04 2008

Social centres: monsters and political machines for a new generation of movement institutions

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Over the last few decades, squatted social centres (SSCs) have been a recurring political creation in the context of social movements Europe-wide. In the period from 1999-2004, the epicentres of politics burst forth beyond the social centres (SCs): it was the *tempo* of the global movement and *no war*. Innovation and experimentation generated diverse territories, alien to the strict logic of the SC. It seemed as though the SC mechanism was set to become obsolete as a political machine. After some time, a new type of social centre started to appear – these were a kind of *public square* for emergent subjectivities in so far as they were bearers of a new kind of institutionality, in the sense that they generated militant training and research and a new cultural and political *underground*.

This article aims to look at the possibilities for the new emergence of the political mechanism known as *social centres*, as effective

movement institutions, that is, as *institutions of freedom, singularity, power, and radical difference in relation to power.*

Sequence one: Memory. Once upon a time there was a social centre…

The arrival of the eighties left a certain sense of defeat all over Europe and the feeling that one cycle had ended and a new one was beginning. The second assault on capital that had been led by the proletariat, and the social struggles of the seventies, were dismantled by the economic, political and social changes that that took shape for the purpose of overcoming the crisis that had appeared 1973.

The capital-work pact of post-war democracies was coming undone. In the race for industrial delocalisation and social deregulation, financial power took the reins of capitalist reorganisation, transforming Western cities into the new headquarters of Imperial control. The industrial fabric in the West was mortally wounded, and the urban reality was thrust into centre stage. By the early eighties, the urban scene had become the stage that would have to be tendentially inhabited by the antagonistic movements. The struggles led by the new social actors had to readjust the coordinates for political intervention. While an essential part of the conflict in Fordist cities was determined by work relations, the struggles based on non-work were behind the new social crisis in post-Fordist cities. Industrial restructuring and unemployment catapulted a new subject onto the streets, stripped of all rights to survival: *No Future* punk, a cry of rage and above all, of truth. This situation led to a gradual decline of the worker-subject as the leading player in the conflict movements, passing the baton to the multiple ways of experiencing the social that were

beginning to open up. It is here that we find the university movement, unemployed young men and women, and movements linked to feminism, environmentalism and alternative communication, which shared scenes of conflict with the last great battles of the workers movement in their struggle against restructuring processes.

But the main question was: how to engage in radical politics in the face of the transformations and structural changes that were taking place? Who should or could embody those struggles? Most of the extreme left organisations were in pieces, and the institutional left, worn down by its collaboration with the government, was going through a dry spell after the overwhelming victory of the neoliberal project.

All of this meant that any emergent reality faced a double challenge. On one hand, they had to recover from the decline of the machinery of the radical left, and on the other they had to define a movement that would know how to inhabit the changes that had taken place in the economic, political, urban and social context of the eighties. There were many responses to this crisis, including a reinterpretation of the autonomous movements. Being heirs to defeat, free radios, anti-nuclear movements, feminist collectives, anarchist groups, individuals and punk or hardcore groups, came together with a core problem. The city, made in the image and likeness of the new neoliberal power, didn't leave any political, social, cultural or physical space in which these experiences could spread and multiply. In the cities of capital, the right to exist didn't take the form of the right to an opinion or the right to think; perversely, to exist meant to "have a space". In all harshness, freedom of movement was measured in square meters. In this context, having a space from which to fight the system was

the condition that made it possible to create any antagonistic project in the city. This was why the SSCs were created.

The truth is that the SC model got many things right, and earned itself an important space. Free radios, music groups, spaces for political debate and, above all, places that opened up an alternative socialisation came together in squatted spaces, spreading as a self-generating, different, recognisable urban subculture in the cities of anonymity. But there was also a dark side to this communal and collective strength, this ethical and aesthetic acknowledgement that was produced in alternative left groups linked to the squatting movement. In a kind of politics of self-affirmation, SSCs were locked into identity-based dynamics, with their own languages for communicating and describing the world, operating as a kind of political faction. Developments in this line served to delimit a social milieu, and looked fundamentally towards a "politics of us", which in turn generated policies of hard segmentarity, inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside.

