


**Squatted social centres in England and Italy  
in the last decades of the twentieth century.**

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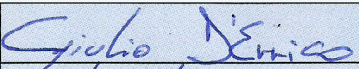
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## **Abstract**

This work examines the parallel developments of squatted social centres in Bristol, London, Milan and Rome in depth, covering the last two decades of the twentieth century. They are considered here as a by-product of the emergence of neo-liberalism. Too often studied in the present tense, social centres are analysed here from a diachronic point of view as context-dependent responses to evolving global stimuli. Their ‘journey through time’ is inscribed within the different English and Italian traditions of radical politics and oppositional cultures. Social centres are thus a particularly interesting site for the development of interdependency relationships – however conflictual – between these traditions. The innovations brought forward by post-modernism and neo-liberalism are reflected in the centres’ activities and modalities of ‘social’ mobilisation. However, centres also voice a radical attitude towards such innovation, embodied in the concepts of *autogestione* and Do-it-Yourself ethics, but also through the reinstatement of a classist approach within youth politics.

Comparing the structured and ambitious Italian centres to the more informal and rarefied English scene allows for commonalities and differences to stand out and enlighten each other. The individuation of common trends and reciprocal exchanges helps to smooth out the initial stark contrast between local scenes. In turn, it also allows for the identification of context-based specificities in the interpretation of local and global phenomena.

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## List of abbreviations

### Archives

56AI: Archive and Infoshop of the 56a infoshop in London.

API: *Archivio Proletario Internazionale* in Milan.

APM: *Archivio Primo Moroni* in the squatted building that houses the social centre Cox18, Milan.

BACZ: *Biblioteca-archivio Carla & Zubba* in the social centre *Forte Prenestino*, Rome.

BAI: *Biblioteca anarchica l'Idea* in Rome.

CDA: *Centro di documentazione Anarchica/Libreria Anomalia* in Rome.

KCCI: Infoshop and Library of the Kebele Community Co-Op, now BASE Co-Op, in Bristol.

## Others

AN: *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance) – Right-wing party, heir of the MSI. 1995-2009

ASS: Advisory Service for Squatters – Squatters’ support group based in London. 1975-present

BHAM: Bristol Housing Action Movement – Squatters’ support group. 1985-present

BBS: Bulletin-Board System

BSA: Brixton Squatters Aid – Squatters support group with base in the 121 Centre. Active in the nineteen eighties and part of the nineteen nineties.

CJA / CJB: Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 (c. 33) introduced in November 1994 / Criminal Justice Bill presented in 1992

CS: *Centro Sociale* (Social Centre)

CSA: *Centri Sociali Autogestiti* (Self-managed Social Centres) – Loose “brand” of social centres developed in the early nineteen nineties

CSL: *Casa dello Studente e del lavoratore* (House of the Student and the worker) – First large occupation in Italy. Milan, November 1968 – August 1969

CSOA: *Centri Sociali Occupati e Autogestiti* (Occupied and Self-managed Social Centres) – Loose “brand” of social centres developed in the early nineteen nineties

DC: *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democracy) – Centrist Catholic party. 1943-1994

DiY: Do-it-Yourself

ECN: European Counter Network – Virtual network connecting several European activist scenes created in 1989

GDHC: *GrandDucatoHardCore* (GrandDuchyHardCore) – Self-appointed title of the Tuscan punk scene in the early nineteen eighties

IMG: International Marxist Group – British Trotskyist organisation. 1968-1982

LSC: London Squatters Campaign – Squatters' organisation. 1969-1970

MSI: *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement) – Italian neo-fascist party. 1946-1995

PCI: *Partito Comunista Italiano* (Italian Communist Party) – Largest Communist party in Italy (1921-1991)

PDS: *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (Democratic Party of the Left) – social-democratic political party, born out of the dissolution of the PCI. (1991-1998)

PRC: *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (Communist Re-foundation Party) – Communist party born out of the dissolution of the PCI. (1991-present)

PSI: *Partito Socialista Italiano*, Italian Socialist Party – Socialist and then social-democratic party. 1892-1994

SDS: Students for a Democratic Society, Left-wing student organisation in the United States (1960-1974)

SNOW: Squatters Network Of Walworth – Squatters' support group active in South London in the mid- nineteen eighties.

SWP: Social Workers' Party – British Trotskyist party, with a history dating back to 1950. (With this name: 1977-present)

TAZ: Temporary Autonomous Zones, as defined by Hakim Bey in 1991.



## INTRODUCTION

This research is situated at the crossroads between academic, political and personal paths. As a history student I have always been interested in the development of the concepts of legality and legitimacy: the modalities of their interactions, reciprocal acknowledgement, validation and contradictions. This interest prompted my BA thesis on prison abolitionism theorists – as a radical critique to the legitimacy of one of the legal system's pillars – and my MA thesis on modern organised crime in Italy in the late twentieth century – as a phenomenon that reveals its real impact in the intersection between legality and illegality and in the constant search of new ways of *detourning*<sup>1</sup> the limits of what is legal and lawful. This research follows, from a third different perspective, the same line of enquiry. Social centres and the people who 'live them' constantly challenge the concept of legality, through the occupation of abandoned buildings (a very common but not essential trait, as will be shown), through the modalities of (self-)management and the organisation of the centres, through to their political campaigns and actions as well as the deconstruction of given modalities of personal relationships, laying the ground for a different way of living within the territories in which they are set. In doing so, they claim the legitimacy of these unlawful actions, reinterpreting the codes and norms of modern societies, and tempering property laws with multiple – and sometimes contrasting – approaches to the right to the city.

Intersected with this interest, and not at all disconnected with it, is my personal and political experience in the social centres' scene in Milan and across Italy. I have been a part of this movement for the majority of the last fifteen years and as an activist I have been involved in a

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<sup>1</sup>*Detournement*: roughly translated as overturning, hijacking, derailing or culture jamming, it is a concept and an artistic practice popularised by the Situationist International in the late nineteen sixties which consisted in repurposing well-known messages in order to create new ones in opposition to the original. As it was originally posed by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman in 1956, *detournement* was about turning the expressions of the capitalist system against itself: Debord Guy, Wolman Gil J., 'A user's guide to detournement', in Knabb Ken, ed., *Situationist International anthology* (Berkeley, 2007) pp. 14-21

collective research project focusing on the relationships between social centres and local administrations.

This double identity – researcher and activist – is essential for undertaking such research. Being a part of a social centre allowed me to better understand the modalities, codes and languages of this scene, as well as its issues and potentials. At the same time the personal relationships built in these years facilitated – and in some cases were essential to – the access I had to a great deal of research material.

Approaching this topic from an academic perspective revealed itself to be unsettling; the tension between the two affiliations is constantly challenging the methodologies, modalities, ethics and outputs of my work. This tension is the goad, the stimulus, to produce a scientifically rigorous piece of critical work, that aims to be useful – or at least interesting – both for the researcher and the activist.

## **1. Literature Review**

Social centres lay at the core of this work. In the past 40 years numerous definitions of what is and is not a social centre have been proposed from within the scenes themselves. From an academic perspective, however, they have been rarely and unevenly analysed. In this work the *social centre* label will be used as a broad definition to indicate the varied forms of political and social squatting which have taken place in both England and Italy since the early nineteen eighties. Despite the internal processes and attempts to define the identity of social centres, the results varied a great deal between the two scenes. I argue that the social centre label can provide – in this context – an epistemological insight into the ‘journey through time’ of English and Italian social and political occupations.

Here, social centres will be defined as those explicitly public and overtly political experiences created as a by-product of the epochal transformations brought forward by the advent of neo-liberalism. An eminently urban phenomenon strictly intertwined with the modifications of both societal organisation – the decline of industrial labour, cuts to public welfare systems, technological innovation and the emergence of new career paths – and in the urban space – processes of zoning, the displacement of populations and gentrification. Social centres not only defied the private ownership of residential and non-residential buildings, but also directly challenged the status quo by posing themselves as a “public sphere in the making”:<sup>2</sup> places in which forms of entrepreneurship,<sup>3</sup> social cooperation and political and cultural activism were experimented with. Squatting was a common but not essential feature of social centres: a small number were indeed located within rented or licensed properties. These centres were also promoting an alternative “social use of territory”,<sup>4</sup> that was in direct conflict with the neo-liberal re-organisation of European metropolises.

The literature on squatting and social centres has grown exponentially in the last five years. Since 2014 both radical and academic publishers have proposed a large number of titles, encompassing different approaches and perspectives.<sup>5</sup> The approaches of social scientists are

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<sup>2</sup> Vecchi Benedetto, ‘Frammenti di una diversa sfera pubblica’, in Adinolfi Francesco, Bascetta Marco, Giannetti Massimo, Grispigni Marco, Moroni Primo, Quagliata Livio, Vecchi Benedetto, *Comunità virtuali. I centri sociali in Italia* (Roma, 1994) p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Pruijt Hans, ‘Squatting in Europe’, SqEK, *Squatting in Europe. Radical spaces, urban struggles* (Wivenhoe, New York, Port Talbot, 2013)pp.21-48

<sup>4</sup> Vecchi, ‘Frammenti di una diversa sfera pubblica’, 10

<sup>5</sup> SqEK, *Squatting in Europe*; Manjikian Mary, *Securitization of property. Squatting in Europe* (London, New York, 2013); van der Steen Bart, Katzeff Ask, van Hoogenhuijzep Leendert, *The city is ours. Squatting and autonomous movement in Europe from the Seventies to the present*, (Oakland, 2014); SqEK, Cattaneo Claudio, Martinez Miguel A.eds, *Squatters’ movement in Europe. Commons and Autonomy as alternatives to capitalism* (London, 2014); Moore Alan, Smart Alan, eds.,*Making Room: Cultural Production in occupied Spaces* (Barcelona, Chicago, Los Angeles, 2015); Andresen Knud, van der Steen Bart, eds., *A European Youth Revolt. European Perspectives on Youth Protest and Social Movements in the 1980s* (Basingstoke, New York, 2015); Fox O'Mahony Lorna, O'Mahony David, eds., Hickey Robert, *Moral Rhetoric and the Criminalisation of Squatting. Vulnerable Demons?* (Abingdon, New York, 2015); Anders Freia, Sedlmaier Alexander, eds.,*Public Goods versus Economic Interests. Global Perspectives on the History of Squatting* (London, New York, 2016); Finchett-Maddock Lucy, *Protest, property and the commons* (London, New York, 2016); Mayer Margit, Thörn Catharina, Thörn Håkan, eds.,*Urban Uprisings. Challenging Neoliberal Urbanism in Europe* (Basingstoke, New York, 2016); Mudu Pierpaolo, Chattopadhyay Sutapa, eds.,*Migration, Squatting and Radical Autonomy* (London, New York, 2016); Vasudevan Alex, *The autonomous city. A history of urban squatting* (London, New

an essential compass for the navigation of the “wider sea of social movements mobilisation”.<sup>6</sup> Social movements’ studies provide a framework for the understanding of the characteristics of squatting and social centres referring to ideology, composition, action repertoires and geographical diversity. Modern urban geography and urban studies have shown a great deal of interest as well. Squatting is here studied as an actor in the transformation of the contemporary metropolis, in the processes of gentrification – and the resistance to it – and in policy-making at local level. These studies focus on links to changes in social composition, relational dynamics, solidarity networks within the urban fabric, local and national welfare policies, modes of political action and authorities' responses.

Historical studies have often overlooked these phenomena and, even in this context of renewed interest, are almost entirely absent, resulting in the absence of a valid and comprehensive analysis of the diachronic evolution of squatting and social centres. It is significant that it is mainly scholars with a social science background who have carried out the limited number of historical investigations. The works of the anarchist social historian Colin Ward stand out as an attempt to re-establish historical and political dignity in our understanding of the ‘hidden side of housing’ and to a six-centuries-long tradition of alternative modes of tenure.<sup>7</sup> Other researchers focused on the antecedents of contemporary squatting. Among them, Charlie Johnstone<sup>8</sup> and Andrew Friend<sup>9</sup> portrayed, in different ways,

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York, 2017); Ofer Inbal, *Claiming the City and Contesting the State* (London, New York, 2017); Albrecht Eduardo Zachary, *Alter-globalization in Southern Europe. Anatomy of a Social Movement* (New York, 2017); SqEK, ed., *Fighting for spaces – Fighting for our lives* (Munster, 2018); Pitti Ilaria, *Youth and unconventional political engagement* (Cham, 2018); Martinez Miguel A., *The urban politics of squatters’ movements* (Basingstoke, New York, 2018); Yip Ngai-Ming, Martinez Miguel A., Sun Xiaoyi, eds., *Contested cities and urban activism* (Singapore, 2019); Polanska Dominika V., *Contentious politics and the welfare state* (London, New York, 2019)

<sup>6</sup> Plows Alexandra Jane, ‘Praxis and Practice: The ‘What, How and Why’ of the UK Environmental Direct Action (EDA) Movement in the 1990’s’, PhD, University of Wales, 2000, p. 30

<sup>7</sup> Among his works: *Housing: An Anarchist Approach* (London, 1976); *Talking Houses: 10 Lectures* (London, 1990); *Cotters and Squatters. The hidden history of housing* (Nottingham, 2005); *Arcadia for all : the legacy of a makeshift landscape* (Nottingham, 2004), written with Dennis Hardy; ‘The hidden history of housing’, 1 September 2004, *History and Policy*, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-hidden-history-of-housing>, accessed 1 February 2019; *Talking Green* (Nottingham, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Johnstone Charles, ‘The tenants’ movement and housing struggles in Glasgow, 1945-1990’, PhD, Glasgow



the first organised and expressly political squatters' movement of the twentieth century, the occupation of army camps in 1946: respectively they stressed the working-class nature of this movement – its use of codes, forms and agencies developed within a long-lasting “campaign of the working class for improved housing provision”<sup>10</sup> – and the contrasting ‘immediatist’ nature of the squatters demands: “that empty property in the private sector should be requisitioned for immediate use by the homeless”.<sup>11</sup> Friend, writing in 1980, delineated the major differences between the 1946 movement and the one that stemmed from the nineteen sixties:

in many ways squatting was nearer the mainstream of working-class life but the unity of squatters was fragile and quickly dissipated under the impact of adverse publicity. [...] A sudden affair [...], that “drew more on a tradition of self-help and on the high levels of expectation fostered by the war, than on [...] the steady working of the system’s contradictions that led to the re-emergence of squatting in the ‘sixties’”.<sup>12</sup>

The global explosion of the New Left in the mid nineteen sixties has since been the cornerstone against which all successive movements were analysed. A plethora of studies delved into the North-American Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the ‘Summer of love’, the ‘swinging sixties’ in the United Kingdom, magazines such as *OZ* and *International Times*, and on the French May 1968, the Prague Spring, the Italian ‘hot autumn’, etc. Even the mainstream media have represented the global 1968 as larger than life, with the result that subsequent protest waves were ignored, or turned into parodies at best.<sup>13</sup> This trend only changed in the new century with the publication of analyses on the specific characters of the new social movements. These were the product of the shift in the ‘structure of feelings’ of

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University, 1992, <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/3487/>, p.77, accessed 1 February 2019; Johnstone Charlie, ‘Housing and class struggles in post-war Glasgow’, in *Class struggle and social welfare*, eds. Michael Lavalette and Gerry Mooney (London, 2000) pp. 139-154

<sup>9</sup> Friend Andrew, ‘The post-war squatters’, in Wates Nick, Wolmar Christian, eds., *Squatting: the real story* (London, 1980) pp. 110-119

<sup>10</sup> Johnstone, ‘The tenants' movement and housing struggles in Glasgow’, p. 167

<sup>11</sup> Friend, ‘The post-war squatters’, p. 110

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119

<sup>13</sup> Katsiaficas George, ‘Preface’, in van der Steen, Katzeff, van Hoogenhuijzep, eds., *The city is ours*, p. IX

modern capitalist societies associated with post-modernism:<sup>14</sup> they had left behind traditional radical and revolutionary ideologies, frameworks and structures, to undergo a “political and social counter-cultural innovation”.<sup>15</sup> New social movements were characterised by a synthesis of very distant sources of inspiration and by the search for ‘immediatist’ approaches to politics: solutions were not to be searched for in the distant future, but within the opportunities offered in the present. Taking from the works of philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard they recognised the polycentric power structure of modern societies and rejected the “authority of private or public bureaucracies to regulate individual and collective conduct”.<sup>16</sup> They had a ‘rhizomatic’ nature, “with multiple connections between the nodal points of networks, composed of these people, ideas, events or spaces, characterised by nonlinear evolution based on ruptures, reconstitutions and alliances, with the opening up of new possibilities for expression, entry and metamorphosis”.<sup>17</sup>

The squatting movement born out of the nineteen sixties in both countries retained these characteristics. Katsiaficas described squatters as the progenitor, and later a wing, of the *Autonomen*:

as radical clusters of activists emerged within the European peace and feminist movements, counter-cultural squatters galvanised a multifaceted formation of independent political parties that eventually became known as the [International] *Autonomen*.<sup>18</sup>

For Katsiaficas, *Autonomen* defined a current of political action and thinking, spreading in an unsynchronised manner throughout different parts of Europe from the mid nineteen seventies on, characterised by a synthesis of “direct-democratic forms of decision making and militant

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<sup>14</sup> Pfeil Fred, ‘Postmodernism as a "Structure of Feeling"’, in Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grosberg (eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (Basingstoke, 1988) pp. 381-404; also in: Harvey David, *The condition of postmodernity* (Oxford, 1991) p. 121

<sup>15</sup> Martinez Miguel A., ‘The squatters’ movement in Spain’, in SqEK, ed., *Squatting in Europe.*, p. 114

<sup>16</sup> Della Porta Antonella, Rucht Dieter, ‘Left-libertarian movements in context: a comparison of Italy and West Germany, 1965-1990’, in eds Craig Jenkins and Bert Klandermans, *The politics of social protest* (London, 1995), p. 231; see also Kitschelt Herbert, ‘New social movements and the decline of party organisation’, in eds Russel Dalton and Manfred Kuechler, *Challenging the political order. New social and political movements in western democracies* (London, New York, 1990), p. 180

<sup>17</sup> Martinez, ‘The squatters’ movement in Spain’, p. 115

<sup>18</sup> Katsiaficas George, *The subversion of politics: European autonomous social movements and the decolonisation of everyday life* (Atlantic Highlands, 1997), p. 18

popular resistance”:<sup>19</sup> a *praxis*, more than a coherent theory, defined as “conscious spontaneity”.<sup>20</sup> It symbolised the eclectic diversification of inspirational sources: the very name, *Autonomen*, is derived from modern Italian Leninist organisations of the multifaceted Italian *Autonomia* movement, but the radicalisation of the Italian context and the practical innovations of the Italian 1977 urban revolts were likely to have played a much more important role than any of the *Autonomia* theories.<sup>21</sup> With its diffusion throughout northern Europe in the early nineteen eighties, the term *Autonomen* tended to encompass multiple meanings, with more accentuated local associations with anarchist, squatter, anti-systemic, etc.<sup>22</sup>

In basic term squatting was – and is – an act of redistributing resources – empty buildings, land, etc. – to dispossessed strata of society – the homeless, people in need – operating outside the law.<sup>23</sup> The development of politicised squatters’ movements in the last decades of the twentieth century depended on material conditions and political opportunities. “A lack of adequate housing, combined with the existence of empty property”<sup>24</sup> had increasingly characterised capitalist urban environments – especially in Europe – since the end of post-war reconstruction. Important migratory waves had increased the population of European capitals and metropolises; the economic growth of the nineteen sixties had lead to an expectation of improved living standards. Nonetheless, slums were still a common feature of urban landscapes, at least until the end of the nineteen sixties. On the outskirts of Rome the largest informal housing settlement in Europe was being built outside of legal frameworks.<sup>25</sup> In 1971,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-174

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 175-222

<sup>23</sup> Corr Anders, *No trespassing. Squatting, rent strikes and land struggles worldwide* (Cambridge, 1999)

<sup>24</sup> Wates Nick, ‘Introducing squatting’, in Wates, Wolmar, eds., *Squatting. The real story*, p. 3

<sup>25</sup> Coppola, A. ‘Esclusione sociale, movimenti urbani e poteri locali. 1945/89. Il caso delle borgate romane’, in Cremaschi Marco, ed., *Tracce di Quartieri. Il legame sociale nella città che cambia* (Milano, 2009)

in the United Kingdom, 6,800,000 families were still living in slums or in accommodation “unfit for human habitation”.<sup>26</sup>

Academic studies on various site specific instances of squatting have often highlighted the characteristics of self-help and self-management,<sup>27</sup> their ‘small-is-beautiful’ vision in opposition to the functionalistic practice of city-planning,<sup>28</sup> or their countercultural approach in expressing and supporting alternative lifestyles.<sup>29</sup> George McKay, in his works about British countercultures, placed the squatting movement within the context of resistance and DiY cultures,<sup>30</sup> interpreting it as “a dominant form of reclamation of space by alternative culture”.<sup>31</sup>

Each of these interpretations is geographically and temporally specific. Squatting, as a practice, has been used by a great variety of actors. Rationales have differed greatly, as well as targets and geographical and political contexts.

Approaching the differences within European squatting movements, Hans Prujit proposed five possible configurations, as “internally consistent combinations of features that correspond[ed] logically to specific environmental characteristics”.<sup>32</sup> Prujit took from the inclusion of squatting among the ‘new social movements’, characterising it through an informal, unstable and net-shaped structure, highly flexible regarding participation and commitments and with a wide array of political and cultural goals. The five configurations he proposed encompassed both squatting for housing – deprivation-based squatting<sup>33</sup> and squatting as an alternative

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<sup>26</sup> Bailey Ron, *The squatters* (London, 1973), pp. 19-29

<sup>27</sup> Katz Steven, Mayer Margit, ‘Gimme shelter: self-help housing struggles within and against the state in New York City and West Berlin’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 9, 1 (1985), p. 17

<sup>28</sup> Mamadouh Virginie, cited in Prujit, ‘Squatting in Europe’, p. 18

<sup>29</sup> McKay George, *DiY culture. Party & Protest in Nineties Britain* (London, New York, 1998); McKay George, *Senseless acts of beauty* (London, New York, 1996)

<sup>30</sup> McKay, *DiY culture*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34

<sup>32</sup> Prujit Hans, ‘The logic of urban squatting’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37.1 (2013) pp. 19-45

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.22-25



housing strategy<sup>34</sup> – and the occupation of spaces for social, cultural and political purposes – entrepreneurial squatting,<sup>35</sup> conservational squatting<sup>36</sup> and political squatting.<sup>37</sup>

Within these configurations, social centres appeared to be an anomalous element. They fitted the description of entrepreneurial squatting – which offered “opportunities for setting up almost any kind of establishment without the need for large resources or the risk of getting bogged down in bureaucracy”,<sup>38</sup> but their activity was also underpinned by an overtly anti-systemic ethos, falling into the category of political squatting. The differences between each social centre and between the strands which can be identified – depending on historical period, ideology, region and country – were copious, but the proposal of an alternative “social use of territory”<sup>39</sup> underlies each of these experiences. Born in the industrial cities of northern Italy at the end of the nineteen seventies, social centres “seemed to constitute a response to the restructuring processes which destroyed the traditional productive *loci* where social solidarity was built and collective political projects were elaborated”.<sup>40</sup> By 1978, Marxist observers had already recognised their role in reacting to such a “proliferation of class struggle locations from the *topos* of productive instance” to those of social and territorial institutions “in which capitalism encompasses all the fragments of its global control system”.<sup>41</sup>

Social centres can be situated within a century-long tradition of political community centre activism in Europe, dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, with the anarchist *Athenaeums* in Spain the anarchist clubs in London and the People’s Houses established in

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp.25-29

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp.29-32

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. pp. 32-36

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-39

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 19

<sup>39</sup> Vecchi, ‘Frammenti di una diversa sfera pubblica’, 10

<sup>40</sup> Ruggero Vincenzo, ‘New Social Movements and the ‘Centri Sociali’ in Milan’, *The sociological review*, 42, 2 (2000), p. 176

<sup>41</sup> Cecchi Raffaello, Pozzo Giò, Seassaro Alberto, Simonelli Giuliano, Sorlini Claudia, eds., *Centri sociali autogestiti e circoli giovanili. Un’indagine sulle strutture associative di base a Milano* (Milano, 1978), p.7

many European countries within their respective working class movements.<sup>42</sup> They can also be placed within a wider political geography of contemporaneous autonomous political spaces, which include protest camps, land occupations, blockades, radical communities, etc. “However, unlike these ‘Temporary Autonomous Zones’,<sup>43</sup> social centres strive to achieve a greater degree of longevity in their locations.”<sup>44</sup>

In doing so, social centres operated beyond the law, illustrating “participatory modes of action designed to bring about change through a deliberate use of conflict”<sup>45</sup> and providing “alternative options to the bureaucratic organisation of so many aspects of social and political life”.<sup>46</sup>

A comprehensive description of Italian social centres was given by Gianni Piazza and Donatella Della Porta:

[they are] autonomous spaces set-up by left-wing radical activists (mainly students and unemployed youth), who occupy and/or self-manage unused buildings in the cities (based upon a conception of free spaces), where they organise political campaigns, social and counter-cultural activities; territorially rooted, they contest the moderation and bureaucratisation of environmental associations and political parties, proposing radical forms of action and participatory organisational models.<sup>47</sup>

These were the common traits. As for dimensions, compositions, cultural and political backgrounds, objectives and action repertoires, Italian social centres have always been extremely heterogeneous.

