our negotiations with the planning department at this time. Planning, in the traditional modernist sense, claims a mediatory role between the competing forces of capital, labour and the state. The implication here is that the planning profession maintains critical distance between itself and these forces. Contemporary planning practices do not support these claims. Planning is no less susceptible to co-optation and corruption than any other profession. In this section I argue that planning is *a* centre of governance within a multifarious

collection of centres. These centres have affective capacities in that they issue authoritative directives that act upon subjects. *Issuing* here is not always carried out in a direct sense. Some centres of governance produce affective *atmospheres* that predetermine “how something [...] is habitually encountered, disclosed and can be related to” (Anderson 2010: 36).

I focus on two departments within the wider planning department complex: the main planning department and the licensing department. More specifically, I concentrate on GSC encounters with the physicality of each office and the cultures of negotiation that unfold within each of these centres of governance. There is a marked difference between the two. The main planning department office is more attuned to the New Urban Movement *charette* experience⁵⁷, which, on the face of it, fosters an environment of community and professional collaboration. Following from Cornwall (2008) I call this ‘Planning as *Invitation*’. The licensing department, on the other hand, is more in keeping with a culture of regulatory directives from above that act as a more recognisable disciplining force upon a population. Following from Latour and Woolgar (1979) I call this ‘Planning as *Inscription*’. The existence of these seemingly counteractive approaches could suggest a transformation in technologies of governance from an outwardly authoritative character (the licensing department) to a softer approach (the planning department). Glasgow Social Centre dealings with the municipal authorities point less towards the transformation from one state to another

⁵⁷ *New Urbanism is a town planning and urban design movement that emerged in the US in the 1980s. It overtly espouses a commitment to “re-establishing the relationship between the art of the building and the making of the community, through citizen-based participatory planning and design” (Congress of New Urbanism, 2001). To this end it promotes neo-traditional urbanism, which includes, amongst other socio-spatial ideas, the prioritization of the public realm and the pedestrian over the private and the vehicle, integrated regional planning and mixed-use neighborhoods (Bond and Thomson-Fawcett 2007). For many progressive urban theorists, these ideas have considerable merit, however, scrutinizing the practices of New Urbanism in more detail reveals incompatibilities between the promotion of citizen-based participatory planning and neo-traditional urbanism or more precisely, the wants and needs of community and the paternalism inherent in a strong professional philosophy.*

than to a coming together of technologies of *invitation* and *inscription* in the service of the dominant political ideology of neoliberalism.

1st Encounter

The waiting area of the planning department's main office is a bright, spacious environment. It doubles as a sort of planning exhibition space with posters and architectural models of a 'better' city on display. People, mainly men in shirts and ties (shirts sleeves rolled up of course) move across the floor in a casual business-like manner, shaking hands with *clients*, exchanging documents, moving in and out of doors to glass walled conference rooms, smiling at colleagues and visitors alike⁵⁸. The atmosphere is more like that of a design studio than what one might expect from the municipal authority. Communication, participation and consensus: on the surface the goal of such a place is to nurture participation between the urban professionals and the communities they 'serve'. That being said, the five members of the GSC in attendance that morning (myself included) – with an assortment of garments including black hoodies, cargo trousers, torn jeans and un-ironed shirts – looked more than a little *out of place*.

After waiting a few minutes we were taken to one of the conference rooms, supplied with tea, coffee and biscuits and introduced to the two planning officials dealing with our proposed 'Change of Use' application. Trying to explain the idea of a social centre to people in general is no easy task. Trying to explain the idea of social centre to planners is fraught with complications. Chatterton and Hodkinson (2006: 8) write of social centres, "each space is unique in origin, character and focus, reflecting the era of social and political context in which they were founded, the peculiar mix of

⁵⁸ *Due to what I was informed were for "security reasons" by front desk staff, I was unable to obtain any photographs of the office interiors.*

philosophical currents, personal histories, local cultures and even the very contours of the building itself'. Social centres are always in a state of becoming. It is difficult to pre-define what a social centre might be. It became clear early in our discussions with the planning officials that pretty soon the 'right' boxes would have to be ticked, ideas codified, finalities pre-determined. We find in these negotiations two very different approaches to understanding the city. The GSC might be seen as the amateurs, the visionaries, working *towards* something. The planners – the professionals – although not disdaining such imaginings, are working *within the constraints* of something.

The officials advised us that the category we should apply for was known as *sui generis* – meaning unique in character. I remember feeling relieved, and oddly more acknowledged, knowing there was a word within planning discourse for what the GSC wanted to be. This relief was short lived – almost immediately my critical thinking 'training' kicked into action and I realized that in feeling legitimized by fitting into a predefined category I was allowing an external authority to define the parameters of my existence. I then remember feeling a little bit ashamed of myself.