The global movement opened up an expansive, dynamic stage in which many of the SCs began to experiment with different points of view and new social powers. A power that was demonstrated in the summits organised by governments, and that saw its most tragic episode in Genoa in the summer of 2001. In a dress rehearsal for the systematic, brutal and disproportionate repression against the global movement, the Genoa summit was a very clear warning: globalised capital will use weapons to defend the established order, even in the heart of a Europe based on human rights.

Sequence 2. It's not over: social centres return.

Excursus. Problem: the (non) creation of movement institutions

From a critical perspective, it could be said that for now, the movement – the movements at the European level, are still unable to make political power productive. In contrast to the situation in Latin America, in Europe there is not even a broad outline of the plausibility of post-neoliberal scenarios, at least in the short or medium terms. There is thus a need to investigate the deficient development of *institutions of movement*, the lack of spaces in which a more effective form of politics can be created and allowed to settle and mature. We miss the presence of more institutions of this kind: institutions that are flexible, mobile, nomadic and inserted in the *swarm of the multitude*. Institutions that arise from the sedimentation of previous mobilisations: of the *global movement's* power to communicate, the multitudinous *no war* declaration, the intuition of the *MayDay* process and the movements in support of new social rights.

There are explicit links here to the problem of organisation expressed by Sandro Mezzadra and Gigi Roggero: "the network model itself is being practised today in a rather 'weak' form "[1]. And also with Raúl Sánchez's idea of "the necessity of the issue of creating institutions"[2]. We suggest, therefore that the creation and growth of these institutions will lead to a *strong network*. By centring the discussion on the creation of these institutions, we enter right into the midst of the discussions and practices that are taking place in the *movement* all over Europe. We're not talking from a theoretical, shallow or frustrating point of view, in the sense that we're not talking about what could exist and doesn't. On the contrary, our perspective is framed within political practices in the present tense.

With this in mind, when we talk about movement institutions we are putting forward innovative, real, practical initiatives that are emerging, and perhaps multiplying, in the European context. They

may not yet be significant in terms of numbers, but they are escapes from repetition - monstrous inventions that introduce a new political arena that is being explored and, at the same time, tested in the real social sphere. And in them we recognise the following features:

1. They are laboratories that allow a more stable connection between the singularities that have expressed diverse political opinions and continue to do so in the current cycle. In this sense, stability becomes a strong strategy/tactic: making it possible for innovative hybrids to form among these singularities, re-composing and producing different subjectivations. Meanwhile, at a time when social ties are highly scattered and fragmented, they are spaces in which to test situations, desires and projects that help to multiply shared life, the common dimension of singularities.

2. They are spaces endowed with financial means, which set in motion a biopolitical entrepreneurship and push to position their political activity on a realistic plane, which is creative and virtuous at the same time. High levels of creativity and circuits of cooperation prove to be partially translatable into the production of monetary surplus that can be put into virtuous circulation: even if it's on a small scale, "grassroots welfare" can make collective projects even more powerful.

3. They create a node for the production of critical discourse and self-education initiatives, which we can join Sergio Bologna in calling "the construction of an immunological system through collective intelligence"[3]. Research, seminar programs and discussion become constitutive elements of these political constructions: a true pole of attraction for subjectivities that produce forms of knowledge that aim to escape state or commercial

regulation (teachers, students, professionals, research grant holders, etc).

4. Neither public nor private, they are institutions that experiment with forms of communal management in variable configurations. They put forward new forms of cooperation with cultural, political and academic institutions, in order to generate income for the different projects being developed. They also generate short-circuits within, and based on, the new forms of cooperation, in an attempt to overcome the suffocating dichotomy between the politics of representation and individualist isolation, and place value on the capacity of existing rich social networks to manage that which is shared, through a post-state form of instituionality.

There are certainly many different kinds of *movement institutions* (publishing projects, transnational magazines, mobile/nomadic university mechanisms, hacker laboratories...). One of these is the artefact we know as a *social centre* (SC), which continues to be the most replicated form of expression of movement at the European level, as we mentioned earlier, seeing as it is present in virtually all major cities. Social Centres are an *anomalous* kind of institution, with a dynamic that brings together significant aggregations of people with diverse configurations of involvement.

