

# Everyday activism and transitions towards post-capitalist worlds

Paul Chatterton\* and Jenny Pickerill\*\*

This article aims to broaden and deepen debates on the everyday practices of autonomous activists. To do this we present three main research findings from a recent research project that looked in detail at what we called 'autonomous geographies'. First, in terms of political identity, we highlight how participants in political projects problematise and go beyond the simple idea of the militant subject, set apart from the everyday who opposes the present condition. Second, we highlight how everyday practices are used to build hoped-for futures in the present, but that this process is experimental, messy and contingent, and necessarily so. Finally, we illuminate the contested spatialities embedded within political activism that are neither locally bounded nor easily transferable to the transnational. This exploration of everyday activism has illuminated that the participants we engaged with express identities, practices and spatial forms that are simultaneously *anti-*, *despite-* and *post-* capitalist. We argue that it is through its everyday rhythms that meaning is given to post-capitalism and it is this reconceptualisation that makes post-capitalist practice mundane, but at the same time also accessible, exciting, feasible and powerful. This paper draws upon material collected during a 30-month empirical research project into the everyday lives of grassroots, non-party political activists in the UK between 2005 and 2008. Three case studies were explored in detail – autonomous social centres, Low Impact Developments, and tenants' networks resisting gentrification.

**key words** activism capitalism post-capitalism autonomy space UK

\* School of Geography, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT  
email: p.chatterton@leeds.ac.uk

\*\* Department of Geography, University of Leicester, Leicester LE1 7RH

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## Introduction

Contemporary life is peppered by a sense of mounting and rapid social, ecological and economic change (Kuntsler 2006; Homer-Dixon 2006; Girardet 2007). At the same time, inspirational transnational movements, initiatives, networks and campaigns are emerging that are demanding greater justice, equality and solidarity and fighting a whole range of ills such as war, ecological destruction, runaway climate change, corporate criminality, destitution, and the commodification and enclosure of land, resources and knowledge (Mertes 2004; Notes from Nowhere 2003). Geographers have been busy here, critically exploring how, and with what success, politically active groups are intervening in these crises and devel-

oping radical alternatives (Leitner *et al.* 2008; Juris 2008; Routledge and Cumbers 2008; Anderson 2003 2004; Featherstone 2003 2008; Routledge 2003; Pulido 2003; Halfacree 2006). What has motivated us to write this paper is the following; one area that has been neglected through a concern with bigger, global concerns is the specific practices of activists and how they challenge, deal with and imagine alternatives to life under capitalism in the everyday. What is missing are detailed insights and case studies into what it actually means to be simultaneously against and beyond the capitalist present, while at the same time dealing with being very much in it.

The focus for this work is our ongoing investigation into what we call 'autonomous geographies'. In this paper we specifically focus on an emerging

thread amongst recent political activists for autonomy, meaning literally to self-legislate, and through this explore how activists might self-manage and develop workable and replicable models for a better life (Smith 1997). We earlier defined autonomous geographies as

those spaces where there is a questioning of the laws and social norms of society and a creative desire to constitute non-capitalist, collective forms of politics, identity, and citizenship. (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006, 1)

It is in these spaces where we can see 'futures in the present' (Cleaver 1979), where people express contradictory visions, as well as live life despite, but nonetheless beyond, capitalism. The kinds of activism that we explore in this paper identify more complex forms of contention and resistance politics that are not simply oppositional but simultaneously interweave 'anti-', 'post-' and 'despite-' capitalisms. This is the dirty, real work of activism that expresses a pragmatic 'get on with it', an antagonistic 'no', and a hopeful 'yes'.

In this paper we outline and explore in detail our three key research findings. First, we found that participants express identities that attempt to go beyond exclusionary labels such as 'militant' or 'activist', which are set apart from the everyday and simply oppose the present condition. Second, we found that everyday practices are used as building blocks to construct a hoped-for future in the present, but that this process is experimental, messy and heavily context-dependent. Finally, we found contested and complex spatial practices that are neither locally bounded nor easily transferable to the transnational. These three findings point towards the rocky road of building post-capitalist worlds and imaginaries (Gibson-Graham 2006).

## The study

This paper draws upon material collected during our 2-year study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) into the everyday lives of anti-capitalist activists in Britain. Three case studies were explored in detail – autonomous social centres, Low Impact Developments (LID) and tenants' networks resisting gentrification. Questions explored included core ideas, beliefs and visions; how ideas were translated into action; spaces for participation; and border crossings and/or boundaries between activist and non-activist spaces.

The research encounter was a deliberately political intervention into autonomous activism using participatory action research (Kindon *et al.* 2007; Cameron and Gibson 2005). We attempted to include each group in the design of the methodology and sought to respond to their needs. Our project had to negotiate the complexity of competing demands, and the uncertainties and inconsistencies within the groups and between ourselves as researchers (for a fuller discussion see the Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010). In all we conducted 40 informal in-depth interviews and 10 focus groups, produced five research reports and consultation documents, two accessible booklets for public dissemination (Social Centres Network 2008; Pickerill and Maxey 2009b), collaborated in the making of a film (*EcoVillage Pioneers*), conducted numerous site visits, helped with leaflets, websites, press work, lobbying, meetings, campaign organising a judicial review, and, finally, months of meetings and immersion with the groups themselves.

The first case study concerned autonomous social centres. These centres are place projects that can be squatted, rented or cooperatively owned, and they include elements such as book shops, affordable cafés and bars, food cooperatives, free shops, spaces for meetings, cultural/political events and educational activities. They draw upon different historical-political inspirations and tendencies (for an overview see Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006; Montagna 2006; Mudu 2004). The current network consists of around 16 venues (see Figure 1) in different forms from info shops and radical cinemas to multipurpose self-managed centres (see Social Centres Network 2008). What sets them apart from established community centres is a desire to be autonomous and self-managed using direct forms of democracy. Some have set up workers' or housing cooperatives to embed these principles. They have become key activist hubs for political organising and they value horizontality, cooperation and solidarity, and often ally with the notion of being 'anti-capitalist'. Social centres have gained added importance in the light of widespread urban gentrification (Lees *et al.* 2008) and the privatisation of city centres under late neoliberal capitalism (Brenner and Theodore 2002). The aim of the engagement was to better understand the centres as a network, develop a clearer understanding of what autonomy and anti-capitalism meant in this context, and strengthen networks of support.