After the officials suggested that a visit to the site by a planning official might prove useful and arranging a date for said visit, we were directed to the Licensing arm of the municipal planning offices, situated in another part of the city council building. There we were to pick up the relevant application forms and get some advice on other regulatory and licensing matters. The particularities of the Licensing Office, 'its way of doing things' presented an entirely different set of negotiations for the GSC participants to that of the planning department main office. There, we were confronted with what might be cynically considered traditional local government authority hospitality. No bright open spaces; no tea, coffee or biscuits on offer; no smiling face to greet us; no images or architectural models of a future city; no

reference to the city at all. It was a perfunctory display of concrete flooring, dark wood panelling and a mass of cream brick tiles tinged yellow with age. The layout of the space was linear. Doors were equally spaced along each side of a long corridor. What life could be seen sat behind doors left ajar: people waiting in cues for their numbers to be called. This was the sort of environment we might expect to find clerks: those administrative professionals from a bygone age whose task of categorizing the social and economic life of the city was a tactile experience involving type-print paperwork, reference catalogue cards and walls of attendant filing cabinets⁵⁹. Proficient, functional, depersonalizing: there was little time for dialogue with the staff behind the counter. We were given the relevant forms, which we were told held within their pages all the relevant information and instruction for completion.

In the following sections I want to draw out what I consider the roles of the planning department and licensing department offices as centres of neoliberal urban governance. My argument here is that although each works upon the urban inhabitant in different ways, the cumulative effect is to undermine substantive democratic visions of the urban that threaten the dominant logic of profit maximization.

⁵⁹ *As in the case of the planning department office, a member of staff in the Licensing Department offices told me that because of security reasons, photographs of the interior were not allowed.*



The “longer journey” mentioned in the above image began when the GSC first visited the planning department.

Planning as Invitation

The planning department’s spacious rooms, architectural models of a ‘better city’ and smiling faces invited participation and engagement. Physical barriers – desks, counters, even walls – between the urban inhabitant and the professional are removed and replaced with round tables, open spaces and glass partitions. Such an environment echoes Cornwall’s notion of the ‘invited spaces’ of participatory democratic practices. This is the space where government officials, community members, private bodies and NGO’s learn *how to get along*, where, to quote the Scottish Executive, “community consultation and involvement is improved [and where] we are finding new ways to give communities influence over the delivery of local services” (Scottish Executive:

Social Inclusion Action Note, 2001⁶⁰). Taking a more critical perspective Cornwall explains invited spaces as “policy moments where public space is open for deliberation or communication before being closed again as authorities return to business as usual” (Cornwall 2002: 2). The GSC’s engagement with the planning department outlined here should not be seen as a ‘policy moment’ as policy change was not up for debate. Nevertheless our encounters with the city council planning services supports the implication in Cornwall’s work that deliberation and communication are given little more than *lip service* with key planning decisions concerning the trajectory of the city already made.

‘Planning as Invitation’ purports to be at variance with the ‘cold’ calculations of traditional top-down planning practices, offering a more interactive encounter between inhabitant and professional. But in the neoliberal city these interactions are greatly enhanced – in terms of outcomes – when the inhabitant has access to capital. The following comment made by a GSC activist present at the meeting with planning officials begins to speak to this observation:

All that nodding and agreeing and supposedly taking on board our ideas and concerns is nonsense. Those two guys [planning officials at the meeting] had nothing to offer us because we’re too high a risk. They need to know that we’re capable of paying the rates and rent but how can we compete with big business and monopoly landlords? We have very little money and we’re not about making money, so as I said, we’re too high a risk for them. (Mark, GSC Activist, Sept. 2012).

Putting Mark’s not unwarranted cynicism aside for the moment, it is important to understand that GSC activists were not in conflict with the planning department. We were engaging with the planning department in order to utilize a property that had been empty for eighteen months. The supermarket chain Sainsbury’s had owned this

⁶⁰ Document accessed online at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/159128/0043279.pdf>

property since 2009. At the time of the GSC's interest in the property a printing company held the lease, making the GSC potential subtenants. The timing of this purchase by Sainsbury's is important. The big super market chains used the property crash of the previous year (2008) to seize sites for new stores – or to keep competitors off key locations (i.e. near an existing store) – in a UK wide land grab that has had a profound effect on the urban landscape⁶¹. This thesis is not the place to discuss the details of this particular strategy employed by the big food retailers but it should be noted that the city-planning department must have passed a change of use planning application by Sainsbury's for this property. Concerns were raised and put to the planning officials about the high commercial rent put in place by the lease holders of the property but officials were in no position to address our concerns. Their task, as they explained on numerous occasions, was “to get us through the planning process” (GCC Planning Official Nov. 2010). In short, there was little space for voicing conflicting views – participation within this *invited space* was lacking in substance.

Bond and Thompson-Fawcett (2007: 457) describe participatory planning practices as “discreet framed events” where public-professional participation is given, at best, little more than lip service within local government and professional circles or worse, represent the deliberate sublimation of alternative voices, modifying them so as to seem in line with dominant practice (ibid). Basing her work on the study of the ever-increasing use of charrettes in planning practice the author provides ample evidence to support these claims. What then might be the rationale for these ‘discreet framed events’?

