

# An Anarchist's Wetherspoons<sup>1</sup> or Virtuous Resistance? Social Centres as MacIntyre's Vision of Practice-based Communities

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*This paper uses narrative from the social centre movement in the UK to argue that social centres are examples of the MacIntyrean small communities that can virtuously resist the overbearing market influence. Looking at the contrast between rented and squatted centres, the paper argues that those that are squatted are practice-based communities, and those that are rented, are institutions. This therefore highlights the interrupting role of the market and argues that the rented centres are incompatible with MacIntyre's ideal.*

## Introduction

MacIntyre claims that we should work to make small communities that are capable of preserving the practices and virtues previously suffocated by the force of liberal capitalism, a reality. Accordingly, MacIntyre states

‘...it is important that the construction of such an alternative cannot begin from any kind of philosophical or theoretical statement. Where then does it begin? Only in the struggles, conflicts, and work of practice and in the attempt to find in and through dialogue with others who are engaged in such struggles, conflicts, and work an adequate local and particular institutional expression of our shared directedness towards our common goods’.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, my aim is to offer the radical movements of our time, as examples of such small communities, as sites of contested dialogue with the purpose of the common good as their quintessence. Each individual internalises involvement in the ‘practices’ and virtues, through their everyday interactions, internal organisation, and external protest. They are the living and breathing formulation of MacIntyre's utopian project. Looking specifically at the social centres and designated ‘social spaces’ within the London area and some in the remainder of the UK, I will argue the presence of genuine ‘internal goods’ within the actions and beliefs of these communities. The goods that are generated are as a result of their belief in, and commitment to resistance.

In order to highlight the implications of MacIntyre's ‘Revolutionary Aristotelianism’, the relationship between practices and institutions will be addressed through the critique of rented spaces presented by those committed to action in squatted centres. I shall support this critique and argue that rented centres are contrary to MacIntyre's vision, and that those that are truly autonomous zones, set outside of the institutionalising forces of the market culture, are indeed those small communities of withdrawal that MacIntyre advocates.

## Methods and Methodology

My usage of the term ‘Revolutionary Aristotelianism’ is taken from the work of MacIntyrean Kelvin Knight. The phrase originated from his 1996 article ‘Revolutionary Aristotelianism’, and has been outlined in more detail in ‘Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre’. Knight's use of E P Thompson's express belief that individuals are more ‘realised’ as rational or moral agents when collectively resisting the biopolitical percolations of market,<sup>3</sup> is combined with

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<sup>1</sup> Wetherspoons is a popular chain of pubs in the UK

<sup>2</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Selected Essays Vol. 2 – Ethics and Politics* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2006 p xi

<sup>3</sup> This was alongside Thompson's great wish for MacIntyre to uphold his valiant task of practical philosophy, seeing the revolutionary impact his thought could have (E P Thompson ‘An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski’ in: R Miliband and J Saville (ed) *The Socialist Register* Merlin Press 1973 pp 58-9)

MacIntyre's ordering in which institutions exist to serve practices. The invocation results in resistance as a virtuous practice in defiance of the omnipotent spectre of liberal individualism and late capitalism. MacIntyre is of course the main theoretical backdrop to this piece aside from Knight's appropriation of his rebellious traditionalism.

On an empirical level, I undertook embedded observation at the 'rampART', one of the social centres concerned, in particular with the women's group 'WANC' during 2006 and 2007. I have also conducted *an* unstructured interviews with *an* important contributors to the UK social centre movement.

A number of internet sourced articles and papers associated with the social centre movement's involvement in the Gleneagles anti-G8 mobilisation (2005), have been of great use. These have provided a fascinating glimpse of the conversation that was going on, and remains, over the implications of rented spaces on the social centre scene.<sup>4</sup> There is a plethora of secondary source material that has been of use, so too the websites of the social centres themselves.

## Revolutionary Aristotelianism

MacIntyre's 'revolutionary Aristotelianism'<sup>5</sup> informs this piece with a resounding understanding of collective action, and an irrefutable application of his syllogism couched in the premise of '...human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realised-its-telos'.<sup>6</sup> The task will be to exemplify MacIntyre's tenets through the practices and ethos of the social centre movement.