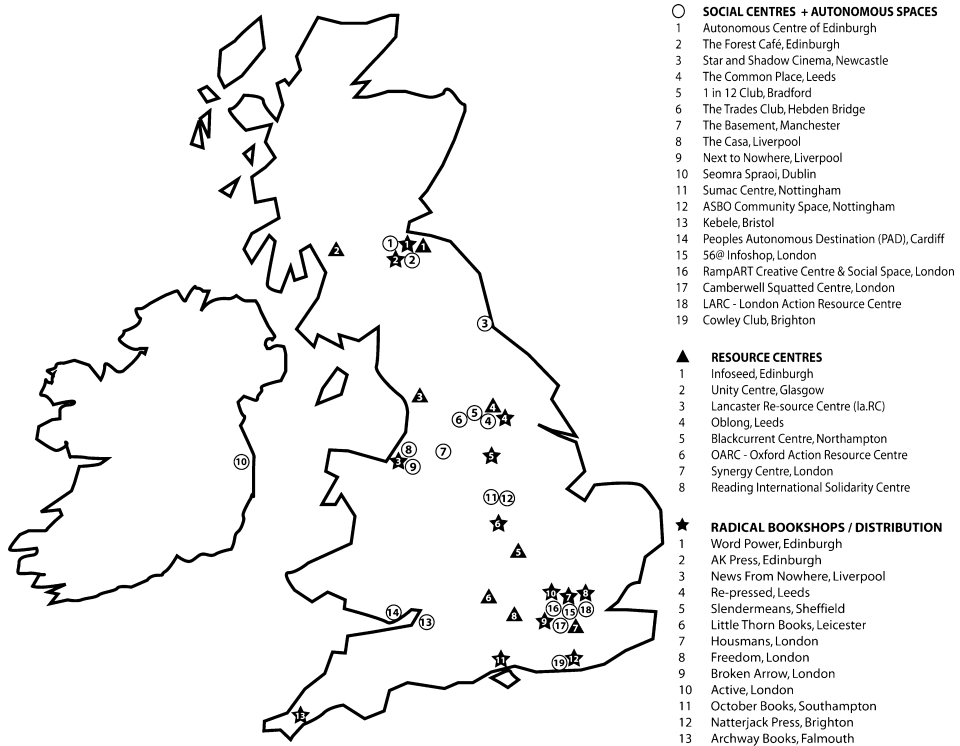


Figure 1 Map of UK Social Centres  
Source: Authors

The second case study focused on Low Impact Developments (LID), a form of living where houses are built from recycled, local and natural products, and livelihoods are made in sustainable ways from the land. They have low visual impact by blending with their surroundings. They are often small scale – creating a direct link between their occupants, their needs and their waste. It is a radical holistic approach that is concerned with personal and emotional sustainability and education as well as seeking to provide more affordable housing options (Fairlie 1996). It is estimated that 10 000 people now live in LIDs across Britain and the number of LIDs are growing (see Figure 2). The study of a residential community was core to understanding both the problems and potentials of living autonomously. Thus far, LIDs have been built in rural areas and considered an extension of the back-to-the-land projects of the early part of the last century (Halfacree 2006). We contend, however, that LIDs signify far more than this characterisation

suggests. They employ approaches and principles that can be applied in urban settings, they challenge the fundamentals of house building and pricing, and the existing planning system. Thus it is possible to translate many of the ideas into urban settings, and in particular the emphasis on low cost housing, low visual impact, reducing environmental impacts, ethical food production, educational outreach and community participation (see also Pickerill and Maxey 2009a). One particular LID, Lammas in south west Wales, became our core case study. The Lammas were proposing to build a LID of 25 eco-smallholdings on farmland near Glandwr, Pembrokeshire (Maxey *et al.* 2006), which in August 2009 just received official planning consent.

The final case study involved supporting a community campaign against a housing regeneration scheme in an inner city estate called ‘Little London’ in Leeds. Leeds City Council had, for many years, been proposing regeneration in this marginalised neighbourhood on the northern edge of the

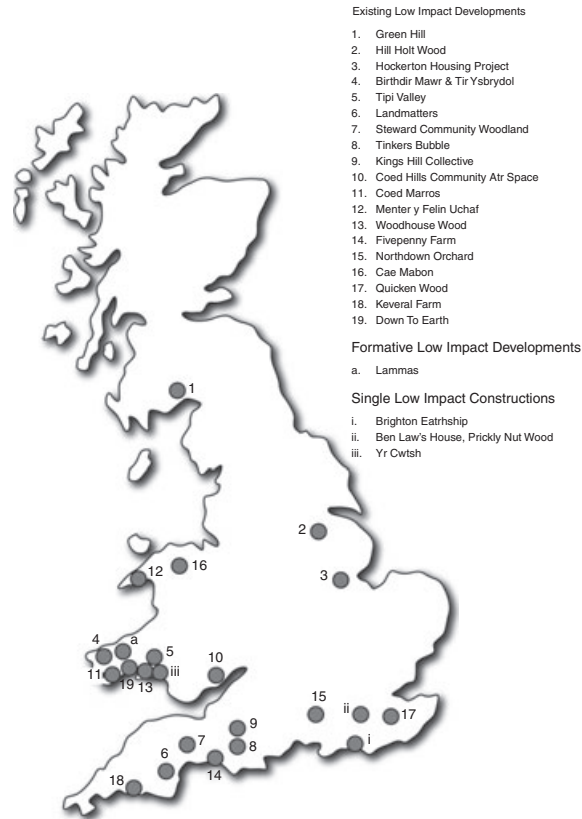


Figure 2 Existing and formative LIDs in Britain

Source: Authors

recently regenerated city centre. Their choice of funding was via a Private Finance Initiative (PFI). It is an important case in a study of autonomous activism because it is a prime fight against privatisation and thus about protecting public spaces from enclosure. Moreover, unlike the other case studies, it was located in a working-class community, where autonomous anti-capitalist politics was not the norm, and thus part of the campaign became about supporting self-organised resistance among working-class communities. The methodology for this case study was geared towards encouraging social change by challenging the Private Finance Initiative. One of our aims was to bring different groups together across the estate and stop them working in isolation. To do so we worked closely with the Little London Tenants and Residents Association (LLTRA) and participated in the Save Little London Campaign.