The Council is trying to squeeze as much money as it can from every corner of the city but the only ones who can afford to access available spaces are people with the money who can afford the rents and the

⁶¹ See <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2009/jun/28/supermarkets-property-crash-expansion>

licensing bills. They are the only folk who can afford rents at £20,000 a year and they are the only folk who can afford to pay lawyers to get them through the planning process so the whole thing is just another inroad for capitalists. It's a huge move towards disbanding communities in the city. It's been going on for years. I think it's totally unacceptable (Simon, GSC Participant, Sept. 2012).

Very much in line with the *community turn* in government discourse discussed in chapter 4, invited spaces of contemporary governance such as a planning department meeting or a developer-led urban design charrette promote the idea that the main agents of change in society should be grassroots communities and the individuals that make up these communities. However, Stephen's quote suggests that the grassroots has very little control over the trajectory of the city. The flipside of planning as invitation is that when communities fail to make any substantive change, as they often do, blame cannot be placed at the foot of local government, who have opened-up the decision-making process to the public. This is a demoralising process for community groups.

A culture of invitation and partnership promises an equality of political engagement across the spectrum of stakeholders but in reality partnership planning today remains "allied to approaches designed to speed up planning decisions in order to facilitate economic growth" (Allmendinger and Haughton 2011: 100). Echoing our discussion of the post-political condition in chapter 1, the attendant 'fuzzy' and often conflicting language of enterprise and development, of economic performance and competition, partnership and consensus that 'adorn' the pages of 'city-centre action plans' and other promotional devices serve to normalize the logic of a very particular stakeholder – the speculator, businessman, developer. Consider, for example this statement from 'Glasgow and the Clyde Valley Community Planning Partnership Action Programme (July 2012): "We know what makes cities successful: a strong and

growing business base, creative, educated people and a high quality, well-connected place attractive to talent and investment”. And consider the following quote from Glasgow City Council’s Economic Strategy document:

What might success look like? A city with a thriving business base, with people who are orientated to think of and set up in business. Where businesses seek to serve not only local and regional markets but national and international ones, using skills, education and innovation as a basis for their success. Entrepreneurs are actively involved in supporting the city’s new entrepreneurs and entrepreneurialism is supported by the school, further and higher education system who value it as an important life choice (GCC Economic Strategy 2013⁶²).

As this quote clearly demonstrates the ‘real’ recipient of invitation is the private sector. Fast-tracked through a planning process that focuses on speed of delivery above debate, these stakeholders – their wants, their needs, their values – define the built environment.

Planning as Inscription

Following from Rose and Miller (2010) we might view a Change of Use application or a Late Night Opening license or Street Performance license, as part of a milieu of techniques and negotiations that serve to normalize authoritative intervention in our everyday lives and spaces. They write:

Government is the domain of strategies, techniques and procedures through which different forces seek to render programmes operable, and by means of which a multitude of connections are established between the aspirations of authorities and the activities of individuals and groups (Rose and Miller 2010: 281).

⁶² See: <http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=5817&p=0>

My argument is that Government understood in these terms in Glasgow today constitutes a network of authorities that operate in such a way as to undermine democratic values. The type of authority that constitutes the licensing department does this by working upon the object (the city's inhabitants) in a regulatory manner. Latour and Woolgar's notion of *inscription devices* is useful in helping us understand how such authority regulates the aleatory domain of real life. In *Laboratory Life* Latour and Woolgar describe scientists as "a tribe of readers and writers making use of inscription devices" (1979: 69). I extend this notion to the local planning complex, which I describe as a collection of urban scientists who rely on data produced by such devices. Birth certificates, marriage certificates, census information, licensing applications and much more: the object is to document the entirety of life. The data produced is gradually collected, discussed and ordered and from this data *urban facts* produced and rules subsequently constituted. Prosaic intervention on this scale requires considerable administrative capacities. The state is the locus of power in such matters. Crucially, the state is not understood here as a monolithic entity. Rather it is aggregate in form. It is a multifarious collection of forces – institutions, individuals and technologies of governance.

Regimes of licensure and certification have been common practices of government in cities for some time. Although not the Orwellian dystopian nightmare of a totally administered society, negotiating a license application or for that matter the spaces of the licensing office, is an alienating experience. The language of administration, categorization and calculation that constitutes this particular centre of governance distances the subject from both her dreams of weaving a thread in the urban fabric of the city and from those individuals or groups (or systems) that make a

decision on the value of her weave. When speaking to activists about negotiations with the licensing department and attendant procedures there is a visceral sense of disappointment at the disjuncture between their urban imaginings and realizing them in a material sense: “*We’re looking for somewhere multi-functional*” one GSC activist explains “*Explaining that in a form that needs certain boxes to be ticked makes your head spin*” (Simon, GSC Activist, Sept. 2012). The same activist continues:

I had to put so much time into things that I didn’t really want to do, like setting up a company limited by guarantee and getting drawings from an architect and doing an acoustic survey and going in to meet councillors: all of this bureaucracy that is required just to get in a building (ibid).

Another activist speaks directly to this sense of disappointment:

You’re quite close to getting a really good space and almost seeing the light at the end of the tunnel of so much hard work and then it doesn’t happen. The Council makes you fill out so many forms and seem to stop you at every point, almost trying to prevent you from getting a building. It can be quite bad for your mental health. A lot of the time it feels that they don’t want you to have a social centre (Andrea, GSC Activist, Oct. 2012).