One of the most explicit themes evident within MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1985) is the transformation of autonomy to *anomie* as a result of the Enlightenment project's separation of practice and morality, the bifurcation of social relations that he argues continues through the auspices of liberal individualism and free market capitalism; the separation of the public and the private, science and metaphysics, facts and values. With the severance of practice from morality, moral judgments are no longer seen as facts,<sup>7</sup> the consequence of which MacIntyre argues resulting in a humanity that can never be unalienated and have '...clarity about means and ends'.<sup>8</sup> In line with this formulation, is therefore the architectonic backdrop in which the component of rational ethics from which MacIntyre's threefold scheme has been removed and the ultimate conclusion of *man-as-he-could-be* as no longer intelligible, no longer relevant.<sup>9</sup> In the question couplet '*What is good for me? What is good for mankind?*'<sup>10</sup> the latter has been removed, and therefore an ultimate *telos* replaced by independent *pleonexia*.

In MacIntyre's synchrony of his Marxist past with that of his Aristotelian ethics, bureaucratic individualism reduces practices to means serving the ends of individual accumulation of wealth and power.<sup>11</sup> The conception of virtue is therefore altered,<sup>12</sup> means becoming ends and the conception of a series of actions in relation to the overall good is lost in translation. The only demographic capable

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<sup>4</sup> See Rogue Element 'You can't rent your way out of a social relationship (Work in Progress)' found at <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/regions/manchester/2004/08/296049.html> and Text Nothing 'All and Nothing: for radical suicide! Towards some Notes and Confusion on 'You Can't Rent Your Way Out Of A Social Relationship: A Critique of Rented Social Centres' ...and to continue the dialogue...' found at <http://www.56a.org.uk/rent.html>

<sup>5</sup> Kelvin Knight 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism' in I Hampsher-Monk & J Stanyer, (Eds.) Contemporary Political Studies 1996 Vol.2 (Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom) Cambridge, Polity; and *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* Cambridge, Polity 2007 p 224

<sup>6</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* Guildford, Biddles Ltd 1985 p53

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p59

<sup>8</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Marxism and Christianity* Hammondsworth, Penguin 1971 p66

<sup>9</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 1985 (*op cit*) p59

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* p 219

<sup>11</sup> Kelvin Knight 2007 (*op cit*) p 158

<sup>12</sup> *op cit* p 225

of sustaining the anterior conception of virtue, an understanding of virtues that nurture political communities where '...men and women seek the good together...' <sup>13</sup> are those whose '...existence is on the margins of the central culture.' <sup>14</sup>

Resuscitating Aristotle's practical philosophy, MacIntyre therefore suggests that capitalist individualism should be met by a politics of resistance in the form of overcoming cooptation <sup>15</sup> and manipulation, the practice of resistance itself therefore becoming a virtuous act. A 'politics of local community', <sup>16</sup> as characterised by small scale localities that share a practical understanding of goods, rules and virtues <sup>17</sup> are those that partake in virtuous resistance. It is this proposition that social centres manifest such local communities that I shall argue. Using the social centre movement as a living and breathing example of MacIntyre's 'politics of the local community', the paper takes a deeper look into their practices, the 'goods of conflict' that are produced and the apparent fissure that exists between rented and squatted centres.

## Introduction to Social Centres

Social centres are occupied spaces, their conception based on a non-commercial use of abandoned urban apertures, propelled by premises of community-based activity, creativity, inclusion, and autonomy from the command of the dominant culture. They attract a pastiche of folk, some unemployed, others married with families and full-time jobs, those who live in the centres, and those who visit. They are places in which, according to the 'Social Centre Network' (UK): 'people can come together to create, conspire, communicate and offer a collective challenge against capitalism'. <sup>18</sup> Hanging as a provocative backdrop to each of the centres is the contested nature of the spaces that have been chosen for occupation. The presence of the groups that form within these spaces can be seen as a rupturous symbolic gesture to the control of private property over the urban geographies of city dwellers and the control that this has over the lives of those who 'remain within the system'. Offering a sonorous semiotic of radical resistance, the centres are a deliberate presence within the communities in which the buildings and structures of the spaces have been found, attracting attention ranging from hostility to appreciation from those outside the confines of the autonomous zones.

On a very basic and local level, the actions and motivations of those involved are directed towards the activities that take place within the centres, and the practical day-to-day housekeeping that engulfs all organisational projects. There are a number of, perhaps you could say, architectonic plateaus, however, that propel the trickle-down inspiration fuelling these zones. Up one plateau from the daily practicalities, they are contesting the emptiness of the space, and the wasteful frivolity of those who own the buildings. Up another tier and you'll find the role of the spaces as reflecting the collective needs, aspirations and ethics of their inhabitants. Another, and it can be said that each of the spaces represent a concerted attempt to accommodate for the social needs generated by the situation of the surrounding area.