## The rocky road to post-capitalist worlds

### *Beyond the activist, beyond the militant subject*

The twentieth century has been preoccupied with the 'great man of history', the militant figure who is dedicated to revolutionary change and detached from the mundanity of everyday reality. Here, resistance evokes visible acts fighting an objective oppressor. Sparke (2008, 423) points to the 'romance of resistance', where autonomous actions are animated by idealism 'which imagines agency in the existential and ageographical terms of some seminal and heroically universalized human spirit'. Thoborn (2008, 98) states that the militant is a figure that 'persistently returns as the marker ... of radical subjectivity across the spectrum of extra parliamentary politics'. This revolutionary agent of history, the god-man (Deleuze 1983), seeks truth and revenge against oppression. For the militant, resistance

always comes after oppression. There is always oppression to fight and a state of grace, now lost, to be regained. What drives this subject is the possibility of political completion. However, rather than this kind of pure, romantic figure of resistance, what our findings point to is an altogether more complex and often contradictory process of activist-becoming-activist through trends that include the rejection of binaries between activists and their other, an embracing of a plurality of values, a pragmatic goal orientation and a growing professionalism.

First, there is an immense complexity behind the often assumed unified activist subject and one that embraces resistance in all its unromanticised, messy impurities. While Anderson (2003 2004) found particular rituals and socio-spatial practices as key to group identity formation amongst activists epitomised by the strong, almost neo-tribal, bonds built up during the Earth First! anti-roads movements of the 1990s (see also McKay 1998; Wall 1999), we encountered activist practices 10 years later much less bound by rituals and norms. A strong desire was to reject simple divides between activists and their other – the non-militant, ordinary citizen. Indeed, there was a mistrust of those who present themselves as social change specialists who know best and have the requisite tools and skills (see Anonymous 1999; Chatterton 2006). What emerged was a very pragmatic approach to how people see themselves as activists. While there is a complex, and often contradictory, articulation of political ideals, our work resonates with recent poststructural interpretations of oppositional identities (through the work of Doel 1999; Day 2004 2005; May 1994; Newman 2007), which reject overly fixed, essentialist ideals and identities and the transcendental search for a good subject. Instead, many people articulated their engagement in political projects through messy, complex and multiple identities – always in the process of becoming and moving forward through experimentation and negotiation (see Gibson-Graham 2006; Whatmore 1997; Castree 2003; Grosz 1999). As Gibson and Graham argue, what we see is activists engaging in ‘new practices of the self’ (2006, xxvii).

We found that political identities were constituted through the everyday practices of doing activism in particular projects and campaigns, rather than political identities pre-existing fully formed (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Rather than a constraint, this fluid co-production was seen as an opportunity that allowed ideas and identities to

develop organically and to avoid dogmatic, anti-state approaches (see Holloway 2002). Many people we spoke to expressed how they valued embracing a mixture of influences, constantly evaluating the usefulness of ideas as they are encountered. Thus for Larch from Lammas:

Like being vegan or whatever, you take it on board – those ideas – and then you absorb it and it mixes with lots of other ideas – so for me anarchism now mixes with Buddhism and Taoism and permaculture – a whole range of other ideas and also realism.

Rather than creating an unfocused and unmanageable menagerie, this diversity gave participants strength and confidence that they would not be stuck with certain ways of organising, nor block off new ideas or tactics that might make projects stronger.

When participants did express clear political values, they were usually only given real meaning through practice. As one participant from a social centre commented:

Say we all passed a resolution saying that we are now against capitalism, which I always assumed I was, what the fuck does that mean? I am an anti-capitalist, I will completely say this now right, but I have no idea what that means; I have no little blue plan in my bedroom about how society should be run. It is meaningless; it is like, what we do now basically. (Jim, Leeds)

In one social centre, for example, a poster advertising a demonstration against the G8 summit in Scotland in 2005 was put up with the slogan ‘smash capitalism’ and by the evening it had been removed by one participant who said they didn’t want people coming to an evening gig getting the wrong idea about the centre. Other social centres have recently had difficult discussions about what groups could and could not use the building. In one, a Cuban delegation was denied access because of the concerns over the hierarchical nature of the Cuban revolution, while in another the participation of an anti-fascist group was questioned due to their support of street violence (although ultimately allowed access). It is the fluidity and immediacy of these kinds of decisions that allow political identities to take shape through everyday practice.

Anti-capitalism is a particularly interesting but difficult term. Many collectives running social centres have debated whether they are anti-capitalist, while other groups have found this to be a futile exercise, preferring to explore what it meant through the practice of running the centre. In terms

of identity labels, most actually prefer labels such as 'radical', 'independent' or 'autonomous'. In most cases, where phrases such as anti-capitalism are in wide circulation, they are still not a given for participation, nor are there attempts to agree a definition. In general, what we saw was either a lack of interrogation as to what it actually meant, or a hesitancy to use it due to its strong connotations and negative impact on attracting a wider public. The lack of formal decisionmaking structures also means that project values can shift according to the profile of participants. Many sites of activism we visited, then, were relatively open places with heterogeneous affinities and identities. However, the key point is that although they were relatively open, participants saw the projects they were involved in as ways to reject an individualist notion of the self and instead build a more socialised self. Coming together was seen as an important political task in an age of social fragmentation. As one social centre activist commented:

The reason why governments want to destroy socialisation is because they realise that they can get really fucked over by it. People start talking to each other and think 'Hang on; we don't actually have to live like this'. (Ed, Leeds)

What we found, then, was that activists act in the present as political subjects and hence are as much goal- and project-orientated as they are interested in movement building and resistance. Many groups avoid overtly political ideals in an attempt to pragmatically further their goals. Rather than spend time articulating a particular political perspective they showed strong concerns with achieving their campaign and project goals, be they resisting privatisation, organising a social space or building a LID. However, there still remain clear discursive differences. Some were motivated by a well-established DIY ethic (see McKay 1998; Trapese 2007) and an explicit rejection of state and capital, while others, such as the tenant organisers we engaged with, rarely evoked ideas of self-management, but were more committed to maintaining state intervention and the immediate need to be rehoused.