Moving North across France and the English Channel, definitions of social centres are fewer in number and slightly different in contents, starting from the name: “The idea of an

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<sup>42</sup> Crossan John, ‘Social centres, anarchism and the struggle for Glasgow’s commons’, PhD, University of Glasgow, 2015; Moses Jonathan, ‘Textures of politics: London’s anarchist clubs, 1 December 2016, *The RIBA Journal*: <https://www.ribaj.com/intelligence/the-texture-of-politics-london-s-anarchists-clubs-1882-1914>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>43</sup> Bey Hakim, *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone. Ontological anarchy, poetic terrorism* (New York, 1991)

<sup>44</sup> Crossan John, ‘Social centres, anarchism and the struggle for Glasgow’s commons’, p. 6-7

<sup>45</sup> Mudu Pierpaolo, ‘Resisting and challenging Neoliberalism: the development of Italian social centers’, *Antipode*, 36.5 (2004) p. 922

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 917

<sup>47</sup> Della Porta Donatella, Piazza Gianni, *Le ragioni del No. Le campagne contro la TAV in Val di Susa e il ponte sullo Stretto* (Milano, 2008), p. 43

autonomous space or social centre is difficult to pin down and the two labels are often used inter-changeably. The word autonomous is about the demand for self-management”.<sup>48</sup>

Researchers described the British social centres as infused of a mix of recent anarchist, anti-authoritarian and anti-global ideas,<sup>49</sup> as “semi-permanent, self-governing, not-for-profit place-bounded political projects which promote grass-roots activism, politics and culture and which largely rely on volunteer labour”.<sup>50</sup> Their role as local nodes for activist networks have been recalled in a number of studies:<sup>51</sup> centres were “moments of subversion [...] purposefully established as organising centres for activists and community groups [...], which “both facilitate[d] the proliferation of activist networks and provide[d] a physically tangible representation of existing networks”.<sup>52</sup>

Against this theoretical background, I argue – with both Lacey and Bascetta – that the range and size of activities in these spaces varied so much as to make any too rigid definition banal and somehow wrong.<sup>53</sup> I suggest that, whether they were called *centri sociali*, social centres, autonomous or radical spaces, infoshops, squats, etc.; whether they were an occupied, rented, or owned; and beyond their self-identification with informal networks; a series of common features can be identified: a radical left-wing identity; their location in unused urban areas and buildings; public support for squatting as a viable and legitimate tool for political action; the prioritisation of ‘collective uses’ of the space; modes of organisation around the principles of direct democracy, horizontality, solidarity and self-management and subsequent decisional processes; DiY ethics shared by the activists; the aim to act outside of the control system of

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Introduction’, in VA, *What’s this place: stories from radical social centres in the UK & Ireland* [pamphlet] (2007) pp. 2-3 : 56AI

<sup>49</sup> Chatterton Paul, ‘So what does it mean to be Anti-capitalist? Conversations with activists from urban social centres’, *Urban studies*, 47 (2010), pp. 1204-1207

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 1205

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.; Lacey Anita, ‘Networked communities, social centres and activists’ spaces in contemporary Britain’, *Journal of contemporary history*, 42.1 (2007) pp. 286-301; Crossan John, ‘Social centres, anarchism and the struggle for Glasgow’s commons’

<sup>52</sup> Lacey, ‘Networked communities’, pp. 292-293

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.; Bascetta Marco, ‘La gabbia delle due società’, in Adinolfi et al., *Comunità virtuali*, p. 15

state and market laws; the creation of a community of sympathisers; the provision of services for this community; the intertwined coexistence of political radicalism and a countercultural ethos; participation in multiple networks of local and global activism.

This set of features will provide the backbone of my research. The role played by each of them varied over time and from centre to centre, highlighting different visions and aims. Different collective identities and groupings have emerged within both the Italian and the British social centre scene, according to the preponderance of some features over others. The identity of single centres was often heterogeneous, and produced by the ideological allegiances of their activists. The reclamation of unused buildings was often undertaken through squatting, but also through legal campaigns and pressure on local authorities, or through private legal or *quasi*-legal agreements with property owners. The use of the space was social and public, but the range of activities and the degree of openness towards the outside varied. Housing projects (often communal) have coexisted within centres, especially in England, but they were never prioritised over the public-spirited ethos of centres' activities. Relevant communities could be territorial or ideological, or again related to specific sets of activities and services offered.

Principles and identities represented horizons to aim for, but they were also interpreted in different (and diverging) ways. The sheer number of approaches to self-management, a pivotal concept for all centres, was paradigmatic of such variety:

Those who see in it an eschatological hypothesis of human liberation are side by side with those who consider it a better managerial technique for company management or with those who slyly think to exploit it for electoral purposes.<sup>54</sup>

The term self-management has been debated at length: while anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon considered it “the revolutionary fact of the 1848 revolts”,<sup>55</sup> another anarchist,

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<sup>54</sup> Massari Roberto, *Le teorie dell'autogestione* (Milano, 1974), p. 11

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Mudu, ‘At the intersection between anarchists and autonomists: Autogestione and Centri Sociali’,

Errico Malatesta, stated that it “offers to oppressed people vain hopes of emancipation without the need of a revolution”.<sup>56</sup> It drew from both early countercultural communes and the working class ‘councilist’ movement,<sup>57</sup> as it represented the “social appropriation of the means of power in society, without limiting itself to the appropriation of the means of production”.<sup>58</sup> In the nineteen sixties and the nineteen seventies it represented a key term for French and – to a lesser extent – Italian left-libertarianism: *autogestione* (Italian for self-management) encompassed an entire political sensibility that refused both social democracy and authoritarian socialism. Within the context of Italian social centres it acquired new meanings, with three different dimensions: a decision-making process to expand participation on a horizontal and inclusive basis, a ‘prefigurative’<sup>59</sup> approach, referencing a new system of social relations, and a hidden process of class struggle.<sup>60</sup>

Self-management involves self-organisation, the ability to be with others in the repudiation of racism, sexism, social climbing, hierarchy and all forms of oppression to create organisations that are the basic germ of a new freer and fairer society.<sup>61</sup>

This prefigurative approach acted as a compass for action: social centres tended to enact self-management, rather than theorising upon it. Its enactment was centred on: collective management, inclusion, refusal of leadership and of power delegation, and independence from external control.

In the English language the term self-management rarely assumed such epistemological significance. In the action-driven experience of the cultures of resistance of the nineteen seventies and the nineteen eighties, *DiY ethics* acquired a very similar meaning.<sup>62</sup> DiY

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*Acme*, 11.3 (2012), p. 423

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Massari, *Le teorie dell'autogestione*, p. 10

<sup>58</sup> Rosanvallon Pierre, *L'età dell'autogestione* (Venezia, 1978), p. 45

<sup>59</sup> Crossan recognises prefiguration as one of the key principles of anarchism, and thus, of the social centre movement: Crossan, ‘Social centres, anarchism and the struggle for Glasgow’s commons’, pp. 9-26

<sup>60</sup> Mudu, ‘At the intersection between anarchists and autonomists’, p. 424-427

<sup>61</sup> Collettivo del Labirinto, ‘Benevento e gli spazi negati’, *Umanità Nova*, 29 May 1994, p. 6

<sup>62</sup> The overlapping between the Italian *autogestione* and the English *DiY ethics* results even more neat considering that the terms are used as respective translations in a number of primary sources. Furthermore, an

encompassed a cultural and political ethos that had its roots in the “*anarchist cultural policy*, perfectly put into effect in the *semi-organised* chaos and in the expressive heat of free festivals”<sup>63</sup> of the nineteen seventies. It was put into practice by the anarchist punk bands and collectives of the late nineteen seventies and early nineteen eighties, acquiring new radical and political nuances, which emphasised: the removal of barriers between performers and audience – i.e. between active and passive participation; the pivotal role of direct action; the importance of having control over the production of cultural and informative material; the self-sufficiency of the movement from market and state, and individual responsibility as a means to effect collective change.<sup>64</sup>

DiY ethics and praxis reflected the ‘prefigurative’ dimension of *autogestione*, directing the actions of English social centres’ activists. They represented the best common denominator between apparently distant phenomena such as the hippy, punk and free party countercultures,<sup>65</sup> and contaminated several movements in the following decades: new age travellers, squatters, eco-activists, queer activists, ravers, hackers and, indeed social centres.<sup>66</sup>

## **2. Research aims**

This thesis shines a light on the origins and the evolution of social centres within two contemporary European societies, Italy and England from the nineteen eighties to the end of the twentieth century. The development of a neo-liberal agenda set the general context. Due to its popularity, the term neo-liberalism has become at the same time over-reaching and

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alternative Italian translation for *DiY ethics* was not found in primary sources.

<sup>63</sup> Alunni Francesco, *Do it yourself. Un’indagine su un caso di controcultura underground in Italia* (Albissola Marina, 2005)

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> McKay, *Senseless acts of beauty*; Cross Rich, ‘The hippies now wear black: Crass and anarcho-punk, 1977-1984’, *Socialist History*, 26 (2004), pp. 25-44

<sup>66</sup> McKay, *DiY culture*

underspecified,<sup>67</sup> a “constant master category that can be used both to understand and to explain all manner of political programs across a wide variety of settings”.<sup>68</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, neo-liberalism will be defined, with Ha-Joon Chang, as “the dominant economic doctrine of the last quarter [of the twentieth] century”,<sup>69</sup> which advocates a tightly delimited role for the state in regulating economic activity. Such delimitation was produced through steady changes in the modes of production, through the forceful end of a long-lasting season of political experimentation (that assumed very different expressions and tones in the two countries), and through the progressive abandonment of welfare-state policies, which had characterised western European countries since the end of World War II. Connected to such epochal transformations, alternative discourses and rhetoric gained popularity: the decline of politics in favour of the economics, the end of history and ideologies<sup>70</sup>, the contraposition between individual freedom and society-based forms of association, and the abandonment of past singular, monolithic identities towards the post-modern, liquid society, composed by multiple, modular and non-exclusive identities<sup>71</sup>. While neo-liberalism and post-modernism cannot be conflated into a univocal societal trend, their evolution has been described by Harvey as compatible and intertwined<sup>72</sup>. This metamorphosis in society is reflected in the transformation of urban spaces, their organisation and governance. During the decades in consideration, industrial cities lost their importance in favour of those centres where the tertiary sector grew stronger and most European metropolises went through important

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<sup>67</sup> Brenner Neil, Peck Jamie, Theodore Nik, ‘Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways’, *Global Networks*, 10, 2 (2010) p. 183; for an analysis of the usage of the category neo-liberalism in literature, see: Venugopal Rajesh, ‘Neoliberalism as concept’, *Economy and Society*, 44, 2 (2015) pp. 165-187

<sup>68</sup> Rose Nikolas, O’Malley Pat, Valverde Mariana, ‘Governmentality’, *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 2 (2006) p. 97

<sup>69</sup> Chang Ha-Joon, ‘Rethinking Development Economics: an Introduction’, in Chang Ha-Joon (ed.), *Rethinking Development Economics* (London, 2003) p. 1

<sup>70</sup> Fukuyama Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992)

<sup>71</sup> Bauman Zygmunt, *Postmodernity and its discontent* (Cambridge, 1997); Bauman Zygmunt, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, 2000)

<sup>72</sup> Harvey David, *A brief history of neoliberalism* (Oxford, 2005) p. 42. See also: Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity*



processes of gentrification and urban renewal that reshaped their physical and social geography.

Assuming different roles across the continent, squats and social centres embodied these changes and at the same time they were also an expression of the resistance to neo-liberal governance in Europe. This particular – and somehow ambiguous – role allowed for the centres to develop an understanding of the potential of the innovations brought forward by neoliberal governances. Outcomes have been unequal and multifaceted, depending on geographical and temporal factors, on the particular issues faced and on the ability to create networks and raise support, but I argue that social centres have been essential in maintaining a radical attitude towards politics, culture and society, creating bigger or smaller cracks in the fabric of the capitalist governance of urban space.

This attitude was translated into practice in different ways. Centres provided a number of paths of politicisation for the disaffected youth. They redefined community-based services through a bottom-up approach. They also experimented with innovative forms of political and cultural actions, which produced local and global political campaigns, fostered the diffusion of oppositional cultures, and created safe environments in which alternative lifestyles could be explored and political networks could grow.

The diachronic approach of the research will allow for the ‘journey through time’ of English and Italian social centres to be enlightened. The dialogue between the transformation of European societies and the evolution of the social centres’ scenes will be situated at the very core of this work and will be key to understanding the modalities of both political and cultural activism carried out by the centres. Culture and politics represent two intertwined aspects of the activity and the identity of both Italian and English social centres. Instead of focusing exclusively on one of the two aspects, this work will stress the pivotal role played by both and

by the constant tension between them. Such tension prompted passionate debates and internal conflicts, but it also fostered important modifications of the very identity of the centres. The comparison of two national expressions of the phenomenon during a set time period, and of two local scenes within each country, will allow for influences and exchanges to be brought to the fore. Where the differences between the two national scenes are striking in terms of the diffusion and success of the ‘social centre’ model, common trends and reciprocal inspirations will be highlighted, considering cultural phenomena, modalities of mobilisation and political campaigns. Singularities will be looked at, in search of those local context-specific determining factors, which were able to impress particular transformations within each local scene. Global stimuli affected the two countries – and each scene – in different ways, fostering diversified responses and reactions, which drew upon different traditions of political and cultural activism, specific local grouping models, and the responses of both surrounding territories and local authorities. This comparative approach is driven by a wish to broaden the scale of the research. A better understanding of the correlations between the two national scenes, and between each one and its national context, could trigger new research perspectives on the circulation and propagation mechanisms within the recent anti-capitalist movements.

### **3. Reading the map: methodological notes**

Throughout the research, a number of methodological concerns were triggered by particular situations, encounters, sources, etc. These are related to the wider discourse around the relationship between academic research and activism, and to the modalities of access and interpretation of the sources used for this work.

### 3.1 Activism and the academy

For both the Italian and the English scenes, an important number of secondary sources situate themselves on the border between the worlds of academia and activism, and some are explicitly tasked with the search for a liminal space, which might be able to conjugate the two approaches. As a matter of fact, the current trend in some academic publishing houses has been to recognise this need for what Paul Routledge defined as ‘a third space’: a “space between and within activism and academia – i.e., a space that enables the disruption of both sites in both directions [...] and in doing so create something else, something other than *academia* or *activism*”.<sup>73</sup>

The literature on this topic has grown greatly since the nineteen nineties<sup>74</sup> and the number of publications that are a product of this third space have also increased: books and articles published by activists/researchers, collectives, collaborations between the two worlds, etc.<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, as my research progressed, I abandoned the initial idea of combining archival work and an ethnographic approach, in order to focus on radical and self-managed archives. These archives, often tightly linked to the social centres’ scenes, are another example of this third space, where “archiving in itself becomes a radical act”.<sup>76</sup>

The relationships between the academy and activism have often been characterised by mutual mistrust. Writing in 1998, George McKay stated: “Coming from an older generation and,

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<sup>73</sup>Routledge Paul, ‘The third space as critical engagement’, *Antipode*, 28,4 (1996), p. 403

<sup>74</sup>This is not true for anthropologists. Within this discipline the attention towards this relationship dates back to the early nineteen sixties

<sup>75</sup> SqEK, Squatting in Europe Collective is one of many expressions of this search: born as a transnational and multi-disciplinary research group, it soon started to “challenge the traditional dichotomy between researchers and their subjects/objects of knowledge”: SqEK, ‘Squatting Europe Research Agenda v. 1.0’, SqEk, 3 January 2010: <https://sqek.squat.net/eng-squatting-europe-research-agenda-v-1-0/>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>76</sup>Ghani Mariam, ‘What we left unfinished/The radical archive’, *Kamel Lazaar Foundation*, retrieved via Wayback Machine, version 7 November 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161107041307/http://www.kamellazaarfoundation.org:80/initiatives/4/23>, accessed 1 February 2019

worse, being seen as an ex-activist, I could only do wrong as I embarked on academic research into DiY culture”.<sup>77</sup>

‘I could only do wrong’ later became the effective title of a paper on the dichotomy between academy and activism.<sup>78</sup> This literature delved into the contrast,<sup>79</sup> as much as into the convergence and overlapping of the two identities of academic researcher and political activist,<sup>80</sup> and into the intrinsic power relationships existing within both production and diffusion of knowledge.

The academy has for centuries been a major player in the perpetuation of the status quo. It is the holder of ‘accepted knowledge’ and it represents itself as the most qualified site for the social reproduction of elite groups. Critical researchers within and without of universities have tackled this monopoly of knowledge for decades: recognising the politicised character of knowledge situated inside the academy, geographers, anthropologists and other social scientists have started to export academic insights and practices “beyond the academy and [to make] them available in shareable, doable ways”<sup>81</sup> in order to undermine the closed circuit of reproduction of academic power and to show the value of “alternative ways of gaining understanding”.<sup>82</sup> Contributions on the relevance of this new approach to knowledge-production underline new problems and different solutions. The modus operandi and mindset of scholars became the subject of researches: Bourdieu in particular criticised scholars’ habit of operating as if their categories and constructions “were the main determinants, the actual

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<sup>77</sup> McKay George, ‘Really revolting party outfits’ *The Times Higher Education*, 13 March 1998, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/really-revolting-party-outfits/106376.article>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>78</sup> Halfacree Keith, ‘I could only do wrong. Academic research and DiY culture’, in Fuller Duncan, Kitchin Rob, eds., *Radical Theory/Critical Praxis: Making a difference beyond the academy* (Vernon and Victoria, 2004), pp. 68-78

<sup>79</sup> Starechesky Amy, ‘Squatting History: The Power of Oral History as a History-Making Practice’, *The Oral History Review*, 41, 2 (2014), pp. 187-216

<sup>80</sup> SqEK, *Squatting in Europe*

<sup>81</sup> Fuller, Kitchin, ‘Radical Theory/Critical Praxis’, p. 7

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

cause of practices”.<sup>83</sup> Taking from the feminist motto ‘the personal is political’, other researchers committed “to deconstruct[ing] the barrier between the academy and the lives of the people it professes to represent, so that scholarly work interprets and effects social change”,<sup>84</sup> to reduce the large chasm still present between the producers of radical theories and the activists ‘out there’.<sup>85</sup>

Routledge – in proposing his third space – underlined the importance of self-perception and narrative in the construction of identity as an academic or an activist. The third space becomes a viable operative option only when both identities are recognised as discursively produced,<sup>86</sup> and not as two homogeneous positions on opposite sides of an ‘either/or’ barricade.<sup>87</sup> Just as the ‘activist’ label is applied by and to subjects with different understandings of its meaning, different connotations and nuances, and can become a tool for either personal and social liberation or for the perpetuation of “society’s dominant lines of oppression”,<sup>88</sup> also academy can be seen as “a location of myriad and differentiated spaces and networks”.<sup>89</sup> Only then can this third space become a *critical engagement* and recognise that:

the voices of those involved in struggles are distinct from the social science literature that seeks to study and explain such struggles. One of the purposes of critical engagement is to open up legitimate spaces for practical actions creating networks of ideas, strategies, communications and alliance. [...] Characterised by its diversity, tactics and strategies, and radically oppositional stance [...], [it] effects a strategic fluidity in the practice of theory, enacting a hybrid moment where the separations between occupational and political caricatures are transgressed, effecting a seizure of presence.<sup>90</sup>

A similar position can be found in the works of the *Colectivo Situaciones*,<sup>91</sup> a collective of researcher-militants active in Buenos Aires, and in those of the Italian promoters of the

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<sup>83</sup>Bourdieu Pierre, ‘The scholastic point of view’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 5, 4 (1990) p. 384

<sup>84</sup>Kobayashi Audrey, ‘Coloring the Field: Gender, “Race”, and the Politics of Fieldwork’, *The professional geographer*, 46, 1 (1994), p. 73

<sup>85</sup>Routledge, ‘The third space as critical engagement’, pp. 399-401

<sup>86</sup>Maxey Ian, ‘Beyond Boundaries? Activism, Academia, Reflexivity and Research’, *Area*, 31.3 (1999) p. 200

<sup>87</sup>Halfacree, ‘I could only do wrong’ p. 71-72; Maxey, ‘Beyond Boundaries?’, pp. 199-208

<sup>88</sup>Maxey, ‘Beyond boundaries’, p. 200

<sup>89</sup>Routledge, ‘The third space as critical engagement’, p. 402

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 407

<sup>91</sup>Colectivo Situaciones, ‘Something more on the researcher militancy: Footnotes on procedures and (in)decisions’, in Shukatits Stevphen, Graeber David, eds., *Constituent imagination*, (Oakland, Edinburgh, 2007),

*conricerca* methodology. Situating themselves outside of the academy, their starting points were very different, but they both posited a redefinition of the equation ‘academy vs. activism’. *Colectivo Situaciones* especially, sought for a middle ground between the two identities:

Militant research works neither from its own set of knowledge about the world nor from how things ought to be. [...] Thus, the researcher-militant is as far from institutional procedures as from ideological certainties; and is distinct from both the academic researcher and the political militant. [...] Far from disavowing or negating university research, it is a question of encouraging another relationship with popular knowledge.<sup>92</sup>

However, for the promoters of *conricerca* there was no middle ground – or third space – between academy and activism, but an urgency to renovate radical politics through the scientific –but nonetheless partisan – production of knowledge. Roughly translated as ‘research-with’ or ‘co-researching’, *conricerca* had been developed since the nineteen sixties as a method and a category which implies a high level of cooperation between researchers and researched, and could be entirely understood “only as a tool for fostering a new and different form of political action”:<sup>93</sup> “not only *conricerca* poses knowledge as the inspiration of action, [...] but as action’s foundations. Knowledge [...] must determine action; in the same manner that the necessity of action is explicitly brought about by certain ways of knowing and not others”.<sup>94</sup>

It became one of the pillars of the typical militant-intellectual figure of the *operaismo* (workerism) and the *Autonomia* Italian Marxist movements, affecting a consistent part of activist-produced knowledge on social movements, and a number of sources used in this work. The Milanese scene especially, with the activities and the works of Primo

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pp. 73-93; Colectivo Situaciones, ‘On the researcher-militant’, in Cotz Mark, Day Richard, de Peuter Greg, eds., *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical experiments against neoliberal globalization* (Toronto, 2007) pp.186-200; Colectivo Situaciones (eds.), *Contrapoder, una introducción, ediciones de mano en mano* (Buenos Aires, 2001); also, the series of notebooks under the title *Cuadernos de situaciones*, (Buenos Aires, 2000-2002): <http://www.nodo50.org/colectivosituaciones/>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>92</sup>Colectivo Situaciones, ‘On the researcher-militant’, pp.187-188

<sup>93</sup>Borio Guido, Pozzi Francesca, Roggero Gigi, ‘Conricerca as Political Action’, in Cotz, Day, de Peuter, eds., *Utopian Pedagogy*, p. 164

<sup>94</sup>Pizzorno Alessandro, ‘*Abbandonare la sociologia-letteratura per una sociologia-scienza*’, *Opinione*, 1 (1956), p. 25-26

Moroni,<sup>95</sup> Consorzio Aaster,<sup>96</sup> the Primo Moroni Archive (APM) and to a lesser extent countercultural magazines such as *Decoder*,<sup>97</sup> owed a great deal to this approach, fostering the development of specific forms of cultural activism and the activation of social centres' activists in the definition of the very methodology directing the analyses on social centres.

The wider discourse around the relationship between activism and the academy guided my selection of sources, their positioning and their interpretation, also revealing unexpected similarities between the two scenes in their modalities of analysis and their decoding of contemporaneous events and phenomena.