This last comment is particularly interesting as it suggests deliberate hostility on the part of the council towards social centres per se. Other activists made comments that suggest not hostility on the part of officials but indifference: concerning ongoing meetings with Business Gateway (a local government advisory service for business new starts) one activist commented of the advisor “*I remember him snorting at some of the ideas and questions we had, as if they were naïve and a bit ridiculous. It was like we didn’t belong there*” (Jo, GSC Activist, Dec. 2014). It is unlikely that deliberate hostility on the part of the council towards social centres exists. As a marginal group the influence social centre activists have on city officials is negligible.

The problems faced by activists in these matters stem from far broader biases concerning what is and what is not *out of place* in the city. As such, there is some truth in the comment “*It was like we didn’t belong there*” (ibid). The Glasgow Social Centre is a non-profit community concern attempting to promote issues of social and environmental justice in the heart of the city. Its members are committed to promoting a different way of being in the city, centred upon notions of mutual aid, direct action and participatory democratic practice. In short, they are not the ‘usual suspects’ we associate with *the city*.

The language of bureaucratic governance details a landscape of formal institutions and organizational apparatus populated by *experts*. Such a landscape is both exclusive and exclusionary: to move about in it freely one must be well versed in its norms and regulations. Like most inhabitants of a city, no one involved in the Glasgow Social Centre was particularly erudite in such matters. Filling out a ‘Change of Use’ application for a property that had planning permission as a non-food retail outlet to *sui generis* status, for example, is a potentially expensive process of trial and error. Submitting this application alone costs approximately £400. If the change of use involves architectural alterations to the interior of the property, as ours did, then architectural drawings must be submitted. If the change of use involves playing live music within the property, as ours did, then an acoustic engineer must carry out an acoustic evaluation. All of this costs money – experts don’t come cheap – which is non-refundable if the application is rejected. For a group of volunteers working on a shoestring budget, getting the application right before submission was crucial.

Under the section of the application concerning ‘proposed use of property’ we decided to tick most of the available boxes, as this was in keeping with the *sui generis* status we were advised to adopt by the planning officials at the planning department

offices. A different planning official, who met the group on location at the St Georges Cross property, told us that ticking every box would make his life and ours “*far too complicated*”. It would have meant negotiating all manner of other regulatory procedures relating to issues concerning public education events, late night opening and much more. His “*off the record*” advice was to tick a couple of boxes, meet the basic requirements to get ourselves “in the door” and take it from there. Throughout our negotiations with the planning complex I was struck by how much our actions and the actions of the planning officials involved were determined by the formal procedures of application. Although we were advised to apply for *sui generis* status, the uniqueness of this position had no referent on the application form. In addition, the on site planning officer told us that *sui generis* can be difficult to pull off because of the ambiguity surrounding it. The on site planning officer gave me the distinct impression that in order to fit into the given criteria we had to present ourselves as something both known and knowable.

Planning is the exemplary modernist profession. It was an attempt to bring *order* to the 19th and early 20th century industrial city. Planners, early in the industrialization/urbanization process, recognized that “different capitalists pursue different spatial investment strategies in an arbitrary way, thus creating intra-capitalist competition” (Beauregard 1989: 111). This competitive paradigm was further pronounced in the industrial city by the capital-labour struggle. Planners viewed what they understood as a disordered and fragmented city, in both a material and social sense, as being symptomatic of these conflicts and saw their role as mediators. By implication planners were sympathetic to capitalist’s interest in growth and economic efficiency but as Beauregard points out, were “more attuned to political reform embedded within the state” (ibid: 114). Paradoxically, they also viewed themselves as

apolitical and therefore able to maintain critical distance. Guided by a belief in the liberatory and progressive potential of knowledge, planners “laid claim to a scientific and objective logic that transcended the interests of capital, labour and the state” (ibid: 112). The task of the modernist planner was to take the fragments produced by the contradictions and conflicts inherent in the logic of capital and shape them into a coherent socio-spatial whole. This resulted in a holistic projection of the city, “totalising what planners call ‘comprehensive’ solutions that have a unitary logic” (ibid). This logic was dependent upon that which is knowable.

Once again I am drawn to Lefebvre’s notion of ‘pre-determined finalities’ when considering the above discussion (see chapter 1): “Finality” he writes “is an object of decision. It is a strategy, more or less justified by an ideology” (Lefebvre 1996: 82). He asks, “Where does this finality come from? Who formulates and stipulates it?” (ibid). Lefebvre is clear in his answer. It is capitalism that produces these finalities, as it must to survive, “by occupying space, by producing space” (Lefebvre 1979: 21 in Gray 2010).

Space is no longer an indifferent medium, the sum of places where surplus value is created, realized and distributed. It becomes the product of social labour, the very general object of production and consequently of the formation of surplus value (ibid).

More recent work by Jacques Rancière and others engaging with his writings present the *occupation* and *production* of space as a process of categorisation in which systems of licensing, for example, can be seen to embody “an administrative rationality of spatial partitioning, ordering and control” (Darling 2014: 78). Rancière calls this the *police order*, which he argues has become so banal as to make social

hierarchies seem natural, and makes a clear distinction between it and *politics*, understood as moments when those at the bottom voice and make visible their dissent.