Pragmatic political identities were also essential for strategic reasons. Lammas, for example, had to delicately balance the need to look respectable and gain the support of the local planners while simultaneously desiring something that challenged the status quo. They were prepared to maintain this complex project identity in an attempt to shift LIDs

away from being regarded as marginal or dangerous to something that would be palatable for the local state and hence ultimately them as a tool for wider social change 'Low Impact Development specifically needs to demonstrate itself to conventional society as a viable model if it's going to make any progress' (Mike, Lammas). Behind such options we found difficult discussions which balance the desire not to dilute political ideals nor make compromises, with a pragmatic desire to maintain and build alternative projects, and see a return on emotions and time invested. This pragmatism also speaks to prefiguration as a driver of much contemporary political activism, where Marxist-Leninist consequentialism (ends justify the means) is rejected in favour of the means as actively shaping ends (Franks 2003).

Finally, the rejection of a more militant identity has in part given way not just to more pragmatism, but also more professionalism. This is in part an attempt to negotiate with official bodies, to reach out to other groups, and on an emotional level enable longer-term activism (Brown and Pickerill 2009). Many activists go to the extent of actively claiming 'we are not activists' (Chatterton 2005). This activist self-critique is also an attempt to transform activism into a more accessible set of practices and politics that can resonate and influence the political mainstream rather than existing on the political fringe. There has been an explicit attempt to turn activist identities outwards and engage with others in a less confrontational and aggressive manner. This has resulted in the deliberate adoption of a professionalised activist persona that will appeal to a broad support base. Examples include attention to welcoming interior design and layout, inclusivity policies to reach out to broader groups, open and activity days and welcome sessions and the use of new open source web 2.0 technologies. There has been a strong critique of this professionalisation as a form of recuperation, a point we will return to in the conclusion.

#### *The everyday messy practices of building the future in the present*

A fairly detailed portrait of activists' everyday practices has been established over the last few years by geographers (see Leitner *et al.* 2008; Juris 2008; Routledge and Cumbers 2008; Doherty *et al.* 2007; Glassman 2002; Featherstone 2003 2008; Routledge 2003; Halfacree 2006; Chatterton 2005; Pickerill 2007; Routledge *et al.* 2007). Moreover,

there is a growing literature evaluating particular activists' innovations, involving hacklabs, free schools, alternative currencies, eco-build techniques and protest camps (Seyfang 2009; Wall 2005; North 2007). These practices are often examined as elements of post-capitalist worlds, niche ideas with potential to grow. But what is still missing are detailed empirical accounts of the messy, gritty and real everyday rhythms as activists envision, negotiate, build and enact life beyond the capitalist status quo in the everyday. This works in multiple ways as we discuss below.

Katz's (2004) work highlighting resilience, reworking and resistance is informative here to understand the multiple levels through which everyday activist practices are built. First, resilience evokes a need to struggle against adverse situations and to develop ways of coping with this adversity and future shocks and crises and a desire to protect, sustain and nurture communities, their people and their infrastructures. Second, '[p]rojects of reworking tend to be driven by explicit recognitions of problematic conditions and to offer focused, often pragmatic, responses to them' (Katz 2004, 247). Finally, resistance invokes a more oppositional consciousness. Looking at these together, we can see a complex set of processes at work here as participants in the projects we engaged with simultaneously try to create resilient support mechanisms, retool themselves as political actors to build a better world, as well as materially resist various inequalities to actually improve their lives and those of others. Groups prioritised different aspects within their everyday lives, as we discuss below.

Most groups we encountered attached importance to group sustenance and nurturing capabilities, in effect developing resilience, empathy and coping skills that build community as a bedrock for more oppositional identities and actions (see hooks 2004). Much of this was done through a commitment to principles such as collectivism, self-management and consensus as guides for everyday activity and the development of a soft infrastructure of interpersonal communications through workshops in consensus decisionmaking, facilitation and conflict resolution. This was no easy process and there was often both confusion and problems in terms of implementation. This approach often relied on anarchist interpretations of collectivism and the ultimate benign qualities of human nature; the belief that society will be bettered through the achievement of collective goals

rather than individual aspirations; and subsequently the importance of building a commons, managed by those who depended on the given resource (see De Angelis 2007). Implicit here are numerous assumptions, underlying principles and implications that were rarely interrogated, in particular broader questions such as what would a society built on direct democracy actually mean in practice across all spheres of life?

Social centres went to great lengths to embed tools for direct democracy into their meetings. Many had drawn on formal training to help them with the practicalities of running groups using consensus. But there was usually not enough time devoted to making connections between the use of these methods and what this meant for the wider political orientation of the group. For example, it was rarely asked why these kinds of organising principles were used over more conventional ones, what this meant for shaping the values and activities of the group, and how they would connect with other groups. As a result, issues such as unequal power relations, individualism and informal hierarchies, the function of sharing and cooperation in social relationships and exchange, and meeting fatigue were under scrutinised or left to fester. On one level this is entirely understandable, given that most people enter political projects with little previous understanding or experience of direct forms of democratic management, or time in their daily lives to fundamentally question the way our institutions and social relationships are ordered.

