Rethinking the Politics of Social Centres
This collection includes three interviews I did with Spanish social centre activists in Madrid and Barcelona in 2010 and an afterword on social centres and the politics of autonomy in Dublin. These were published in *The Mutation* e-zine in September, October and December 2010.

El Ateneu Candela interview is available at: themutation.com/the-politics-of-social-centres

Seco Social Centre interview is available at: themutation.com/seco-social-centre

Exit interview is available at: themutation.com/social-centres-exit-barcelona

The afterword is available at: themutation.com/autonomy-and-conflict

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Rethinking the Politics of Social Centres: Three conversations with Social Centre activists in Madrid and the Barcelona area

Presented here are interviews with activists from three social centres from the Barcelona area and Madrid: El Ateneu Candela in Terrassa, Exit in Barcelona and Centro Social Seco in Madrid. All three, in different ways, are concerned with reworking the politics of autonomous social centres.

How do we create new forms of resistance, of organisation and of intervention that can deliver social change in today’s world? This is the question several social centres across Spain have been asking over the last decade or so, and have been answering through a series of political experiments. What's most remarkable about these projects is their recognition of the exhaustion of the classic forms of radical organising while insisting that the urgency of transforming capitalism is as clear as ever. They've sought to explore the potentials of social centres, not just as a resource for movements or as an alternative cultural space, but as a key weapon in combating advanced capitalism.

But this desire immediately brought into focus some of the limitations of the squatted social centre model prevalent in Spain in the 80s and 90s. The price of squatting (evictions, conflict with the police, legal trials) often precluded a stable political project capable of transforming the city. Social centres are always going to have a relationship with the authorities and with the institutions of power. The question was, how to change this relationship into one which works for social movements rather than against them? How can we change this situation into one which opens up the possibility for politics rather than drowning that very possibility under an avalanche of trials and evictions? The social centres discussed here have all confronted and attempted to overcome this problem. In two cases, by pressuring the city.

1 For an interesting analysis of some of the limitations of the squat movement, check out: eipcp.net/transversal/0508/carmonaetal/en
communities of resistance which can respond to the problems they face and achieve concrete victories. The issues listed above represent some of the most significant conflicts in our political present, which is why it’s vital for social movements to find ways of inserting themselves into these conflicts.

With the old organisational forms (parties, trade unions) in crisis, the question is, how? And this question can only be answered through political experimentation: through a recognition of the redundancy of the old ways and an ability to create new ones. This is exactly the challenge the social centres interviewed here have responded to over the last decade or so.

Central to this has been the development of Social Rights Centres. SRCs become a hub of social conflicts by providing information and support in relation to issues like housing, migration and precarious work; in them you meet an array of people from all over the world and confronting a variety of forms of oppression and exclusion; precarious workers, undocumented and documented migrants, or people who can’t access decent housing. Over the last decades new forms of power and exploitation have proliferated such as the precaritisation of work, the exclusion of migrant workers from citizenship, and the transformation of the city into a space of brutal accumulation and speculation. SRCs respond to these new challenges by demanding new social rights, such as the right to the freedom of movement and the right to the city. They act as a machine for the formation of

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2 For an analysis of SRCs check out: transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0508/lopezetal/en#redir
El Ateneu Candela began in 1999 with a rented space in the small city of Terrassa, about an hour from Barcelona. Since then they have acquired a larger space following a campaign against the city council, which brought the question of self-managed public space onto the streets. El Ateneu Candela has been primarily involved in organising in relation to migration, free cultural and knowledge production and precarity. In addition they have a bar, a radio station and a free shop. I spoke to Xavi about the development of the social centre over the last number of years.

Mick: Like many other social centres, in recent years El Ateneu Candela has moved away from squatting and created a new form of social centre. How did this change come about?

Xavi: El Ateneu Candela has never been a squatted Social Centre. However, some of the people who began the project came from the squat movement. In 1999 those people decided to get together with people who’d been working in different projects (university, around social exclusion, development etc.) to start a new project which differed from squatting.

The squat movement has many interesting elements, but also many negative elements. For example, the ghettoisation of social centres, the need to continually defend social centres against eviction, permanent campaigns against repression, and trials and fines which undermine all the other aspects of activism. We thought that these negative elements of squatting could be largely overcome by creating a social centre in a rented space.

M: How did you get your current space and what are the conditions?

X: El Ateneu Candela began in 1999 in a very small rented building in the centre of Terrassa, which we paid €360 a month for. The rent was covered by voluntary contributions from members of the collective. We were there until 2004, but the space was too small for the large number of activities and projects which we wanted to develop. This caused us to consider shifting the project up a gear and looking for a bigger space, one which could hold all types of activities and one in which the social centre could become a reference point in the city and in the metropolitan area.

