

Occupy and Resist?

Miguel Brea

11/04/2024

Contents

An Undeniable Need for Space	3
The Limits of the Bubble	3
The Hangovers Keep Getting Worse	4
The Limits of Practice Are the Limits of the Strategy Behind It	5
A Strategic Proposal for the Libertarian Movement Based on the Reality That Au- tonomism Is Common Sense in Social Movements	5

On March 13, *La Ferroviaria*, a self-managed social center (CSO) in Madrid, awoke surrounded by state repressive forces ensuring its eviction, despite the dozens of activists from various currents and organizations gathered at its doors. In Sabadell and Zaragoza, the same scene played out at the social centers *L'Obrera* and *Loira*. A week later, the threat loomed over *La BanKarrota*, where the police did not deploy a sufficient operation to carry out the eviction. This self-managed space in the popular neighborhood of Moratalaz survived only a few more days and was unfortunately evicted, jeopardizing the continuity of many projects it hosted.

Fortunately, not all news is bad. On March 10, *La Rosa* was presented—a reclaimed space in the very center of Madrid, in the heart of the capital. A week later, it held its “constituent” assembly and raised its voice under the slogan “10, 100, 1000 Social Centers.” We know writing a political and strategic reflection on squatting and opening self-managed social centers amid a wave of repression is risky—but we also consider it necessary. In this article, we aim to reflect on the potential and limitations of squatting social centers and the autonomist strategy, not as a critique of our comrades involved in these projects, but as an exercise in self-critique based on our two decades of militant experience within the autonomous and neighborhood movement.

An Undeniable Need for Space

The power that resides in opening a space for gathering and self-management is undeniable. Anyone resisting this voracious system needs places for meeting and debate, storage and workshops, leisure and education, funding and mutual aid... The capacity of these projects to foster and sustain struggle in hostile environments such as large cities is so clear that opening and offering abandoned spaces—otherwise left to speculation—has become common sense among activists, militants, and libertarians.

Their strength lies not only in the synergies created through these encounters or their potential as political schools. They also serve as tools for denouncing and highlighting speculative real estate practices, mobility plans tailored for elites, the plunder of public resources, and extreme inequality. Squatted and self-managed social centers fulfill the role once held by unions, neighborhood associations, and cultural centers (ateneos); and they are direct heirs to practices of expropriation and resource socialization. As operation bases from which to fight—often our trench and banner—their defense becomes unquestionable and central to our political activity.

The Limits of the Bubble

For those of us who've been in the squat movement for years, the issues associated with this practice are no secret. Beyond the legal and financial risks from state repression, there's the immense workload involved in opening, maintaining, and caring for the space. This means many hours, many hands, and many minds devoted to improving infrastructure, cleaning and maintaining, organizing activities, monitoring and defending the space... These are practical tasks, but no less political. However, they can bury collectives in day-to-day management, limiting our ability to engage in other activities like training, critical reflection, or political projection based on strategic analysis and contextual reading.

Many of these issues stem from the difficulty of achieving both quantitative and qualitative growth within a “spatial” project. In practice, this often leads to a range of political participants

we might label as tourists, activists, bureaucrats, users... Some projects with greater internal diversity tend to reproduce a kind of division resembling a real “maneuvering base.” That is, while the center’s daily activity supports the project with events, leisure, and parties organized through a management assembly, a different, more politically oriented space and assembly arises to articulate a concrete message. This wouldn’t be problematic if there were a clear, accessible, and explicit connection between both assemblies—but that’s not always the case.

To the workload and difficulty of integrating various political actors without generating a damaging divide, we must add at least three more problems:

1. The relationship with the surrounding community
2. The fragility of our position
3. The clear inability to form a combat-ready, effective federation

The first issue refers to the difficulty of connecting these social and combative processes with political practices and social agents increasingly distinct from the “autonomous us.” Neighborhood associations, residents, small business owners, institutions... There’s no easy answer that doesn’t involve establishing an explicit political project—nonexistent in many of our spaces and inflexible in others. Why do so few neighbors support us during repressive processes and evictions? How can we build alliances with more institutional political projects like neighborhood associations? These are questions that, when we finally confront them, are often already too late.

This directly relates to the second issue: the fragility of our projects. Under threat of eviction, in often precarious spaces, without real integration into the local neighborhood, and lacking a clear and unified project understood and supported by the center’s users, the threat of eviction and repressive processes becomes even more severe. This often results in resistance dynamics that push us toward sectarianism and bunkerization, worsening the issues mentioned above. Worst of all, the alternative of integration via negotiation and institutional concessions has led to the political disarming of projects. Once they are opened to broader and more diverse profiles, the original combative capacity is diluted. We all know how easily our bubbles can be burst by capital and the state. In many cases, we’re left choosing between staging a doomed, heroic resistance, making a big splash and starting over elsewhere, or dispersing to lick our wounds until we regroup and return to the struggle.