However, in the case of LIDs, residents at Green Hill attempted to tackle some of these issues by introducing formal 'feelings' sharing and reflection time to air grievances prior to the practical discussions; 'it's a sign that we haven't had enough meetings if there's conflicts happening outside of those meetings' (Will, Green Hill). One social centre had also established an inclusivity group to explore why women did not attend organising meetings and how to increase accessibility beyond essentially middle-class, white groups. A number of social centres had undertaken workshops for members on facilitation and conflict resolution with the help of the activist collective, *Seeds for Change*. The Little London case study demonstrated real barriers to the translation of such ideas into traditional working-class contexts. In particular, the traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical format of the tenants' committee was slow to accept new ideas and mem-

bers, was resilient to change and open to influence by key individuals. On several occasions, tensions arose between the established committee and this research team who suggested new opportunities for inquiry and action.

The sheer amount of organisational activity and the deleterious impacts it had on energy foregrounded all our case studies. Much of this stemmed from the frustration of numerous meetings that the consensus approach often requires. As the importance of consensus becomes more central than the importance of meetings and group process become amplified. Some activists had begun to see the quest for unqualified consensus as a cumbersome filter in the translation of ideas into action, and a restraint on dynamism as decisions had to be channelled through group process. However, although perhaps flawed, it provided a structure through which all participants were reassured that they would be heard, and without it internal group efficiency would be much worse. For example, both Lammas and many social centres embarked upon idealistic ventures initially planned with as few rules and as little bureaucracy as possible during early periods of excitement and possibility. However, over time they shifted towards imposing a set of structures and rules due to the necessities of legal and planning stipulations; the need to deal with interpersonal politics and hold certain individuals to account to the group; to present a coherent image to the outside world; and to increase the efficiency of the group in terms of meeting its aims. Thus, despite the emphasis on horizontality and consensus, groups sometimes mimicked bureaucratic structures.

Many projects focused on purposeful attempts to embed competencies for reworking and retooling for the future, often framing what they were doing as essential survival tactics that increase resilience and adaptation in the face of perceived life-threatening ecological and social problems (Homer-Dixon 2006; Heinberg 2005). This was one of the strongest trends we identified, with people developing projects, campaigns and infrastructure that are useful, make a direct and immediate impact, and in some way aspire to make the future more just or tolerable.

In the case of social centres and LIDs, this future proofing, upskilling and resilience, was a core concern, and great efforts were made to skill share and learn collectively. Many participants in LIDs were driven by concerns such as peak oil and cli-

mate tipping points, embarking on project building through a personal concern for their own survival and doubts as to whether ecosystem services will be viable:

I see it is as a vehicle for making space for people to live a low-impact lifestyle. I see myself as being a catalyst for letting permaculture happen in the countryside, and letting people with no money or very little money, live a balanced lifestyle that will survive economic crisis, and will survive peak oil and will survive the collapse of the American empire. (Tony, Lammas)

Some of those in social centres saw their role as providing essential infrastructure or welfare services for the most marginal in the light of recessionary cuts to the welfare state. Hence, many social centres run language classes for asylum seekers, breakfast clubs for the homeless or free schools. All social centres we visited were committed to providing affordable food, drink and entertainment in response to high prices in central areas. What this raises is the extent to which this retooling also called into question and contested wider political and institutional structures and norms or whether they represent individualised and local responses that fail to tackle local class structures (Peet and Watts 2004).

Finally, where there was least clarity was in terms of resistance within the everyday practices of place projects. As we discussed earlier, resistance is not usually articulated against a clear figure of oppression, be it the state, capital or the global corporation. There were few activists who were prepared to identify a clear sense of what they thought they were up against. Moreover, resistance is perhaps better seen as hard-wired into the productive daily acts of project building rather than as part of direct action and confrontation (see Carter 2005; Graeber 2009; Franks 2003). There was expansionary logic to this formulation, with activists keen to translate their ideas into visions that would be connected and legible to people outside their immediate political community. Border crossings (Giroux 1992) became a political tactic for many, which eschews fixed notions of us and them, or good and bad tactics, or convincing people of certain ideas, but rather foregrounds questions, differences and newness, however shocking, problematises ourselves and our own positions, and explores possibilities for changing our world.

One participant, Gary, who was involved in a succession of high-profile squatted social centres in



central London over a 3-year period explained such border crossings:

The most productive thing we can do is create an accessible place where people are engaging in an analytical dialogue with us and then developing from that point onwards. Also not patronising people ... they create their own sort of political engagement as well rather than some sort of factory thing where they come in non political and they come out as anarchists.

What Gary expresses is a desire to create spaces that can be co-authored and co-created by the participants who use them, rather than creating a space for political indoctrination. Clearly, such crossings are a complex process fraught with tensions and failures, given that such radical, autonomous spaces already come heavily scripted with assumptions and values based around political, youth-oriented subcultures. While social centres prioritised a desire to connect with 'ordinary people', many still feel ghettoised around fairly homogenous individuals (mainly white, middle-class and sub-cultural), which can often appear as a closed, private club for activists and their friends, while LIDs can seem part of a backward rural past. Overcoming separateness was often a function of familiarity over time. More established LIDs, for example, had made better connections than people outside the community with early-stage communities who often felt isolated from the local population. At Steward Woodland Community, for example, after initial years of scepticism or hostility from local residents communities, participants gradually became more integrated in the area, often through local people coming into the community, making friends or enjoying an area previously locked up for private ownership.