Given this pre-eminence, in the last three-year period, just after the crisis of the global movement and the attempt to overcome it through the reterritorialisation of the political epicentres, we are seeing a relative emergence of SCs: singular institutions of movement, with their own original characteristics. On this basis, we will suggest some tasks that we consider to be essential if they are to be established as institutions, as constructs; in short, as *war machines*.

End of excursus. Back to sequence 2. Characteristics of the new social centres.

Over the last few years, these spaces have operated in a double process of deconstruction and reconstruction: the reasons for the *deconstruction* can be found in the expiry of an identitary form of SC that is incapable of entering into dialogue with the new emergent political subjectivities. These SCs were very little given to contamination by the new virus that was flooding politics. Inversely, the reasons for the *reconstruction* can be found in the non-corporality of existing movements and networks, beyond a few, although sometimes intense, spasms: SCs with the potential to effectively catalyse these new social forms of prominence began to regenerate. The centres became a useful interface for today's metropolitan politics, which seeks porosity and seduction in the way it presents itself and its political mechanisms, in order to condense a new repertory of proposals and actions. The mechanism first deconstructs itself, even if it means making the traditional form of SC obsolete, in order to later give it a new, updated form that transforms it into a useful tool.

This reconstruction becomes plausible when these centres evolve into spaces that bring together multitudinous forms of political emergence. The emergent movements of the early 21st Century have showed us that we can in fact speak of those *many* people who act in an arranged way in the public sphere as a *multitude*. The political task that arises from this is the need to think about and experiment with new forms of cooperation for multitudinous plural subjects, which are more highly sedimented and productive and can be built on the specific codes, bands and diverse subjectivities that make up the multitude-form.

It was along these lines that the new SCs began to develop as a new, more sedimented and more stable kind of communal space, in the framework of building a new grammar of the multitude. This step involved making porosity a distinctive feature and, therefore, creating seductive spaces and dynamics for the inclusion of groups with no direct link to the history and the practice of social centres. In this metropolitan public square, different mechanisms generate the biopolitical machine that is the social centre, and therefore the commons: the point of exodus, of escape, of metropolitan exploitation.. It is a factory of the coming class, the class that is being formed[4].

1. *Designing a stable cultural program that is a point of reference in the specific urban context*. The Ateneu de Nou Barris in Barcelona is one of the most advanced cases in this sense. The hip-hop schools at Ateneu Candela (Terrassa), Patio Maravillas (Madrid) and Centro Social Seco (Madrid), or Casa Invisible (Malaga), with its ability to attract hundreds of anonymous artists, also illustrate this cultural density. It is all a demonstration of the increasingly important role of culture, which brings living work into the cultural field: *a creative mechanism, which stages creation as an act of resistance and affirmation, of shared production.*

2. *Cultural publishing under free culture licences, creative commons* or *copy left*. In metropolitan frameworks that increasingly commercialise and capture emergent cultural forms, with a steadily increasing weight in urban *governance*, social centres are becoming *another* model. One that doesn't just produce culture but produces it under other logics, which makes it easier for replicas to appear, and also encourages them. Thus, we find ourselves before an *institutional mechanism of movement that replaces the D-D scheme, giving priority to the infinite accumulation of capital, with the infinite accumulation of the desire for freedom, for creation*.

3. *The new SCs are metropolitan spaces that declare themselves in favour of the creation of circuits of self-education and militant research*, with the aim of developing anomalous, nomadic forms of shared learning, in the framework of a new composition of cognitive work. This opens up *mechanisms in the form of a knowledge network, which herald the universities of the cognitariat - the postmodern universities of technological, anthropological and political self-learning, as mechanisms for subversion on a large scale*[5].