To make matters worse, local efforts often struggle to form genuine ties of solidarity and cooperation beyond their immediate sphere. Let alone building a project with broader articulating capacity. Perhaps at this point—far from the partial victories and joy of face-to-face organizing, and in a space more abstract but essential—the most critical bubble bursts: the strategic one. Unable to generate a broader project, the hypothesis that alternative spaces can grow to rival capitalism evaporates. The “Swiss cheese” metaphor fails—capitalism, by definition, cannot coexist with other social organizing forms, especially not those seeking to challenge its hegemony.

The Hangovers Keep Getting Worse

We must not overlook the cost of adopting a resistance tactic like “one eviction, another occupation.” We need to ask: who is wearing down more in this war of position? Based on our direct

experience, we can draw several conclusions: many comrades become demobilized, others flee toward reformist or more vertical political structures, while those who remain face the dilemma of starting over from scratch or relying on their experience—often making it harder to integrate new participants and deepening the divide between activists and militants.

We now see what happens when these defeats coincide with a reconfiguration cycle within the far-left political spectrum, reacting to the restoration post-reformist drift: the rise of an autonomist project proposing articulation via a traditional party structure—the very model autonomist strategy sought to move away from. A dramatic turn of events we failed to predict, but from which we must learn and generate change. Because repeating “one eviction, another occupation” after this is either thoughtless or irresponsible.

The Limits of Practice Are the Limits of the Strategy Behind It

We’ve argued in various publications and debates that the autonomist strategy has become common sense within the libertarian movement and social movements. ([source](zonaestrategia.net)). When we say “common sense,” we mean that a strategy born in post-’68 Italy and spread through alter-globalization movements (as a reaction to the limitations of traditional party or union structures) has filtered into our political practices to the point of hegemonizing all activity.

Those born after the 1980s don’t adhere to the autonomist strategy consciously—they adopt it as a tradition in the deepest sense of the term. The underlying logic often goes like this:

1. Capitalism cannot control everything
2. It’s possible to liberate spaces that support dissident and alternative logics
3. Accumulating these spaces can create an alternative system that surpasses the capitalist status quo

The theoretical development is, of course, more nuanced and varied than this common sense. But that doesn’t make it more accurate. Whether reformist or revolutionary, rooted in romanticism, cultural exoticism, or idealization of struggles in other regions, the strategy of autonomy has shown its limits clearly.

A Strategic Proposal for the Libertarian Movement Based on the Reality That Autonomism Is Common Sense in Social Movements

This long title affirms two things. First, the strategic debate and alternative we support is not aimed at mass movements or general social movements—it’s aimed at the libertarian spectrum. Known as *platformism* or *especificismo*, it advocates the creation of specifically anarchist organizations where a strategic line and unity of action are agreed upon to intervene in social reality with a revolutionary program. We can’t detail the full theory here, but we encourage reading texts like [*Building Utopia*](lizaplataformaanarquista.wordpress.com) or [*Change the Tide*](lizaplataformaanarquista.wordpress.com) to dig deeper.

What we want to emphasize is that, unlike other political projects, we’re not calling on all activists or affected individuals to join a single movement. This is a proposal by and for anarchists,

seeking to build combativeness, organization, and unity beyond movementist practices—a strategic, social, and organizational revolutionary project.

Now, if this is possible and sustainable as a proposal, it's partly because a broader space—the one we might call “social movements”—has autonomist common sense. What does that mean? That those spaces we so badly need to sustain our struggles, and that function as laboratories and political schools, will continue to be liberated. This practice will fortunately go on, and we should support it. But that doesn't mean it should be the task of anarchists who believe revolution is possible. In other words: if squats don't exist, we must encourage them; if they do, we must support them; and if they are threatened, we must defend them. But this is a tactical issue, not a strategic one.

For us, this tactical proposal must serve a broader revolutionary project—and be implemented because our analysis tells us that liberating spaces, in the current social and historical context, contributes to the social struggle.

But—and here's the key—it's a tactical proposal because in a different social phase, with higher levels of conflict and class struggle, liberating spaces may not be the top priority. It might be necessary to activate workers' councils, organize direct confrontation with repressive forces, or consolidate broader political spaces.

That's why, for us, the task of anarchists who believe this system cannot be peacefully reformed or replaced, and who believe its downfall depends on building a social force capable of confronting it, is not to push autonomy as a strategy—but to build libertarian organizations capable of contributing to the consolidation of popular power. From this perspective, liberating spaces or autonomous spheres is a tactic subordinate to a larger strategic project.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Miguel Brea
Occupy and Resist?
11/04/2024

www.regeneracionlibertaria.org

theanarchistlibrary.org