One of the continuing problems relates to developing discursive and linguistic strategies that can express complex ideas and allow activists to interact with different audiences to have an impact outside their immediate comfort zone. Making radical messages more palatable and more widely understood was a constant desire, in part to use crossing points tactically and pragmatically to challenge and nudge mainstream political, economic and cultural processes. To do this they needed to influence and cooperate with more traditional groups, such as planners, local politicians, trade unions, tenant groups and Non Government Organisations. In the case of Lammas, their initial engagements with planners were difficult, and in part this was due to the language they used;

I think we could have presented it in a lot more digestible form to begin with, [but] we've had to learn whole new languages really ... when you're talking to the planners they want a different set of terminology and then the legal people want a different set too. (Mike, Lammas)

There were particular problems in the case of Little London as more autonomous activists attempted to communicate and work with more traditional socialist organisers and working-class communities. Very different languages and styles of organising became evident very quickly. However, this was also one of the most productive engagements for us, as new tactical repertoires emerged from these differences. To some extent, both sides went through a period of listening, coming to a realisation that differences were both productive as well as challenging, whilst also realising that they were not insurmountable and were less significant than first feared. A key lesson here is that a commitment to mutual learning and listening, and rejecting essentialist assumptions about the 'other', can uncover surprising points of convergence between those who self-identify as activists and those that do not (see Whatmore 1997; Castree 2003). Sentiments of anti-capitalism and anti-authoritarianism have more widespread purchase than many people realise, and the most fruitful ways to uncover them is not always through adherence to orthodox political dogmas such as anarchism or socialism.

#### *The contested spatialities of political activism*

These case studies offer further insights into the spatialities of political activism and contentious politics. What has intrigued geographers who have studied and engaged with activist groups is how they use space and organise across it, and in turn how these spatial formations shape their activist practices and identities. We need a sensitivity, as Featherstone (2008) has pointed out, to understanding how political activism emerges in particular places in ways that reflect the uneven geographies of contemporary capitalism. Of perennial concern, then, is how activist practices are embedded in, and emerge from, the particularities of place, but also how they can exceed place and the limits of the local to signify something bigger than themselves in the broader struggle for social change (see Harvey 2001; Featherstone 2008). The task at hand is to explore the complex spatial narratives and practices that emerge through interactions between

a commitment to building dense networks of trust in stable place projects on the one hand, and aspirations to extra-local activism and re-imagining wider political, economic and cultural processes on the other.

Our overall findings indicate a strong desire for more stable and long-term spaces, alongside, and even instead of, temporary moments of resistance and alterity (see Bey 1991). While they may employ different tactics and political imaginaries about how the future might be organised, what connects all our case studies is that they share a desire to regain control over space locally, in a period where access to physical space has become subject to price hikes, privatisation, enclosure and surveillance (Leitner *et al.* 2007). Thus, rather than relying on the vulnerability of squats, collectives have opened social centres in rented or owned buildings, and LIDs are applying for formal planning permission rather than risk being evicted from their land. This permanency has implications. Norms of participation can develop that create boundaries against newcomers, and yet permanency can enable longer-term collaborations with local communities to be developed and also allows place projects to act both as safe spaces for retreat and reflection, and the incubation of ideas. Many participants, especially from LIDs and social centres, used the idea of the 'commons' as the spatial motif for their desire for self-management, both in the sense of a social relationship between people, the 'commoners' who regulated and protected a commons, and to signify the space produced through these social relationships (de Angelis 2007; Midnight Notes Collective 1990). At the same time, Little London provides an alternative reading of the value of autonomous, self-managed, space. The question of the local control of space was a central feature of political life in the community, but community spaces that did exist were segregated along social and ethnic groups, and often heavily controlled by the local state. There was also no fully formed desire to create an open, inclusive community-managed space, which highlighted disjunctures in political vocabularies and tactics between local residents and political organisers. In fact, the ongoing preferences were for spaces that exclusively met local needs.

This desire for permanence also highlights a persuasive localisation above a regard for extra-local politics. In some instances this localisation appears to actively advocate disconnection, through a

desire to be self-reliant and in other cases to respond to romanticised and exclusionary local needs. For many activists, segregation and the retreat to activist 'safe' spaces does still hold huge appeal (see also Doherty *et al.* 2007). Although the possibilities of living from welfare payments long term are much reduced (the classic dole autonomy that allowed the 1970s punk and squatter scenes to thrive), there are still opportunities to live a relatively removed life amongst activist spaces (such as housing, food and workers' cooperatives, festivals and gatherings). In the case of LID activists, we found that many participants enjoyed the separation that came with rural self-managed spaces and found it relatively easy to live a segregated life (see Pepper 1990), especially as there is much contemporary environmental rhetoric about the value of self-sufficiency and localism to justify separateness as a political aspiration. A member of one LID expressed this separateness in a way that reinforces uncomfortable binaries:

The more that we are here and value and feel comfortable with what we're doing, the more the rest of the world out there seems to be on a completely different planet. (Jo, Green Hill)

Yet it was not the residents' intention to remain separate and this position was forced upon them because of their illegality, as Matty from Green Hill argues:

There's an edge of separateness here because we're breaking the law and we're going to keep on doing so, so we need to keep quiet, but it's not good to be separate. It's not about running to the hills and digging bunkers against the end of the world.

Many participants did acknowledge, then, that their activist lives weave together different spatial logics – that of the activist safe space and that of the real world (see also Brown and Pickerill 2009). Borders are a key spatial motif that was expressed to us, which were materially and emotionally felt and crossed by those seeking to live autonomously. At certain moments the gulf between hoped-for ideals and actual lived reality can appear huge and confounding for participants, and the more oppositional and utopian the spaces and activities, the greater and more difficult these border crossing become. This is perhaps less so for those who are older for whom age brings confidence, knowledge, experience and a willingness to compromise that reduces the tensions felt. Moreover for many, the art of living 'in between' is the lifeblood of their

activism, which can create new and strange bedfellows and repertoires of action. Daily activist practice, then, remains full of tensions and contradictions. Activists simultaneously recognise how boundaries shape their everyday practices at a material and symbolic level, and at the same time work to overcome them.

Rather than a simple and parochial place-boundness, then, there is a complex set of choices at work here – a strong commitment to place and a defensive localism that seeks to protect gains in particular localities (Escobar 2001), while at the same time networking and reaching out selectively when possible, or needed. We also found a reluctance to use simplified and essentialist understandings of different spaces (see Massey 2004); that activist safe spaces are not always safe, and that outside spaces can be more rewarding and liberating. A focus on the local was in fact a tactic to build a solid base from which to strengthen a broader set of social relations built on trust and reciprocity (see also Melucci 1996; Tarrow 1998), which offered greater legitimacy and protection. This is illustrated by the significant community outreach elements of LIDs, the strong place identity of social centres, and attempts in Little London to reclaim community spaces to resist the PFI scheme. Creating these locally embedded communities, a place for ‘us’ from where campaigns and projects could be furthered, was seen as an important broader political task in particular localities, especially in the light of the active remaking of central areas that has eroded community-owned spaces over the last two decades.