In order to make this jump we needed money which we didn't have, so we came up with two ways of getting the money; by getting 30 members who would contribute €300 in a period of 6 months or by negotiating with the city council, demanding the money and arguing that as citizens we have a right to a social centre. We achieved both and we found an old textile factory which is 400m². After a year of work on the building, work...
which was done by those involved in the project and others who worked in solidarity with the project, we managed to inaugurate the current El Ateneu Candela.

M: Was it difficult to go into negotiations with the city council?

X: Actually, it wasn’t particularly complicated, for three reasons. Firstly, it was the only way of really developing the project. Secondly, everyone in the collective was clear that it was a question of pressuring the city council. Thirdly, it allowed us to bring the issues into the open; the lack of spaces in the city, especially autonomous spaces which create alternative forms of socialisation, where different groups working on different projects can get together, where ‘free culture’ can be created, with wifi and free software and so on. We were able to demand the social centre as a new type of social right.

M: How does the organisation of the social centre work?

X: We have an ‘organisational assembly’ which meets up every two weeks. These are kind of functional meetings. We try to make sure that there is the right number of people and that we don’t get into political discussions, because we have other spaces for that. The issues are usually: the programme of activities; proposals for activities, workshops, courses, parties and so on; finances and expenses; and other issues related to the day to day of the social centre.

M: What kind of projects and activities go on in the social centre at the moment?

X: The projects at the social centre are organised around four principal themes:

1) Social Rights/ Migration: As part of this theme we have the Social Rights Centre which provides information on residency documents and migrant detentions, workplace rights and housing. Rather than simply providing information to individuals, the objective is that people who come along to the Social Rights Centre unite and transform their individual problems into collective ones. We also have Catalan and Spanish classes for migrants and there are associations of migrants which are independent but also form part of the Social Rights Office.

2) Free culture and free software: This involves a stable programme of cultural activities which guarantee access to culture for everyone and which empower forms of culture which are suffocated by the official cultural circuits. At the same time we work to distribute free culture through non-property based licenses (copyleft/creative commons). In terms of free software, we try to let people know about alternatives to property-based systems. All of our computers have free software as do our radio programmes. We also offer help with installing GNU/LINUX.

3) Communication: This involves a whole system of communication to let people know about everything we do in El Ateneu Candela and the different campaigns we run. We use Communia (communia.org), which is an internet based tool, our website (communia.info/candelaup), our pirate radio station (Post Scriptum Radio) and the internet.

4) Autonomous Education: Talks, seminars and discussion groups which are an alternative form of education to that which is imposed by the business-university model. This is also an attempt to bring together thought and action.

M: What is the role of the wide variety of cultural activities in the social centre?

X: As I was saying earlier, cultural events play a key role for us. We think that precarity affects all artists and creators very profoundly. We also think it is necessary to organise in order to fight
and in order to make a living from creative work, while at the same time breaking with the logic of the artist as ‘individual genius’ and recognising that culture is a social and collective creation. Here the big problem isn’t the artists and creators but the music industry. We think that in the ‘network society,’ industry is preventing people from freely accessing culture. This is where we come in, and in our own small way we value and create space for culture which is underground and based on an alternative logic, for example using licences such as those of Copyleft and Creative Commons.

**M:** For quite some time now the question of migration has been important for your project. Could you explain how your social centre came to consider this issue and organise around it?

**X:** The reality is that migration is something that is completely changing our cities. Terrassa, a kind of satellite city of Barcelona, for example, is one which was created thanks to migrants. First were those internal migrants in the 60s and 70s, especially people from Andalucia, and afterwards migration from other countries from the 90s on. In 1999, in one of the neighbourhoods where many of the newer migrants lived, there were some serious attacks on the Maghreb population. This has had an important impact on the perception of the city in relation to migration.

It has meant that in spite of the large number of migrants in our city there has been very little interaction between the different communities. In the face of this, we decided to create a collective which we called Colectivo Intercultural (Intercultural Collective) whose only objective was to create space where different communities of our community could come together and get to know each other. Then, in 2005, the government initiated a one-off mass regularisation of undocumented migrants. However, because of the impossibility for many migrants of demonstrating eligibility for regularisation, a cycle of struggles began, involving lock-ins and hunger strikes. One of these lock-ins was organised here in Terrassa, and Colectivo Intercultural was part of the network supporting the lock-in. The lock-in lasted 20 days, it began in the premises of one of the big trade unions and later moved to Terrassa’s Institute of Technology. Through these actions the regularisation of almost 60 undocumented migrants was achieved.

**M:** The Social Rights Centre is an important and innovative element of El Ateneu Candela. Can you explain a little bit what a Social Rights Centre is and what its relation to the social centre is?

**X:** Basically, Social Rights Centres are self-organised spaces offering assistance and information for people affected by precarity. The Social Rights Centre tries to combine different levels of politics in order to turn problems experienced by isolated individuals into processes of social self-organisation, creation of networks of mutual support and strategies to achieve concrete victories in the face of the landlord or the boss, and in the face of the severe limitations of the social welfare system.