On a meta-level, there are some intrinsic logics that drive the individuals and the spaces they create. The notion of autonomy, control and freedom over their own ideas and practices, set apart from the overarching market-infused culture, filters through. Centres are conceived without the constraints upon human interaction that are created by the outside world, resulting in the production of art, culture, forms of communication that are not allowed, and generally ignored, elsewhere. Similarly, the impulse to accommodate for the surrounding social demographic is twinned with the desire to change, shape and influence the thoughts of those that attend the events and meetings of the centres. This process of 'radicalisation', in turn, is representative of the constitutive wish to remain outside the system, and yet similarly to try and change its infrastructure for the good, accordingly, of humankind. The political attachments and activities of those of the centres, those that visit, and

<sup>13</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 1985 (*op cit*) p 219

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* p225

<sup>15</sup> Kelvin Knight 2007 (*op cit*) p213

<sup>16</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good' in: Kelvin Knight *The MacIntyre Reader* London, Duckworth 1998 pp 246-50

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* p250

<sup>18</sup> Social Centre Network found at <http://www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk/> 2007

are affiliated to them, determine the final plateau of contact, and remain at the heart of their reasoning and existence. According to an interviewee, 'the experiences and memories of the spaces are passed on to others in the hope of continuing the movement and altering peoples' perceptions, about the movement itself and also about the issues they bring up and support'.<sup>19</sup> This connection of struggles brings on a wider, national, and even international dynamic, through the linked pages of the social centres on the internet, and their conglomerated presence at large political protests. Having said all this however, this directedness to the common good differs between those that are rented and those squatted. More shall be said on this later.

Organised within the centres are cultural and political activities, such as amateur theatre, poetry slams, art installations, alongside public meetings, training, and skill sharing such as dance classes, bike repair sessions and IT lessons. Kitchens are available for low-cost food and communal cooking, as well as resource-sharing such as free internet access, 'Infoshops', and libraries. The sense of organised disorganisation is pervading, the promotion of leaderless and non-formal hierarchical relations<sup>20</sup> as paramount, the idea of the 'DIY' culture as practiced. As indicated earlier, each centre caters for the needs of the community within and outside its walls, and therefore the selection of practices and activities available will reflect this.

Aside from the activities and events, meta-level considerations take up the time and energy of the participants. Either by the commitment injected into the maintenance of the spaces; the act of 'skipping' (where leftovers found in bins outside supermarkets and homes are collected for communal cooking) in a double order where remaining removed from the value-exchange system is coupled with ensuring the produce that our wasteful habits throw in the bin are put to good use; furthering their refusal of the market of exploitation through practicing veganism; enlightening themselves through spiritual enhancement; coming into direct contact with the irascibility of the law in order to maintain and support the spaces; or ensuring political engagement with ongoing protests in opposition to the injustices exacted by the authorities they oppose, each of them internalise the *telos* of the community through the ordering of their practices with the ultimate good always in mind.

## Background

The phenomenon of social centres is not an entirely new one, and of course squatting would be the most familiar of the forms that these occupied spaces take. A recent survey found that there are up to fifteen spaces in the UK at the moment, the nature of some being illegal, their lifespans being unpredictable. With a total of 250 events organised per month, the centres attract a crowd of 4,000 to 6,000 participants, with 350-400 additional individuals involved in the running of the spaces.<sup>21</sup>

Within London, there are a handful of current centres: the 'rampART Social Centre',<sup>22</sup> located in Whitechapel; '56a Infoshop', in Walworth; and LARC (London Action Resource Centre), also in Whitechapel. The rampART has been open since May 21<sup>st</sup> 2004, a lifespan of length considering the average of that of a social centre is three to six months. 56a Infoshop has been around since 1991, although its healthy duration has been facilitated by recently becoming a rented social space. LARC is also a rented space. The Camberwell Squatted Centre came into being in Spring 2007, although it was evicted in August 2007. Other evicted spaces include the 'Ex-Vortex Social Centre' (Stoke Newington), 'The Square' (Russell Square), 'Use your Loaf Social Centre' (Deptford), and the 'Radical Dairy Social Centre' (Stoke Newington). Further afield in the rest of the UK, spaces have been appearing in Brighton, Manchester, Bristol, Leeds, Oxford, Birmingham, Glasgow, Swansea and Bradford. 'The Cowley Club' (Brighton), 'SUMAC Centre' (Nottingham) and '1 in 12 Club' (Bradford) are all owned and rented spaces.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview September 2007

<sup>20</sup> This is in line with the principles of 'Indymedia', the focus of Lee Salter's paper in this Special Issue

<sup>21</sup> L Alessio 'The Spring of Social Centres 2007' <http://www.occupiedlondon.org/socialcentres>

<sup>22</sup> The rampART has been served its eviction papers as of late 2007, early 2008.