Inevitably, questions are raised about the wider resonances and potentials of autonomous activism and their micro-resistances. What Harvey (2001) referred to as ‘militant particularisms’ has resonance here and in these difficult neoliberal times many activist projects do ‘just’ survive rather than call into question broader social and economic issues. Harvey challenges us to reconsider how to transform these localised resistances ‘into something more substantial on the global stage’ (2001, 175). The challenge remains, as Brown (2002) reminds us, to make whatever micro tactics we are involved in seem feasible and exciting.

Our case studies did start to trace out extra-local aspirations. Many social centre activists continue to be strongly influenced by the anti-globalisation movement that has emerged since the 1990s (see Mertes 2004). Many LID groups understood their

place and role in the broad debates of autonomy and sustainability and actively sought to expand their ideals to other places. From Little London emerged a broader city-wide campaign *Hands off our Homes*, which was embedded in national debates over housing policy. Often, this sense of extra-local, transnational political agency emerged from key transnational activists (Tarrow 2006) who imported aspirations and ideas from their wider networks and experiences beyond particular localities. Indeed, we were not innocent here. One of our roles as action-researchers was to help ferment any upscaling, networking and linking.

Some case studies did show a desire to reach out and debate with others about what they are trying to achieve. But overall, transnational solidarities remain an unfulfilled ideal for many activists. As much as we would have liked to have found, as Routledge and Cumbers (2008, 2) did, ‘new globally connected forms of collective action against neoliberalism’ and ‘emergent forms of transnational political agency’, the everyday activisms we engaged with were much more locally and project-grounded. Participants were heavily focused on project building or reacting to more immediate issues, such as personal conflicts or financial concerns, which constantly arose from running projects and campaigns. It was often simply the case that many activists did not have the knowledge or exposure to wider cultures of transnational activism, while others did not have the time. This is an interesting finding, given the hopes pinned on the anti-globalisation movement that has built up since the 1990s.

A number of crucial points stem from this. First is that a transnational outlook needs constant work. Due to the open and fluid nature of these projects and high throughput of people, constant updates and reminders are needed to retell and reconfirm the relevance of these wider extra-local and transnational narratives and inspirations. Otherwise they can die off. Katz’s (2001) work on building counter-topographies is illuminating. She explains:

I want to imagine a politics that maintains the distinctness of a place while recognising that it is connected analytically to other places along contour lines that represent not elevation but particular relations to a process (e.g. globalising capitalist relations of production) (1230).

Doing this kind of counter-topographical work locally is essential but also difficult. Telling convincing narratives linking specific places to their

wider context relies on experienced and skilful narrators. Therefore, those projects that have a heavier presence of transnational flaneurs (Leontidou 2006) have a stronger transnational identity. Many of these 'extra-local narrators' who were active in the wake of the Battle of Seattle through the 2000s are today less active – many have had families and moved on. This highlights problems the transnational movement faces in grounding a new internationalist imaginary within local activist spaces, the difficulties of making wider relational connections between oppressions and injustices in particular localities and wider institutional and political structures (Massey 2004), and the mistrust that can build up between outward-facing translocal activists (seen to be doing the exciting work) and inward-facing local activists (who feel they do the mundane work).

Second, there was often an absence of wider debates about the political role of projects and how they related to social and institutional arrangements, especially in terms of the local and national state, police surveillance and repression, and links to working class communities who, because they do not self-identify as 'activist', are often overlooked. Of equal concern is that the immediate locale, with all its messy but productive conflicts, is often overlooked or underused, as a source of inspiration for political solidarity. What this highlights is that developing solidarities of any description, be it within or beyond a localities, is key but needs constant work as groups tend to be selective in supporting each other (Sundberg 2007).

Third, broader questions of political strategy and social transformation often existed as a set of implicit assumptions. Values such as being anti-capitalist, and equality and justice were commonly shared and did form an almost invisible common ground, but they were rarely openly discussed or regularly interrogated. In particular, opportunities were often missed to convert internal conflicts and issues into opportunities for debate and reflection about the wider politics of a particular project. Examples emerged such as the relationship of LIDs to the local state that could broker questions of land ownership more generally; uneven work and burnout within social centres that raised issues of gender relations and informal hierarchies; or questions of organisational forms and tactics in the tenants' groups that could have raised key issues of community relations, political paternalism and authoritarianism.

Finally, the obsessions of scale-jumping and scaling up local micro-resistances can also be an academic imposition that misunderstands the actual aspirations and overlooks the limitations of those sustaining place-based projects. Scaling up and scale-jumping is as much about the desires of progressive intellectuals to find evidence of a heroic local 'David' who will resist and take on the neoliberal Goliath rather than actually understanding the messy particularities of activist place projects. It evokes the machismo and vanguardist tendencies amongst (mainly white, male) academics to inform activist groups that going global is what is best for them, rather than getting involved in everyday sustenance work (see also Pratt and Yeoh 2003). The broader, and more thorny, issue relates to views on scaling up as a strategy, and how this is actually done in practice. Too often there is a call for scaling-up without interrogating 'scaling up how or to where?' The influence of Marxism to seek a wider coordinated internationalism to make up for the immense failure of 'socialism in one country' still lingers strongly (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985), as does the revolutionary logic that merely seeks quantitative growth (Bonanno 2003).