The licensing office of the wider city-planning complex is one node or centre within this topology of designative power. A node that is more traditional in its exercise of authority than the *open* spaces of the planning department proper. The lines of separation between the issuer of the directive and the subject are clear: they are expressed in physical space – the linear corridor of doors leading to waiting rooms; the counter between the inhabitant and the administrator; and in language and process – the specialized vocabulary of technocracy and, of course, ticking the right boxes. Life made knowable: our ideas, our aspirations inscribed, made “stable, mobile, comparable, combinable” (Rose and Miller 2010: 281). Life reconfigured and inscribed back onto the reality from which it came, creating norms “that function through efficient and continuous calculations of alterity” (Nealon cited in Anderson 2010: 34) The result: we are *permitted* or *not permitted* to make our inscriptions on the city.

In critiquing the protocols and procedures of the licensing department one might be forgiven for conflating these anti-bureaucratic sentiments with elements within the political right who favour reductions in red tape, lifting the burdens on small business etc. Such a conflation would be mistaken. For the rightwing, the rationale and outcome of a de-regulated planning process is to further the extraction of surplus value from the city. For GSC activists the motivation is fundamentally different:

I would remove or relax the planning process on the waste ground and empty spaces. If the space is commercially unused for more than two years, for example, the people should get it. It becomes held in trust to the people of Glasgow and the people can determine a solution for the space: A proper common good. Whether it's about a crèche or some art house or art gallery or any form of public building it's the people who use it who make the decisions (Paul, GSC Activist Oct. 2012).

This is about creating autonomy from both capital and the state so that a different understanding of *value* and a different *order* can flourish in the city. In other words this is about developing a bottom-up generative engagement with the city. These values are premised on an intimate understanding of the deleterious effects of the city commodified and as such act as a counterpoint to profit maximization. Order here is premised on the recognition of individual and community self-realization as a legitimate vehicle for occupying, re-imagining and re-producing the city and as such acts as a counterpoint to the exclusive, paternalistic, in short, anti-democratic tendencies inherent in professional planning practices. On this last point Lefebvre's notion of autogestion is useful: "...autogestion" writes Brenner (2001: 795) "is not only a project of democratic governance but is also a conflictual, contradictory process through which participants continually engage in self-criticism, debate, deliberation, conflict and struggle". Concurring with Brenner I understand autogestion as a level of intense political engagement but I do not see it, as he does, as something akin to revolutionary spontaneity. Autogestion has more in common with an incremental form of insurrection were the latter is understood as a *process* that "leads us to no longer let ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves and set no glittering hopes on [existing] institutions" (Stirner 1913: 421). Social centres, as outlined in the last chapter, try to incubate such a process. But, as this chapter has shown, in attempting to engage with the planning process proper, GSC activists had to fill out applications, write a business plan, tick the right boxes, follow protocol, and become known and knowable. Maybe we never shook enough hands, nodded enough, smiled enough and agreed more often or maybe we were fighting a losing battle? What I

mean here is that maybe we were doomed from the moment of our initial engagement with the planning complex? Anderson writes:

An 'affective condition' involves a doubled and seemingly contradictory sense of the ephemeral or transitory alongside the structured or durable. As such, it does not slavishly determine action. An 'effective condition' shapes and influences as atmospheres are taken up and reworked in lived experience, becoming part of the emotions that will infuse policies and programmes and may be transmitted through assemblages of people, information and things that attempt to organize life in terms of the market (Anderson 2010: 37).

I associate 'Planning as Inscription' with the latter strand of Anderson's notion of effective condition – "the structured or durable" (ibid). Although some centres throughout the topology of state power purposefully promote and facilitate the organization of life in terms of the market, the regulatory, bureaucratic experience of the licensing department seemed detached from even the pervasive reach of the market. But capitalism needs a detached force such as this as it is not pervasive in and of itself. It requires other modes of organization, other centres of authority in order to realize its goals. My criticism here is that 'Planning as Inscription' de-politicizes urban life by transforming the minutiae of our experiences into administrative matters "to be resolved by the application of rational knowledge and professional expertise in relation to objective and apparently neutral criteria" (Starr and Immergut cited in Rose and Miller 2010: 294). Objectivity and neutrality are mythical 'others' in the realm of the urban: the power of the professional mystified as a greater force outside of the messy business of reality. Policy commitments are no more objective or neutral than my analysis of the contemporary urban environment. Consecutive neoliberal orientated ruling parties have had a great deal of influence down through multiple centres of governance, making the mantra of 'economic growth' the default agenda

for all. The bureaucratic measures and protocols associated with Planning as Inscription obscures this strategy ensuring that alternative imaginings of city life continue to struggle to make a durable mark on the urban landscape.