### 3.2 Access to primary sources: Radical archives

During my fieldwork I visited a great variety of places and archives. Among the totality, a particular typology of archives has been pivotal to the data collection. These can be grouped

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<sup>95</sup>Primo Moroni was a pivotal figure for Milanese political and cultural activism between the nineteen seventies and his death in 1998. His bookshop, initially called *Calusca* and then renamed *Calusca City Lights* as a homage to the beatnik poet-bookseller-publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti, has changed locations many times since it first opened in 1972, but has always been an important node of Milanese activists' networks. Since 1992 the bookshop has been housed within the building occupied by the *Cox18* social centre. Moroni was an atypical figure of *cultural agitator*, who influenced a generation of activists, fostering the encounter between Milanese anarchist punks and sectors of the *Autonomia*, promoting magazines and debates which proved to be seminal for the social centres' scene. After his death, the large patrimony of documents he had accumulated became the core of the archive, officially formed in 2002 as a cultural association. Among his works: Moroni Primo, Bermani Cesare, ed., 'Da «Don Lisander» alla «Calusca». Autobiografia di Primo Moroni', *Primo Maggio*, 18 (1982-1983) pp. 27-37; Moroni Primo, Farina Daniele, Tripodi Pino, eds., *Centri Sociali: che impresa!* (Roma, 1995); Moroni Primo, Balestrini Nanni, *L'Orda d'oro: 1968-1977. La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale*, (Milano, 1997); Moroni Primo, Martin John N., *La luna sotto casa*, (Milano, 2007)

<sup>96</sup> Consorzio Aaster, Centro sociale Cox 18, Centro sociale Leoncavallo, Moroni Primo, *Centri sociali. Geografie del desiderio. Dati, statistiche, progetti, mappe, divenire* (Milano, 1996); Consorzio Aaster, 'Lo spazio sociale metropolitano tra rischio del ghetto e progettista imprenditore', in Moroni, Farina, Tripodi, eds., *Centri Sociali: che impresa!*

<sup>97</sup> *Decoder* was a Milan based cyberpunk magazine which ran from 1987 to 1998. It explicitly aimed to recompose the different tendencies of the Italian and international underground: Anonymous, 'Untitled', *Decoder*, 2 (1988) p. 146



under the labels of radical archives or informal archives, but as I argue, given the variety, these categories have only a descriptive and conventional purpose.

By framing archiving as a radical practice, we wish to consider: archives of radical politics and practices; archives that are radical or experimental in form or function; moments or contexts where archiving in itself becomes a radical act; and how archives can be active in the present, as well as documents of the past or scripts for the future.<sup>98</sup>

This definition contains all the elements which characterise and link the radical archives I visited: the urge to save and spread the knowledge and the memories of anti-systemic political and social struggles; the preservation of the legacy of radical politics and social movements; the awareness of the eminently political nature of the records and of “the power structures that dictate which groups’ records are collected and preserved”;<sup>99</sup> the perceived necessity of shared political sensibilities and affiliations between archives, archivists and archive users; the centrality given to the means of archiving and of sustaining the archives; the positioning of archival work inside a wider political action; the idea that no institution could do the same work without changing the nature of the archived material.

Throughout my fieldwork I visited seven spaces that correspond to this description: in England, the London based 56a infoshop's archive (56AI) and the infoshop and library of the Kebele Community Co-Op (KCCI) in Bristol; in Italy the *Archivio Primo Moroni* (APM) and the *Archivio Proletario Internazionale* (API) in Milan, the *Biblioteca-archivio Carla & Zubba* (BACZ) in the social centre *Forte Prenestino*, the *Biblioteca anarchica l'Idea* (BAI) and the *Centro di documentazione Anarchica/Libreria Anomalia* (CDA), in Rome.

The term ‘Radical Archives’ is taken from the British context, where the adjective ‘radical’ is more linked to autonomous movements and, indeed, to the political thought of the radical Left. It is used both internally and externally, as a self-definition as much as an academic

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<sup>98</sup>Ghani, ‘What we left unfinished/The radical archive’

<sup>99</sup>Springer Kimberly, ‘Radical archives and the new cycles of contention’, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 31 October 2015: <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/radical-archives-and-the-new-cycles-of-contention/>, accessed 1 February 2019

label. However, in Italian political language it has acquired different meanings: on one hand, as in English, it is used to refer to the extreme left of the political spectrum, in an unspecific way and mostly in journalistic accounts, on the other, it is rarely used by social movements or autonomous groups to describe themselves or their own actions, as it is connected to a long lasting political strand of civil rights' struggles (i.e. the *Partito Radicale Italiano*, Radical Italian Party). In Italy archives and libraries of this nature refer to themselves using different terms, connected to distinguishing practices (self-managed, militant, activist, 'from below', documentation centre), ideologies (anarchist, libertarian, communist, autonomous, proletarian, internationalist) or to the material archived (working-class movement, counterculture, 1968). It is thus possible for archives with very different names to implement similar choices regarding material, archival policies, or access to the material, as well as for archives with very similar names not to have anything in common.

In the English-speaking world, the academic community, mostly in the US, has just started to notice this particular phenomenon,<sup>100</sup> and recent works are informed by a search for identity: what makes an archive a 'radical archive'? The *Archive Journal* addressed such a question directly in 2015, from the very first lines of their call for papers for a monographic issue on radical archives:

*Radical archives* and *radical archiving* are concepts that continue to gain currency among archivists, artists and cultural theorists alike, but to date, discussions of *radical archives* and *radical archiving* often appear to rest on an assumed rather than articulated understanding of what these concepts mean.<sup>101</sup>

Radicalism is interpreted as a feature of the chosen material, or the function assigned to that choice; radical can be the creation – the capturing – of the content, the challenge of accepted norms in the field, the policies of access and the use of open licences and interfaces. Again,

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<sup>100</sup> Ghani Mariam, Chitra Ghanesh (eds), *Radical archives* [conference], Asian/Pacific/American Institute and NYU Cantor Film Center, New York University, 11-12 April 2014, <http://www.radicalarchives.net/ra/>, accessed 1 February 2019; *Archive Journal*, <http://www.archivejournal.net/> accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>101</sup> Anonymous, 'Call for participation', *Archive Journal*, retrieved via Wayback Machine, version 8 April 2015: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150408074257/http://www.archivejournal.net:80/submit/>, accessed 1 February 2019

radicalism can be seen in the relationship to activism, or archival practices can be radical without involving the social-justice focus of activism.<sup>102</sup>

In the practical experience of my fieldwork, radical archives frequently overlap with other entities: libraries, bookshops, infoshops, and social centres. Some of them exist within squatted social centres, where they can be the expression of the collective will of the centres' activists, of one of the groups existing within the centres, or of an external group, which decided to share the space with the centres.<sup>103</sup> Some are located in legally rented spaces: the API is hosted by the Milanese branch of the Italian anarchist federation and the CDA is in the basement of the *Anomalia* bookshop in Rome.

The aims of radical archives are essentially to preserve the difficult heritage of oppositional and revolutionary movements, to prevent a “loss of know-how, voices and experiences [and] to translate them into our own present”,<sup>104</sup> to “safeguard the political autonomy of those who produced the material, and of the people that are now working on it”<sup>105</sup> and to *create connections* between independent researchers and activists. Key features of all these spaces are: the political affinity with the archived material; the archival work as a continuation of political activity; the priority given to the continuous exchange between past and present; the importance accorded to the means and methods of the archival practices.

Among these means and methods, a particular attention is given to funding modalities and mechanisms. Italian archives especially, explicitly state their refusal of public funding in order

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<sup>102</sup> Devor Aaron, Evans Meredith R., Gore Emily, Matienzo Mark A., Novak Joy R., Wilson Lara, ‘Radical Archives roundtable. 1: What does it mean for an archive to be, or to be made, ‘radical’?’, *Archive journal*, November 2015: <http://www.archivejournal.net/roundtable/radical-archives-question-1/>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>103</sup> Such differences informed experience in both London, Bristol, Milan and Rome: the BAI in Rome and the 56AI in London are social centres *and* archives; the BACZ in Rome and the KCCI in Bristol are projects within social centres which encompasses many other activities; the APM in Milan is a separate project, which found its “natural home” in the squatted building which also host CS Cox 18. The charter of the Archivio Primo Moroni association is published in: Il gruppo di lavoro dell’archivio, ‘Presentazione’, *Archivio Primo Moroni*, 18 May 2012: <https://www.inventati.org/apm/index.php?step=presentazione>, Accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>104</sup> ‘Storia’, *Libreria Anomalia. Centro di documentazione anarchica*: <http://www.libreriaanomalia.org/storia/>, Accessed 1 April 2019.

<sup>105</sup> Il gruppo di lavoro dell’archivio, ‘Presentazione’, *Archivio Primo Moroni*

to preserve their self-managed nature. Self-funding, donations and personal commitment are the forms of support that allow such spaces to carry on their activities, resulting in a scarcity of economic means and a considerable increase in the time needed for maintenance and everyday activities.<sup>106</sup>

A number of questions arose from my visits to these archives. Trying to orientate myself within the theoretical framework of the activist-researcher, a constant negotiation characterised my fieldwork. Radical archives are not intended to be primarily a resource for academic researchers. They are not the usual users, nor are they the preferred ones. Researchers need to meet a set of criteria different from the academic affiliation needed in most institutional archives. Such criteria can be defined as relational capital, affinity and commitment. They are negotiated and interpreted by each archive in different ways.

Understanding and meeting these criteria played an important role during my fieldwork. Taking from organisations' studies, relational capital can be defined as the "level of mutual trust, respect, and friendship that arises out of close interaction at the individual level between alliance partners".<sup>107</sup> Affinity, which can be political, cultural, or lifestyle-based, represents the degree of shared values between the researcher and the activist/archivist. Commitment is the will and opportunity of the researcher to support and participate in the activity of the archive or of the centre to which it belongs.

The relationships built during the time spent as an activist of the Milanese social centre *Cascina Autogestita Torchiera* and as a member of *Laboratorio Lapsus*, a working group of activists and history students, composed my relational capital. It fostered access to material held in radical archives and in the personal collections of activists and ex-activists both in

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<sup>106</sup>Il gruppo di lavoro dell'archivio, 'Presentazione', *Archivio Primo Moroni*; 'Archivio', *Libreria Anomalia. Centro di documentazione anarchica*, <http://www.libreriaanomalia.org/archivio/>, 1 February 2019; 'L'Idea?!', *L'Idea, biblioteca anarchica*.

<sup>107</sup> Kale Prashant, Singh Harbir, Perlmutter Howard, 'Learning and protection of proprietary assets in strategic alliances: building relational capital', *Strategic Management Journal*, 21 (2000) p. 218

Milan and in Rome. Friendship and comradeship in this case overlapped, providing, as in the case of the APM, common ground on which to discuss modalities of access and collaboration and a certain degree of independence when *moving* among boxes, folders and files. Familiar bonds provided a close connection with – and knowledge of – the API and facilitated contacts with the CDA in Rome and with anarchist activists whose personal archives were of great help.

During my visits to English archives I could not make use of such capital. Not being a ‘face from somewhere’ impacted on the level of trust granted and on access to archives. In this case political affinity provided a shared experience-based understanding of the principles underlying social centres and radical archives, which allowed me to build personal relationships and mediate access to the local archives.

My commitment towards the archives has been varied, depending on the different conditions of each fieldtrip. Where long and continuative visits were always considered optimal – as the only way to foster significant relationships, acquiring confidence and building know-how – such an option was not always realistic. Time management and economic pressures were considered together with the requirements and the modalities of access to the individual archives: the time I could dedicate to each archive, the funding necessary to live in each city, the particularly time consuming nature of researching in radical archives and the synergies I could create with the archives. In Milan, my hometown, living costs could be easily reduced thanks to a support network of family and friends, and the relational capital developed through fifteen years of activism facilitated my visits. In Rome, I opted for one extensive visit where I had the chance to live within the squatted social centre *Forte Prenestino*, which hosted one of the archives I visited. The costly nature of London was in turn the main rationale behind choosing to make a number of short intensive visits to archives or libraries. Finally, in Bristol I opted for a long-lasting visit as a way to combine income generation (a

few part-time jobs) and visits to local archives. When possible, I also participated in and supported the archives and their initiatives. These modalities of support varied according to current opportunities and needs: participating in meetings, use of my historiographical expertise or my manual capacities, whether it be moving boxes, behind a bar or loading a van. The nomadic nature of my fieldwork fostered a specific kind of collaboration, focused on the sharing of digitalised material. The data collection was only possible through a significant digitalisation of the documentation held in the archives. This allowed me to physically carry tens of thousands of pages of documents around Europe and to separate the stages of data collection and analysis. These three factors – relational capital, affinity and personal commitment – produced different effects in each visits, some more successful than others, but each was nonetheless key to obtaining “theoretical insights and data otherwise unavailable”.<sup>108</sup>

The self-funded nature of these archives often entails both a scarcity of economic means and a protraction of the time needed to carry out daily activities. The time-consuming nature of my fieldwork was one of its key features. Weeks could pass between the first visit and the beginning of the actual archival work, months if the first contact was made via email. Opening times are often reduced to a few days per week and are not always respected. The search for documents is difficult, as the filing is often an unending work in progress. If examined under the profile of efficiency, these archives do not stand out, neither are they interested in doing so, and – if truth be told – the bureaucracy and intricacy of some Italian public reference libraries and archives made those visits even more difficult.

Radical environments, such as social centres, treat academic researchers with some degree of suspicion.<sup>109</sup> This suspicion has to be understood as a coherent aspect of a general – and

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<sup>108</sup>Starechesky, ‘Squatting history’, p. 189

<sup>109</sup>Pickerill Jenny, ‘A surprising sense of hope’, *Antipode*, 40.3 (2008), pp. 482-487; the email quoted at pp. 482-483 well represents a common activist point of view about academic research on activism.

sometimes justified - suspicion towards institutions. Finding closed doors is indeed a part of the game. During my fieldwork this suspicion towards my work was expressed in different ways. The most common was an initial, and sometimes harsh, diffidence, abated after a long and exhaustive introduction and explanation of who I was, why I was there and what I would do with the material. Sometimes this happened over of a drink, at other times in large meetings where the modality and level of access I could gain were one of the agenda points, and occasionally via email. In the *Forte Prenestino*, the participation in the centre's duty rota, activities, discussions and decision-making processes fostered – recalling Moeran – access to individual and collective 'back stage behaviour'.<sup>110</sup> An extensive collaboration characterised the relationship I built with the *Kebele Co-Op* in Bristol as well, where archival work and participation in the organisation of weekly social dinners went hand-in-hand. My fieldwork in Bristol was also significant for its limits. Outside of *Kebele*, I was generally unsuccessful in finding and obtaining access to other material. In London the limitation of the fieldwork to the 56AI – with reference to radical and informal archives – did not preclude the collection of data on two decades of social and political squatting, due to the richness of the archive. In Bristol however, KCCI dedicated little space to earlier squats, resulting in the need to look elsewhere. The unsatisfying results of this search for materials were due to a combination of several factors. Mainly, considering my fieldwork in Italy as an exportable blueprint, I underestimated the time factor in building enough relational capital within a scarcely known scene. The central role of relationships in acquiring access to this kind of documentation involves the willingness – and the possibility – on the part of the researcher to let these relationships play out, conceding them the time they need. On top of these difficulties and errors, given the informal nature of the topic at the core of this work, it is very easy to just arrive 'at the wrong time', when projects are experiencing difficulties or particular key

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<sup>110</sup>Moeran Brian, 'From participant observation to observant participation: anthropology, fieldwork and organizational ethnography', *Creative encounter working paper*, 1, July 2007: <http://openarchive.cbs.dk/bitstream/handle/10398/7038/wp%202007-2.pdf?sequence=1>, Accessed 1 April 2019



individuals are unavailable, or when the activist scene is expressing higher levels of mistrust towards newcomers.<sup>111</sup>

In some cases access to archives was denied. In coherence with their choices and paths of political struggle, a limited number of spaces openly refused any kind of access to their archives. This refusal was expressed by brief emails in reply to my first contacts, or discussed and detailed throughout face-to-face meetings. When explained, the main cause was the perceived incompatibility between their policies and my academic affiliation, resulting in an unwillingness to share information with someone seen as irremediably *alter*.

A last case needs to be added to this list: silence and the inability to help. Silence in response to emails or phone calls, the inability to help in response to requests made in person. In an environment almost completely based on voluntary work and high-paced commitment on different fronts it is likely that requests for a meeting or to access some documentation are not at the top of the list of activists' priorities and can be lost and forgotten within a short amount of time. At the same time, the high turnover can often be the cause of lost information: in a few cases, approaching an archive through multiple contacts and channels proved to be the only successful tactic. Nonetheless, both of these types of answer can be interpreted as a non-conflictual refusal, possibly expressing the already discussed suspicion.

### **3.3 The role of the Internet in accessing sources: Newspapers**

The role of the Internet in historiographical research, its potentials and limits, and the modalities of its usage have been widely analysed.<sup>112</sup> The databases of academic and

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<sup>111</sup> Without delving into a complex sequence of events, since October 2010 information started to emerge about the deployment of long-term undercover police agents in a cross-section of radical groups throughout the country: *Undercover Research Group*, <http://undercoverresearch.net/>; 'Undercover Research portal', *Powerbase. Public Interest Investigations*, [http://powerbase.info/index.php/UndercoverResearch\\_Portal](http://powerbase.info/index.php/UndercoverResearch_Portal)

<sup>112</sup> Trickle Dennis A., *The History Highway. A 21st-Century Guide to Internet Resources* (Armonk, 2006);

secondary sources available online are a valuable resource to expand the methodological basis of the research and to confront findings. Thanks to academic networks and digitalisation projects supported by various organisations a great deal of primary sources are easily accessible online, simplifying and speeding up the scrutiny of large amounts of data: just to name one, online newspaper archives radically modified the approach to this primary source, on the one hand stripping the research of part of its romanticism, on the other, facilitating access to a much wider pool of sources, previously impossible for a single researcher. New issues arose from this transformation, some particularly relevant for this work. Among them the disparity in number and access level between online newspaper archives in Italian and English, the new hierarchy of sources and new skills needed by the researcher. The disparity between Italian language and English language newspapers' archives is striking: through my affiliation to Aberystwyth University I had access to ten online databases covering the English-speaking press since the beginning of the nineteenth century. For Italian newspapers and magazines there are no online resources such as Nexis,<sup>113</sup> or the British Library Newspaper.<sup>114</sup> The number of sources, search options and usability of such archives find no comparison in Italy: an archive of Italian newspapers has yet to be created. Researchers have to rely on the online historical archives of each single newspaper, thus selecting the sources on the basis of the investment in such a project made by each media outlet. For the main Italian newspapers, *Il Corriere della Sera* the archive is only available via a monthly subscription, *La Repubblica*'s only dates back to 1984, the archive of *L'Unità*, the first newspaper to have a complete open-access historical archive online, has been used for a large

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Craver Kathleen W., *Using Internet Primary Sources to Teach Critical Thinking Skills in History* (Westport, 1999); Barber Sarah, Peniston-Bird C. M., eds., *History beyond the text: a student's guide to approaching alternative sources* (London, New York, 2009)

<sup>113</sup>Nexis, LexisNexis: <https://www.nexis.com>, accessed 01 February 2019

<sup>114</sup>British Library Newspapers, Gale Group:

<http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/start.do?prodId=BNCN&userGroupName=uniaber&finalAuth=true>, accessed 01 February 2019

part of this research until January 2017, when it went offline.<sup>115</sup> The only newspaper that provides a cost free, and complete online archive is *La Stampa*, based in Turin. In the context of this thesis, the most useful newspapers and periodicals – those which covered social centres’ activities more widely – have no online archive and have been examined during my visits to Milan and Rome via public libraries and archives, or thanks to the helpfulness of the staff of the publications. These are local periodicals, which closely followed the events of the centres, left-wing newspapers and periodicals, which hosted debates involving the centres and articles authored by their activists and right-wing newspapers, which focused their attention on the public order aspect of the centres’ activities and on calls for their eviction. Radical archives – especially those more tightly linked to the social centres’ scenes – have also been particularly useful. A number of news clippings covering centres’ activities were preserved there. Entire runs of several radical magazines were found in the APM in Milan, and anarchist press was instead widely present in both the API and in the CDA.

### **3.4 The role of the Internet in accessing sources: Websites**

The Internet was, for the majority of the period considered by this work, a tool reserved for a small elite, if not a topic of science-fiction books. Nonetheless, the close relationship between social centres’ activism and the diffusion of informational technology, especially in their Italian manifestation, has prompted a different use of Internet sources as primary sources *per se*.

From the late nineteen eighties to circa 1995 the use of computer networks, the Internet and its predecessors, was extremely limited. Among the first explorers of these new languages and modes of communication, were groups of self-taught “data travellers, electro-wizards,

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<sup>115</sup>The issue was bypassed thanks to a group of hacktivists that, exploiting a technical oversight, copied the entire archive and opened it again anonymously: <https://archiviounita.noblogs.org/>

and techno-anarchists”:<sup>116</sup> cyberpunk literature had fuelled an interpretation of ‘the net’ as a new frontier, free from society’s rules and constrictions, where borders were erased and international exchanges of information could happen instantaneously. Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) – early protocols for information and file sharing – were the *loci* of the creation of the first computer-based activist networks. Most of these experiences have already become lost, due to what the internet pioneer Vint Cerf termed ‘bit rot’,<sup>117</sup> the quick decay of old digital formats, now impossible to read on modern hardware and software (e.g. 8-inches, 5 ¼-inches and 3 ½-inches floppy disks, zip drives), but hard copies of some of the materials produced by these early hacktivists have been saved by social centres themselves and have made their way back into digital form through self-managed projects of digitalisation organised by people involved in the same scene.<sup>118</sup>

Social centres’ and political groups’ websites date back to the second half of the nineteen nineties, as part of the public side of these organisations, and are a great resource as well. For my diachronic approach particular tools revealed themselves to be pivotal: the digital archives of the World Wide Web, services which preserve artefacts in digital form and “create an Internet library for researchers, historians, and scholars”.<sup>119</sup> The most recent surveys counted 88 web archiving initiatives around the world.<sup>120</sup> The initiatives are extremely diverse: public and private, national and international, open-access and pay-walled, charities and businesses, etc. Differences can also be found in the heritage they choose to preserve, in the modalities of

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<sup>116</sup>Definition given by the character Brad Wilczek in ‘Ghost in the Machine’, *The X-Files*, Season 1, episode 7

<sup>117</sup>Sample Ian, ‘Google boss warns of ‘forgotten century’ with emails and photos at risk’, *The Guardian*, 13 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/feb/13/google-boss-warns-forgotten-century-email-photos-vint-cerf>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>118</sup> *Among them: Archivio Grafton9*, <https://grafton9.net/>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>119</sup> Anonymous, ‘Why is the Internet Archive collecting sites from the internet? What makes the information useful?’, *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/about/faqs.php#21>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>120</sup> ‘List of Web archiving Initiatives’, *Wikipedia*: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Web\\_archiving\\_initiative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Web_archiving_initiative); accessed 1 February 2019. This Wikipedia entry has been created by Daniel Gomes, João Miranda and Miguel Costa, authors of ‘A survey on web archiving initiatives’, conference paper presented at the *International Conference on Theory and Practice of Digital Libraries*, Berlin, September 2011. It serves as a complement to the presented paper and as an up-to-date summary of the survey.

the collection and in the protocols used. As it was noted, “the preservation of digital heritage is crucial to modern societies because web publications are extremely transient”.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, “web collecting, in all its shapes and forms, will grow to represent a significant portion of what libraries and archives do”,<sup>122</sup> in order to avoid creating “a historical void regarding our current times”.<sup>123</sup> The total amount of archived data reached 6.6 Petabytes (181 978 million contents) in 2011,<sup>124</sup> and it is now probably in the range of hundreds of Petabytes and the tens of billion contents.<sup>125</sup> However, new legal, ethical and technological challenges have been raised in the last years: “open access to historical web data would enable the creation of federated search mechanisms across web archives”<sup>126</sup> and a much more meaningful and effective exploration of “the potential of this valuable source of historical information”.<sup>127</sup>

Among the web archiving initiatives, the Wayback Machine<sup>128</sup> is both the oldest and largest. This service was essential in retrieving old versions of web pages and in the analysis of the evolution of this form of communication within the scene. At the same time it allowed for the retrieval of information about groups and centres that are now beyond their own life cycle. One of the characteristics of the Internet is the rapidity of its changes. Webpages are updated frequently, designs and graphic interfaces change; websites are erased when subscriptions to hosting services are not renewed, they get lost by accident, due to the failure of servers, or to repressive action by law enforcement agencies.<sup>129</sup> The automated crawling<sup>130</sup> services of the

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<sup>121</sup>Gomes Daniel, Miranda João, Costa Miguel, ‘A survey on web archiving initiatives’, in Gradmann Stefan, Borri Francesca, Meghini Carlo, Schuldt Heiko, eds., *Research and Advanced Technology for Digital Libraries* (Berlin, 2011) p. 416

<sup>122</sup>Graham Pamela M., ‘Guest Editorial: Reflections on the Ethics of Web Archiving’, *Journal of Archival Organization*, 14.3-4 (2019) p. 109

<sup>123</sup>Gomes, Miranda, Costa, ‘A survey on web archiving initiatives’, p. 417

<sup>124</sup>Ibid., p. 416

<sup>125</sup>Data extracted from: ‘List of Web archiving initiatives’, *Wikipedia*

<sup>126</sup>Gomes, Miranda, Costa, ‘A survey on web archiving initiatives’, p. 417

<sup>127</sup>Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Anonymous, ‘What is the Wayback Machine?’ *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/about/faqs.php#1>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>129</sup> Anonymous, ‘Police seize Indymedia UK server (again)’, *Indymedia UK*, 23 January 2009:

Wayback Machine or other similar services are not systematic and cannot cover the entirety of virtual space-time: websites may be excluded because the services were “unaware of their existence”,<sup>131</sup> because they were not well linked to and from other sites, or due to robot exclusion, or again by the request of the owner.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, the archive has to respect privacy laws, crawling is not synchronised with actual updates, and it varies in frequency depending on the website.