Despite the presence of centres in London since the 1980s, such as the 'Wapping Autonomous Centre', and 'Centro Iberico', the spread and popularity of these defiant hubs is much greater on the continent, particularly in Italy and Spain where the 'OCSA Forte Prenestina' in Rome holds much inspiration for the centres that we see in the UK today. The Italian movement springs from a rich history embedded in the Autonomous Workers' Movement of the 1970s. Centres mainly came in to existence as a response to increased deprivation, and were the projects of the unemployed.<sup>23</sup> In 2000, Milan alone catered for 26 centres, and throughout the whole country there are 130 of the autonomous zones.<sup>24</sup> Aside from the Mediterranean countries, social centres have a considerable presence in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, amongst other European countries. The recent police storming of the 'Ungdomshuset' (literally meaning the 'Youth House') occupied house in Copenhagen, Denmark, evicted 1000 people from a social space that has been a hub of political activity since 1982.

## Rented and Squatted Centres

As the following quote may imply, there are some fundamental differences between the practices and values that drive squatted centres and those that are rented:

...the act of occupying a building is a form of direct action: illegal – collective – carried out openly that leads a group of individuals to reconquer a living space previously taken away from the collectivity by those in power.<sup>25</sup>

Those that are squatted have a lot more to lose and to resist, than those that do not. It was explained to me by interviewees that their concerns are very different. For the rented centres, they survive through loans and income support of those who live there,<sup>26</sup> and so the housekeeping chores are centred around how to make the money for the rent and how to pay the bills. For squatted spaces, the contestability of the space is part of the process, and money for rent and bills is not an issue. Amongst some of the views prevailing as a result of the controversial nature of these rented zones, it has been said that they only serve to reinforce the existing framework of legitimacy, reifying the barriers of the legal and illegal.<sup>27</sup> Others are more keen on these spaces, their more commercial and familiar feel described to me benevolently as reminiscent of an 'Anarchist's Wetherspoons'.<sup>28</sup> These spaces have much longer life-spans than the normal three month, flash-in-the-pan, squat-you-like zones.

With a view to illustrating social centres as those resistant, virtuous communities of the greater good, a look at their practices and virtues shall follow, delineating their role as practice-based collectives. The following two sections shall then delve deeper into the schisms of the movement, the manner in which conflicts are dealt with and their similarities to the MacIntyrean concept of the 'goods of conflict',<sup>29</sup> furthered by an examination of the differences between rented and squatted centres and the impact this has upon the assimilation of MacIntyre's vision.

## The Practices and Virtues of Social Centres

### *Phronesis*

So, what's the point of a building without anybody in it? Well, actually we know the answer to that one. It looks like this: Make ££££££££. Well we choose another answer. Our answer: Make life. Surely that must be the point. That is our experiment here. That is our occupation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Interview (See Footnote 19)

<sup>24</sup> Dazza 'In Italy Another World is Growing 2000' [www.edgehill.ac.uk/Research/smg/ArticlesDazza.htm](http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/Research/smg/ArticlesDazza.htm)

<sup>25</sup> El Paso 'Occupato and Barocchio Occupato Against the Legalisation of Occupied Spaces' <http://www.omnipresence.mahost.org/occupied.htm>

<sup>26</sup> Interview (See Footnote 19)

<sup>27</sup> See Footnote 24

<sup>28</sup> See Footnote 1

<sup>29</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Toleration and the Goods of Conflict' in 2006 (op.cit)

<sup>30</sup> Camberwell Squatted Centre, found at <http://www.56a.org.uk/warham.html/>

The above quote is taken from the webpage of the Camberwell Squatted Centre, extracted from a description of the beginnings of the centre in 2007. It reverberates with the task of unifying the conception of human flourishing with that of practice. In the words of Aristotle, 'What is the good for man? It must be the ultimate end or object of human life: something that is an end in itself completely satisfying. Happiness fits this description'.<sup>31</sup> Happiness here is determined by the determination of excellence in the practices of the participants of the centre. The concept of instruction, learning and sharing of knowledge is a fundamental principle that animates the practices of the members. By tuning into the internalisation of knowledge and deliberation, as opposed to the external materialist search of the mainstream culture, their *phronesis* places *eudaimonia* over *pleonexia*.