Conclusion

This chapter was concerned with the difficulties of constructing social centres in the context of deepening neoliberal urban governance in Glasgow. Firstly, I argued that GSC participants fall under the socio-economic category the “precariat” or “precarious class” popularized by economic theorist Guy Standing (2011). This class (or condition) is marked by instability that results in a life of “drift” (Ferrell 2012). After considering two different takes on precarity found in the literature on the subject and analysing them in relation to my own empirical work, I argued that a precarious existence acts as both a catalyst and hindrance to social centre activity. On the one hand a precarious existence contains potentialities that spring from our refusal to accept the dominant order over our spatial and temporal lives. On the other hand our efforts to define our own space and time is hindered by the actualities of precarity: that is an ever-decreasing amount of time and space we can call our own.

The chapter then turned towards a series of negotiations between the GSC and the city’s planning and licensing departments. More specifically, I concentrated on GSC encounters with the physicality of each office and the cultures of negotiation that unfolded within each of these centres of governance. I argued that there exists a marked difference between what I referred to as ‘planning as invitation’ and ‘planning as inscription’. This difference might be explained as ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ forms of governance respectively that work in the service of the dominant political ideology of

neoliberalism. My argument here is that although each works upon the urban inhabitant in different ways, the cumulative effect is to undermine substantive democratic visions of the urban that threaten the dominant logic of profit maximization.

Exploring the interface between the GSC and the city planning complex is useful because it offers us insight into two different ways of knowing and engaging with the city. In other words, through exploring these negotiations we, hopefully, get a better understanding of each. On the one hand we have the city planning complex, which knows the city as a series of, what Lefebvre (1976) calls, “pre-determined finalities” set by the conditions required to maximize profit. On the other hand we have a group of people influenced by their own precarious lives and motivated by a will to achieve a sense of stability in their lives through the promotion and production of common spaces. This chapter has shown that these different ways of knowing and engaging with the city are incompatible with one another. This obvious incompatibility is indicative of the distance that lies between two ideas about city governance: grassroots-led and expert/elite-led.

As an area of concern this interface between city officials and urban activists offers much in the way of future research. This chapter only begins to explore the complexities of this relationship. A relationship that may well develop the more austerity ‘bites’ and city officials through necessity begin looking too less traditional income streams and rent arrangements. This new understanding of what city space might offer has already begun with the *creative class* and their need for “bohemian consumption spaces” (Pratt 2008: 4). The recent language of *creative cities* is very much tied to the competitive cities approach (see Chapter 1) and seems more concerned with “real estate revitalisation than with issues of social inclusion and life-

chance provision” (Ponzini & Rossi 2009: 1037). Nevertheless, for many cities the *creative class* are asking the planners to move out of their comfort zones and in many cases the planners are doing just that. How accommodating planners will be of a more creative ‘political class’ who recognise the value of having a presence in the city remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Social Centres: The Persistence of the Common Will

Understanding the contemporary urban environment in the Global North necessarily involves an understanding of neoliberalism as a process of political interventions into the *entirety* of our urban existence. The multiple advances of neoliberalism – ideologically and materially – begins with the colonization of already existing centres of vertical control that have for too long held sway in human society. I began this thesis by arguing that the mobile nature of neoliberal politics does not erode state authority but rather extends the now colonized institutional hierarchies of the state further into the lived urban experience. Crucial to this foundational argument is that neoliberal forces re-construct key urban activities and places as politically neutral when they are not. Re-construction takes on a variety of forms but, importantly, in Glasgow these different forms are authorized by market and state vertical power logics at work through neoliberalism.

I then presented the anarchist political tradition as a viable counter to the impositions of neoliberalism. While acknowledging theoretical and practical tensions that exist within the anarchist tradition, I contend that a commitment to the core tenets of anarchism – that is Anti-Authoritarianism, Decentralization, Mutual Aid and Prefiguration – offers us a realistic and sustainable way out of the current neoliberal condition. An anti-authoritarian perspective questions the legitimacy of an authority before freely accepting its directives. Anarchist decentralization is concerned with achieving equality of participation in the decision-making process. Mutual Aid is an *ethics of practice* with which individuals can guide themselves and one another

through and beyond their vices so that virtues (which include empathy, sympathy, courage, love and caring) come to the fore. Prefiguration means building the future offered by these three principles in the present.

Putting these ideas into practice necessarily involves producing common places in the interstices of the neoliberal city. A common place nurtures alternative values and attendant practices to those of the neoliberal city: solidarity over competition; participatory decision-making practices over vertical lines of command and control; collective concern over individual detachment. A social centre should be seen as an example of this – a place where, through our imperfect experiments in cooperation, we generate ways of *knowing* the city and *being in* the city that move us beyond the atomising logic of neoliberalism. Participation here involves being seen and heard in these places, having access to the decision-making processes that determine the materiality of these places and, crucially, carrying the knowledge and practices *we* produce within these places into our everyday lives. Participation here is the act of re-politicization. It is to disrupt the norm. It is to question the very contours of the city.

Politics then, is a matter of choice: undoubtedly fraught with danger for some but a choice nonetheless. We choose to act upon a perceived injustice or we do not. An individual comes to the table or better still searches out a table where she, maybe knowing some of her privileges, almost certainly knowing much of what she lacks in terms of knowledge and political power, aims to participate in political action. Concomitant with the practice of participation is the activity of learning. Difference – different ideas, approaches, subjectivities – is a fundamental component of learning. This important association between participation, learning and the city begins to open

up ‘the political’, freeing it from any number of predetermined dogmatic assertions about how things ‘will be done’.