From a different point of view, my periodisation is not touched by the ‘revolution of the Internet 2.0’. The advent of social networks, smartphones, instant messaging applications, cloud storage, and of the dogma of constant connection have transformed, within everything else, the mechanisms of internal and external grass-roots political communication. With it, concerns over data preservation have changed as well: “Activists risk losing the official record of their actions when everything that constitutes an archive of social change is entrusted to third-party web apps and companies, such as Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter. We have moved relatively quickly from concerns about backing up physical hard drives [...] to blindly trusting that our organisations’ thinking and planning are safe ‘in the cloud’”.<sup>133</sup>

### **3.5 The role of the Internet in accessing sources: Primary sources**

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<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2009/01/419838.html>; Anonymous, ‘FBI server seizure’, *Indymedia UK*, 7 September 2004: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/actions/2004/fbi/>; Anonymous, ‘Indymedia Bristol server seized by police’, *Indymedia UK*, 28 June 2005: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2005/06/315072.html>; Autistici/Inventati, ‘A short tale about why we are who we are and why we do what we do’, *autistici.org*, <https://www.autistici.org/who/telltale>; all webpages accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>130</sup>Springer, ‘Radical archives and new cycles of contention’

<sup>131</sup> Anonymous, ‘The Wayback Machine faqs’, *The Internet Archive* [https://archive.org/about/faqs.php#The\\_Wayback\\_Machine](https://archive.org/about/faqs.php#The_Wayback_Machine), accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>132</sup>Ibid.

<sup>133</sup>Springer, ‘Radical archives and new cycles of contention’

The Internet is also home to a myriad of formal and informal radical archives. The environment of autonomous activism has always been characterised by a large production of material. Audio, video, written records: activists have produced masses of documents for their communities or for larger audiences. The ethics of Do-it-Yourself (DiY) imply free or low cost circulation and the refusal of copyright policies. This refusal is expressed in several different ways, from a basic and implicit withdrawal of any property rights on the material published, to more conscious discourses over free licences and sharing, prompting an expansion of typical software-related agendas out of the virtual boundaries of the internet. Licences derived from BDS, FOSS, GNU GPL, ShareAlike, Copyleft and Creative Commons are used on several types of records, as a political message connected to their actual legal definitions. Public digital libraries contain entire collections of digitalised radical sources: zines, old leaflets, pamphlets, posters and *dazebao*, political reports and minutes. Sources are not only in written form: video and audio recordings of demonstrations, talks, meetings, occupations and evictions of social centres, anarcho-punk and radical hip-hop songs and concerts in occupied spaces, but also documentaries and television broadcasts. Personal and collective blogs and websites gather materials from various sources around particular interests and issues. Some have been essential in acquiring data and information related to specific events, or for a wider spectrum analysis on a period in time or a local scene. For two distant examples, *Grafton9*, an Italian online radical archive, in the last few years digitalised tens of radical and countercultural magazines produced by activists of social centres between the late nineteen eighties and the nineteen nineties<sup>134</sup> and the website *Kill your pet puppy*,<sup>135</sup> managed by part of the editorial collective of the punk zine with the same name published in the early nineteen eighties in London has been a goldmine of information on the anarcho-punk scene in London and in the whole of England. Oppositional cultures revealed a unexpected

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<sup>134</sup> *Archivio Grafton9*, <https://grafton9.net/>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>135</sup> *Kill Your Pet Puppy*, <http://killyourpetpuppy.co.uk/>, accessed 1 February 2019



persistence: the passion and commitment of small groups of people still inspired by those DiY ethics that characterised countercultures for the last few decades have allowed for the preservation and transmission of a surprising amount of documentation, especially useful regarding the more transient and ephemeral aspects of the squatting and social centres scenes. A number of websites have worked as attractors for material from small but active communities. The topics covered are impressively wide, from complete transcriptions of the lyrics of several bands lost in time, to collections of pictures of squatted centres and venues, from personal memories to news clippings, and zines, video recordings, squat gigs and parties' flyers, interviews on politics and lifestyle, etc.

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These methodological concerns have affected the direction and the modality of both my fieldwork and the writing of this thesis. The discovery of a valuable and often overlooked heritage in Italian and English radical archives prompted the decision to base this research mainly on primary sources produced and stored by these spaces. This choice, while excluding the ethnographic contribution previously considered, added a new layer to the analysis, providing useful information on the role of memory and cross-generational exchanges, on the mechanisms employed to preserve difficult heritage and on the relationship between social centres and their history.

In this exploration, the constant search for a third space, in which to combine inputs from both the academy and activism, worked as a compass. Despite having occupied a large percentage of my fieldwork, radical archives are far from being the only archives I visited; in each city I dug into public archives and private collections, university libraries and documentation

centres, looking for official papers and news articles, or for the same pamphlets and self-produced magazines I was looking for in the radical archives.

#### **4. Research design**

The first chapter of this thesis investigates the core concept that informs this work: the practice of squatting, exploring both its spatial diffusion and its rooted history within the development of western societies. The discursive production of the ‘squatters’ category is also analysed here.

The second and third chapters focus on the Italian and English national contexts in the years that surrounded the birth of the first centres. Special attention is given to the nineteen seventies and to the narratives which have developed around that decade, especially regarding the perception of those years as a watershed for both Italian and English recent history. Those experiences, which laid the groundwork for the development of social centres, are highlighted within the developments of radical politics and countercultures. For Italy, these are the growth of the groups of the *Autonomia* in the second half of the nineteen seventies, the first experiments of *centri sociali* and *circoli del proletariato giovanile* in Milan and other large cities and the crisis of mobilisation and political participation at the end of the decade. For England, instead they are represented by the diffusion of squatting and the formation of large urban squatters’ communities since the early nineteen seventies and by the important role played by different countercultures, such as hippies and anarcho-punk.

The third chapter traces a history of social centres in both countries from the early nineteen eighties to the end of the century. This is the backbone on which the thematic analyses of the following chapters are based. Trends, exchanges, similarities and differences are highlighted

and contextualised within the evolution of the four local scenes taken into account for this work.

The fourth chapter focuses on the political aspect of the activity of the centres, especially on how local and global campaigns are approached by centres. Particular attention is given to the modalities of mobilisation within the scenes and the relevance of the issue of the legitimisation of squatted social centres. Also debates on the role of radical politics in neoliberal societies, which interested both scenes, are investigated.

In the fifth chapter, cultural activism is observed as the principal method for centres to foster and establish relationships with both elective and local communities. A tension between a separatist approach towards the rest of society and an inclusive attitude draws from wider countercultural experiences, which are reinterpreted in different ways by the individual centres and scenes.

The conclusion attempts to summarise the results of the comparison between the Italian and the English social centres' experience, stressing their nature as a by-product of an important societal transformation.

## Chapter 1. SETTING THE SCENE

The focus of this research, the social centres' movement, is a phenomenon intertwined with modern European politics and society. Squatting also encompasses other dimensions. This section contextualises the thesis: it will look at the global nature of the practice of squatting and will trace the evolution of this alternative housing practice, highlighting its pivotal role in the evolution of modern society, as an act of resistance and ingenuity of the poorer strata of the European population. Furthermore, the analysis will focus on the role language has played in constructing the contemporary 'squatters' category and on the definitions of both squatting and social centres proposed from within the movement. This will allow for a better contextualisation of those forms of squatting, which arose from within the modern urban environments that will be analysed in the following chapters and will help to stress how the categories that will be introduced are discursively produced, assuming different connotations according to context-specific factors.

### 1.1 The Global picture

One of the most recent United Nations' official publications to dwell upon informal and illegal housing across the world was published in 2003.<sup>1</sup> Squatters are there defined as “people who occupy land or buildings without the explicit permission of the owner”.<sup>2</sup> In this instance, the centre of attention is the *locus* of global poverty, the slums at the edges of the cities of the global South. These slums are thus defined as squatters' settlements, which are usually established through self-help processes situated outside the law.<sup>3</sup>

Only referring to the English language, these settlements have many names: self-help or self-built settlements, spontaneous settlements, marginal settlements, squatter areas, shantytowns

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<sup>1</sup> VA, *The challenge of slums: global report on human settlements* (London, Sterling, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83

and the already cited slums. In Italian they have assumed specific names in different locations: *coree* in Milan and *borgate* and *borghetti* in Rome.<sup>4</sup> In other language they have been defined *barrios*, *tugurios*, *favelas*, *bidonvilles*, *kampungs* and *gecekondular*.<sup>5</sup>

Since the birth of cities there have been poor quarters, but slums, “places that are squalid, overcrowded and wretched”,<sup>6</sup> started to appear at the beginning of capitalist modernity, during the sixteenth century. Some of the current ones, in South and East Asia, date back to the nineteenth century; but most have far more recent origins and have been the only large-scale solution to providing housing for low-income people.

Squatter settlements represent an important, but not exclusive, part of these slums. Built primarily on public land, these settlements can be the result of highly organised and explicitly political invasions of land, such as in South America, where a number of them have grown to become municipalities in their own rights. They can also be the product of a gradual process of occupation, which could take generations.<sup>7</sup> Yet some settlements remain small, informal and unstable, “located under bridges and flyovers, on vacant plots of land between formal buildings, or on pavements and dry-season riverbeds”,<sup>8</sup> often on land that is unsuitable for any other purpose, in order to diminish the chances of immediate eviction.

Settlements are varied in terms of size, longevity, conditions and legal status.<sup>9</sup> Some forms of “security of tenure” are occasionally offered to the squatters. These are mostly temporary and not legally binding, but a “*de facto* legality can be implied by the simple fact of the settlements not being demolished, and/or public services being provided”.<sup>10</sup> This fostered the

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<sup>4</sup> The term *coree* derives from their appearance during the Korean war; *Borgate* and *Borghetti* are derivations of the term *borgo* (village): Foot John, *Milano dopo il miracolo. Biografia di una città* (Milano, 2003); Clementi Alberto, Perego Francesco, eds., *La metropoli spontanea: il caso di Roma* (Bari, 1983)

<sup>5</sup>VA, *The challenge of slums*, p. 82

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. XXIX

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 82

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 82-83

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 83

creation of an informal housing market, where squatted houses were rented out because they were considered relatively secure. This was recorded in several settlements in East Asia and Africa, but also among urban occupations in Southern Europe.<sup>11</sup>

In 2001 almost one billion people were living in slums and 20% of all worldwide householders were squatters, with much higher figures for developing countries and projections assuming a doubling in the number of people living in informal settlements before 2030. The trend observed in the last two decades is a rapid spatial expansion of irregular settlements, but a decrease in the total number of squatters:

in many cities there is no longer free access to land for squatting purposes; but land can be accessed for unauthorised settlements by informal deals with the landowner. This reflects the ever increasing commodification of land delivery systems for the poor of the cities.<sup>12</sup>

## **1.2 Between history and folklore: the dark side of housing**

From an historical point of view, in different periods and areas of the world squatting has been a legitimate way of occupying unused land. Examples include the settlers' periods in the US West and in several parts of the Australian continent<sup>13</sup> and, far more recently, desert lands in Peru.<sup>14</sup> To be more accurate, squatting has been defined as the oldest mode of tenure in the world, as we all descend from squatters of common lands.<sup>15</sup>

In his unpublished work on squatter settlements in Herefordshire in the nineteenth century, James Moir stated that these settlements "should be viewed in the context of a developing capitalist economy, which ultimately is responsible for giving birth to, and destroying,

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 105-106

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 107, 168;

<sup>13</sup> Jacoby Karl, *Crimes against nature. Squatters, poachers, thieves, and the hidden history of American conservation* (Berkeley, 2003); Roberts Stephen, *The squatting age in Australia: 1835-1847* (Melbourne, 1964). Roberts' volume was originally published in 1935.

<sup>14</sup>VA, *The challenge of slums*, p. 105

<sup>15</sup> Ward Colin, 'The early squatters', in Wates, Wolmar, eds., *Squatting: the real story*, pp. 104-109

squatters' communities".<sup>16</sup> Housing history since the Enclosure Acts has had its hidden side: a common thread of resistance and resilience to parliamentary and local bills enforcing the enclosure of the 'waste' and the 'common'. It could be recognised not only in the revolts of the Levellers and the True Levellers in the seventeenth century, but also in the everyday ingenuity and stratagems deployed by thousands of country-dwellers to manage different types of settlements throughout the last six centuries. The principal roots of today's squatters can thus be found in the centuries surrounding the dawn and the first steps of capitalism.

Colin Ward, in his work on the traditions, beliefs and folklore surrounding the practice of squatting in rural England and Wales, showed that almost every area and county had its own squatting folklore.<sup>17</sup> It was often a variation of the same folk tale, the 'one-night-house', or *Ty-unnos* in Welsh: "if you can build a house between sunset and sunrise, then the owner of the land cannot expel you".<sup>18</sup> Alternate versions of this same core idea were traceable throughout the country, with different conditions: the house had to be built in one night, or in a single day; the roof had to be in place; smoke had to be visible from the chimney; a boiling pot had to be on the fire, etc. In many rural areas old cottages once called 'squatters' cottages' can still be found nowadays. In Wales this tradition seemed to be related to the imposition of Norman land law. Cumbrian poets created verses about it<sup>19</sup> and it was at the centre of several nineteenth century novels.<sup>20</sup> Everywhere, this oral tradition symbolised both the inventiveness and naivety of common land squatters: the absence of any written document supporting the one-night-house claim contrasted with the resilience and diffusion of this oral myth. A diffusion that went far beyond the United Kingdom: traces of it can be found in the beliefs of the people of the Burgundy region, in eastern France, in the recent experiences of

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<sup>16</sup> Moir James, 'A World Unto Themselves?': Squatter Settlement in Herefordshire 1780-1880', PhD, University of Leicester, 1990, p. 1

<sup>17</sup> Ward Colin, *Cotters and squatter*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>19</sup> Anderson Robert, *Ballads, in the Cumberland dialect* (Wigton, 1834) p.203

<sup>20</sup> Ward, *Cotters and squatters*, pp. 5-14, 41-105

squatters' settlements in Turkey, where they were called *gecekondu*, from *gece*, night and *kondu*, settled.<sup>21</sup> In South America, where the self-organised land invasions in the outskirts of cities, took place under the cover of darkness, “and token walls of straw matting or corrugated sheeting [were] erected”<sup>22</sup> before dawn and the completion of the roof represented a celebration.<sup>23</sup> Recently in Colombia this tradition was described as “a remnant from ancient Germanic law, claiming that so long that there is no trace of a break-in to the site and it is furnished with a table and four chairs, a house built in one night, if it has a roof, cannot be torn down”.<sup>24</sup> In Italy, a 1956 film titled *Il tetto* (the roof) depicted the illegal construction of a one-night-house in one of the *borgate* at the outskirts of Rome. Once completed, the house could not be torn down without an explicit court order, which, thanks to the proverbial endless proceedings of Italian Civil Courts, would have probably taken years to be approved.<sup>25</sup>

Thus we see that in different times and different places a common folklore (or common law) of squatting developed. It seemed to be “an attempt to find a loophole in the stranglehold of land-ownership”,<sup>26</sup> the attribution of its origins was as differentiated as its diffusion: Roman Law, Germanic Law, Norman Law, Ottoman Law and Indo-European traditions. This shows “very clearly that nobody knows where this ancient subversive legend came from, but we all have an interest in claiming its legitimacy”.<sup>27</sup>

### 1.3 Who are the ‘squatters’? Language and law

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<sup>21</sup> Hinze Annika Marlen, ‘Sold Overnight: Istanbul’s Gecekondu Housing and the Challenge of Ownership’, *Middle East Institute*, 12 January 2016: <http://www.mei.edu/content/sold-overnight-istanbul%E2%80%99s-gecekondu-housing-and-challenge-ownership>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>22</sup> Ward, *Cotters and Squatters*, p. 6

<sup>23</sup> Turner John, ‘The Re-education of a Professional’ in Turner John, Fichter Robert, eds., *Freedom to Build* (New York 1972), p. 133

<sup>24</sup> In 1993 the Colombian director Sergio Cabrera dramatised the ingenuous resistance to an eviction in Bogotá in *La estrategia del caracol* [The strategy of the snail]. He was quoted in: Ward, *Cotters and Squatters*, p. 8

<sup>25</sup> De Sica Vittorio, *Il tetto* [Film], (Italy, 1956)

<sup>26</sup> Ward, *Cotters and squatters*, p. 10

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



In common language, in the United Kingdom, the words ‘squatting’ and ‘squatters’ took on the current meaning in the nineteenth century, coming from a similar usage in North America and Australia. According to the Oxford English Dictionary,<sup>28</sup> it started to appear in published writing at the end of the seventeenth century in the United States. As with many other words, shades were added and lost throughout the spatial and temporal diffusion of the term. In North America the term indicated “a man, mostly a poor man, who, without any claims, sat down on a small farm, and called himself a homesteader or squatter”.<sup>29</sup> In Australia the word seemed to have been first used in Tasmania “to differentiate between [...] farmers and frontiersmen”,<sup>30</sup> as a term of considerable reproach. During the 1830s, after the regulation of the occupation of lands, the connotation of the term started to become more positive, paving the way for the birth of the term ‘squattocracy’<sup>31</sup> to indicate the social and political importance of the squatters' class in many parts of Australia.

It is safe to state that, during its journey through the Atlantic Ocean from the US Western frontier to the United Kingdom, the term did not retain this positive connotation. The attitudes held towards squatters were best exemplified by the ‘Report of the Select committee on commons' enclosure’, ordered by the House of Commons and published in August 1845:

[...] I have no opinion of the advantages of people living on the edge of a common; they are generally the most immoral and worst portion of the rural population. [...] Uninclosed commons are invariably nurseries for petty crime, [...] families are in a state of destitution from the dissolute habits of the men [and] are so large that they all live together, as it were, in one bed.<sup>32</sup>

The historian Thomas Babington Macaulay was among the firsts to use the term in a British context: in his *History of England since the accession of James II* the term was used several

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<sup>28</sup> ‘squatter, n.1’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/188262?rskey=lxJhOz&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous, ‘Origin of the word “squatter”’, *Queenslander*, 1 November 1924, p. 3

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Roberts, *The squatting age in Australia*

<sup>32</sup> HC Report, *Select Committee on Commons Inclosure*, 5 August 1845, ProQuest UK Parliamentary Papers, <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1844-021652?accountid=14783>, accessed 1 February 2019

times, in reference to both North America and England. In his blindly progressive and positivist view of English modernisation, squatters were remnants of an uncivilised past. Before the Revolution and the enclosures, “squatters and trespassers were tolerated to an extent now unknown” and could occasionally procure “some palatable addition to [their] hard fare”. Enclosures and the progress of agriculture “necessarily deprived them of these privileges”, which were replaced by the “advantages” and “blessings” of “civilisation and philosophy”.<sup>33</sup>

During the first half of the twentieth century terms like squatting and squatters were present but infrequent, especially in reference to the British situation. Their usage seemed to be mostly linked with reports from other parts of the world. It was only after the Second World War that the terms assumed an overtly political nuance. Starting in the late 1945 the ex-servicemen squatters’ movement, sometimes referred as Vigilantes movement,<sup>34</sup> catalysed significant media coverage; the occupation of army camps and buildings by former soldiers and their families was an organised movement, and its politicised nature – it developed strong connections with the Communist Party of Great Britain – was immediately recognised and exploited by the media. An actual mass diffusion of the term took place between the very end of the nineteen sixties and the early nineteen seventies, thanks to the popularity of the first organised urban squatting movements, which became associated with the hippy counterculture and with alternative lifestyles, adding the last nuance of meaning to the term. Finally, it conveyed a sense of otherness, which is still present in the ‘squatter’ label today.

From a different perspective, the British Government directly addressed the terms squatting/squatters only in the early nineteen seventies. In a ‘Consultation paper on

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<sup>33</sup> Macaulay Thomas Babington, *History of England from the ascension of James II. Volume II* (Leipzig, 1849) p. 317

<sup>34</sup> Johnstone, ‘Housing and class struggles in post-war Glasgow’; Friend, ‘The post-war squatters’

Squatting’ produced by the Department of Environment in August 1975,<sup>35</sup> squatters were described as a heterogeneous group:

[...] some, whether families or single people, have a genuine need for housing; [...] some have political objectives; [...] others may prefer the life-style of squatting and its cheapness; [...] yet others may be disaffected groups or individuals who welcome the freedom and anonymity of squatting, [and] may be passing through or tourists.<sup>36</sup>

In British Public General and Local Acts there were no actual references to the terms ‘squatting’ or ‘squatters’ until the nineteen eighties. The first reference was on a Northern Ireland Council Order in 1981 (“warrant for possession of land after conviction of squatter”)<sup>37</sup> and then it was used in three English council acts (Kent, 2001; Medway, 2001; Nottingham city, 2003) in the locution ‘squat-trading’, to indicate:

a trade or business consisting of the selling, offering for sale, display or exposing for sale of any article by any person on any premises if that person occupies the premises without the consent of the owner or lawful occupier of the premises.<sup>38</sup>

Squatting was explicitly referred to in the ‘Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994’ as a cross-heading for the relevant sections of the act,<sup>39</sup> and later in 2012, when the ‘Legal aid, sentencing and punishment of offenders Act’ created a new criminal offence relating to “squatting in residential building”. Here we had the first definition of squatting as an offence:

- (1) A person commits an offence if—
  - (a) the person is in a residential building as a trespasser having entered it as a trespasser,
  - (b) the person knows or ought to know that he or she is a trespasser, and
  - (c) the person is living in the building or intends to live there for any period.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>National council for civil liberties (NCCL), *Squatting, trespassing and civil liberties* (London, 1976), p. 8

<sup>36</sup> Quoted from: *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Judgements Enforcement (Northern Ireland) Order, 1981*, 1981, No. 226 (N.I. 6)

<sup>38</sup> *Kent county council act, 2001* (c.3); *Medway county council act, 2001* (c.4); *Nottingham city county council act, 2003* (c.2)

<sup>39</sup> *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994* (c.33). The ‘Squatters’ cross-heading comprehend section 72 to 76 and it is included within “Part V, Collective trespassers and Public nuisance”

<sup>40</sup> *Legal aid, sentencing and punishment of offenders act, 2012* (c.10), section 144, Offence of squatting in a residential building

In earlier decades British lawmakers preferred to refer to squatters as trespassers or occupiers. It was matter for the civil courts and was thus considered differently in England and Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, as will be shown in the next chapters.

In the Italian language, the word *squat* (in its noun form, or adapted into *squattare* as a verb) is used informally, but is not common; its derivatives, such as squatting and squatters, are not used at all. In common and legal language the words *occupare / occupato / occupante / occupanti* (to occupy / occupied / occupier / occupiers) are used instead. The first penal code to regulate squatting in Italy was the 1889 penal code, known as the *Codice Zanardelli*, terming it *usurpazione*.<sup>41</sup> Attempts to regulate unlawful trespassing can also be found in the earlier *Codice Sabauda*, promulgated in 1839 and later extended to large parts of the unified Italian territory.<sup>42</sup> The 1930 Italian Penal Law introduced article 633, which still regulates squatting today, criminalising “everyone who intrudes upon other people's lands or buildings, public or private, with the intent to occupy them or benefit from them”.<sup>43</sup> The status of this crime and its jurisdiction varied according to several factors: the number of people involved, the classification of the building or land, and aggravating clauses. From 1945 to 2018 it was modified eight times, without altering the significance of the original article, but progressively harshening the related punishment.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Libro II, Titolo X, Capo VI’, *Codice Penale per il Regno d’Italia* (Roma, 1889)

<sup>42</sup> Vedi: ‘Libro II, Titolo X, Capo II’, *Codice Penale per gli Stati di S.M. il Re di Sardegna* (Palermo, 1861)

<sup>43</sup> ‘Libro II, Titolo XIII, Capo I, Art. 633 Invasione di Terreni o edifici’, *Codice Penale* (1930), in *Normattiva, Il portale della legge vigente*: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:regio.decreto:1930-10-19:1398>, accessed 1 November 2019

<sup>44</sup> ‘Aggiornamenti all’articolo’, in *Normattiva, Il portale della legge vigente*: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:regio.decreto:1930-10-19:1398>, accessed 1 November 2019

This global overview of contemporary squatting outside of Western societies helps to situate the phenomenon of political squatting within the context of a widely practiced form of alternative housing. History and folklore regarding one-night-houses and the “hidden history of housing” roots this phenomenon in a six-century-long tradition of resistance and ingenuity against the privatisation of the ‘commons’. The diachronic breadth of the discourse over squatting analysed in the last pages contextualises the words – ‘squatting’ and ‘squatters’ – that comprise the backbone of this work. Understanding the different layers which constructed of the meanings of these words is important in the navigation between the different sources used throughout the next chapters, their conflictual views on squatting and the sub-texts often implicit in each position.