4. *The establishing of heterolingual mechanisms*[6]. The European metropolis declares itself a fully post-colonial, multiplicity of *citizens who don't belong*. SCs position themselves on this plane and become frontier spaces, hybrids that define themselves as *struggles against all suture to a national identity, whether dominant or supposedly "secondary"*. These SCs become barbaric, committed to a radical cosmopolitanism, within a “definition of a form of citizenship that is no longer linked to the nation-State, but is undetermined and universal[7]. Mechanisms are opened up to secure this exodus of hybrid metropolitan culture: *a mechanism for which hybridisation and post-national identity are an immanent gesture of the new composition of class, which is capable of surviving even the production of fear and the security-based governance of the European political class.*

5. *New forms of social syndicalism*: social rights offices, precarious agencies and consultancy workshops try to articulate singular and shared forms of expression in precarised life. They deal with work, citizenship, home and life, with the multiple forms of contemporary exploitation. They express a mechanism for political formulation and struggle, which belongs to the *general intellect* period, creating networks of cooperation based on specific forms of knowledge. SCs favour informal moments in which to share the

singular form of precarity, where advice can circulate and conflict can be de-individualised, thus returning to the best tradition of workers' taverns and informal *class-education* spaces. Thus, we find ourselves before a *recombinant mechanism, a proletarian self-organisation of new subjects that come together for the purpose of obtaining new social rights - the right to education, to mobility, to income*.

6. Finally, *these places launch important experiments in empowerment and social prominence on the field*: a tactical and post-traumatic relationship with power and the politics of representation that allows the creation of vectors of cooperation, militant forms of knowledge, alliances and public legitimacy, working towards specific conquests that can position them as actors on the metropolitan stage. This is the case with the virtuous negotiations in defence of squatted spaces (Seco, Madrid; La Escalera Karakola, Madrid; La Casa Invisible, Malaga), in the forced redistribution of public money (Ateneu Candela, Terrassa), and the production of conflict in the face of state violence (Casas Viejas, Seville, Ungdomshuset, Copenhagen).

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Reconstruction, coming together and conspiring through mechanisms such as those mentioned above allow us to portray SCs - not on the defensive, not as reserves for the *nostalgic* or *pissed-off*, but just the opposite: they become offensive mechanisms, proliferating war machines, molecules of new social counter-powers. In this way, they end up becoming - and this is their most significant characteristic - an aggregation against metropolitan exploitation: the framework of the multiplicity of subjects finds common ground in the construction and development of spaces – SCs – that imply an exodus, a different way of being in the

metropolis, an alternative use of the relationality of the *general intellect,* in order to create spaces of enjoyment, freedom, *voice* and *exit*.

We are dealing with an experiment that constitutes a productive exercise against that exploitation, which herald and practice a new social right, a new metropolitan right: the right to inhabit the metropolis, to represent it in a different way, to generate an effective molecule of life. This right is taken and defended through different modalities in a variable configuration: many of these social centres arise from squatting, but they go beyond it to reclaim this space from exploitation through various forms of negotiation with administrative institutions. It is thus a constituent practice, the social centre as a social right, and we should take note of it as an exercise of the commons.

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To finish off, we propose three hypotheses that we believe should be developed if there is to be a qualitative leap in the political commitment heralded by the SCs.

Hypothesis 1. This coming together and conspiring among diverse groups, which results from the social centre mechanism and is accompanied by mobilisations, campaigns and shared calendars, is a step towards a practical definition of class as a multitudinous subject that seeks its own forms of organisation and cooperation. This implies progress in empirical terms in the attempt to reveal forms of exploitation taking place in the present, and an awareness of the practices that exist outside of them. We believe that this is a central point in the reflection on new-generation social centres: after the multitudinous forms of political action that we have witnessed over the last few years, these centres become

organisational experiments in *class*, that is, in the joint political action of this multiplicity. Social centres are understood as war machines capable of launching initiatives that can reclaim, manage and invent a new range of social rights. These discussions inevitably lead to considering the need to carry out *a research/survey program on the metropolitan factory, as it is in its heart that the SCs and their links to new forms of metropolitan politics are produced*.