The basic idea which drove us to consider Social Rights Centres as a political project was the collective need to begin communicating our daily problems and, above all, to find collective answers and solutions to the problems of housing, work and residency documents which affect us.

In this sense, what is at stake is an attempt to discover what kind of institutions and infrastructures social movements can create in order to combat the precarity of our own lives and to experiment with a new model of social syndicalism which can intervene in processes of ‘precaritisation.’ These processes increasingly go beyond the question of labour relations to include all the elements of life.
People who come along to the Social Rights Centre see that we’re organised, we fight for our rights, we’re not alone, and that their problems are also ours. This leads to people participating in different initiatives and ensures that it’s not just a case of ‘us helping them.’

In terms of the relationship with the social centre, the SRO itself is situated in El Ateneu Candela. The language classes also take place there. At the same time it means that everyone who comes along to the language classes or who drops into the Social Rights Centre can also enjoy all the resources on offer at the social centre (internet, radio, the migrant associations, cultural activities etc.). At the same time the social centre plays one of its basic roles as a kind of ‘public square,’ a space of encounter and socialisation.

M: What do you mean by precarity?

X: We use the word precarity to describe the situation of permanent instability and uncertainty which penetrates us right down to our bodies. This situation of generalised precarity establishes a general culture of fear: the fear of losing our job; the fear of not being able to pay our mortgage; the fear of not being able to pay the bills and so on. The fear of feeling excluded in the society of consumption has resulted in precarity extending from work to all other areas of our lives. This is social precarity, no longer only work related, in which all the forms of oppression and control which capitalism has historically used in terms of people’s relationship with work, can be found today in every area of our lives.

M: Often precarity means we feel impotent in relation to contemporary conditions. In what way does the Social Rights Centre allow us to escape this paralysis?

X: In the context of social precarity any kind of individual response tends to be invisibilised, repressed or excluded. As a result, the challenge which confronts us today is that of collectivity, ‘community,’ a common space from which we can respond to precarity. Society today is liquid, financially and ideologically, and as such it contains innumerable points of escape. That’s why the forms of collective opposition to social precarity can be rich and diverse, and can become incontrollable.

The Social Rights Centre is our form of opposition. It’s a collective experience which helps us to escape from the culture of fear, to create our own spaces in which social precarity is not the dominant form of social relation. We don’t think of this ‘escape’ as fleeing, but as the establishment of conflict in order to defend social relations and new forms of life.

M: Coming back to migration, what type of work do you do?

X: Well, at the moment it’s one of the most important dimensions of our work in El Ateneu Candela. As I was saying earlier, this is because our city and the metropolitan area of Barcelona have experienced a significant transformation in recent years, and as a result there is an important new component which is our migrant neighbours.

We work toward ensuring that everyone in our town has the same rights as we do, that they have residency documents and can have a decent life. But while this is not immediately possible, we try to take small steps.

At the moment we:

1) have Catalan and Spanish classes for migrants. These classes are a form of self defence. They’re not only about language but also about knowing your rights or what to do in case of detention.

3 Check out Papadopoulos, Tsianos, and Stephenson’s *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the 21st Century* on the relation between ‘escape’ and transformative conflict today.
demonstrate to the city council that they weren't alone.

Following all of this there has been a decrease of police pressure as well as an increase in support from citizens. It has lead to the street sellers having the social centre as a reference point for when they encounter all sorts of problems. It has also led to mobilisations on the streets for the decriminalisation of 'top manta.' This was the first association of 'top manta' in Spain and since then associations have been formed in Madrid, Seville and Zaragoza. These various associations are in contact and coordinate their activities.

We Fight for Our Rights was started by Moroccans who had been active in student struggles in Morocco and who decided to create an association in order to bring more people together and to fight for the rights of migrants. Their work has mainly focused on publicly criticising the current laws around migration and on education. They organise workshops in different neighbourhoods about basic rights. Today the association is formed by Moroccans, locals from Terrassa and some Latin Americans.

M: Could you say some more about the experiences of the migrant associations you've just mentioned?

X: There are two associations, so I'll talk about each of them.

Terressa Association of Undocumented Migrants came about as a result of police persecution of migrant street traders. These are mainly Senegalese guys who work as 'top manta,' selling stuff on the streets. We decided to go and talk to some of the street traders and invite them to the Social Centre in order to know more about their situation.

At that meeting they told us about their need to learn Catalan and Spanish. So we organised the language classes and at the same time we supported them in the creation and public presentation of the association that they formed. By forming an association they were able to make visible their situation and to 4 Many migrants in Spain work as street traders, often selling pirate CDs or rip-off brands. These 'top manteros' can be penalised with up to 2 years in prison under laws relating to intellectual property.

Following the economic crisis, many people were affected. For example, many people worked in construction and after the property bubble burst they were left with no work, they’ve been fired with no rights in terms of redundancy payments or social welfare and often they’re owed money for several months work.
Others have been coming along to the Social Rights Centre and are in danger of losing their residency permits because they haven't been able to pay 6 months tax per year, which is a requirement of the Immigration Bill.