## Chapter 2. ITALY IN THE ‘LONG-1968’

This work studies social centres in both England and Italy between the nineteen eighties and the end of the twentieth century. The following two chapters will outline the contexts in which social centres developed in these two countries. Particular attention will be given to the transformations of both countries during the nineteen seventies, and to particular *films rouge*, which – in different ways in each country – helped lay the groundwork for the inception and the evolution of social centres.

In Italy these can be found within the classist traditions of extra-parliamentarianism and heretic Marxism, in the extra-systemic ethos of countercultural movements, but also in the lack of opportunities offered by the Italian welfare system to the urban youth population. It is here argued that such factors allowed for the inception, spread and development of social centres as nowhere else in Europe, which accompanied the transformation of the urban social fabric and landscape in large Italian cities. The tension produced by the relationship between radical politics and countercultures is key to understanding the role of the centres, and their emergence into the social and political life of Italian youth.

In England the landmarks of the scene are drawn from outside of the industrial conflicts and traditional class-struggle agencies, instead relating to the renewed energy of the anarchist movement during the late nineteen seventies, the synergies and transformations of new urban radical movements, especially the squatters, and the countercultural tension between the urban and the rural.

Within public discourses in both countries, the turn of the decade between the nineteen seventies and the nineteen eighties is often presented as a neat break with reference to many aspects of public life. For radical politics this is particularly true, as global and national narratives about those social movements, which were born out of the countercultures of the

nineteen sixties, and about the widespread radicalisation symbolised by 1968, frequently find their conclusion at the end of the nineteen seventies.

## 2.1 The garden of earthly delights

If Italy, in the decades after World War II, could be conveyed in a picture, it would resemble one of Hieronymus Bosch's paintings. Bucolic landscapes highly populated by people, fantastic creatures and monsters. In the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties, the country was firmly immersed in the Cold-War-New-World. It had just emerged, through a clandestine struggle, which in some areas was an actual civil war, from twenty years of fascist dictatorship. It was a frontier between the West and the Eastern Bloc, bordering with Tito's communist Yugoslavia in the east. It was also an *internal frontier*, with the biggest Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) in Western Europe.

Grey would be the main colour representing Italy: grey as "...the unforgivable scandal of conformism, that freezes life itself".<sup>1</sup> Conformism and *trasformismo*<sup>2</sup> were the key features of a country surrounded by the pervasive power of the two prevailing cultures: the Catholic Church and the Communist Party. Having never dealt with deep-rooted issues of Italian identity (such as the country's colonial and fascist past, its role in the Holocaust or the meaning of the Resistance), the political and cultural class treated these issues with a mixture of rhetoric and silence. The *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democracy Party, DC), the 'white whale' firmly beached at the centre of Italian politics,<sup>3</sup> was the ever-lasting governing party, up until the crash of the First Republic in the early nineteen nineties. Italy approached

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<sup>1</sup> Corrias Pino, 'Prefazione', in Fofi, Goffredo, Giacomini Vittorio, eds., *Prima e dopo il '68* (Roma, 2008), p. 5

<sup>2</sup> Tranfaglia Nicola, 'Trasformismo', *Stato dell'Italia*, Paul Ginsborg ed. (Milano, 1994) pp. 95-98

<sup>3</sup> Foot John, *Modern Italy* (Basingstoke, New York, 2003) pp. 185-189

capitalist modernity whilst a large part of its society was still absorbed in traditional values, backward religiosity, ‘familism’<sup>4</sup> and distrust towards any public ethos.

At the centre of the picture, local and national *Demo-Christian* politicians, with their private vices and public virtues, ruling over a weak and highly inefficient bureaucratic apparatus, and communist leaders, engaged in the double-binary politics of the party. On one side, one would find the industrial families of the North, the *latifondisti* of the South, and members of the *ruling class* from all sectors of society, who were *fascistissimi* before the armistice and were then saved and reinstated by the *Togliatti Amnesty* after the war, as well as the highest rank and file of the security apparatus (law enforcement, army and security services), often also ex-fascists, always prone to authoritarianism. On the other side, there would be intellectuals, more *organic*<sup>5</sup> to a party’s truth than to the interests of a social class, and ecclesiastic hierarchies, the first censors of the morality of the country and of its political directions, because “in the secrecy of a polling booth God sees you, Stalin does not”.<sup>6</sup> Less visible, was the growing and pervasive presence of organised crime, negotiating its power and accumulating capital with its crowd of *faccendieri* and *palazzinari* (middle-men and building speculators). In the background, the Italian *ceto medio*, as a sort of mythical creature: “[the] new immense *piccola borghesia* (petite bourgeoisie) of the tertiary sector [...], exploited in their free time, alienated by the cultural industry, atomised in a total impotency”.<sup>7</sup>

Over time, the picture changes. The background stays the same, in the best tradition of the Italian *Gattopardo*, because “if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to

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<sup>4</sup>Ginsborg Paul, *A history of contemporary Italy* (London, 1990), p. 16-19

<sup>5</sup> In the meaning given by Antonio Gramsci: “[...] ‘organic’ intellectuals, the thinking and organising element of a particular fundamental social class. These [...] are distinguished less by their profession, [...] than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong”: Gramsci Antonio, Hoare Quentin, Nowell Smith Geoffrey, eds., *Selection from the Prison notebooks* (New York, 1971)

<sup>6</sup>“Ascolta la voce della tua coscienza – Nel segreto della cabina Dio ti vede Stalin no! ...”[Listen to your conscience – in the secrecy of polling booth God sees you, Stalin does not! ...], Comitato Civico Democrazia Cristiana, *Ascolta la voce della tua coscienza* [electoral leaflet and poster], 1948,

<http://www.manifestipolitici.it/SebinaOpacGramsci/.do?idopac=GRA0011203>, Accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>7</sup> Fortini Franco ‘Lettera ad amici di Piacenza’, in Fortini Franco, *L’ospite ingrato* (Bari, 1966), p. 92; the letter was originally written in 1961.



change”.<sup>8</sup> *Trasformismo*, conformism and familism remain the main features of Italian society and politics for several decades. The figures, on the other hand, move through the picture, some towards the background, others to the foreground. Politicians of the Partito Socialista Italiano (Italian Socialist Party, PSI) walked a long way from the systemic opposition to the bourgeois governments, alongside the Communists in the Popular Front in the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties, to the *champagne socialism* of the nineteen eighties. They were destroyed by the corruption scandal known as *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville/Kickback city), together with their best allies in the DC.

Rarely do figures disappear, but new ones enrich the picture. In the nineteen seventies a new generation of ambitious *bureaucrats* appeared from the ashes of the 1968 revolt, from the directive groups of the short-lived New Left political parties that were formed in those years. Less than two decades later they occupied cardinal roles within left-wing and right-wing mainstream parties, cultural industry, and the academy. This bleak picture is not enough to understand the Italian context in the decades after World War II, but it helps us in portraying some of the features against which Italian radical politics were set.

Social movement scholars often point out that radical movements born in the last decades of the twentieth century suffer from an automatic comparison with the nineteen sixties and 1968, which are often represented as “bigger than life”.<sup>9</sup> This is especially valid in the Italian case, where *1968* entailed across-the-board societal transformations, which lasted much longer than anywhere else in Europe and assumed very specific features.

From a global point of view, several layers of interpretations are encompassed within the category of 1968. Throughout the world a series of protests and campaigns exploded during and around this year, which were informed by democratic, socialist, and anarchist claims and

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<sup>8</sup>Tomasi di Lampedusa Giuseppe, *The Leopard* (London, 2007), p. 19; The first Italian edition was published in 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Katsiaficas George, ‘Preface’, p. IX

progressive, revolutionary and anti-authoritarian ambitions. The global challenge to the status quo of highly differentiated societies included issues such as racism, patriarchy, inequality, the class-divide, individual rights, and youth ambitions. Its polycentric nature meant that each local manifestation of the protest was inscribed within the same global *zeitgeist*, even if it carried very different content and form.

Following on from the interpretation of historian Diego Giachetti, the category of 1968 was *translated into Italian* in a two-decade-long process, from the beginning of the nineteen sixties to the end of the nineteen seventies.<sup>10</sup> It was one facet of the process of modernisation in the country. It was pushed forward by the economic and social transformations in the early nineteen sixties, such as the economic boom, the introduction of compulsory middle school and important internal migration flows on the South-North and countryside-city axes.

This is not the only interpretation of 1968 proposed. Even today, almost fifty years later, the greater part of the related literature is made up of memoirs and first-hand accounts written by the leaderships of the different groups created in that year. Leaderships made up of people that are still playing an important role in mainstream cultural and political public discourse in the country. As a consequence, this literature is afflicted by both suppression and censorship, “intentionally combining memories of the past and present status, [...] putting in place a psychological mechanism to defend identities”.<sup>11</sup> Within this mechanism, three processes have shaped a *polished* public image of the Italian 1968. Firstly, the student revolt is often analysed as an ‘event’, separated from what was before and – most importantly – from what came next. Secondly, the anti-capitalist, revolutionary contents of the students’ struggle are watered down, highlighting its generational, human and cultural aspects. Lastly, a contraposition is created “between a good ‘68 and bad organisations”,<sup>12</sup> where these, the New

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<sup>10</sup> Giachetti Diego, *Oltre il sessantotto* (Pisa, 1998)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13

Left parties, betrayed and corrupted the innovations and naivety of the Italian 1968, infecting it with old ideologies and violence. The events of the 1968 students' movement, lasted, according to this interpretation, the length of an academic year, from September to June, and then suddenly finished, depriving it of its diachronic breadth. This mechanism has important methodological and interpretative effects: the link between the students' movement and workers' struggles of the 'hot autumn' 1969 is broken, and with it also the link with the multifaceted experiences of the revolutionary galaxy of the nineteen seventies: 1968 and the violent *anni di piombo*<sup>13</sup> are completely separated. The 'event 1968' is thus flattened into a mono-dimensional interpretation as a progressive, democratic movement and a generational conflict that can easily be reprocessed into contemporary mainstream discourse.<sup>14</sup> This interpretation also has a second repercussion: a whole generation – ten years of political experience – is essentially negated. The nineteen seventies become the *anni di piombo*, the years of the 'opposed extremisms' of the terrorist groups of the far-left and far-right. The armed struggle, and especially the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades, BR), became the style, the brand, of the entire decade. The fervour of a decade, the plurality of situations, organisations, personal and collective stories and struggles remain hidden. The interpretation of 'opposed extremisms' recently acquired public notoriety, due the combined publications of several works supporting it and the focus of official public discourse on pacification, shared memory and victims. This interpretation, which attempts to equalise neo-fascist and far-left violence is, in the words of historian Aldo Giannuli:

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<sup>13</sup> *Anni di piombo* is a term widely used to describe the violent Seventies. It "derives from the Italian title given to a German film: Margarethe Von Trotta's *Die bleierne Zeit* – literally 'the leaden time' – shown at the Venice film festival in 1981. [...] It] is problematic in that the transition from the German adjective 'bleierne', intended to connote the 'leaden' weight of history, to the Italian noun 'piombo', with its clear metaphorical allusion to bullets, implicitly excludes the bombings characteristic of right-wing terrorism". Such effect is more evident in English-language literature. Paul Ginsborg used the even less metaphorical term 'years of the bullet', while other sources opted for a more literal 'lead years'. See: O'Leary Alan, *Tragedia all'Italiana. Italian Cinema and Italian Terrorisms, 1970-2000* (Bern, 2011), p. 8; Ginsborg, *A history of contemporary Italy*, pp. 348-405.

<sup>14</sup> Giachetti, *Oltre il sessantotto*; Bertante Alessandro, *Contro il '68. La generazione infinita* (Milano, 2007)

a rough historiographical falsification, proved wrong firstly by the numbers and secondly by the chronology: the fascists triggered the wave of violence; left-wing violence came next and was the reaction. [...] Nonetheless, for an objective reconstruction, we need to take into account the gradual increase in left-wing violence that would end in the adventure of the armed party.<sup>15</sup>

Returning to Giachetti's interpretation of a long-1968, the nineteen sixties saw an evolution of personal and collective behaviours, especially regarding the role of the youth and women within the family and in society, which was reflected in new lifestyles and cultural consumption – and production – patterns. The first countercultural groups – small but seminal minorities – appeared in large Italian cities, taking from the experiences of groups in Northern European countries, especially the *Provos* from the Netherlands, or overseas experiences, such as the North American beatniks.<sup>16</sup> Mainly through personal choices (clothing and haircuts, escapism, mystic spirituality, and the discovery and use of drugs as *psychedelic*<sup>17</sup> empowerment) these groups enacted the first attempts<sup>18</sup> at creating a juvenile micro-society based on egalitarianism and mutual solidarity, external and parallel to the adults' one. They were met with extreme hostility from mainstream media and local authorities, leading to explosions of “moral panic” throughout the decade. The *Corriere della sera*, the most read Italian newspaper, set the tone in 1965 and all major tabloids followed suit. Articles on the first Italian hippies expressed the discomfort felt by certain sectors of the population, but not without petty attention paid to the behaviour of girls and young women, described at the same time as prey of rapist *capelloni* ('mop-heads'), and sinful, luxurious, loose *ninfette* (nymphs), mixing a paternalist nostalgia of the 'good old times', patriarchal refusal of any expression of female autonomy, voyeurism and the sexual urges of respectable journalists and readers.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Giannuli Aldo, *Bombe a inchiostro*, (Milano, 2008), p.132

<sup>16</sup> De Martino Gianni, (ed.), *Capelloni & Ninfette. Mondo Beat 1966-1967. Storia, immagini, documenti* (Milano, 2008); Cartosio Bruno, *I lunghi anni 60* (Milano, 2002)

<sup>17</sup> Here used in its etymological meaning of perception, conscience widening and soul revealing.

<sup>18</sup> Outside the anarchist tradition of rural communes that dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

<sup>19</sup> Among many similar articles: Bugialli Paolo, 'Tempi duri per I capelloni che bivaccano a Trinità dei monti', *Corriere della Sera*, 6 November 1965, p. 3; Anonymous, *Raso al suolo dalla polizia il villaggio 'beat' di Nuova Barbonia*, *Corriere della Sera*, 13 June 67 p. 8; Also in: Grispigni Marco, 'Angeli fottuti. La gioventù

The publishing sector also saw a substantial increase in both production and readership. Up until the nineteen fifties the readership of books and journals was mostly composed of the wealthier and more educated part of the population. In addition, ideological censorship had severely curtailed the array of choice. With the dawn of the new decade, economic growth fostered the expansion in the spectrum of media and information, the diffusion of television, and the publication of new entertainment magazines and new newspapers. This growth especially effected the radical sector, with the introduction of foreign political literature for the first time, such as works by Fidel Castro, Ernesto Che Guevara, Algerian freedom fighters and others regarding the anti-colonial struggles throughout Africa, Asia and South America, but also about Communist dissents against the USSR regime, the Chinese cultural revolution, the civil rights movement and race struggles in the US, the social enquiries of Danilo Montaldi, the philosophical writings of the Frankfurt School, etc. A handful of magazines and journals also played a key role in providing the cultural background to the revolutionary Left of the following years. Among them, the *Quaderni Piacentini* and *Quaderni Rossi* were particularly important. Since the early nineteen sixties, *Quaderni Piacentini* (1962-1984) had been able to tune in to the desire for knowledge and the interests of the growing numbers of students and young workers, which in a few years “would inflame workplaces [and] neighbourhoods, but first of all echoed in the corridors of the universities”.<sup>20</sup> They published articles and dossiers about national and international social struggles, liberation processes, “feminism as a crucial political variable”<sup>21</sup> and new approaches to mental illness and the role of intellectuals. The magazine would frequently side with causes such as “wage rise demands [and] the Vietcong offensive towards Saigon, against ‘peaceful coexistence’ as a huge political

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senza 3M’, in De Martino, ed., *Capelloni & Ninfette*, pp.15-35

<sup>20</sup> Fofi, Giacomini, eds., *Prima e dopo il 68*, p. 11

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

control mechanism on a global scale [and] with the youth of Prague who drove the anti-Soviet revolt”.<sup>22</sup>

*Quaderni Rossi* (1961-1967) instead focused on the transformations of Italian capitalism and was one of the most significant journals of the Marxist Left. The *operaista* (workerist) strand of politics was conceptualised on the pages of this journal, driven by the urge of its editors to reinterpret Marx’s *Capital*. Among their ideas, the birth of a new generation of work force, the *operaio-massa* (mass-worker) – was especially significant. The mass-worker was young, with no memory of the war, recently immigrated to the northern industrial cities, scarcely politicised or unionised and immune to the ‘work ethic’ that saturated the working class of the previous years. This figure signalled the emergence of class struggle outside of traditional class agencies, such as parties and unions, setting the ground for the future development of the *Autonomia* groups.

Following almost two decades of social peace, the first industrial actions and urban riots took place at the beginning of the nineteen sixties, setting an important precedent for the years to come, but also acquiring an important role in the collective memory of the following generations of protesters. In 2010, Marco Philopat – a Milanese punk and cultural activist, involved in the social centres’ scene of the nineteen eighties – still recognised the protesters of the early nineteen sixties as political founding fathers. Referring to the ‘striped t-shirt kids’, as an iconic symbol of anti-fascist unrest from 1960 onwards,<sup>23</sup> he wrote:

I heard about them, for the first time in my life, when I was wearing with pride my black punk armour [in the early eighties]. [...] No point in saying that for us punks, who considered our clothes as one of the few tools to express rage and rebellion, those striped t-shirts were a precise indication of our future duties.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Paloscia Annibale, *Al tempo di Tambroni. Genova 1960, la Costituzione salvata dai ragazzi in maglietta a strisce* (Milano, 2005)

<sup>24</sup> Philopat Marco, ‘La strada bruciata delle magliette a strisce’, *Carmilla online*, 29 June 2010, <https://www.carmillaonline.com/2010/06/29/la-strada-bruciata-delle-magliette-a-strisce/>, accessed 1 February 2019

According to Giachetti's interpretation the long-1968 ended between the end of the nineteen seventies and the beginning of the nineteen eighties, when the capitalist response to the crisis – made up of the outsourcing, closure or de-escalation of major factories and the rise in industrial unemployment – reached its peak.

The scale of the events encompassed by those 20 years has filled hundreds of books and memoirs. The student revolt soon spread outside of the high schools and universities where it started. It gave energy to a season of highly participated in industrial mobilisation, dubbed the 'hot autumn', in 1969, which was characterised by important demands and innovative and aggressive methods. Several New Left organisations were formed as a result, which for several years occupied the political space to the left of the PCI and led to the flowering of local and national struggles on various issues.

The modalities of reaction to such events were also specific to the Italian context: in the afternoon of the 12<sup>th</sup> December 1969 a bomb exploded in the *Banca dell'Agricoltura*, Agricultural bank, in Piazza Fontana, in the very centre of Milan. Sixteen people died and eighty-eight were wounded. Around the same time other explosives detonated in Rome and one more unexploded bomb was found in another bank in Milan. With this episode, what became known as *strategia della tensione*,<sup>25</sup> the strategy of tension, had its first public outcome. It encompassed the different dimensions of the violent reactionary responses of neo-fascist groups, and a part of the military apparatus, to the rise of student and worker activism in 1968/69 and to the general shift to the Left within society from the beginning of the nineteen sixties: between 1969 and 1974 at least six bombings killed 46 people, leaving hundreds of wounded and a number of *coups d'états* were either planned or attempted. All such massacres were initially attributed to the far-left – especially anarchist groups – only to

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<sup>25</sup> Lanza Luciano, *Bombe e segreti* (Milano, 2009); Boatti Marco, *Piazza Fontana* (Milano, 2009); Dondi, *L'eco del boato* (Roma, 2017); Cento Bull Anna, *Italian Neofascism. The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Nonreconciliation* (New York, Oxford, 2008)

be later disproved during decades of enquiries. Each investigation was delayed, halted and sabotaged by elements within public institutions, in order to hide the role of far-right terrorist groups and their connections with the authorities. All of this quickly became the common heritage of the radical left. The Piazza Fontana massacre especially, has often been recalled in literature as the moment of the ‘loss of innocence’ for groups and individuals involved in revolutionary and anti-systemic politics: for the first time many people suddenly realised what was at stake, it became a point of no return. An authoritarian turn seemed suddenly more likely; the chances of a military takeover supported by the Greek Colonels seemed more real.

Moreover, the strategy of tension irreparably moved the conflict to a different level. Violent episodes had characterised both the students’ 1968 and the ‘workers’ autumn’. From the nineteen seventies on, all the New Left groups faced the problem of equipping themselves with ‘information and logistic’ structures.<sup>26</sup> With this locution such groups indicated, in different ways and with differentiated strategies, a covert apparatus dedicated to illegal actions. These could entail informative operations, the support of comrades hit by repression, the creation of safe-places, organising for the defence of the bases, the retrieval and holding of weapons, and the constitution of armed cells.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the strategy of tension triggered and accelerated a series of events and decisions that impacted upon the public life of the country for several decades. The biggest armed militant formation in Italy, the BR, identified the bombing of Piazza Fontana as one of the rationales behind the constitution of the group. More widely, after almost forty years of investigations, dozens of different trials, and parliamentary enquiries, still no one was definitely sentenced for any of the massacres, the strategy of tension became the symbol of the impunity of the ruling class, further

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<sup>26</sup>Grandi Aldo, *La generazione degli anni perduti: storie di potere operaio* (Milano, 2003), pp.102-145

<sup>27</sup> After the bombing in Piazza Fontana in Milan, the PCI and the PSI started to put in place defensive strategies to defend the party’s sections from possible attacks and to protect the life of its leadership.



impacting the already low level of trust held in law and order agencies and in the political system by the working people.

While the first social centres considered in this work were formed at the beginning of the nineteen eighties, other occupied social and political spaces – some also called social centres – were created during the last years of the nineteen seventies, especially in Milan. In general, the occupation of public spaces and public or private buildings for housing or political purposes did not begin in the nineteen seventies. It had always been one of the tools used by the workers' movement. The impact of the factory occupations during the *Two Red Years* of 1920-21 and of the land occupations in the struggles for land rights and for agrarian reforms, which took places in the South of Italy after the Second World War, is sufficient to signal the presence of *occupation* as a methodology of action for different actors. As discussed in chapter one, squatting for housing was not new either. The innovative features of the occupations started in the nineteen seventies were their overtly public nature and the demands they posed to local and national authorities as well as to the surrounding territory.

Defining the number of illegal occupations is generally difficult; the task is virtually impossible for the years before 1968, as occupations did not 'show off' as a visual break in the urban landscape – which is instead a prominent feature of later and contemporary squats – and they did not demand housing rights, functioning mainly as a temporary off-the-radar solution to primary housing needs.<sup>28</sup> On the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 1968 the *Hotel Commercio*, in the very centre of Milan, was occupied by high school and university students at the end of a demonstration. It was immediately renamed *Casa dello Studente* (Student's House), and then *Casa dello Studente e del Lavoratore* (House of the student and the worker, CSL). It hosted around 300 inhabitants throughout the nine months of its life. With a tactic that became popular in the next decades, police evicted the CSL in the early morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> of August

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<sup>28</sup> Olivieri Mauro, '1925-1981: La città abusiva', in Clementi, Perego, eds., *La metropoli spontanea*, pp.290-324

1969, when the city was empty for the summer holidays, universities were closed and only a small number of people were inside the CSL.

This experience was paradigmatic of the fast paced transformations apparent in radical politics, in youth behaviours and in the entirety of society. The occupation was organised by *fuorisede* students<sup>29</sup> and students housed in university accommodations. Their motivations were to be found in the leaflet distributed during the demonstration: “In Milan there are 2.300 spaces for more than 20.000 *fuorisede* students. More than 1.800 have monthly fees higher than 60.000 Lire and arrive to 110.000 Lire;<sup>30</sup> of 2.300 accommodations only 900 are publicly owned”.<sup>31</sup> It represented an important break in the students’ politics, for two main reasons: the CSL became the first student outpost external to the universities, and with this occupation students started ‘to take’, instead of asking for, what was within their rights.<sup>32</sup>

Some countercultural activists participated in the occupation of the CSL from its inception, influencing the first months of activities and the modalities of organisation and communication used. The occupation allowed students to denounce the housing situation in the city, and at the same time to show a solution: the creation of a new student housing project. The CSL took inspiration from previous countercultural experiences, such as rural communes and international living projects. The occupants organised themselves as a free youth community, which gave itself internal rules, organised every-day life and promoted cultural and political events.<sup>33</sup> Within a few months the composition and the affiliations of the inhabitants of the CSL changed: mirroring the students’ movement inside the universities, the identities of its different factions assumed a stronger role within the CSL. Divisions

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<sup>29</sup> *Fuorisede* are students frequenting a university far from their hometown.