Examples of such are abundant within the social centre network. After the dissolution of 'The Square' in the summer of 2006, an occupied building in the heart of academic Bloomsbury, there was a call for papers as to what could be learnt from the closing of the centre (the closure of which was reached by consensus), encouraging a critical engagement with its successes and failures, and how such could be built upon for the benefit of future spaces. During the time in which the centre was live and occupied, one interviewee informed me that there had been a series of lectures, where seven to eight academics had stood in discourse with a further 250 participants, the event of course having been put together for free. Not only does this highlight the manner in which their practices are oriented towards the goods of the local community (as it was surrounded by the labyrinth of Russell Square institutions), but so too does it illustrate the importance of knowledge and deliberation within the actions of the members of the spaces, and those who came to attend. This is transformed through practical application, through radical reading groups (see the rampART webpage for listings of their reading group events), through discussion forums, blogs and debates that take place either at the centres or within the virtual social centre community. Through a myriad timetable of events and intellectual engagement, these social centres underscore the ultimate source of unity that *phronesis* can bring to achieve the ultimate good.

### ***Community as the Supreme Good***

Central to the creation and precepts of these social centres is the ultimate good of the community. Striving in an architectonic formulation of practices and virtues enacted not only for the sake of the individuals, but so too for the betterment of the group,<sup>32</sup> and an ultimate perseverance in the name of happiness to be achieved for the human good as a whole, the community resides as the central focus.

Now in its eighth year, the Women's Anarchic Nuisance Café, one of a string of events taking place on a monthly basis at the rampART Social Centre,<sup>33</sup> grounds itself in notions of community:

The cafe builds a community from our often fragmented inner city lifestyles. It anchors and roots us, providing us with positive reference points for who we are, all on our own terms, which is a political feat in itself! ...The fact is the cafe belongs to all of us and is what we make it -something to be cherished and nurtured, somewhere to be fed on a soul level.<sup>34</sup>

In line with MacIntyre's critique of the modern displacement of virtue and standards of selfhood, the project of the Women's Café attempts to overcome the caustic nature of contemporary society upon the ties of community, reunifying their sense of the self with their separated roles. Indeed, the 'rampART' itself denotes the air of 'just generosity', through the sharing of goods such as food, IT and audio equipment, kitchen facilities; this can be seen as a form of giving and receiving as propounded by MacIntyre<sup>35</sup> and the underlying Aristotelian notion of friendship. The understanding of cooperation within the communities of the social centres upholds the Aristotelian

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<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, translated by J A K Thompson *The Nicomachean Ethics* London, Penguin 2004 p1097a35

<sup>32</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings need the Virtues* London, Open Court 1999 p159

<sup>33</sup> WANC is in the process of perhaps moving to another space due to the eviction process being undergone at the rampART.

<sup>34</sup> 'Women's Anarchist Nuisance Café' [www.wanc-cafe.org.uk/](http://www.wanc-cafe.org.uk/)

<sup>35</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 1999 (*op cit*) pp 81-123, pp 155-62

sense of justice in relation to others. Social centres survive on the acceptance that each individual plays a central role to the inner-workings of the group, and therefore if there are informal hierarchies present, they are reinforced and not exploited.<sup>36</sup> This is in accordance with MacIntyre's conception of the necessary dependence upon others for the virtues to be realised in each of ourselves:

...We need both those virtues that enable us to function as independent and accountable practical reasoners and those virtues that enable us to acknowledge the nature and extent of our dependence on others.<sup>37</sup>

'Grand Banks' in Tufnell Park, which came to a close in 2004, has been deemed as one of the most successful spaces so far, according to the positive involvement it generated from the outside demographic. Mirroring the needs of the area, the space took on the role as something of an unofficial community centre, each day the kitchen catering for 50 to 60 students from the neighbouring school, including on occasion the teacher contingent. Through the cooking, through the welcoming of the students into the space, through the determination to serve those most in need and the positive image of self-organisation they projected, the centre placed the good of the community above that of themselves. There were later frictions as to which community exactly the centre was supposed to be catering for, whether those living in the space, or those that visited and ate there everyday. Conflicts such as these shall be looked at in the coming section.

### ***Tradition***

In line with the notions of community comes that of custom and tradition, this is central to the inner-workings of the groups, as the standards are set and the basic tenets of community practice are enacted. For instance, as the Women's Café has been moving from one social centre to another, locating new spaces of resistance after each eviction, hence the group has had the time to nurture some classic Greek traditions. Posted as prose on their website:

In ancient Greece, the heart of the home was in the kitchen - the fire in the hearth—dedicated to Hestia. The communal preparation of food, sharing it and sitting down and eating together are all time-honoured rituals, that help build communities. Such rituals are the mainstay of [the Women's Anarchist Nuisance Café].