People are buying less and less CDs or DVDs so the ‘top man-ta’ street sellers have to spend more time on the streets, where they are vulnerable to police persecution. Many women domestic workers have also lost their jobs. We also encounter cases of people who are in danger of losing their houses because they can't pay the rent or mortgage. There are also those who are having difficulties to meet the basic need of having something to eat.

M: How are you responding to the recession and its effects?

X: We can respond by continuing to organise and fight for the right to residency documents and citizenship, the right to an income, to food, to decent housing. At the same time we put pressure on the city council to try and make it fulfil its role and meet the needs of the citizens. We’re also exploring projects which can generate income for those involved in the associations.

Seco Social Centre, Madrid: There'll never be a neighbourhood without us!

ods.cs-seco.org

Seco, in the Vallekas area of Madrid, is one of the oldest social centres in Madrid. It began as a squat in 1991 and since then they’ve been through a threatened eviction, campaigned against a planned ‘regeneration’ of the neighbourhood, negotiated a new space with the city council, and developed a series of innovative projects for combating precarity, as Bea explains below.

Mick: Seco is one of the oldest social centres in the Spanish state; can you tell me a little bit about the project’s history?

Bea: The Social Centre began with the squatting of a school on a street called Seco in Madrid in 1991. In the 90s squatted social centres were spaces for autonomous collectives, and Seco was run by, among others, Vallekas Zona Roja (VZR).5 Following the Zapatista insurrection as well as debates around the exhaustion of the Lucha Autonoma model,6 many groups began criticising

5 Vallekas Red Zone, an autonomous collective in the Vallekas neighbourhood.
6 Autonomous Struggle, the coordinator of the autonomous and libertarian
the self-referential ‘squatter’ identity, which, it was argued, was characterised by an aesthetic style and a form of politics which in many cases made impossible any kind of communication with other people and thus created a political ghetto. People involved in VZR participated in these discussions and decided to join AAVV Los Pinos-Retiro Sur (an association whose background was in the neighbourhood level struggles of the 80s) and to call on other collectives in the area to create a local network.

M: How and why did you decide to negotiate with the city council in order to get the building you have today?

B: In the Adelfas neighbourhood, where Seco is, there was an urban plan which would have meant the disappearance of the neighbourhood, and as such, of the Social Centre. The people who were participating in the social centre decided not to lock themselves into the space, but rather to turn the tables and take advantage of the urban plan in order to launch a counter-plan. This counter-plan came to be called the Alternative Urban Plan (AUP). The demands included the re-housing of the local residents, the provision of a building for the Social Centre, the formation of a cooperative of young people in rented accommodation, and other improvements for the area. The AUP was taken up by the local network which was formed by the various collectives in the area.

In contrast to other squatted spaces which had not prioritised the problems of the area in which they were located, Seco wanted to make politics local. We thought that the struggle for the Social Centre to be provided with a new building could create more interesting alliances then the struggle against being evicted, and that these alliances were more important then whether or not we actually got the new building. The important thing is the path, not the destination. Our building at the time was a limitation in itself. Firstly, in terms of the time limits suffered by squats (they tend to be evicted sooner or later). Secondly, the building was in bits and wasn’t at all inviting for children or adults. Finally, the fact that the squat was illegal meant that coming in would be a risk for undocumented people (i.e. migrants). We wanted to make a space that would last and would be diverse. Managing to pressurise the city council into granting us a space would also be a legitimisation of the contribution of squatted spaces and a precedent in terms of public spaces which are independent of the state.

We identified the building we wanted, which was abandoned at the time, and we began meetings with the city council and some civil society groups. On the 5th of March 2005 we organised what we called the Pink March,7 a demonstration of more than 3000 people from the area, from other collectives and from social centres in Madrid and across Spain. We debated about the negotiations in our assembly and the negotiations were undertaken under the name of AAVV Los Pinos because they were a group with a legal identity. The city council offered us half of the building we had identified, but in autumn of 2006 we got the whole building. We pay a social (reduced) rent, half of which comes from funding from Citizen Participation.8

M: Doesn’t negotiating with the city council and receiving funding undermine an autonomous project?

B: The collectives that make up the Social Centre take, in the assembly, absolutely all the decisions about our projects, mobilisations, activities, alliances, time tables etc. We also have group and individual membership through which we ensure economic autonomy. At the moment we receive funding in order to pay the rent, but if we lost that we could still continue our project. So although we have a negotiated social centre, we’re fully autonomous.

7 The name comes from Seco’s mascot, the Pink Panther, who in impossible situations is always capable of painting a way out for himself, a reflection of the importance of imagination and desire in resistance.

8 This is an agency within the city council.
es also work against any kind of stability in neighbourhoods.

All of this dilutes any sense of belonging to a geographical neighbourhood as an important element of identity, any sense of identification with your neighbour and so on. In the case of migrants, you can also say that they are more connected to international networks or to networks made up of people from the same place or language community, rather than neighbourhood level ones. It’s also true that the problems which residents in particular neighbourhoods confront go beyond the neighbourhood level, for example work and housing.