An egalitarian and freer society is realized in a system where political power – or simply, decision-making – is dispersed among those most effected by the decisions being made. In other words it is best initiated from the bottom up, as the socio-political skills required for democracy to properly function could only be heuristically and collectively learned. That is, through a ‘hands-on’ interactive communion with the world around us (i.e. beings and things). The city is, paradoxically, both a hindrance to and facilitator of the communities of care that are today nurturing, through a range of imperfect experiments, the potential of living in a freer and more equal society.

As a hindrance to such communities the city is conceived of as an urban sprawl “with its smothering traits of anonymity, homogenization, and industrial gigantism (Bookchin 1992: 3). Urbanization does not respect boundaries. In its vastness, urbanization makes developing knowledge of, and subsequently respect for, particularities a difficult task: that is particular groups, particular places and particular ideas. The default response to this, which is a reactionary response, is to defend the self from the confusion of urbanization’s gigantism. Everyone becomes the ‘other’ and from this culture of always-imminent antagonisms, develops the case for the defence of material self-interest. This is a vicious circle, a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this thesis I have argued that the chamber of commerce, city council officials and other powerful urban elites have attempted, through the manipulation of law and the media and subsequent application of policy, to inscribe upon our urban lives a vision of Glasgow that adheres to the logic of profit. This is a totalising and false definition of the city but it evokes behaviours and practices that bring into being the original

false conception. These ‘stakeholders’ are imposing upon the entirety of the city their particular understanding of what is wrong with the city; what is a crime; what we should fear, and what the right trajectory for the city is. The ‘right’ trajectory here favours a particular type of urbanite – those that can afford to participate in public spaces designed to extract profit from its users. In doing so it excludes those who cannot participate or do not wish to participate in this urban vision. Social centre activism questions this vision by asking who has a right to a place in the city and on what terms?

Understood as a facilitator of common places the city is conceived of as a great assemblage of the world of human and non-human beings: A constellation of people, animals, plants and things. But unlike a constellation of stars fixed in the night sky, this constellation is immanently flexible; its component parts overlapping, bleeding into one another, separating and crossing paths again in some other form: A constellation of particularities that exists within a delineated geography, where each particularity owes its existence to the others. Paraphrasing Murray Low (2004) and echoing my notion of democratic engagement as a *need* or *want-to-understand*, the city here, like democracy, “has to be thought of as complicated and capable of assuming many forms in different contexts” (ibid: 137). This is the antithesis of the neoliberal urban vision. I want to again stress the importance of actually existing space in this understanding of the city as a common resource. We construct this city through our active relationship in and with urban space – that is through changing and/or maintaining space – ultimately making places. Here we define the city, not as private beings, but as social beings experiencing our lives in the multiple communities we are associated with. This is not to overplay the public sphere at the expense of the private. As I have argued in this thesis, understandings of care and social nurturance,

often developed in the domestic setting, should be extended into the public realm. Indeed the emancipatory potential of the city as commons lies with its ability to forge caring solidaristic trans-local links within and beyond its geographical horizons, thereby countering neoliberalism's penchant for separation and competition: what Featherstone et al (2012) have termed 'progressive localism'.

In a provocative paper about the pickets, neighbourhood assemblies and recovered factories of the Argentinazo⁶³, North and Huber (2004) suggest that these moments of anger and creativity were limited in their capacity to effect change because they lacked "thought-through alternatives to neo-liberalism beyond what López Levy calls "a shared understanding of the need to roll up one's sleeves and muck in for anything to truly change'"(North and Huber 2004: 980). The plight of the Argentinean people during the early 2000's was different from the struggles waged by Glasgow's social centre activists in recent years. 20% of the population in Argentina at this time were considered to be living in "severe" poverty (ibid). Capital flight happened. But there are parallels to be found in the actions of various groups within the Argentinazo and GSC activists that centre upon a commitment to prefigurative democratic practices that aim to move us beyond hierarchical systems of control. The Argentinazo were operating within the context of a collapsed economic system, therefore the critique that they lacked sustainable "thought-through alternatives" is understandable. In Glasgow, as in much of Europe, social conditions, generally speaking, are in less turmoil than Argentina circa 2001. This is why prefiguring a socio-political system that takes democracy seriously is so important today in the cities of the developed world. My fellow social centre activists and I do

⁶³ *The Argentinazo is the name given to the uprising of Argentinean people as a reaction to the economic 'disciplining' of the country after the 2001 economic collapse. The uprising manifested itself in a variety of ways – notably, for the purposes of my argument, in the form of grassroots political assemblies in both neighbourhoods and workplaces.*

not wish for a revolution if it is born out of calamitous events that see a marked increase in suffering. We want to prefigure our futures in the here and now.

Direct action is not fundamentally about a grand gesture of defiance, but is instead the active prefiguration of alternative worlds, played out through the eternal process of becoming and a politics of infinitely demanding possibilities (Critchley 2008: 141).