The customs and practices encourage a 'narrative unity'<sup>38</sup> within the lives of the participants, and therefore determine the panacea of 'life as a whole' to the members of the groups.

### **Conflict Management**

In terms of action, there is also the potential for conflict to emerge between 'users' of the space, those whose priority is the centre, and those who take action, which may place the centre at risk. This is often a fraught relationship. This was even the case with a squatted social centre in Manchester when those running the social centre tore down another collective's flyposters because they were publicising an action in the city which they thought might bring down repression on the squat.<sup>39</sup>

The social centre movement is far from immune to conflict. The types of conflicts that arise within the centres can be many and there are generally dialogical rules which are followed in order to maintain the notions of the individuals involved behaving decently and peacefully towards one another in a reciprocal relationship of mutual exchange, agreement and constructive disagreement. According to an interviewee, there are weekly meetings held within the spaces in which anyone who feels disgruntled or the need to voice their concerns can do, in a discursive and non-aggressive environment.

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<sup>36</sup> See Footnote 19

<sup>37</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 1999 (*op cit*) p 156

<sup>38</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 1985 (*op cit*) p 205

<sup>39</sup>Rogue Element (*op cit*)

Within the centres, as mentioned previously, there are undeniable hierarchies that exist, structured according to skills, knowledge and experiences. Such systems can cause tension, and if the individual experience of the group takes over that of the collective, then there can be creases that need ironing out. People can see the spaces as a reflection of their personality and therefore they move away from the idea of the collective experience - those that are arguing for something more collective and those on a singular basis tend to clash. Accordingly:

The social centre scene is trying to move away from the image of the squat party – those seeing the spaces as a free-for-all, no rules, where they can live out their fantasies etc., and those that promote the wider political project outside the centres, tend to come into conflict with those that want to show an expansion of their lifestyles, those that actually live there and look after the centres.<sup>40</sup>

Difficulties arose out of a lack of clarity over goals, and the resultant lack of consensus over the group's aspirations. Therefore, the divisions that are created by the background rationalities of justice – the conflicts, the contestations – resonate very much with the conflicts that arise out of the social centres, in that there are different conceptions of the common good and therefore for this to be avoided, there must be an original notion of the good determined from the outset of the project.

This should not surprise MacIntyre's readers. The dialogue that takes place exemplifies the virtues of members conducting

...th[e] kind of conversation occur[ing] when a group of individuals enquire together about how it would be best for them to act, so that some good can be achieved or some evil avoided...<sup>41</sup>

For rented spaces, different issues provoke conflict, and this is where the presence of the outside market can be felt creeping in. There are shared logistics, practicalities over mortgages and supplies, and so therefore the practical aspects of having an income and paying for a roof over the heads of those living in the rented centres means that the political will is diminished due to the concentration of energy elsewhere. The fact that the spaces have greater longevity, there are greater opportunities for more damaging conflicts to arise, such as those over ownership, and the acquisition of licenses etc<sup>42</sup> Perhaps, therefore, in this context, the values of those within a rented space are different from those within a squatted space. This is in line with MacIntyre's argument over the alternate values of the state and local communities:

The values of state and market are not only different from, but on many types of occasion incompatible with, the values of such local communit[ies].<sup>43</sup>

## Rented & Squatted Centres

Renting a social centre is, in our opinion, an admission of failure and cannot promote anything other than the idea that the anti-capitalist movement has been absorbed into the system.<sup>44</sup>

Prior to the anti-G8 mobilisation in Gleneagles in 2005, a wealthy individual, certainly within the activist community, donated £70,000 between a handful of local activist groups, via the 'Dissent! Network', to help set up a network of social centres.<sup>45</sup> The benevolent benefactor wished to collectivise their wealth, and there is no doubt that the intentions of the person were genuinely to engage with the political community. The aim of the establishment of these centres was to occupy a wall of resistance before and after the Gleneagles summit, places to gather, discuss strategies, and important political and ideological issues that the summit disclosed.