In the context of this mobility, Social Centres become particularly interesting as they are defined precisely as a space which is stable and fixed, a kind of enclave which remains while everything else changes.

For us in Seco, calling yourself a ‘neighbour’ and relating to others in terms of ‘neighbours’ is more a decision, rather than something objective or a reflection of a reality. We want to create social bonds, a social fabric, to cultivate the idea that we’re all in the same boat and we’re better off navigating together. Basically, we want to generate community.

We don’t think people come together just to come together, but in fact because of things which are important to them. In this process of coming together people get to know each other and bonds are formed. We hope to build a community which is concerned with the material conditions in which its members live and intervenes in the broader reality of the city, the state and the world.

So there’s no point for us in working with anyone who just happens to be from the neighbourhood. We want to work with people who want to change things. Specifically, we focus on ‘social rights’: housing, work, culture, the body and freedom of move-
ment. For us, the ‘neighbourhood’ is the people who want to create a network around those issues.

**M:** Social Centres often have difficulties in creating relationships with people from the local neighbourhood. How do you do it?

**B:** To answer that you have to first think about what our relationship with the local neighbourhood is. Our relationship is one of offering people in the area a point of entry into a larger network, a network of reciprocity and struggle for social rights. The social centre is a space for ideas and projects which you won’t find in the media and so on, and it’s a space for collective reflection. Our relationship is also one of co-managing a non-state public space were people can come together and consider their concerns, stop being customers and start to participate. We don’t want to fight for them or in their name, we want to fight together.

People come along to the social centre because of the resources we have developed. Resources related to fighting for social rights (like the Social Rights Centre), cultural activities (like workshops, neighbourhood parties) or the space itself with its free internet and free shop.

**M:** Has ‘militant research’ been useful to you in that sense?

**B:** Militant research has been fundamental for us. How can you intervene if you don’t know the territory, the people or the problems that exist out there? Just as importantly, it’s necessary to know how the territory is perceived by people, what their priorities are, what tools they use to survive. In order to build alliances, to elaborate discourses, decide practices and actions, information is vital. We also believe that the collective production of critical knowledge can produce shared readings of reality and as such can sustain radical practices. Hence, militant research isn’t just about generating knowledge which allows us to intervene better; it’s also about a collective reconstruction of subjectivity and of ways of understanding the world.

**M:** As with several other Social Centres, Seco has a Social Rights Centre (SRC). What is an SRC?

**B:** The Social Rights Centre is a project which has been growing over the last 5 years, in contact with other groups in Madrid and across the state and in relation to general debates about precarity, immigration, rights and the metropolis. SRCs aren’t an abstract model, they’re collectives which start from a reading of the needs and desires in particular places and which create a space of encounter, exchange, education and conflict. They’re spaces of encounter because individualising us and separating us is the principal strategy of the system. They’re spaces of exchange because we already have a lot of knowledge, know-how and resources, and by sharing them we multiply them. They’re spaces of education because often we don’t know the rights we already have or how to access them. And they’re spaces of conflict because with mutual support we can win battles that we can’t win alone.

So SRCs are a broad project. In Seco, we want to develop 5 themes: migration; work; housing; income and reproductive rights. We want to be able to provide free legal aid for each one of these, to put on information workshops on rights (for migrants, people who are renting, precarious workers etc.), to support those who are struggling for their rights in concrete cases and to share the resources we have. We also want to be a meeting point for those interested in getting to know others and working together for our rights. In this way we hope to establish, along the way, political and interpersonal networks. For the moment, conflict around migration (against the new Migration Bill and for freedom of movement) takes up nearly all our time. Our idea is that the groups of affinity and interpersonal networks that we
are already creating will also serve to respond to work or housing related conflicts. In order to create that possibility, we have to first get to know each other and build trust. But in the current context of the crisis, we think it’s time to shift gears.

**M:** So, is it the same as an NGO?

**B:** The fundamental difference, for me, is that an NGO is based on the intention to help others, whereas an SRC is about fighting for our rights, with the idea that these rights belong to everyone but at the same time speaking in the first person: ‘I’m precarious,’ ‘I can’t access decent housing.’ We seek to create permanent networks, it’s not a job, it’s a form of life and as such the connections we want to create are political and personal, not charitable. As we say, ‘we’re not going to fight for what others want or in the name of others, we fight together.’

Another difference with the majority of NGOs is that we actually want to create conflict; we don’t want to manage money and projects and so on, we want to become strong to fight together for what should belong to everyone, in an active manner. We’re looking for a change in the structures, not just that one group can access certain resources while everything else remains the same. Rather, we want to develop a radical critique of the distribution of work and wealth. We feel part of the thousands of social movements (peasants, workers, feminists, blacks, ecologists...) which have fought and which continue to fight.