Roberto Unger (1998), writing about radical democratic potential, noted what he understood as “an astonishing gap between the alleged interest in alternatives and the lack of any tangible signs that this interest is real” (Unger in Harvey 2000: 188). Being involved in social centre activism in Glasgow over the last four years has brought me into contact with a variety of community groups, political activists and concerned citizens whose interest in alternatives is real. However, ‘tangible’ signs of these alternatives are certainly lacking. Struggling against 30 years of neoliberalization as well as capitals most recent manifestation of *crisis* has made realizing alternatives extremely difficult. But a far longer history of top-down organisational structures has exacerbated this condition. The ability of communities to effect substantive change in their urban environments has long been undermined and prohibited by top-down command and control structures: this, I believe, has made communities more vulnerable to the deleterious effects of crisis.

Bearing these insights in mind it is remarkable that GSC activists persisted as long as they did. Despite all the obstacles we faced we were able to create an alternative presence in the city through our pop-up social centre events. We moved from place to place inviting others to join us as we developed our stories of anarchism, freedom and city. In the end the level of organisation required to run events in different locations around the city became too much for the core group. The GSC

stopped operating in the winter of 2012. That being said, I write this conclusion in September 2014 two weeks after attending a first organising meeting of a new social centre collective in Glasgow. Along with other GSC activists I was invited to take part in discussions set up by people interested in starting a new social centre collective in the city. The people who organised the meeting had attended our events over the previous years and had been inspired by our work and the work of other social centres around the UK. The will to produce and propagate radical ideas and practices that value mutuality, equality and democracy persists. The will to create common spaces in Glasgow persists. Oxford Action Resource Centre; London Action Resource Centre (LARC); 1 in 12 Club, Bradford; 58a Crampton St, South East London; Autonomous Centre, Edinburgh; Blackcurrent, Northampton; Cowley Club, Brighton; Kebele Cultural Project, Bristol; Next to Nowhere, Liverpool; Red and Black Umbrella, Cardiff; Subrosa, Manchester; Warzone, Belfast; Wharf Chambers, Leeds – to this list of the UK’s social centres we may yet again include Glasgow.

A key contribution of this thesis is the contention that the act of political participation does not point towards the notion of a fixed foundational antagonism in human relations as constitutive of the political, as some commentators have argued (see Mouffe 2006, Ranciere 2010, Springer 2012). Rather it suggests a dynamic process of political subject-formation that is a far more heuristic and open-ended activity, where an individual’s reasons for entering into political debate are often motivated by a *need* or *want-to-understand* rather than a “will-to-hostility” (term borrowed from Barnett 2012). A second contribution of this thesis is to place neoliberal urban governance within a historical narrative that recognises that governance practices of the state before neoliberalism were top-down in character. This hierarchical model enabled the near saturation of the state complex with the logic

of the market because it created and continues to sustain distance between the plurality of society and places of substantive decision-making powers. This ‘distance’ creates the need for the type of heuristic participatory spaces discussed in this thesis. GSC participants, in producing social centre space are attempting to reduce this distance. Thirdly, moving forward the work of a small group of anarchist theorists, notably Colin Ward (1973, 1985) and Tom Goyens (2009), this thesis offers a geographical account of anarchist politics as a counter to urban neoliberalization. Positioning the key anarchist principles of anti-authoritarianism, decentralization and mutual aid in the spatiality of contemporary urban life unsettles the neoliberal urban condition because these principles foreground everyday places and their inhabitants as key political actors.

In aligning myself with these practices I cannot but acknowledge their inconsistencies and tensions. However, when people create the time and space to converse, to argue, to find common ground, solutions to contemporary urban problems arise. That being said, implementing these solutions would require a more extensive degree of networking than the GSC achieved, linking like-minded groups across both traditional sites of reproduction and crucially production. This insight opens up space for future research that asks what are the possibilities for making robust solidarities between progressively transformative political groups operating in and across both sites? The discussion in Chapter 6 that places social centre activists in Glasgow within the newly named precarious class offers us a way into this research. Across Europe and the US projects that attempt to organise the precarious class into an active political force are underway (e.g. The Precarious Workers Brigade in England and the Excluded Workers Congress in the US). Mapping the work of these emerging organisations, paying particular attention to the ways in which they

approach the production-reproduction divide, I suggest is an important future research programme that could advance the broader social centre project.

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Appendix 1

Interview Schedule

- Age
 - Occupation
1. How long have you been involved with the GSC?
 2. What has been your involvement with the GSC?
 3. Why choose social centre activism? (Prompt if necessary on anarchism paying attention to informants understanding of different forms of anarchist thought/action)
 4. What do you see as the main obstacles or difficulties in establishing a social centre? (Prompt if necessary on external and/or internal factors)
 5. Focusing specifically on the GSC, what if anything, would you like to change or implement within the group?
 6. What do you regard as the groups most successful action or event and why?
 7. Concerning the day-to-day workings of the city what two things would you change or implement if you had the chance?
 8. Is there a role for the state and/or capitalism in your vision of a more equal society?
 9. Do you identify with a social class?