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<sup>40</sup> See Footnote 19

<sup>41</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 1985 (*op cit*) p 205

<sup>42</sup> See Footnote 19

<sup>43</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 1985 (*op cit*) p 212

<sup>44</sup> Rogue Element (*op cit*)

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*

The result of this generous move on behalf of one individual was divisive. There are those that might say that this gift was not injurious,<sup>46</sup> that the scene both in Scotland and abroad was not in anyway subject to a difference in approach. However, it could be said that once there is an involvement of financial consideration in the form of rent, bills etc., then there arise some fundamental deviations from the social space establishment, so-to-speak. What is striking is the fact that the very contested nature of the spaces, their autonomy from the market culture, is compromised. It is no longer contested nor autonomous, in the sense that the squatted spaces are legitimate and within that same legal regime. One of the particularly helpful articles on the Gleneagles debate, 'You can't rent your way out of a social relationship (Work in Progress)', illustrates very clearly the appearance and conception of these social centres as within the established order, and not challenging nor resisting in any manner: 'How can we engender radicalism in our society if people's first point of contact with non-mainstream politics is a space built on compromise, which exists only because the state says it can?'<sup>47</sup> The line between what is considered legitimate and illegitimate is stark, simultaneously delineating those that are rented as within the law, and those that are not, outlaws. This does of course further radicalise those that are squatted, which perhaps distances them even more from the mainstream order. For those that are rented however,

The feeling that one is outside the petty rules and regulations of the system, even in some small way, is a magnificent one. Entering a centre that follows rules, pays its rates and licenses, and has financial and cultural ownership of the space is radical suicide.<sup>48</sup>

The fact that there are other priorities, other distractions, and perhaps the values are not as those within the squatted spaces, sees energy directed elsewhere. Indeed,

...with all this energy going into officialdom and cake selling, what will come of direct action and resistance? Will all the form filling, maintenance and café shifts not sap the energy from those who might otherwise be taking part in acts of resistance against what the G8 represents, and direct action?<sup>49</sup>

The content of the political events within the centres remains the same,<sup>50</sup> put on by those who are not caught up in the monetary wrangles over licenses, etc. From a MacIntyrean perspective, here there are present 'goods of effectiveness', insofar as the necessity for selling cakes, paying for licenses, rent payment etc., determine the effectiveness of the space, within the restraints of its purse strings. Perhaps what is therefore being argued from the other perspective, is that those of the squatted space contingent, are creating goods of excellence, the maintenance of contested spaces, remaining outside of the law which demands great tenacity and creativity, the staunch abidance to the common good of the centre – this is what shapes and moulds the lives of those that participate. Once these challenges are removed, therefore the values alter, the goods that are created are for means rather than ends in themselves, and the common goal shifts.

One of the main reasons for the renting of the spaces is in order for the achievement of some form of continuity, a point of reference that did not change and was not constantly under the threat of eviction. The longevity of these spaces of course creates a greater flow of time in which there can be issues of conflict, as opposed to the three month centres that survive on the pure adrenaline of the resistance itself. Accordingly,

If something is not continuous because it is constantly repressed – such as a squatted space – then surely the alternative is not co-option or the creation of continuity by buying into the system, but resistance.<sup>51</sup>

Squatted spaces are deliberately remaining outside of the system, outside of any form of institutionalisation. It is very clear that once there is a cooperative stance taken through the payment of rent and the necessity to sustain such payments, that the influence of the establishment

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<sup>46</sup> Text Nothing (*op cit*)

<sup>47</sup> Social Dis-Centres 'Do or Die' Issue 10, [www.eco-action.org/dod/no10/index.html](http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no10/index.html) p185

<sup>48</sup> Rogue Element (*op cit*)

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>50</sup> See Footnote 19

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*

takes root. The squatted spaces are practice-based communities, those practicing a virtuous form of resistance for the achievement of the common good of each collective. In the rented spaces the demands of their mode of institutionalisation leads to preoccupation with the goods of effectiveness. Indeed, They not only fail to threaten the world of capital and the state; they actually ease the pressure on those in power by providing voluntary social services under the guise of creating 'counter-institutions'.<sup>52</sup> The mode of institutionalisation undermines the practice of resistance.

## Conclusion

We are not satisfied to be spectators in our own lives, we want to fully participate. Our lives are affected by situations out of our control we want to bring them in our control. By using direct methods and not limiting ourselves to appealing to those in power, we are setting ourselves the aim to completely re-shape the power balance in the places where we live, work and socialise.<sup>53</sup>