**M:** How does the SRC work?

**B:** Every SRC has its own spaces and practices of intervention. We have free legal aid around migration and work related conflicts. We also have Spanish language classes. We have a free shop and an email list where people exchange information, skills and so on, like info about jobs, houses or whatever. We have a hip-hop workshop and a ‘cabaret café’ every Thursday with cultural and political activities. A year ago some Moroccans involved in the SRC set up their own association (Afaq) and we work together with them in terms of protests, leafleting etc. We support people who’ve been detained by the police and we denounce police raids and attacks on rights and public services. We organize workshops on rights (migration, detentions, and workplace rights). Within the SRC there are various groups (e.g. Moroccans, Senegalese, teachers, lawyers, women’s group) and we come together once a month to discuss things which concern all of us. For example, at the moment we’re discussing how to respond to the crisis and support ourselves within the new context.

**M:** At the moment the economic crisis is causing radical transformation in the political landscape. Many social centres have difficulties responding to the world outside the social centre. What are you doing in Seco in relation to the crisis?

**B:** At the macro level, we organized a gathering last December about the crisis, to which people from all over Spain came. The objective was to understand better what was going on and start thinking about alternatives. This year in March there will be a second gathering to continue and deepen our collective proposals, for example, the demand for a universal basic income. We’ve also worked with other groups on a video called ‘Crisis, what crisis?’ which includes dozens of interviews with people from the social centre and the neighbourhoods to see what their thoughts were: who was responsible, where has all the money gone, how have we ended up here, and what can we do about it. The video has given us lots of ideas about the kinds of ideas and discourses that are out there; we tried to understand why there

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9 A great analysis of NGOs and their relationship with social movements has been developed by the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement. Check out the following link, especially the downloadable word document at the bottom of the page: abahlali.org/node/6398

10 Over recent years the Spanish police have begun ‘mass raids’ in which they ‘round up’ migrants in public places (squares, internet cafes, metro stops) and detain those with out documents.
Exit, Barcelona:
Experiment, Invent, Transform

exit-raval.net

Exit is based in the Raval area of Barcelona, just off La Rambla. Like the other Social Centres featured, Exit is concerned with the new political and economic dynamics that characterize the contemporary city or ‘metropolis’: the new governance-exploitation of knowledge and culture, control of movement and segregation of the population, new mechanisms of exploitation (precarity, financial mechanisms). In what follows Mauro gives us an idea of the development of the project and some of their current projects, in particular the struggle around debt and house repossession.

Mick: How did Exit begin?

Mauro: The night of San Juan, June 2006. As part of a symbolic action involving the disassembling of a Migrant Detention Centre, which was part of a weekend of actions for the Second Caravan for the Freedom of Movement, 59 activists were arrested, including journalists and lawyers who were present.
As the summer passed several of those involved who were based in Barcelona decided to set up a Social Rights Office, like the ones which had already been set up in Terrassa, Malaga and Madrid.

Getting to know and learning from other social movement projects was a fundamental motor for the development of our collective. We had in mind projects like El Ateneu Candela, Casa de Iniciativas (Malaga) or Seco Social Centre; these are all collective autonomous initiatives that are developing new forms of organization and of political, cultural and economic participation. Some of us had been involved in those projects and what we wanted was to form part of this network of activist spaces which were characterized by a shared political language and practice.

In the first year we were just developing the group affinity and the collective. This was a period of collective learning and growth, of caminar preguntando (walk forward questioning) through which we got to know each other and to think about the project we wanted to create. We organized various autonomous education events but in the end we decided we wanted to start a physical space from where we could develop our political project.

At the beginning of September 2007 we had the opportunity to squat a space with some other collectives. From the beginning the squat was based on new ideas, defined by a new way of managing our relationship with state institutions and other social movements. Most importantly, from the beginning we were thinking about negotiating with the city council. After 8 months, however, we were evicted.

Then we decided to rent a place, to guarantee a stable project which would allow us to dedicate all our energies to the political activities we were interested in, rather than to the defence of the space.

A lot has changed since then. Exit, in its new location on Calle Sant Marti, has become an organizational machine for the re-subjectivisation and recomposition of new productive figures: students, migrants, researchers, artists, mortgage holders.

**Mauro:** Exit as a way out, as a point of escape, as a crack...The opening of a space is our way of realizing the right to escape, a rebellion against metropolitan governance which opens a breach in the centre of Barcelona and in the urban model which is imposed on us. Exit is also about the desire to EXperiment, Invent and Transform. This is where Exit becomes a positive force, making possible alternative collective understandings of Barcelona, of how to live, and demanding, through collective mobilization, the right to the city, which isn't just about the right to what already exists but, as David Harvey says, about changing the city.11

**Mick:** In your current space you’re renting, was it difficult to take that decision? Doesn’t renting a social space mean a loss of autonomy?

**Mauro:** Over the years we, along with other Social Centres and movement projects, have developed a series of reflections about the necessity to innovate, to overcome the dialectic between disobeying and negotiating, between conflict and dialogue.