<sup>30</sup> The contractual minimum wage for factory workers was around 100.000 lira per month in the same year: Istituto Centrale di Statistica, ‘16 –Lavoro, 2 – Retribuzioni’, in Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Annuario statistico Italiano 1969* (Roma, 1969), pp. 319-327

<sup>31</sup> Natale Giuseppe, ‘L’occupazione dell’hotel commercio’, *Quaderni Piacentini*, 38 (1969) p. 21

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Natale Giuseppe, ‘Il ‘68 all’hotel commercio’, *Il manifesto*, 31 January 2009:

<https://cittastudi.noblogs.org/post/2009/02/12/il-68-all-hotel-commercio/>, accessed 1 February 2019

increased, while the space for the anti-authoritarianism and the left-libertarianism of the countercultural groups was drastically eroded. The CSL is an interesting lens through which to observe the passage from the nineteen sixties to the nineteen seventies: from the existential revolt, already partially politicised, to the hard-line ‘ideologisation’ of the New Left groups; from the students’ movement to the prioritisation of workers’ struggles, through to the decline of the students as the main political subject and the relationships built between students’ and workers’ grass-roots organisations.

From 1968 and throughout the following decade, the housing movement increased in strength and scope throughout country. Images from these struggles remain among the most iconic symbols of the nineteen seventies in Italy. Tenants unions and neighbourhood committees were created; tens of thousands of flats were occupied, often several nearby buildings and even whole streets; demonstrations and bills’ strikes were organised and anti-eviction watches fought against private and public bailiffs and security forces. The political aim of such occupations was clear in one of the most used slogans: ‘Taking the city’. As two radical magazines of the early nineteen seventies put it, occupations are not simply a way to achieve housing security but also – and mainly – a spanner in the works of capitalist control of the urban environment:

We have a program. [...] *Take the city* is a general rallying cry. It is not a tool to work in the neighbourhoods [...], it is the actual way to give a political scope and a meaning to two years of autonomous workers’ struggles, to the reprisal of the students’ struggle, to the struggling ferment in the neighbourhoods.<sup>34</sup>

The rent strike must no longer be understood as a strike to defend our wages, but [...] as an attack on the power structure [...].<sup>35</sup>

The occupation of the CSL was both a means and an end, paving the way for a large housing movement throughout the following years. The occupied building was also a means of expression: banners and flags waved outside the windows, slogans were written on the walls;

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<sup>34</sup> Anonymous, ‘Contro i padroni, fascisti, Dalle masse alle masse’ *Lotta Continua*, 11 December 1970, p. 3

<sup>35</sup> Anonymous, ‘untitled’, *Sinistra proletaria*, 1-2, September/October 1970, p. 11: APM

several political and cultural ethos mixed in what was defined as the largest commune in Europe.<sup>36</sup> Several features of the CSL returned in the occupation of social centres in the late nineteen seventies, bringing some observers to describe it as the first social centre, or as the closest ancestor to modern social centres: the attempt to combine in the same space countercultural inputs, a radical politics' agenda and an immediate answer to material needs; the *detournement* of a portion of the urban fabric in opposition to the social order of the city; and the visual transformation of the urban landscape – the facade of a building turned into a political manifesto – to mark this opposition. Nonetheless and more importantly, the CSL and future social centres came out of very different societal conditions. At the end of the nineteen sixties future prospects and possibilities were perceived as rapidly expanding: the employment rate was growing, both social and economic structural transformations were underway, more seemed to be achievable and the revolution was 'just around the corner'.

A few years later, between May 1975 and March 1977 around fifty *centri sociali autogestiti*, self-managed social centres, and *centri del proletariato giovanile*, young proletarians clubs (from now on, simply 'clubs'), were squatted in Milan, forcing other political actors to recognise them as an unstable but widespread presence in the urban landscape. While still immersed in the climate of the revolutionary struggles of the nineteen seventies, these occupations were one of the responses to the economic and political crisis that followed the 1973-1975 global recession. Centres and clubs came forth as one of the most innovative aspects of the emergence of territories as battlefields of social struggle: a moment of resistance against the introduction of austerity measures and the exploitation of urban space and public and private lives.<sup>37</sup> They represented a sector of the unemployed and the precariously employed youth, who had rapidly emerged and became the main political actors in the struggles during the last years of the decade. As participation in workers' struggles

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<sup>36</sup> Moroni, Martin, *La luna sotto casa*, pp. 123-127

<sup>37</sup> Cecchi et al., eds., *Centri sociali autogestiti e circoli giovanili*.

decreased, the ‘social’ became the field where “proletarian autonomy articulate[d] its most innovative initiatives, with the direct re-appropriation of house, city, territory, refusing its exchange value and imposing its own value in use”<sup>38</sup>. In other words, these processes were new models of struggle against the expropriation of territories and services: the rise in prices of houses and utilities, the expulsion of poorer strata of society towards the peripheries, the reduction of the welfare system and public services, etc. This was, for many observers, the first wave of social centres in Italy. Social centres in this period were limited to Milan, while clubs were present in several other major cities, but still held Milan as their epicentre, as here there was a greater diffusion and range of activities.

Both centres and clubs were essentially urban, encompassing the sprawl of the cities outside of their administrative borders – the hinterland. Clubs spread to a much wider territory, with a prominence in the extreme peripheries, the dormitory-boroughs, the workers’ ghettos of the city. The only club in the centre of Milan was the *commune* in the Brera neighbourhood, home to *Viola*, the club’s magazine and to the ‘centre for the fight against heroin’, a short-lived attempt to create a headquarters for the movement. Social centres were instead mainly squatted within the boundaries of the administrative city. The biggest presence was in the south western boroughs, especially the *Ticinese* neighbourhood, where a network of housing squats and radical left political sections had already been built. A second group was situated in the north eastern section of the city, the area that connected the centre with *Sesto San Giovanni*, the ‘Italian Stalingrad’, and which was comprised of the neighbourhoods with the highest density of factory workers.

Centres and clubs had particular features that distinguished the former from the latter. In general, the centres were structures linked to entities and organisations of the radical left, which were already active in the urban landscape (parties and groups of the New Left, grass

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 13

roots unions, tenants associations, groups of the *Autonomia*). The clubs were instead an expression of those youth groups that did not fit within the radical politics movements which had developed in the years after 1968. Centres were on average located in bigger spaces, many of them occupying industrial buildings fallen into disuse. They had a much wider composition in terms of age, but were often tighter in terms of ideological cohesion. Clubs found their home in smaller buildings, shop fronts, offices, etc. They focused their political action on the issues strictly related to the living conditions of the youth, while the ethos of social centres was to focus outwards, towards the surrounding social fabric and the whole city. In practice the demarcation lines were of course more blurred, as identity processes were very dynamic and unstable. The two paths could ‘meet’ in several ways, as two different entities within the same occupation, but succeeding each other in the management of a squatted building, when the energy of one project (most commonly a social centre) ran out and was replaced (by a club).

The sources analysed suffer this same difficulty: some of the primary sources produced by the clubs used both terms indiscriminately, media coverage, from both mainstream and radical media, was ambivalent in the terms uses as well, frequently adopting self-chosen labels, or stretching the meaning of one of the two terms to cover the whole scene of squatted social spaces. The few contemporary secondary sources available are no different: where the focus was on social centres, clubs were mentioned *en passant*, as something similar but unconnected: as an example the first (and only) comprehensive analysis of Milanese social centres of the nineteen seventies intentionally never used the name *circoli del proletariato*. They were nonetheless described and harshly criticised as minor centres “whose life was all-internal, revolved inward [and that managed] to establish only abstract and mediated relationships with the outside”.<sup>39</sup> The divide was, however, highlighted in later secondary

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 50

sources, most of them written no earlier than the nineteen nineties, when social centres acquired a very different role and thus a specific interest. Most centres and all clubs did not survive the end of the decade. Those that did suffered the collapse of their collective identity. The centres that were squatted during the nineteen eighties in part turned to them for inspiration, but mainly looked abroad for more actual and up-to-date examples to follow.<sup>40</sup>

Such occupations signalled important transformations in the urban fabric of Milan: the processes of urban renovation which had started in the nineteen fifties were established. By the end of the nineteen seventies the concentric circles of the inner Roman Walls, the Spanish Walls, the *circonvallazioni* (ring roads) and the *tangenziali* (orbital road) coincided with class divisions between the inhabitants. The *coree* and the informal housing settlements at the outskirts of the city, which had been created during the time of mass migration towards the industrial North in the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties, had been absorbed, destroyed, or pushed even further out by the growth of the city. New and old towns had surrounded Milan, expanding – often seamlessly - the urban landscape. The administrative area of Milan reached its peak in resident population in 1971 (1,732,068, 36% more than in 1951), a number that has decreased constantly ever since (1,604,884 in 1981). The increment was even higher if observed from the point of view of the whole of the Metropolitan Area, which included 133 towns in close proximity to Milan: 3,087,296 in 1971 (+60% than in 1951) and 3,139,490 in 1981.<sup>41</sup> The growth of this urban belt was a consequence of the expulsion of sectors of the working class to outside of the city limits<sup>42</sup> and it was not accompanied by adequate housing solutions: in peripheral neighbourhoods huge social housing projects were still underway for most of the nineteen seventies, while the average cost of rent and bills constantly rose.

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<sup>40</sup> De Sario Beppe, *Resistenze innaturali: attivismo radicale nell'Italia degli anni '80* (Milano, 2009); Philopat Marco, *Costretti a sanguinare. Racconto urlato sul punk* (Milano, 2016)

<sup>41</sup> Istat data from Census conducted every ten years, elaborations of: [www.tuttaitalia.it](http://www.tuttaitalia.it), 1 February 2019

<sup>42</sup> Moroni, Martin, *La luna sotto casa*, pp. 133-142

Although the dynamics of urbanisation in Rome took a different route than they had in Milan, the new decade signalled similar changes. Throughout the far-reaching peripheries new ‘borough committees’ and new forms of struggle gave new ferment to the housing movement. Here, the housing movement had already started a series of disputes in the nineteen sixties regarding the infringement of urban planning schemes and the indecent living conditions in the *borgate*. The main innovation brought by such struggles consisted of a widening of the action repertoire of the subjects involved and of a transformation of the same subjects and their political allegiances. Up until then, local agencies of the Communist and Socialist parties had headed and controlled these disputes, with a variety of actions that ranged from demonstrations and the symbolic occupation of buildings, to the self-reduction of rents and institutional pressure on local councils. In the nineteen seventies, new collectives and committees radicalised these struggles. The occupation of buildings was no longer symbolic: mass-occupations of hundreds of flats were organised by one or more groups in several peripheral neighbourhoods. The self-reduction of rents was extended to utilities, expanded in percentage of reduction (often to more than 50%, while before it was kept between 10%-30%), and safeguarded through collective rent deliveries, patrols against evictions and against the cutting off of utilities and the residents direct access to junction boxes and counters.<sup>43</sup> As with the workers’ struggles, the housing movement was an important environment for the encounter and the cooperation between New Left organisations and strata of the urban *excluded*. Women, young people, blue-collar workers, artisans, and third-sector workers were connected through these collective actions, widening the sphere of influence of these groups and spreading their rallying cries. The aesthetic of the urban landscape changed swiftly, as the model of the house-manifesto spread across the city. Wall-painted slogans and banners

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<sup>43</sup> Lajolo Anna, Lombardi Guido, Leonardi Alfredo, *La nostra lotta è l'autoriduzione, la nostra forza è l'organizzazione* [Documentary] (1972); Lajolo, Lombardi Leonardi, *Il fitto dei padroni non lo paghiamo più* [Documentary] (1972); *Quartieri popolari di Roma* [Documentary] (1974): documentaries from the group of militant cinema Videobase



became a common feature. The large community of Chilean and Argentinean refugees, who had arrived in Italy in the early nineteen seventies, had brought over the South American tradition of *murales*.<sup>44</sup> Large collective graffiti projects were discussed and realised with neighbourhood committees.

As mentioned, after 1975, the Italian industrial system suffered the effects of the 1973 global crisis. This meant a drastic growth in unemployment, especially for young people and women, and the introduction of austerity measures aimed at reducing welfare system expenditure as a starting point for the process of demoting factory work from its position as the centrepiece of the Italian capitalist economy that culminated in the nineteen eighties. Radical politics changed as well, following the loss of the centrality of industrial action and transformed by the emergence of new political actors (women, young workers, informal workers and the unemployed), the expansion of contentious issues and the proliferation of the arenas of class struggle from the *loci* of production to the ones of social institutions. Within such a perspective, territory – especially urban territory – was interpreted as a structural factor in a capitalist organisation, as the arena for new expressions of class struggle and, in itself, as a political actor.<sup>45</sup> Groups of students, factory workers, the unemployed, squatters, *Indiani metropolitani* (metropolitan Indians) and feminists comprised the multifaceted autonomist movement that attempted the *assault to the sky* in 1977 and disappeared soon after, hit by the combination of hard-handed repression, the pandemic diffusion of heroin and a drastic ebb in participation.

This autonomist underworld was everything but homogeneous, divided into political strands and regional alliances. While it had originated as a network of workplace organisations, the *Autonomia Operaia*, it had expanded far outside the workplace, into a ‘diffuse’ galaxy of

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<sup>44</sup> Guarnaccia Matteo, Ascari Giancarlo, *Quelli che milano*, (Milano, 2010). Page numbers are absent, the quotation is taken from the chapter “O - Occupazioni”

<sup>45</sup> Cecchi et al, eds., *Centri sociali autogestiti*, pp. 5, 30

independent collectives, active on different issues.<sup>46</sup> Hundreds these groups were formed across the whole country in the space of a few years. A strong thematic and/or territorial specificity characterised each of them, in spite of a search for a wider and more general identity. Theoretical innovations included the abandonment of the discourse over the ‘seizure of power’, as such power was now interpreted as poly-centric and scattered throughout society, and a new focus on “difference”, instead of on a rigid identity-building process. This was translated into practice with the demotion of the concept of long-term struggle and the prioritisation of direct action in order to satisfy immediate needs and desires: squatting for housing and for social spaces, the appropriation of goods through ‘proletarian expropriations’, income defence through the self-reduction of rents, utilities and public services’ tariffs; time re-appropriation through the reduction of working time in the workplace. Rigid state institutions were bypassed on a social level, more than confronted politically. The ‘localist’, minimalist and ‘minoritarian’ ethos that seemed so powerful on specific issues and local territories lacked the tools to coordinate different situations and confront the state on a more general level.<sup>47</sup>

The surfacing of such innovations recalls descriptions of the ‘new social movements’, usually used in reference to the nineteen eighties and nineteen nineties: *new* because they were detached from the traditions of contentious and radical politics, ‘rhizomatic’ in structure, focused on the empowerment of differences rather than on the building of rigid identities, localised and specialised. Italian *Autonomia* – or at least a part of it – can be seen as anticipating the forms and contents of those autonomous groups which developed in Northern Europe in the following decades. On the other hand, while ‘new social movements’ are often

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<sup>46</sup> Wright Steve, ‘A party of autonomy?’, *Libcom*, 23 July 2005, <https://libcom.org/library/party-autonomy-steve-wright>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>47</sup> Bianchi Sergio, Caminiti Lanfranco (eds.), *Gli Autonomi (III Volumes)* (Roma, 2007, 2007, 2009); Cuninghame Patrick Gun, *Autonomia: a movement of refusal: social movements and social conflict in Italy in the 1970's*, PhD, Middlesex University, 2002; Borio Guido, Pozzi Francesca, Roggero Gigi, *Futuro anteriore : dai "Quaderni rossi" ai movimenti globali: ricchezze e limiti dell'operaismo italiano* (Roma, 2002)

indicated to be single-issue and highly specialised, for the groups of the *Autonomia* such ‘specialisation’ was firmly inset within a wider – if somewhat vague – Marxist revolutionary framework.

Among the expansion of radical politics’ arenas, feminism and a new countercultural wave played a major role within the centres’ and clubs’ scene of the nineteen seventies and for the years to come. They both worked towards the reconciliation of the ‘personal’ with the ‘political’, as in the introduction of political – revolutionary – awareness into the spheres of private life which were often left untouched: with a focus on relationships between genders for the feminists, and lifestyle and consumption for the countercultural activists.

As the subordination of women had been perpetuated in the students’ and the workers’ movements,<sup>48</sup> the space for the extra-systemic ethos of the countercultures was forcibly reduced by the rise of such movements in 1968. The pivotal issue was that New Left militants were not willing – or able – to interpret the conflicts brought forward by these groups as “a variable of the main contradiction between Capital and Labour”,<sup>49</sup> and identified everything that did not revolve around those variables as ‘intimist’, individualist and bourgeois practices, a diversion from the ‘real’ struggle. Feminism erupted within New Left organisations and groups of the Autonomy, producing internal clashes that were always harsh and sometimes violent. Contrasts with the feminist component signalled an important crisis for many such groups and brought others to their dissolution.

Countercultural groups had survived as an undercurrent since 1968, balancing existential and political ethoses. The transformations that took place around 1975 opened up new space for less sectarian and ideological positions, and countercultures were able to resurface as the

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<sup>48</sup> Moroni, Balestrini, *L’Orda d’oro: 1968-1977*, p. 469

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 479

‘creative wing’ of the diffuse *Autonomia* and as an important component of social centres and clubs.

This new connection influenced the forms of political communication developed around 1977. Free radio stations grew up in different cities and a new wave of comic-book authors started publishing stories and strips in the numerous underground and political magazines. Thousands of sheets, zines, periodicals and a-periodicals were published in the second half of the nineteen seventies. Some publications continued for years, others were abandoned after the first issue. Codes and languages were changing at high speed and the traditional forms of political expression used by the radical left aged and became anachronistic. As political actors and repertoires were changing, neither could the language remain the same: “The languages of activism blended with ‘freak’ behaviours [...]. Until then everything flowed in perfect waterbeds, a revolutionary communist was a thing, a *hippy* was another. Everything blended”.<sup>50</sup>

New languages allowed for new freedom of expression, which was reflected in new topics and themes. New magazines hosted articles about local and national demonstrations beside articles on feminism and gay rights, new countercultures, struggles against nuclear energy and the first mentions of radical ecology. Languages and topics developed hand-in-hand: new phenomena that could not be interpreted through traditional schemes needed and found new forms of expression.

As Umberto Eco recognised in 1977,

the ‘generation of the Year Nine’ (Seventy-Seven minus Sixty-Eight) communicated with the voice of desire, a form of communication, which “circulates, produces, transforms and ‘liberates the desire’. [...] It] means denying reason, morals, sense, politics, it means talk about the irrational that lies under everybody’s skin.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Infante Carlo, ‘77, i presagi della mutazione futura’, *DeriveApprodi*, 15 (1997), <http://www.urbanexperience.it/linizio-della-fine/>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>51</sup> Eco Umberto, ‘Comunicazione sovversiva nove anni dopo il Sessantotto’, *Corriere della Sera*, 25 February

This irrationality destroyed given codes, and language became a subversive practice in itself<sup>52</sup>

The peak of this practice was reached in 1977, mainly by those groups and collectives which revolved around *A/Traverso* and the free radio *Radio Alice*, both based in Bologna. These groups were overtly aware of the centrality of cultural experimentation, defined as a *creative guerrilla* that was pivotal to any form of expression. The Milanese clubs never reached this level of cultural awareness, but from the pages of their magazines and fanzines it is possible to discover similar practices. Many of the publications of those years – sheets, zines and magazines – signalled a separation with the written production of traditional groups, which was both visual and thematic. The legacy of these magazines influenced the punk fanzine, the primary means of communication for the punk scene of the early nineteen eighties, and for the very first social centres of that decade.

## **2.2 ‘The end of the world as we know it’: from the nineteen seventies to the nineteen eighties**

Industrial reorganisation, the diffusion of heroin, the rise of armed violence, hard-handed repression and crisis combined to epitomise the end of the decade and of the end of a two-decade-long season of hopes for societal and political structural transformation.

A short tale, written by two ex-militants of *Rosso*, a Milanese group of the *Autonomia Organizzata*, describes a demonstration held on the 12<sup>th</sup> March 1977 as “those shots that killed the movement”,<sup>53</sup> and exemplifies the ambiguities, choices and difficulties posed by the armed struggle to many militants and activists – even from some of the groups that were more willing to use violent means as a political tool:

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1977

<sup>52</sup> Eco Umberto, ‘C’è un’altra lingua: l’Italo-Indiano’, *L’Espresso*, 14 (1977), pp.34-35

<sup>53</sup> Tommei Franco, Pozzi Paolo, ‘*Quegli spari che uccisero il movimento a Milano*’, *il manifesto*, 26 February 1987, p. 5

In 1977 it was already over, all that was left was uncertainty, broken militants about to demobilise or being tempted by the 'jump' into the armed struggle.

In the dynamics of the demonstration at the *Assolombarda*, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, in the discussions over which path to take and which targets to aim for, in the twitching succession of events, it is possible to see the impoverishment of the movement and the imminent diaspora.

*Between the lines* it is possible to read the opposition between the violence [...] of the movement and the 'war discourse' that will become typical of armed organisations.

[...] That march wasn't cheerful or happy, at all. Angry faces, pissed off.

Pockets were full of bottles, and you could sense or knew about weapons hidden under the coats. In a city centre totally empty and full of fear the march moved forward looking for targets.

[...] In the meantime over the heads the usual mottos full of rage and bitterness.

The hands of a few held in the air to symbolise a gun.

We, from *Rosso*, were not really ready [...].

But how could you stay away from a demo in '77? And thus: there, inside with the others.

[...] At the crossing with *Corso Monforte* the march stopped abruptly.

We moved quickly to reach the front.

And in front of us there was the Prefecture surrounded by units of Carabinieri armed with Winchester shotguns.

Among the spokespeople of the autonomous groups, a murmured talk. They asked if we from *Rosso* agreed with assaulting the Prefecture, by any means necessary.

It took a second to understand that everything we did to make *illegality* a part of the movement was about to turn against the movement itself: the use of violence was no longer connected to a conflictual and aggressive negotiation, but was about to become the sole domain of those who wanted to leave any chance of political work behind and to choose the side of armed fight and clandestinity.

But in that moment, the need was *to give a way out to that illegality*, different from the prefecture but equally violent [...] avoiding the lethal clash with the Carabinieri.

«We from *Rosso* want to demonstrate at the *Assolombarda*, one of the reasons we are here today is the protest of the workers against the Marelli factory reorganisation.

We don't agree with an attack towards the state, it's not in the interests of the *Autonomia*.» «Don't you see the shotguns of the *Carabinieri*, it's crazy!» [...]

Finally the march moved.

[...] We had arrived at a dead end.

How to get out of it? But we were already running in the wrong direction, escaping what most of us that day didn't want to happen.

[...] Finally in front of the *Assolombarda*.

Against that empty palace with its glass windows, we threw everything we had.

Molotov cocktails a go-go, guns and rifle shots.

And the windows of the *masters' house* came down so well.

«Burn boy, burn!» we felt it inside.

That was the last attempt in Milan to link the subversive aspects of the movement with the organised groups of the Autonomia, which soon enough would die, gripped between repression and militarisation.

It was the last march in which we showed the highest level of conflict and armament, without attacking people.

Two months later, during a demonstration against the repression, [police] agent Custrà was killed: the side of armed fight had won within the movement.<sup>54</sup>

The year 1977 represented the last highly participated in series of protests of the decade, with dozens of demonstrations in many large Italian cities, especially Rome and Bologna, where two demonstrators were shot and killed by police and *Carabinieri*, exacerbating situations that were already tense. Armed struggle was becoming more appealing to many militants both young and old. Around 13 of the 47 active armed left-wing organisations between 1969 and 1989, were founded between 1976 and 1979.<sup>55</sup>

The state responded by tightening already existing laws and introducing new ‘emergency laws’, which suspended the basic rights of people accused of terrorism-related crimes and were used to suppress any form of dissent: the creation of special task-forces within law enforcement agencies for terrorism and political crimes, the extension of police powers, the creation of new ‘special’ prisons, and the legalisation of preventative detention were among the provisions introduced by such laws. By the mid- nineteen eighties 40,000 people had been prosecuted for crimes related to left-wing political violence during the nineteen seventies; 15,000 people had been arrested; 6,000 sentenced.<sup>56</sup> Several claims were made against Italian authorities due to the lack of defendants’ rights and the use of torture by

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> VA, *Progetto Memoria. Vol. 1. La mappa perduta* (Roma, 1994) p. 15

<sup>56</sup> Moroni, Balestrini, *L’Orda d’oro*, p.15

security forces.<sup>57</sup> Especially after the kidnapping and the killing of ex-PM Aldo Moro, the most notorious action of the BR, a new narrative took hold: “the ‘evil’ 1977 movement [was] a tragic epilogue and a degeneration of the ‘good’ 1968”.<sup>58</sup> The radical left was repeatedly purported to be a unified whole, and as such all were responsible for the violence of the armed groups, being either terrorists or terrorists’ supporters. In such a climate, the ‘terrorist’ label strengthened the separation between the radical left and the rest of society. It was from these narratives that the nineteen seventies acquired their negative features in popular memory: they became the decade of excess, brutality and violence, where ‘it was not safe to go out’; they became years of ‘opposed extremisms’, *anni di piombo*.