Hypothesis 2. The creation of new social centres shows the plausibility of a radical and realist form of politics, in the metropolitan context. It is not the only one, by any means. Over the last two years, we have seen new expressions that seem to point to a new political emergence for our times[8], combined with less visible but equally political forms of rejection of metropolitan governance. In the case of Spain, this emergence hasn't been able to establish itself in all its clarity in the 2004-2007 period (the first term of office of the Rodríguez Zapatero government). The new scenario that will be opened up by the government elected at the latest elections should be used to clearly promote the emergence of the most audacious, persistent and patient, and at the same time impetuous and virtuous, movements capable of generating a long, fertile, happy and enjoyable cycle, where there is a place in the public sphere for the new social movements, the power of resistant life and the reappropriation of that which is essential for life (housing, care, education, mobility, income...) We believe that in order for this framework to become reality, *there is a need for intense cooperation, through new vocabularies, new practices, new shared programmatic diagrams and designs among these SCs and the political emergences that act as a driving force for a new metropolitan exodus.*

Hypothesis 3. To go back to the social centres, we confirm that this new dimension of these spaces is being produced, in obviously diverse forms, in many metropolitan places in Europe. We think

that it is desirable and pertinent to organise, within the movement's agenda, *a specific conference to examine forms of Europe-wide cooperation among these social centres, with circuits of trans-national self-education, shared cultural programming and, why not, sedimented forms of exchange in a kind of "Erasmus for-and-with the social movements"*. It should be an experiment for establishing and baptising the metropolitan right to social centres at the European level - a vindication and a practice of prime importance that would form part of the range of new social rights.

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We consider that these characteristics and these hypotheses define SCs as new, monstrous institutions in the metropolitan context. In short - *the new type of social centres are an experiment in new kinds of institutions*. Without overestimating or fetishising them, they generate answers for today's social movements. Like other institutions in other fields, they generate new spaces of autonomy. And their power lies in their capacity for collaboration and cooperation with the struggles taking place right now: for access to housing or for the rights of migrant persons today, and for the struggles that will come later and are just starting to appear in the - we hope terminal - context of neoliberal capital.

The authors of the text participate in various political experiences (Traficantes de Sueños Publishing Project, Universidad Nómada…) as well as the actual social centres (SC Seco in Madrid, Casa Invisible in Málaga, Ateneu Candela in Terrassa…). In this sense, this text isn't intended as a personal declaration, but rather sets out to express the concerns that run through part of what we call the movement. The reflections included in this document are linked to discussions with many

colleagues and friends, in the present tense. Impossible to name all of them. But we do want to make a special mention and very sincerely thank Carla Ubach and Joan Miquel Gual for the comments and suggestions they sent us after reading one of the drafts of this text.

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[1] Sandro Mezzadra and Gigi Roggero, "Singularization of the Common: Thoughts on the Crisis of the Movement of the Movements", en *turbulence. ideas for movement*, 2003 (http://www.turbulence.org.uk/singularisationo.html).

[2] Raúl Sánchez Cedillo, "Towards new political creations. Movements, institutions, new militancy", in *transversal: prácticas instituyentes*, July 2007 (http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0707/sanchez/es).

[3] Sergio Bologna, "Proteger la mente o sobre la autoformación política", in *Crisis de la clase media y posfordismo*, Akal, Colección Cuestiones de Antagonismo, Madrid, 2006.

[4] See the folder of texts *La Classe a Venire*, in *Posse*, November 2007 (http://www.posseweb.net).

[5] Consider the Université Ouverte (http://www.cip-idf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=306), Libera Università Metropolitana (http://www.escatelier.net/), Universidad Nómada (http://www.universidadnomada.net).

[6] Sandro Mezzadra, "Vivir en transición. Hacia una teoría heterolingüe de la multitud", in *transversal: traducir la violencia*, November, 2007 (http://eipcp.net/transversal/1107/mezzadra/es).

[7] Judith Revel, “Nuevas experiencias de organización” (http://estrecho.indymedia.org/newswire/display/68245/index.php).

[8] See V de Vivienda (http://www.vdevivienda.net). There are others that are less known and less visible, but herald an innovative form of political action: the initiative of mothers demanding rights and the valuing of care of child care (see http://www.stylofoam.com/marato/cast/index.html); mobilisations of university scholarship holders (see http://uabprecarietat.wordpress.com); and the busdrivers protests in Barcelona (see http://comitedescansos.blogspot.com).