In Malaga, for example, they spent months meeting with representatives of the city council to get official recognition for the Casa Invisible. These negotiations could permit a pioneer agreement between the city council and the ‘squatted’ social centre, in which the city council would accept the autonomy and capability of self-management of the social centre.

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11 Harvey’s ‘Right to the City’ is available here: newleftreview.org/?view=2740
In our case, in a city like Barcelona in which the urban model is subordinated to the economic model, we have to continue to defend public spaces for self-managed social and cultural activities. Squatting, as a model for the re-appropriation of empty spaces for use by the citizens, was always an option for us, but considering our levels of organization and strength in the context of the current difficulties of political organizing, we decided to rent.

The reality is we were in a hurry to get a space. As I said earlier, having a space was a priority, as a physical space and as a tool for political action.

Mick: How do you pay the rent?

Mauro: At the moment all the members of the collective give a monthly contribution. In the medium term we’d like to get funding to subsidize the project. We would see getting funding as another way to re-appropriate resources. This summer we’re opening a bar and café as an autonomous economic space which we hope will provide work and rent for us.

Mick: Does the Social Rights Centre have a role in Exit?

Mauro: At the moment we’re in the process of setting the Social Rights Centre up. The idea is to provide information and support in relation to housing, work and the regularization of migrants. We also want to offer a space for other forms of cooperation (for example Spanish classes and internet access) and to promote concrete mobilization for social rights (for example the demands of migrant street traders or people with mortgages who are fucked now because of the economic crisis). A clear objective is the creation of a common space between migrants and precarious workers which we see as a new form of trade-unionism, which we call biosyndicalism, as a response to the exhaustion of the classic trade-union model based on permanent full-time work.

Mick: What relation does Exit have to the economic crisis and what conflicts are emerging around that?

Mauro: The effects of the crisis are already being felt by the most precarious groups in society. Through the social centre, but especially through the Social Rights Centre, we’ve been seeing first hand the resulting precarisation and exploitation of work/life. We also do research from the social centre to find out what’s happening.

We see this clearly in movements, such as the movement of people in danger of home repossession, which point toward new areas of conflict which have emerged as part of this crisis and which can generate a cycle of struggle for social rights, such as the right to housing.

I’d like to discuss the issue of home repossession in a bit more detail, both because I think it reflects the work we’ve been doing in the SRC and because I think this is going to become an increasingly important issue as the crisis deepens.

Generalized unemployment, especially for sectors like the construction industry, means many families aren’t able to make their mortgage payments. In the Spanish case, the situation is even worse then in, say, the US, because the banks will take your home, but your debt doesn’t end there; in effect you’ll be indebted to the bank for the rest of your life. At the beginning of the crisis, some people considered this to be just a problem of the person with the mortgage. Any kind of measure that meant public money going to those who had voluntarily bought a home with a mortgage was deeply criticized.

That’s why I think it’s important to emphasize that a lost home usually starts with a lost job. Many companies have fired work-
ers because of a reduction in incomings and lack of available capital. In addition, credit is hard to come by because the markets have collapsed as result of the fall in the value of property and the related fact that people can’t afford to pay their mortgage. In other words, the mortgage crisis, the financial crisis and the broader economic crisis are interconnected.

Our strategy, in order to win over public support, is to move the responsibility from the person with the mortgage to the Banks, who are receiving billions from the state to avoid their collapse. They’ve been getting rich while the market was going well and now they have to pay the price, rather than just wiping their hands of the thousands of families left homeless and up to their necks in debt.

As result of all this and through the initiative of Exit and other collectives working on the housing issue (like V de Vivienda), a platform has emerged of those who face repossession, and there’s plenty of people getting involved.

The people who participate in this campaign are mainly migrants who’ve lost their jobs. These are people who embody the crisis which in Spain is a double crisis; the financial crisis and the crisis of a mode of accumulation based on property speculation. While both the Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank have invested billions in the financial system to save it, millions of people in Europe and the US are loosing their homes. This is where the class dimension of the affects of the crisis is most visible.

We have a double demand: as workers effected by the crisis and as mortgage holders. I think this really reflects the nature of the current economic crisis. Certain sections of society who are in a position of power, and can make use of the different mechanisms of the financial system, are able to capture a socially produced excess in a new form of exploitation which is more complex than the extraction of surplus value in the work place. These mechanisms include risk as a defining element. The capacity to shift risk on to other social groups has become a mechanism for the capture of socially produced value. It’s because of these kinds of innovation at the level of mechanisms of exploitation and conflicts in relation to them that we want to develop new types of movement strategies and practices. We think Social Centres and SRCs are among these.
Social centres attempt to generate an alternative form of social relations and political organisation in a context in which the means are the ends, i.e., the objective is simply to create a space characterised by egalitarian and emancipated social relations. Social centres draw strongly on the feminist tradition of ‘the personal is political’ in the sense that they aim to revolutionise everyday life. They are defined by an alternative political temporality and geography; they don’t go to the places of power or organise themselves around the actions of power. They try to constitute a time and space outside of power. Social centres focus strongly on resubjectivisation, transforming people through collective participation in an egalitarian project, based on the logic that if we change the relations and subjectivities that capitalism is based on, we change the world itself.