The kinds of prefigurative politics highlighted in this study points to qualitative growth – the quality of the social relations and networks that develop through activism. Self-organisation is a powerful tendency in complex social systems, and it is this power of self-organised minoritarian politics that poses such a challenge to traditional majoritarian politics (Chester 2008). What we often see in the latter is a reluctance to acknowledge the emancipatory potential amongst everyday micro-examples, and a fear, or at least mistrust, of letting go and embracing a constantly emerging politics that refuses to be fixed and tamed (see Sen 2010). There are real tensions, then, in terms of spatial forms and imaginaries based on mutuality, solidarity, networking and affinity, and those committed to hierarchical and quantitative growth from a clear centre (Juris 2008). It is the material and discursive battles between these different spatial forms that gives everyday activism part of its momentum.

### **Conclusions: against, within and after capitalism**

To summarise, our project 'autonomous geographies' has generated three main findings that help us to understand everyday activist practice. First,

we have found a complex and often contradictory process of activist-becoming-activist through a rejection of simple binaries between activists and their other, an embracing of a plurality of values, a pragmatic goal orientation and a growing professionalism. Rather than the need to self-identify as activists, many activist spaces also foster a more complex narrative of the political self as they bring and hold together different identities and practices. As such, this illustrates the difference between what Bobel (2007) calls 'doing activism' and 'being activist'; people are keen to do activism without self-identifying as activists and this increases the potential for engaging with a broader range of participants. This cultivation of flexible identities is about being comfortable with not knowing and using the 'unknown' (Solnit 2004) in productive, open and inspiring ways (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Second, messy, everyday practices define participation in political projects where participants attempt to build the future in the present. It involves, using Katz's formulation of resilience and coping with life under capitalism, reworking to pragmatically build alternatives and be more future-proof, and resisting various injustices. What we saw was resistance as a productive moment in everyday life being fused with resilience and reworking, in ways that meant it was difficult to pull them apart. At the same time, there were implementation problems, especially making direct democracy work and not being overwhelmed by its demands. There were also ongoing problems with how to make autonomous politics legible to a wider audience. Through these everyday messy practices, activists are constantly border crossing between the familiar and unfamiliar, the world they are stuck in and cope with, the world they are against and resist, and the world they dream of and work towards (see Carlsson 2008; Holloway 2002).

Finally, there is a diverse set of spatial practices that privilege building dense networks of trust in stable place projects. Overall, then, we found a strong push towards establishing permanence, with activist spaces representing an everyday groundedness that speaks much more to the needs and rhythms of a locality. While there was a recognition of the need for both extra-local and local networks of solidarity, we found that most participants had difficulties making transnationalism and scale jumping mean something tangible.

This was often due to a lack of clarity and time, and especially to the unequal distribution of extra-local activists.

In this conclusion, it is also important to note concerns and critiques we have of the groups we engaged with. First, political visions and values were often implicit or taken for granted rather than rigorously interrogated. This often led to a neglect of discussions of the wider social-institutional arrangements or political contexts groups find themselves in. Second, there was a lack of time for networking, making connections beyond the locale and building solidarity with other groups, and where it did exist there was an overreliance on extra-local animators. Third, we noted a creeping professionalisation that has both improved activist practice but also raised the concerns of co-optation and recuperation. Mayer (2003) suggests that activist projects often become cornered by modes of neoliberal governance, self-discipline and a creeping individualism based around mobilising 'social capital', becoming entrepreneurial and chasing grants to maintain their activities. More worrying is a creeping cult of the (eco)celebrity over the social movement activist, where willing activists are used as spokespeople by the media, sanitised and packaged for the public.

Fourth, there is an increasing divergence between 'project activism' and more general social struggles of frontline communities, both of which express very different class relations. The concern that we found is that the goal-orientation and stable identities amongst activists involved in project or movement building can detract from opportunities for productive encounters with many headline and frontline communities involved in material struggles, be it over work, land or resources. The key issue is that autonomous spaces must at some point make a material difference to livelihoods (Peet and Watts 2004). We also need to realise that these spaces may not be liberatory if, rather than transforming material conditions, they instead simply impose new hegemonic discourses. Finally, and related to this, with such an open and unfinished terrain we have to deal with and respond to the prospect of both more and less progressive political realities and imaginaries emerging. On one level this refers to parochial and chauvinistic notions of place, but in more extreme examples it concerns the creation of micro-fascisms. Tools for direct democracy were seen as the best ways to counter these tendencies.

So what broader understandings does this study point towards? It has illuminated that the participants we have engaged with express identities, practices and spatial forms that are simultaneously *anti-, despite- and post-* capitalist. Activists accept that their everyday lives will weave together practices and values that will sometimes feel embedded or trapped in capitalist ways of doing things, and at other times will be more liberatory or antagonistic. But they continue to move, acknowledging that autonomous political organising is always going to be contradictory, interstitial and in the making. There is also a commitment to a politics that lets go and tries not to control. Grosz's work has been informative here. She states,

What, for example, would politics be like if it were not directed to the attainment of certain goals, the coming to fruition of ideals or plans, but rather required a certain abandonment of goals? (Grosz 1999, 11)

Being simultaneously against, within and after capitalism means that the everyday becomes the terrain where our politics are fought for and worked at. As Gibson-Graham states, post-capitalist imaginations need 'to be sustained by the continual work of making and remaking a space for it to exist in the face of what threatens to undermine and destroy it' (2006, xxvii). Just as capitalist social relations are reproduced at an everyday level, so too ordinary everyday practices can be generative of anti- and post-capitalisms. Post-capitalism, then, is not an end point, some universal sister-brotherhood of human perfection waiting over the hill. It is reconceptualisations such as these that make post-capitalist practice mundane, but also exciting, feasible and powerful.

Ultimately, the nature of what we have described will be subject to critique and scrutiny. To some, our examples will seem like insignificant islands, to others, inspiring seeds of the future, grassroots innovations that will flourish into something more significant (Seyfang 2009). Maybe they are glimmers of hope that have always shone in dark times, the seeds under the snow waiting for better times. What is certain is that more comparative and historical action-research is needed into everyday activist practices. This is not just an abstract pursuit in the academy. Alongside other academics and activists, we call for more intellectual, practical and symbolic work to deepen and develop these progressive alternatives.

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