At the same time, heroin diffusion increased exponentially. While the first recorded death caused by heroin use was registered in 1974, by the end of the decade heroin users were counted between 100,000 and 200,000. The expansion of the heroin market and the ebb of participation in radical politics at the end of the nineteen seventies have been linked in various studies to explain the high number of young (ex-)activists who started to be addicted to the substance. The ‘lost generation’, as it became known, was living through the drastic decline of politicisation and radical perspectives in a context of institutional repression, the polarisation of the armed struggle, economic stagnation and the rise of unemployment. Radical politics had in the end failed to offer collective solutions to the younger generation who grew up during the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies. As it was recognised by the activists of the Milanese clubs, “heroin takes over among those who feel social contradictions more drastically and more lucidly: young proletarians who shoot up were – and are – potentially revolutionary. And among those who shoot up there are comrades in crisis”.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> VA, *Progetto memoria. Vol. 4. Le torture affiorate*, (Roma, 1998)

<sup>58</sup> Mudu Pierpaolo, Piazza Gianni, ‘Not only Riflusso’, in Andersen, van Der Steen, eds., *A European youth revolt*, p. 113

<sup>59</sup> VA, *Sarà un risotto che vi seppellirà. Materiali di lotta dei circoli del proletariato giovanile* (Milano, 1978), p. 52



Studies have highlighted this connection between the frustration of revolutionary ideals and the diffusion of heroin in both Italy and Spain,<sup>60</sup> showing the proportional prevalence of heroin consumption among disaffected young militants.<sup>61</sup> The safest option for many was to return to a *normal* private life that had been strenuously fought against until then.

As explained, the birth of the first social centres was inscribed within this cycle. They were a response to a crisis of the models of radical politics which developed throughout the nineteen sixties and which became prevalent in the years after 1968. Social centres of the nineteen eighties and nineteen nineties retain some similarities with those of the previous decade, but are more the social product of the *tabula rasa* of the early nineteen eighties, of the dramatic failings of the generation of 1968, and represent an attempt to rebuild radical politics from scratch.

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<sup>60</sup> M. Suanes Larena, *Plantant cara al sistema, sembrant les llavors del canvi*, Arola Editors, Tarragona, 2010, p.34. Translated in Cattaneo Claudio, Tudela Enrique, 'Beyond Desencanto', in Andresen, van Der Steen, eds., *A European Youth revolt*, p.133

<sup>61</sup>Mudu, Piazza, 'Not only Riflusso', p. 114

## Chapter 3. ENGLAND IN THE NINETEEN SEVENTIES.

### DECLINE AND ‘DECLINISM’.

“Testing, testing, 1, 2, 3”: Roland Rat speaks on a microphone.

Margaret Thatcher sits on a digger; someone loses while playing *space invader*; KITT, the super-car in the Knight Rider TV series drives through a desert.

A block of council flats; a group of skins walking up a staircase; a Rod Stewart concert and people dancing in a club; aerobics sessions on TV; a punk concert; the royal marriage between Prince Charles and Diana Spencer.

A palace demolition; the explosion of a flash bomb on one of the balconies of the Iranian embassy in London during the 1980 siege; fences pulled down at the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp; the Rubik’s cube being solved; a bike cross event; more videogames.

Margaret Thatcher in front of a computer, a music CD production machine; confrontations between miners and the police at the Orgreave Colliery in 1984; a march from the British National Party; racist attacks against Asian people; urban night clashes; three skinheads wrap themselves in the Union Jack; a large brawl breaks out among skins in a pub.

The British army marching in Northern Ireland, Margaret Thatcher on a war ship, scenes of war in the Falklands, a joint press conference of Thatcher and Reagan.

The first page of *The Sun* announcing that “Britain’s backing Maggie”; Maggie *testing* an army helicopter; wounded British soldiers in the Falklands.<sup>1</sup>

Against the musical backdrop of The Toots and the Maytals, Shane Meadows depicts in only three minutes an impression of The United Kingdom at the height of the nineteen eighties, mixing popular culture, national politics and international crisis. Margaret Thatcher returns frequently, highlighting the decidedly divisive nature of her mandates and of her very figure. Social conflict had reached new peaks; waves of riots opened and closed the decade, a year-long industrial action attempted to prevent the collieries from closing, and new forms of youth protest erupted within the larger Northern European youth revolt, which had in part been anticipated by the Italian 1977 movement.<sup>2</sup> Unlike in the nineteen seventies, these young people were met with an ideologically renovated repressive system. Unlike in the nineteen seventies, the perception of defeat was clear.

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<sup>1</sup> Description of the opening sequence of: Meadows, Shane, *This in England* [Film], (UK, 2006). The soundtrack of the sequence is: Toots and the Maytals, ‘54-46 That’s my number’ (Beverly’s, 1968)

<sup>2</sup> Adresen, Van Der Steen, eds., *A European youth revolt*

In contrast to Italy, English social centres situated themselves outside of the workers' movement. There, the distance between youth protests and workers' struggles was mediated by the highly pervasive role of revolutionary ideology, which broadly covered the political space to the left of the Communist Party. Here, a stronger divide separated youth protests and workers' struggles: the low appeal of traditional classist ideologies for the younger generation and the relative weakness of renewed radical Marxist strands had strengthened the extra-systemic attitude of the strong countercultural traditions in place since the nineteen sixties. The British social and political environment had traditionally been a difficult terrain for Marxist and revolutionary ideologies and for political groups too closely associated with them.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, far-left organisations had continued to exist at the margins of the workers' movement and the Labour Party.<sup>4</sup> During the nineteen seventies and in the first years of the nineteen eighties, new and old countercultures met and mixed, were transformed by contamination from portions of the anarchist movement and were 'complexified' by both urban and rural social movements, such as squatters and travellers. Within large metropolitan areas this created a breeding ground for the formation of the first social centres.

As was noted, the most widespread interpretation of the nineteen seventies depicted the decade as a time of crisis and turmoil. Such a representation was set within a long-standing tradition of declinism, that saw, in the decades after World War II, a constant and unavoidable decline from previous imperial grandeur. The nineteen seventies thus became "the end point of a century-long period of national decline, mismanagement, and retreat of which the years since 1945 had been the worst of all".<sup>5</sup> While economic performance was undoubtedly poorer

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<sup>3</sup>McKibbin Ross, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', *The English Historical Review*, 99, 391, 1984, pp. 297–331

<sup>4</sup> See: Smith Evan, Worley Matthew, eds. *Against the grain. The British far left from 1956* (Manchester, New York, 2014)

<sup>5</sup>Cannadine David, 'Apocalypse When? British Politicians and British 'decline' in the Twentieth Century', in Clarke Peter, Trebilcock Clive, eds., *Understanding Decline* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 276

than in previous years, the deep similarity with the conditions of other Western European countries had to be ignored in order to reinforce the idea of British singularity.

The end of the affluent years had proved to many working class people that the governments' claims to a classless society were invalid. While there had been improvements in material conditions, and many policies had benefited the most disadvantaged through the development of the welfare system, working class aspirations were halted by higher taxes and wage restraints.<sup>6</sup> Despite such difficulties, and the growth of divisions within working class organisations, the nineteen seventies witnessed an increase in the number of industrial actions and their scope. Also, the global wave of protests at the end of the nineteen sixties fostered the formation of several new groups of what was defined as the 'independent left', which proceeded to overtake the traditional formations on the left of the Labour Party in popularity,<sup>7</sup> to the extent that Tariq Ali could state in 1972 that the "revolutionary left groups as a whole" were the only way forward and the only "real alternative to capitalist policies".<sup>8</sup> Among this surge in participation there were varied and often contrasting groups: non-conforming Marxists, left-libertarians, single-issue campaigns, direct-action movements, etc. Women's liberation, gay rights, anti-colonialism, nuclear disarmament, and housing rights were among the previously repressed issues and concerns that now became prominent. Foreign examples of radicalism, countercultures, situationism and the squatting tradition widened the tactics of these new groups. Within a few years, such glorious hopes had turned into a much less optimistic attitude. If, as Eric Hobsbawm famously noted, the long march of the labour movement had come to a halt by the end of the nineteen seventies,<sup>9</sup> it can be argued that a much more multifaceted and complex, if more isolated, youth underworld had emerged.

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<sup>6</sup>Black, *Britain since the seventies*, pp. 119-124

<sup>7</sup> Smith Evan, Worley Matthew, 'Introduction: the far left in Britain from 1956', in Smith Evan, Worley Matthew, eds. *Against the grain. The British far left from 1956*, pp.1-24

<sup>8</sup> Ali Tariq, *The Coming British Revolution* (London, 1972) p. 10, quoted in Smith, Worley, 'Introduction', p. 1

<sup>9</sup> Hobsbawm Eric, 'The forward march of Labour halted?', *Marxism Today*, 22, September 1978, pp. 279-286

### 3.1 Unlawful but not illegal: squatting in England

While having deep roots in English history, the starting point for modern squatting can be found in the first broadcast of *Cathy Come Home*, a BBC television play aired for the first time in November 1966. This television drama has been cited in several sources as a symbol of a change in values and in the new perception of issues such as homelessness and unemployment, which were widespread but seldom discussed. 12,000,000 people were reported to have watched the show, one fourth of the population. The impact it had on the audience was unprecedented and it had repercussions on society as a whole. It was raised in Parliament by the then housing minister; the charity Crisis was founded following its broadcast and it led, in part, to the abolition of the *no husband allowed* policy of many homeless hostels, stopping a practice that had divided thousands of families.<sup>10</sup>

The first showing had stirred people; everyone, but everyone, suddenly cared for the homeless [...]. Housing had always been part of every politician's platform, particularly at election time, they had always cared and for years they had promised action, but with *Cathy* they all became even more 'concerned' in their speeches and made even more promises. Politicians of all parties fell over themselves and each other in the rush to express their interest in the problem of homelessness.<sup>11</sup>

Despite increasing awareness, the creation of charities and politician's promises, the housing crisis only worsened, assuming the dimension of a national emergency: in the following years the number of people in homeless shelters increased from 13,000 in 1966 to more than 21,000 in 1971.<sup>12</sup> In London the situation was no better: waiting lists for emergency housing contained 150,000 people in 1966 and 170,000 three years later. Thousands of people lived in overcrowded rooms and unsanitary conditions, with the constant risk of eviction and of having their children taken away – this was the case for 4,000 children every year. 1,800,000

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<sup>10</sup> 'Cathy Come Home' [Radio show], *Witness*, BBC World Service, 16 November 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p001f1d3>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>11</sup> Bailey, *The squatters*, p. 29

<sup>12</sup> These figures refer to people living in Part III Accommodation, as shelter were named under the terms of the National Assistance Act, 1948 (c. 29)

families lived in accommodation classed *unfit for human habitation*, 3,000,000 families were living in slums and other 2,000,000 in accommodation classed as *badly in need of repair*. In London alone the housing shortage was estimated at about 290,000, while 190,000 inhabited buildings that were unfit for human habitation.<sup>13</sup>

This housing crisis became the driving force for the first squatters' campaign, with the conviction that direct action was – more than a revolutionary tactic – the only way people could win decent housing. The London Squatters Campaign (LSC) was then founded, enacting symbolic occupations and street protests, denoting from the very beginning the media-savvy nature of the group and their actions. A survey of empty flats, offices and buildings in East London was undertaken, as well as a study of all the possible legal consequences of the action. Excluding the possibility of criminal prosecution was a prerequisite for the involvement of homeless families. The antecedent of 1946 was deeply examined and charges such as breaking and entering, malicious damage, forcible entry - a statute which dated back to 1381 and was used against the organisers of large-scale occupations in 1946 - riotous assembly, unlawful assembly and conspiracy to trespass were all taken into consideration while planning the actions. The initial group – 15 people participated in the first meeting - was formed by a loosely-knit assembly of anarchists, libertarian socialists, international socialists, and radicals; many had been involved in the Vietnam Solidarity movement and in the Committee of 100, and all had experience in housing and tenant struggles.<sup>14</sup>

At the beginning of 1969 the LSC started to house homeless families in Redbridge. By June 1969 seventeen houses had been squatted and thirteen families housed. Families were housed in buildings that had been left vacant for months or years, condemned houses that were often

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<sup>13</sup> All data are extracted from Bailey, *The squatters*, pp. 7-32

<sup>14</sup> Reeve Kesia, 'The UK Squatters Movement 1968-1980', in *Van Hoogenhuijze Leendert (ed.), Kritiek 2009 : Jaarboek voor Socialistische Discussie en Analyse* (Amsterdam, 2009) pp. 137-159

in better condition than affordable legal housing and homeless accommodation<sup>15</sup> and empty offices, mainly but not exclusively owned by local councils. Just after the first symbolic protests, other groups in London were set up and in March 1969 the first family obtained permanent housing through squatting. It was the first time this had happened since the nineteen forties<sup>16</sup>

The group grew in number, as did their support base, with the participation of homeless people and families at meetings and in solidarity actions, and managed to prevent some evictions. The role of media in such campaigning became essential. The focus on families allowed the LSC and the other groups that were burgeoning throughout the country to gain supportive and sympathetic coverage. Other actions were undertaken in Reading, York, Leeds, Edinburgh, Manchester and Brighton – the second town to experience a widespread squatters' movement after London. “The beginning of squatting on a mass scale had been made”<sup>17</sup>

Here lies one of the main discriminants between England and other parts of the UK, namely Scotland and Northern Ireland. In Scotland squatting had been made a criminal offence in 1865,<sup>18</sup> while in Northern Ireland this happened in 1946.<sup>19</sup> This legal framework did not stop the use of squatting for housing or political purposes, but – especially in Scotland – it reduced the scope of such actions. In Northern Ireland public housing authority surveys still counted 6,168 squats in public properties in 1977 and 3,781 in 1980. Since the early nineteen seventies large population movements had been caused by sectarian fighting in some parts of the country and squatting was an important tool in the political actions of para-military groups

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<sup>15</sup> Staff reporter, ‘Unfit flat relet at double rent’, *The Times*, 17 April 1969, p. 3

<sup>16</sup> Platt Steve, ‘A decade of squatting’, in Wates, Wolmar, eds., *Squatting. The real story*, p. 17

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Trespass (Scotland) Act, 1865

<sup>19</sup> Grimson Mark, ‘Everybody’s doing it’, in Wates, Wolmar, eds., *Squatting. The real story*, pp. 212-213

of both religious denominations. More than a solution to homelessness, it was in this case a way to find safety and to reinforce the separation between the two communities.<sup>20</sup>

The aims of the first LSC actions were wider than the rehousing of homeless families. As recalled by Ron Bailey, a central figure within LSC, four different layers existed: the immediate housing by means of squatting of people in dire need of homes, the promotion of “a squatting campaign on a mass scale”,<sup>21</sup> which had to be inspired by a small number of successful actions, “an all-out attack on the housing authorities”,<sup>22</sup> and the unification and radicalisation of “existing movements in the housing field”.<sup>23</sup>

It is important that these wider aims be understood because many people felt that the squatters, even if they succeeded in launching a mass campaign could do little more than Shelter to solve the housing problem.<sup>24</sup>

LSC actions were overtly politicised and always publicly promoted. They interpreted squatting as both a direct action response to the housing shortage in itself and as a way to pressure authorities:

[Squatting] must become the living demonstration that ordinary people will no longer accept the intolerable housing shortage. It must become the threat that will compel government, national and local, to change its priorities.<sup>25</sup>

The campaigns in that first stage reproduced – and tried to overcome – a strong divide between activists and squatters, with activists acting as providers of homes but also, and more importantly, of tools, know-how and support for homeless families in need of a roof over their heads. If the immediate satisfaction of a grave need was at the forefront of the campaign, the empowerment and radicalisation of strata of society marginalised by the affluent society of the nineteen sixties was at its core. Homeless people had, for the first time in decades, the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Bailey, *The squatters*, p.34

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



chance to be the protagonists of their own housing situation, after having been dealt with as an issue to be solved, blamed for their own situation, and labelled as ‘problematic’.

After long negotiations and public pressure, in 1969 the first local councils started to licence a selected pool of squats for short periods of time. This situation was made more complex when in the same year young single people started to occupy flats and buildings on their own. Termed at the time as ‘hippy squats’, they added the component of alternative lifestyle to the discourse on squatting. Generally aiming at larger buildings, young squatters intended to experiment with new modalities of social relationships within the new ‘communes’, asserting the “right to have a personal life-style and life history”.<sup>26</sup> Sectors of the London hippy scene had followed the actions of the LSC attentively and between August and September 1969 occupied mansions and large buildings in the Hyde Park area, creating the London Street Commune. The most famous of these became the 50-room mansion at 144 Piccadilly Road, squatted in September and evicted one week later: “we heard about the squats out at Redbridge, and that seemed like the answer to our housing problems. But instead of squatting in the leafy suburbs we remembered that we were kids of the Dilly[...]”.<sup>27</sup> The series of occupations which formed the London Street Commune was not unique, but it came to symbolise the formation of the first divisions among squatters and their supporters.

A dependency cycle had so far formed between the first squatting campaigns and a sympathetic media, which in turn put pressure on the local council. Thus the media was used to positive effect by both squatters and councils, as such coverage facilitated political pressure on authorities to secure housing for the squatters. Consequently, when councils licensed

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<sup>26</sup>Touraine Alain, *Critique of Modernity* (Oxford, 1995), p. 247

<sup>27</sup> Supercrew, ‘London Street Commune’, *Squatting archive*, March 2010:

[http://www.wussu.com/squatting/144\\_piccadilly\\_supercrew.htm](http://www.wussu.com/squatting/144_piccadilly_supercrew.htm), accessed 1 February 2019. More accounts on the London Street Commune: Anonymous, ‘What happen next’, *IT International Times*, 62, 15-21 August, p. 5; Bailey Ron, ‘An Englishmans home’, *IT International Times*, 66, 10 October 1969, pp. 10-11; Sigal Clancy: ‘144 Piccadilly’, *New Society*, 9th October 1969, p. 6. The term Dilly was used to indicate the Piccadilly area in the hippy community: ‘Piccadilly. The old fuzz’, *IT International Times*, 62, 15-21 August 1969, p. 5

squats they were favoured by the same positive reporting, enhancing their internal power relationships and their external public image. This cycle was put at risk by the new ‘hippy squats’ who attracted negative media attention. The South East London Squatters Campaign – the direct heir of the initial LSC group – issued a statement stressing the difference between “those of us who advocate and organise to secure the rights of the homeless and badly housed” and those who simply want to “amuse” themselves.<sup>28</sup> This rupture was partly a consequence of a violent campaign in the media against the London Street Commune. “September 1969 became open season for hippy-hunting and squatter-bashing”. An article titled ‘Hippie thugs, the sordid truth’ by the tabloid newspaper *The People* depicted a surreal and squalid scene from within ‘the hippie fortress’: “drug taking, couples making love while others look on, rule by heavy mob armed with iron bars, foul language, filth and stench”.<sup>29</sup> *The Times* focused instead on portraying the violence of the hippy squatters, remarking in their title that the squatters were preparing “petrol bombs for a long siege” and writing about “hippies with swords wait[ing] for battle”.<sup>30</sup> This tone was used by the large majority of national newspapers and tabloids during the week of occupation of 144 Piccadilly.<sup>31</sup> The commune did indeed have several internal problems, amplified by the feeling of being under siege. Hundreds of people were constantly stationed in front of the building, resulting in some violent attacks upon the squatters and occasional confrontations.

The media coverage of the commune “provide[d] the historical basis of later popular and media images of squatters. Labels thrown around freely at that time stuck. The image of lazy scroungers bent on destroying society became synonymous with squatters”.<sup>32</sup> Such labelling

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<sup>28</sup>South East London Squatters, ‘untitled’, [leaflet], undated (1969). As reported by Reeve, a member of the LSC revised the views expressed at the time: “We were pretty condemnatory...I think it was terrible. [...] you cannot condemn other people who are fighting for a better way of life as we did. And it was wrong”, in Reeve, ‘The UK Squatters Movement 1968-1980’, p. 145

<sup>29</sup>Anonymous, ‘Hippie thugs. The sordid truth’, *The people*, 21 September 1969, p. 2

<sup>30</sup>Cashinella Brian, ‘Squatters prepare petrol bombs for long siege’, *The Times*, 20 September 1969, p. 1

<sup>31</sup>Platt, ‘A decade of squatting’, p. 24-26

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 25

would become the core of public discourse on squatters: a factor that every squatter since then has had to take into account. After the frenzy over 144 Piccadilly, press reporting focused on the dichotomy between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ squatters:

Among the genuine homeless people who have taken to squatting as a desperate last resort there is a new army of parasites. The plight of the truly homeless who take over long-empty houses commands sympathy. The parasite squatters do not.<sup>33</sup>

In truth, the London Commune signalled the emergence of young single people as the principal actors in the squatting movement. It expressed a different kind of housing need, where the ‘roof over your head’ was the basis on which to develop communal living arrangements, to grow communities and to experiment with alternative lifestyles. Despite being perceived as group who chose squatting as a lifestyle and who did not actually need a place to live, many of the occupants of the London Street Commune had in fact slept rough in the city, unable to afford rent and unwilling to submit to a ‘straight lifestyle’, which they felt to be repressive and imposed. Young people became the propulsive driving force of the squatting boom in the following years.

The number of squatters kept growing up until 1977, going from a few hundred at the end of 1969 to 40,000-50,000 in 1975.<sup>34</sup> The number of licensed squats grew steadily, reaching 1,000 at the beginning of 1972, 2,500 by 1973, more than 10,000 by 1980. The practice of licensing, partly introduced in order to limit the growth of unlicensed squatting, failed to do so. By 1972 there were already more unlicensed squats than licensed ones. This produced divisions in the squatting movement based on their evaluation of the licensing practice and of its limits. Most of the unlicensed squatters were actually demanding a license, but the number of properties made available by councils was not keeping up with demand.

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas Peter, Wooding Dan, ‘How a naked woman beats the bailiffs’, *The Sunday People*, 15 June 1975, p. 20

<sup>34</sup> Anonymous, ‘Myth and Fact’, in Wates, Wolmar, eds., *Squatting. The real story*, p. 230

Most squats were located in inner city London, but by then “there were few towns of any size which escaped”.<sup>35</sup> Specifically an urban phenomenon, in every city squatting only occurred within certain areas. By 1977, ten London boroughs accommodated the vast majority of squats.<sup>36</sup> The concentration of squatting in London was caused by the particularly severe epidemic of homelessness in the city, high housing prices and the presence of large areas under redevelopment, which meant a vast number of houses were vacant for years, often waiting to be demolished. This last factor accounted for their particular localisation within the city.

In smaller urban centres squatting campaigns were more difficult to organise. In Bristol, by the early nineteen seventies, around 5,000 people were on the waiting list for social housing, and almost the same number of houses remained empty, 300 of which were publicly owned. Local activists had been closely following the actions of squatters and activists in the capital: in 1972 the first squats appeared in the city and by 1974 between 200 and 300 houses were squatted. During these years, the Bristol Claimants Union and the Bristol Squatter Association were founded, distributing their own magazine, the Bristol Street Press and supporting squatting campaigns in different neighbourhoods. Connections were also created on a national scale, and the centrality of London within the radical national scene was important to this process. The Bristol Street Press for example was printed in a squat in Islington, where the squatters had installed an ‘offset litho printer’ and were training different groups from all over the country to use it.<sup>37</sup> Local authorities had different reactions to squatting campaigns: in Bristol the South West Electricity Board (SWEB) – the local electric power supplier – attempted to set a precedent by switching off the supply to a number of

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<sup>35</sup>Platt, ‘A decade of squatting’, p. 40

<sup>36</sup>Anonymous, ‘Myth and fact’, p. 230

<sup>37</sup> McConnel “Mac”, ‘Housing activism and squatting in 1970s Bristol’ [Video recorded talk], *Bristol radical history group*, 25 April 2012: <https://www.brh.org.uk/site/events/housing-activism-and-squatting-in-1970s-bristol/>, accessed 1 February 2019

squatted houses. These produced the first organised protest actions of the Bristol Squatter Association, which for a few hours occupied the showrooms of the SWEB, thus obtaining the reconnection of the electricity. Bristol squatters and activists also connected direct-action and the demand for licenced squats: as one activist recalled, there was no use in “asking for a licence if you [were] not in the squat already ... if you [did] it, you [were] as likely to have the council to smash up the toilets”.<sup>38</sup> Outside of the capital acquiring a licence required greater negotiation leading to more varied approaches to the problem such as the direct involvement of charities, religious groups and local councillors in squatting practices and solidarity with squatters, the creation of empty-house patrols in order to pressure owners not to leave them vacant, and with the development of different modalities of housing on the verge of legality, often with the unofficial consent of the authorities.