In this sense social centres are of enormous value. However social centres, precisely because they attempt to build a space free of power, are characterised by the absence of conflict. This leads to what Italian activists sometimes call the ‘Indian reservation’ effect, i.e., social centres become like Native American reservations, small bubbles at the margins of society.

The danger here is that a kind of escapist mentality creeps in (‘we know we can’t change the world so we’ll try and make the perfect world in our social centre’). As a result social centres tend to turn in on themselves and even take on bureaucratised tendencies with all the attention focused on the micro-politics of the space.

An additional limitation concerns what Felix Guattarri once called the ‘homosexual tendencies’ of social movements, i.e., the tendency for social centres to be attractive to people who are like the people who are already in the social centre.
The upshot of all this is that social centres’ politicising potential gets limited. My sense is that the absence of conflict is key to this.

*Possibilities: beyond autonomy*

With regard to the dangers of depoliticisation, one solution that has been suggested is that of getting social centres involved in campaigns, as evidenced in Seomra Spraoi’s recent participation in the Right to Work protest and the newly formed 1% Network, and some other activities related to the banking crisis. This solution, however, maintains a separation between the campaign outside the social centre and the internal world of the social centre. It maintains the separation between the creation of alternative forms of social relations and subjectivity, on the one hand, and the creation of political conflict on the other. It tends to be reduced to carrying a banner with the social centres name on it at a protest organised through a campaign.

The challenge, then, seems to be the generation of a more conflictual form of autonomy, which calls for further reflection on the process of politicisation and its relation to conflict. My contention is that politicisation necessarily takes place within an antagonistic relation, one in which we directly challenge the processes we’re trying to transform. Squatting has been the traditional mechanism through which social centres have achieved this. The creation of autonomous spaces through the direct appropriation of property produces a conflictual relation with the state (the guarantor of private property) that in turn politicises the whole question of property. But squatting is just one of many possibilities in this regard.

More generally, we need to distinguish between an autonomous space/process and an isolationist space/process. On a political level, autonomy has always been conceived as a way of confronting power and not a way of isolating ourselves or our social/cultural lives from it. Social centres allow us to imagine an alternative form of sociability and organisation, but they need to also allow us to ‘declare war’ on the existing hierarchical and capitalistic forms. This means putting it up to a concrete instance of inequality/power, without which there can be, by definition, no conflict.

There is certainly no shortage of conflictual issues to engage with. I want to suggest that these might be approached in three ways:

1) The issues effecting those who participate in the social centre:

One of the anomalies of social centres is that often the difficulties and oppressions people suffer outside the walls of the centre are in no way dealt with within the walls. For example, people might be experiencing precarious work conditions, oppressive gender relations, forms of exclusion related to race and migration, or dreadful housing conditions. These are all issues which ‘pass through’ the centre in the sense that they are written into the experiences of everyone who walks through the door. In addition to linking the politics of the social centre to broader conflicts, taking into account our own situations makes it possible to do politics ‘in the first person,’ i.e. rather than saying ‘work is exploitative,’ saying ‘my work is exploitative’ etc. Here the social centre takes on what we might call a ‘syndicalist’ function, in the sense that the social centre becomes a space for getting together to fight back, rather than just a social space.

2) The issues effecting the neighbourhood:

Every neighbourhood has its conflicts, its housing problems, its unemployment, poverty etc. These issues should be taken to directly concern the social centre. This approach may require a form of ‘militant research,’ an active investigation of the antagonisms and resistances, which allows us to politically ‘map’
an area, as well as make connections with other individuals and groups. Often processes which effect the neighbourhood directly impact on the social centre, such as property prices and gentrification.

3) The issues effecting the city:

Why is it that the Dublin Chamber of Commerce feels entitled to comment and intervene in terms of what goes on in Dublin and social centres generally don’t? The conflicts which circulate around the city can be taken to directly affect the social centre because the social centre is a vital part of the city. For this reasons, social centres can take such conflicts as a starting point for a political process. The absence of non-commercialised social spaces is itself one of these issues. The irrationality of this is particularly visible today, given that the State has a massive empire of empty properties arising from the take over of most of the banks.

Conclusion

Autonomous processes and spaces provide a key to developing constructive and creative political projects outside of both the state and ‘the party,’ and in a more empowering and affirming way than the standard campaign. As argued above, however, autonomous projects need to assert themselves more fully against the processes they’re trying to transform, in this way generating conflicts and politicisation, making connections and building alliances. The alternative is to reduce the social centre (or other autonomous projects) to an isolationist space (an asocial centre), with a consequent limitation of politicisation.