This quotation from the now Ex-Vortex Social Centre, makes the contention against the dominant mode of consumerism and individual acquisition patent. The Vortex was originally 'The Vortex Jazz Café', owned by a property developer whose intention was to sell on the disused space to a well-known chain of cafés, thereby ensuring the presence of multinational commerce within the heart of a community struggling already from accelerated 'gentrification'. Occupying the building as of January 6<sup>th</sup> 2007, managing between then and their eviction in early March 2007, to pressure the brand from not buying the building, and indeed into not entering the Stoke Newington area at all, their practical application of a will to resist cooptation is characteristic of the general ethos of social centre philosophy. Their determination is resonant of MacIntyre on a number of levels. Clearly, there is a common good that fuels the practices and virtues of the participants, each act of defiance as a means towards protecting the building, the area, and ultimately, humankind in general, from the claw of globalised avarice. The force of practice, manifested by those who occupied The Vortex, permeated their whole lives, reformulating a unification of practice with morality. The determination to struggle against the forces of manipulation, enacted through the will to preserve the balance and livelihood of a populace, is lucid. What is seen as an unethical intrusion into the lives of a community indicates the acknowledgement of capitalism as incompatible with MacIntyre's vision of autonomous resistance. With an understanding of injustice, so too is there a coupled understanding of justice, thereby demarcating the social centre as that harbouring the will of a political drive.<sup>54</sup> Following the characteristics prescribed by MacIntyre's 'politics of local community', the rules, goods and virtues of the members are all understood and centred around the good of the community. Despite being an urban collective located within the kernels of the sprawling Londinium metropolis, such a centre is arguably an expression of the small scale *polis* which MacIntyre advocates, most certainly at odds to, and in withdrawal from, the overbearing market culture.

The incompatibility of these centres with the mainstream capitalist avarice, the communal *telos* of flourishing through instruction, manifested by their participants, are clear characteristics that smack of MacIntyre's resistant kinships.

Having observed the events put on by these groups, I have witnessed the all-encompassing grip that the projects of the centres have upon the individuals. Upholding the formulation of resistance as virtuous, there is a commitment and belief that goes into transforming their centres into sanctuaries safe from outside influences, where they can learn from others and achieve a level of commonality and community that they had not experienced before. The law comports the centres as 'radical' through their illegality, and yet clearly the double genitive of the law becomes clear in that radical in this sense therefore does not mean unjust. The mask of law as guaranteeing justice is simultaneously removed. It is thanks to the inclusivity of MacIntyre's revolutionary virtue that these communities can be understood in their genuine form.

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<sup>52</sup> Wolfi Landstreicher 'Realism' in Against the Logic of Submission' [www.anti-politics.net/distro/download/againstthellogic-imposed.pdf](http://www.anti-politics.net/distro/download/againstthellogic-imposed.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> Ex-Vortex Social Centre <http://www.londonsocialcentre.org.uk/>

<sup>54</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 1999 (*op cit*) p 9

MacIntyre's commendation of practices over institutions is underlined through the differences that can be highlighted between the rented and squatted centres' differing ethos. The goods of conflict that are created through dialogue and understanding of the other as prescribed in the squatted centres, are radically altered when issues of ownership and financial constraint are introduced to the scene. There are those within the social centre movement who see that 'an anti-capitalist social centre, [that pays] rent to a landlord, [pays] rates, and bills, obey[s] licensing laws, legal structures, and insurance, cannot in essence be in any way in conflict with the capitalist system'.<sup>55</sup> Although this may represent a site of conflict within the movement itself, so too does it serve to highlight the role of institutionalisation in the overbearing market economy and ideology. Therefore, the rented centres contradict MacIntyre's vision of a 'politics' of the local community', whilst synchronically reinforcing the appropriateness of MacIntyre's revolutionary Aristotelian determination of practice-based communities, as illustrated through the autonomous squatting of abandoned, empty urban spaces. Perhaps for those who believe in the contested nature of the spaces as that which determines the common good, then the use of MacIntyre's theoretical toolbox would not create much of an alteration in their work. However, if MacIntyre were to be used by those within the rented spaces, as an intellectual determination of *phronesis*, then the rented spaces would soon be turned into illegal squats.

The conception of MacIntyre's local communities advocated as living and breathing within the lungs of some of the most unanticipated pockets of the urban landscape, could show that the separation of practice from morality of which MacIntyre wishes to reunite, is already in the process of being enacted. Through the centres' practical application of their beliefs and in their search for the common good, perhaps the 'goods of the community'<sup>56</sup> is being brought to life. This is not in the realm of utopia therefore:

As everyone knows, the dream is dead. The dream, the desire, the hope for a better world. And yet we are dreamers. We too should be dead, then. But if we are not mistaken ... HERE WE ARE.<sup>57</sup>

Lucy Finchett-Maddock

### **Author profile**

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<sup>55</sup> Rogue Element (*op cit*)

<sup>56</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 1985 (*op cit*) p 53

<sup>57</sup> Camberwell Social Centre (*op cit*)