Squatting communities grew rapidly in office properties, blocks of flats, and even whole streets: “the availability of empty property is a precondition for squatting but a concentration of empty property is what sustains it”.<sup>39</sup> The creation of such a critical mass scaled up the capacity of mobilisation and resistance to evictions and allowed for the development of projects that went beyond the housing issue, working at the level of societal organisation and thus redefining concepts of family, neighbourhood, relationships, and work. Within squatted buildings several local businesses were set up (mainly cafes, community centres and wholefood shops), informally run by ‘collectives’ or more formally through the establishment of co-operatives. Maintenance duties and skills – particularly important for groups who were occupying houses in need of a great deal of work before being habitable – were shared and self-taught. Properties were adapted to accommodate social and cultural instances, favouring communal spaces over private rooms and often connecting houses together. New configurations reflected the innovative features of these households, typically rejecting

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<sup>38</sup>Unnamed activist, in McConnell, ‘Housing activism and squatting in 1970s Bristol’.

<sup>39</sup>Reeve, ‘The UK Squatters Movement 1968-1980’, p. 147

nuclear family models and instead composed of single people, couples, young families or groups of friends who could thus experiment with larger and/or more fluid sentimental relationships. For a combination of lifestyle and economic contingencies casual jobs were the principal source of income for many squatters; some communities tried to exclude money, preferring exchange systems, experiments in time banking or work-tokens were undertaken. Legal and bureaucratic know-how was also acquired and shared through the network of squatting communities. Local authorities or large private institutions owned the vast majority of squatted properties, with a predominance of the first case. Indeed the reasons for such preponderance were practical and also – and possibly foremost – political: local authorities were deemed responsible for causing homelessness; occupying empty public properties was an act of denouncing the shortcomings of the state. Moreover, while no situation could be considered safe from the risk of eviction, public ownership was subject to stricter rules and proceedings. A vast sharing network of ‘time-buying’ skills was created through word of mouth channels, meetings and through an extensive production of leaflets, newsletters, documents and handbooks. Among the array of actions available to secure squats for longer time periods, squatters learned how to use legal technicalities in their favour and how to *detour* them in imaginative ways. They could swap squats once a Possession Order<sup>40</sup> was filed, thus invalidating it, as occupants named in the document were no longer residents. They could request adjournments because the “local authority had failed to take *reasonable steps* to determine the names of all occupants”, issue subpoenas to local politicians who did not fulfil electoral promises, battle in court, etc. Cases where such actions produced a definitive halt of the eviction were very few in number, but their main aim was to tie up the property owner in time-consuming proceedings that could last months or years; moreover these moments became local spotlights for denouncing current housing policies.

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<sup>40</sup> An order made by a court directing that possession of a property be given to the owner or other claimant.

Private owners could resort to faster responses. Eviction methods could more easily ignore or bypass legal proceedings. Such actions were met with different reactions according to specific factors, mainly the level of support from the surrounding community and the modes of organisation employed by the squatters. Nonetheless, the squatting of private properties in many cases assumed a precise anti-speculation and conservational character, fighting against projects of gentrification and re-development that entailed the demolition of residential buildings to make space for office blocks and consequently the expulsion of low-income populations. These became some of the most symbolic and effective struggles of the squatters' movement of the nineteen seventies. In Tolmers Square – or Tolmers Village – in Euston, central London, a long-lasting struggle against Stock Conversion and Investment Trust, one of the largest firms involved in the city's redevelopment projects, came to be known as the “*locus classicus* of London's intellectual squatting movement”.<sup>41</sup> Buildings on the square and on the surrounding streets were selected to be demolished to make space for commercial premises. Squatters organised meetings, maintained and repaired both empty and inhabited houses, proposed and developed shared projects on empty land and promoted a street festival. This introduced communal elements into the life of the area, a wider support base to fight alongside tenants associations, and a renewed interest in community investment in the future of the area.<sup>42</sup> The square was later demolished but its designation was changed from commercial to housing. The three-day-long occupation of Centre Point, “the best-known empty building in Britain”,<sup>43</sup> in 1974, became another symbol for the struggle against private speculation. The 32-storey tower block built between 1963 and 1966 and empty since then, was used as a “propaganda squat”<sup>44</sup> to demand its requisition and its use as housing. The occupation revealed both the complexity of squatting action and the skills acquired by

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<sup>41</sup> Longstaffe-Gowan Todd, *London square* (New Heaven, London, 2012), p. 270

<sup>42</sup> Wates Nick, *The battle for Tolmers square* (London, 1976); Wates Nick, Clayton-Thompson, *Tolmers, Beginning or end?* [Documentary], 1975

<sup>43</sup> Platt, ‘A decade of squatting’, p. 36

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35

squatters through several years of campaigning: six months of planning, a study of the habits of the security company's guards, the infiltration by one activist into this company, managing police and media, the organisational capacity needed to secure the building: "80 people with sleeping bags and other essential equipment [were] safely inside within 90 seconds".<sup>45</sup>

Squatters groups emerged on a local basis, often assuming the name of the borough or the street or some variation of it (Tolmers square, Villa road squatters, Frestonia, from Freston road). These groups were collectively-run grass-roots organisations responsible for the more diverse practical and political tasks: setting-up forms of communal living, proposing shared *rules* and opening social spaces for events and fundraising within the squatters communities; finding and opening new houses, organising maintenance and rotas and producing written materials; negotiating with owners and councils, handling legal defence, setting-up physical defences against eviction and liaising with the press. In some cases they opened a space to be used as an office or headquarters, where they could meet periodically. Often they also produced local papers or newsletters.

This growth produced attempts to establish citywide networks and periodical national meetings. Political, strategic, and organisational heterogeneity hindered large parts of such attempts, and the continuity and scope of their action. Moreover, the fracture lines between groups supporting and promoting licensed or unlicensed squatting deepened. By 1975, these frictions had become an open conflict, which exploded over the issue of handing back council owned licensed squats when the licence expired, even if no rehousing solution had been secured. One of the most successful squatters struggles - in Elgin Avenue in London<sup>46</sup> - generated from this issue, and was able to bring together both licensed squatters pending eviction and unlicensed squatters. Among the many squatter campaigning groups that were

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 35-37

<sup>46</sup> In Elgin Avenue the GLC had tried to evict around 200 squatters. At the end of months of struggle, and after two days of erecting barricades and confronting police forces, the council agreed to rehouse all the squatters.



formed at the time, the Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS) was the only one which was able to continue its actions for several years.<sup>47</sup> Steering clear of acting as a centralised body and mouthpiece of the squatters, it instead became a collective “controlled by the people who worked for it”. Self-funded, it provided support and advice for squatters and in 1977 began publishing the Squatters handbook, the most notorious publication by and on English and British squatters, later replicated and adapted in several other countries.<sup>48</sup> Other organisations, such as the London Squatters Union and the Squatters Action Council had a more troubled life, attempting the difficult path of establishing a delegate system to represent the local squatting groups. They failed in sparking a sense of identification within the wider squatting community, resulting in “meetings [...] frequently attended by fewer than a dozen people, who were sometimes delegate in name only”.<sup>49</sup> Other attempts at broadening the horizon of the squatters’ movement included the publication of several bulletins publicising ‘squattable’ empty properties all over the country. Despite the difficulties, the role of campaigning and networking organisations became pivotal in the mobilisation around large-scale campaigns and in the opening of mass squats (in 1977 demonstrations were organised against the introduction of the Criminal Law Act, and, as a *contribution* to the celebration of the Queen’s jubilee, a series of large building were opened – the Jubilee Squats – in central London).

Local squatting and coordination structures were characterised by different degrees of politicisation and/or practicality and were in part an answer to the need for a new public discourse on squatting and to widening the support base for squatters in case of evictions. Often, when threatened with eviction, squatters moved to new and more isolated occupations, and preferred playing down their action, pretending not to be squatters at all. The victory at Elgin Avenue proved to be an exception, as not many other squats obtained the same results,

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<sup>47</sup> ASS is still functioning as a London-based, volunteer-run support group for squatters at the time of writing.

<sup>48</sup> The publication of *The Squatters Handbook* started in 1973. In the first years it was edited and published by the *Islington Squatters*.

<sup>49</sup> Platt, ‘A decade of squatting’, p. 71

but was also the fruit of a year-long relationship-building project with the surrounding social fabric: neighbours and tenant associations, local shops, grass-roots groups and the local council. Not many other groups undertook such a process, and it was not an infallible blueprint for success. Relationships with the local community were often troubled and conflictual. Squatting could allow for the breakdown of classist and social divisions within the cities: through squatting, working-class families could be housed in parts of the city they could otherwise not afford to live in, and middle-class youth could occupy a house in a traditionally working-class area, or within residential areas inhabited mainly by the elderly. However, this social mobility also caused problems due to the lifestyles of many of the squatters. Complaints about behaviour, nuisances, loud noises and against the prioritisation of squatter-related issues over those of the local population were often brought up at council meetings. The development of widespread negative opinion locally could undermine the chances of a negotiation with the authorities, and also lowered the confidence of the squatters. The local authorities employed a wide range of responses to squatting. These could be grouped into four main categories:

- Prevention: through the practice of ‘gutting’ empty houses to deter squatting, ripping out staircases or pouring concrete into the drainage system, or – often unlawfully – pre-emptive demolition; and less frequently through agreements with charities for the use of empty houses, in a more controlled environment;
- Cooperation/Co-optation: publicly, through licensing policies, as a result of the squatters’ political pressure and initially intended as a deterrent against unlicensed squatting, or off-the-record, through unofficial agreements;
- Administrative sanctions: these could vary from disconnection or refusal of utility supplies, denial of school places for children living in squats, to refusal of waste

collection or other council-based services; these sanctions could be applied either legally or illegally, and could sometimes be appealed against by the squatters;

- Repression: evictions were also not always legal, and the degree of violence could range widely, as could the degree of violence used in response.

The modality of resisting an eviction was usually intensely discussed in the weeks and days approaching the eviction – when the date was known – or improvised by the squatters if the eviction was unexpected. Confrontations on a purely ‘physical’ and ‘military’ level were extremely rare, but a mix of determination, physical resistance and political pressure could be employed, through the mobilisations of other squatter groups, grass-roots collectives and supporters, the erection of barricades and the employment of other actions aimed to stop or block the police forces.

Agreements and licenses too – as seen – were perceived in a variety of ways dependant on the group in question. Squatting communities throughout England were involved in different power relationships with authorities and as a result had a variety of different political targets. The same victory in Elgin Avenue, hailed as a great success by some,<sup>50</sup> was criticised by others.<sup>51</sup>

The relationships between squatters and the wider revolutionary movement also varied locally. While a great number of people who resorted to squatting had little interest in the various currents of revolutionary politics, many others were political activists of Marxist or anarchist organisations, or were active in environmental or gay rights campaigns, or a part of anti-racist or feminist groups. The majority of Marxist organisations saw squatting as little more than a distraction from their focus on the workers’ struggles, but activists of Trotskyist

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<sup>50</sup> Corbyn Piers, ‘We won, you should fight them too’, in Wates, Wolmar, eds., *Squatting: the real story*, p. 130-141

<sup>51</sup> Reeve, ‘The UK Squatters Movement 1968-1980’, p. 148

groups, such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the International Marxist Group (IMG), were very involved in squatting. They considered squatting to be a useful tool in exposing the shortcomings of the current capitalist system: the demand of ‘housing for all’ – which was explicit or implied by all squatting actions – was termed as a “transitional demand”, a “demand that could not really be met, within the terms of the system”, while sounding “reasonable”.<sup>52</sup> Other groups, such as local sections of the libertarian Marxist group *Big Flame* supported several squatting campaigns, especially in Liverpool and East London, as part of wider housing campaigns, within which they connected with women’s groups and immigrant housing associations.

In the squatters’ movement, the anarchist underworld of the nineteen seventies recognised the direct-action approach which had always defined anarchism. Anarchist contributions to the movement came in a much less structured form, consisting of both direct participation and the external support of local struggles. This was a consequence of the situation in the anarchist movement at the time. As with all the far-left groups, those of an anarchist bent had seen an increase in numbers since 1968, but no single organisation had been able to capitalise on this growth. The anarchist milieu was still divided between several distant positions, from the more countercultural ethos within the alternative press of the nineteen seventies to a more strictly classist – anarcho-syndicalist – approach; from community based intervention, to armed formations such as the Angry Brigade.<sup>53</sup>

Squatting has indeed been a site of political contamination and for the testing of personal and collective freedoms. This was particularly true in the nineteen seventies as “the collective nature of squatting and squat culture [was] more emphasised”.<sup>54</sup> In squats, connections were

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<sup>52</sup> ‘Property is theft’, *Lefties*, episode 1, BBC Four, 2006: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Erp2utEgZp4>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>53</sup> Franks Benjamin, *Rebel Alliances. The means and ends of contemporary British anarchisms* (Edinburgh, Oakland, 2006)

<sup>54</sup> X-Chris, ‘Partisan notes towards a history of UK squatting (1980 to the present)’, in Moore, Smart, eds.,

made between the most diverse political organisations, and within squats activists of many groups lived together and communally. A BBC documentary<sup>55</sup> showed the internal composition of the Villa Road squatters community in London, which brought together around 200 people and resulted in innumerable discussions between anarchists, Trotskyists, feminists, non-politicised squatters, primal scream therapists, middle-class students, working-class single mothers, hippies, etc.

Only recently has the discourse on squatting started to tackle racial, gender based and sexual orientation divides. Squatting was for the greater part the activity of white people, and the literature on the phenomenon has only exacerbated this feature. Yet, critical race, feminist and queer studies have pointed out how squats revel in diversity<sup>56</sup> and – especially in areas like Brixton, south London – became sites in which to break up divisions on multiple levels and experiment with new forms of political action. In squats such as the South London Gay Community Centre, set up in 1974, more than 60 queer activists took their homes,<sup>57</sup> “offering an alternative vision of queer urban life”.<sup>58</sup> In the same streets, as will be shown in the next chapters, the founding members of the British Black Panthers and the Brixton’s Black Women Group, squatted several buildings.<sup>59</sup> The role of the Rastafarian community, the Bengali Housing Action Group in London, the Black communities in the St. Pauls neighbourhood in Bristol, and many others in the country, has so far been overlooked, relegated to the margins of official narration.

The history of squatting is also the history of the erosion of squatter rights. This is certainly valid for the period starting in 1968-69, but it could be extended as far back as 1381, with the

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Making Room’, p. 85

<sup>55</sup> ‘Property is theft’, *Lefties*

<sup>56</sup> Brown Gavin, ‘Mutinous eruptions: autonomous spaces of radical queer activism’, *Environment and Planning A*, 39, 2007, p. 2696; Kadir Nazima, *The autonomous life? Paradoxes of hierarchy and authority in the squatters movement in Amsterdam* (Manchester, 2016)

<sup>57</sup> Brown, ‘Mutinous eruptions’, pp. 2685-2698; Cook Matt, ‘“Gay times”: identity, locality, memory, and the Brixton squats in 1970’s London’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 24 (1), 2013, pp. 84–109

<sup>58</sup> Brown, ‘Mutinous eruptions’, p. 2686

<sup>59</sup> Vasudevan, *The autonomous city*, pp. 58-59

Forcible Entry Act.<sup>60</sup> From a *longue-durée* perspective, progressive limitations to squatting had been actuated through the use of civil and criminal law, starting ‘from the margins’ (aggravating factors, uncommon situations, connected crimes) and arriving to the plain criminalisation of residential squatting in 2012. Looking closely at the nineteen seventies, this trajectory can be also recognised, with the five-year-long path to the actualisation of the 1977 Criminal Law Act. It has to be noted that throughout the decade alternatives to repression were proposed, outlined, experimented with and employed. Each had its drawbacks and received, often accurate, criticisms; nonetheless they opened up new spaces for negotiations. Licensing policies, the rehousing of squatters, and court cases won by squatters against unlawful evictions set often ignored precedents. In other cases, giving in to squatters’ demands came only as a consequence of the housing shortage: in 1977, the newly elected Conservative-led GLC, proposed an amnesty for all people squatting in GLC properties before a set date, proposing licensing and rehousing. There were around 1,850 GLC-owned squats, housing 7,000 people; around 70% of them were accepted under the amnesty.<sup>61</sup> This initiative was decided on as a response to squatting: the amnesty was accompanied by the assurance that they would use “all measures which the law allows”<sup>62</sup> against future squatters.

The trajectory of the tightening of squatting laws proceeded. Earlier drafts of what later became ‘Part Two’ of the ‘1977 Criminal Law Act’ proposed the criminalisation of trespassing tout-court, which meant the criminalisation of squatting. A widespread wave of public criticism arose when activists began to advertise the implications and limitations that would result from the proposal. Workers and students feared that the new law could lead to severe limitations of their rights to protest, criminalising the occupation of universities and

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<sup>60</sup> ‘History of squatting in the UK’, *Aaron’s reports*, 28 January 2008; <https://aaron.resist.ca/history-of-squatting-in-the-uk>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>61</sup> Platt, ‘A decade of squatting’, p. 89

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

workplaces. In the version approved on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1977, the law was seen as a “clever compromise between the original suggestions and those of their critics”<sup>63</sup>, with the effect of making “squatting more difficult but not impossible”.<sup>64</sup> In detail, it introduced five new offences that criminalised trespassing on embassy and consular property,<sup>65</sup> trespassing using violence or carrying a “weapon of offence”,<sup>66</sup> and it facilitated eviction procedures.<sup>67</sup> It introduced Section 6, which criminalised “using or threatening violence to secure entry knowing there is someone present opposed to the entry”,<sup>68</sup> enabling “landlords to evict squatters whilst they are out”.<sup>69</sup> This was the starting point for the widespread practice of displaying a legal warning outside squats in order to defend squatters’ rights and to stop unlawful evictions.

The effect of the new law was a decline in squatting between 1977 and 1979 and though the number of squats occupied rose again in 1980, a large number of the squatters’ communities, formed by the concentration of several squats in the same area or road, had already disappeared. These communities were the pivotal nodes of the *open network* that formed the squatters’ movement. Their disappearance left behind a vast number of isolated squats – still around 40.000 across the country, but they now lacked the capacity for connection, coordination and mobilisation.

### 3.2 Countercultures

I was 13 in the school playground when The Beatles happened, I was 18 and went to the university when the revolution in drugs happened, and I was 26 and a TV presenter with my own show when

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<sup>63</sup> Watkinson David, ‘The erosion of squatters rights’, in Wates, Wolmar, eds., *Squatting: The real story*, p. 161

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162

<sup>65</sup> *Criminal Law Act 1977*, c. 45, Part II, Section 9, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1977/45/contents>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>66</sup> *Criminal Law Act 1977*, c. 45, Part II, Section 8

<sup>67</sup> *Criminal Law Act 1977*, c. 45, Part II, Section 7, 10-12A

<sup>68</sup> *Criminal Law Act 1977*, c. 45, Part II, Section 6

<sup>69</sup> Watkinson, ‘The erosion of squatters rights’, p. 161

punk happened. And it was when I was 38 that acid house happened. Because it's a 13-year cycle: 1950, 1963, 1976 and 1989.<sup>70</sup>

The idea of a 13-year cycle had little epistemological relevance, but reflected an aspect of continuity which, while being loudly refused by each countercultural experience, from Teddy Boys to Acid House, highlighted their ability to act as mechanisms of expression and grouping, and to make sense of reality during times of crisis.<sup>71</sup> As shown in the last section, the actual 'boom' in squatting was not caused by an increase of family-oriented and licensed squats, but was instead a youth related phenomenon, highly intertwined with lifestyle choices and – to a lesser extent – political activism. Countercultures played a pivotal role in offering interpretative models of cultural and lifestyle politics to thousands of squatters. Furthermore, stressing the continuity between different oppositional cultures provides the necessary background to understand the role of punk, anarcho-punk and DiY ethics in the squatting and social centres' scene since the early nineteen eighties.

The linguistic unity between the United States and the United Kingdom allowed for the creation of a preferential channel between the two coasts of the Atlantic Ocean, which transmitted back and forth the ethics and modalities of the underground scene. The scandalous life of the North-American hippies in the 'summer of love', a "living criticism of bureaucratic rationality"<sup>72</sup> was characterised by sets of common experiences related to music, protest, sex, drugs, travel and collectivist experiments. These were prerequisites for the construction of a social identity in contrast with the values of a society based on industrial capitalism. The focal role of pop and rock music in the identity-building process was symbolised by the mass musical events that reached their peak of popularity at the end of the

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<sup>70</sup> Nolan David, *Tony Wilson. You're entitled to an opinion...* (London, 2010), p. 38

<sup>71</sup> Free Association, 'The kids were just crass', in Dines Mike, Worley Matthew, eds., *The aesthetic of our anger. Anarcho-punk, politics and music* (Colchester, 2016), pp.299, 310. The continuity of countercultures, particularly connected to welfare society, have been analysed by several authors, Free Association among them: McKay George, *Senseless acts of beauty*; Home Stewart, *The assault on culture. Utopian culture from lettrism to class war* (Stirling, 1991); Free Association, *Moments of excess* (Oakland, London, 2011); Cross, 'The hippies now wear black'.

<sup>72</sup> McKay, *Senseless acts of beauty*, p.12



nineteen sixties (from the thousands at the Jazz festivals throughout the decade, through to the tens of thousands at the Fantasy Fair and Magic Mountain and Monterey Pop in 1967 and the hundreds of thousands in the utopia of Woodstock and in the tragic reality of Altamont in 1969).

The phenomenon of the music festival soon arrived to the United Kingdom where it acquired specific characteristics, giving birth to the ‘free festivals’ of the nineteen seventies. These bypassed and overrode the commercial nature of the first British festivals, becoming – with the Windsor Festival and the Stonehenge festival – eminently political events. The Windsor festival symbolised a practice of reclaiming a piece of land that for centuries had been a hunting reserve of the royal family. Stonehenge Festival on the other hand, represented an important crossroads for very different reasons. The choice of ‘the Stones’ was a clear bridge built towards an ancient imagined past, in which history and folklore mixed and where pastoral tradition and political reminiscences were renovated by modern countercultures: Celts, druids, pagans and rock and roll; medieval heretics, exotic shamans and new drugs; levellers, diggers, hippies and twentieth century revolutionaries; tepees and live-in vehicles. Penny Rimbaud was one of the organisers of the first Stonehenge festival and a decade later formed the anarcho-punk collective and band *Crass*, embodying the continuities and breaks between the two cultures. During the nineteen seventies and the first part of the nineteen eighties Stonehenge festival lasted for a whole month, creating liberated islands, the TAZ postulated by Hakim Bey, enchanted realms in which to experiment with a miniaturised utopia. It survived for ten years, before being violently disbanded by the police in 1985.

Incongruously, free festivals became popular not at the peak of hippy counterculture, but at its decline. By the summer of 1976 free festivals ran throughout the whole season and the entire country. The second half of the decade saw the explosion and the success of punk. Despite declaring a radical refusal of every pre-existing cultural tradition, punks shared with hippies

modalities of cultural activism, based on the refusal of *straight* values and loosely inspired by anarchist principles. Free festivals were the breeding ground of these bidirectional influences and relationships: chaotic spaces in which identities were negotiated and vehicles of both the transmission of knowledge and the contamination of styles.

The exchange was not always easy or linear, made up of reciprocal negation, feedback, influence and cooperation. Punks, from the very beginning, refused the societal commitment, the subversion and the collective ethos of hippies. They focused their message on the individual, in neat contraposition with the rest of society: thus, the appeal of nihilistic approaches symbolised in the ‘no future’ slogan. ‘Anarchy in the UK’, sang by the Sex Pistols in 1977, although a very clever commercial operation, was definitely not a call for social revolt.<sup>73</sup> It embodied the refusal of dominant values, and proposed a theme for a generation that ‘didn’t know what to want, but knew how to get it’, and for whom the only possible revolt was individual and desperate: ‘get pissed! Destroy!’. Yet, at the same time the punk band Alternative TV organised a free festival tour together with the band Here and Now, highly influenced by the late hippy scene.

Penny Rimbaud wrote about coming back to *Stonehenge Festival*, and playing with *Crass* in 1980:

Our presence at Stonehenge attracted several hundred punks to whom the festival scene was a novelty; they, in turn, attracted interest from various factions to whom punk was equally new. The atmosphere seemed relaxed and as dusk fell, thousands of people gathered around the stage to listen to the night’s music. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, a group of bikers stormed the stage saying that they were not going to tolerate punks at ‘Their festival’. What followed was one of the most violent and frightening experiences of our lives. Bikers armed with bottles, chains and clubs, stalked around the site viciously attacking any punk that they set eyes on. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to escape to; all night we attempted to protect ourselves and other terrified punks

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<sup>73</sup> The intro of this song by The Sex Pistols was later parodied both in Italy and the UK in very similar ways: “questa volta sul serio/dicono sempre cosi:/‘io sono l’Anarchia’/‘ecco un altro Anticristo’/ma eri solo carino/proprio carino/pigro di/ testa/e ben vestito” [this time for real/they always say:/ ‘I am Anarchy’/ ‘here’s another Antichrist’/ but you were just cute/really cute/lazy-minded/and well dressed” (CCCP, ‘Tu menti’ [You lie], *Socialismo e Barbarie*, Virgin Dischi, 1987); “I’m an anarchist/I’m the anti-christ/Well sort of not really/It’s not big not clever/And I’m quite a reasonable fella” (Chumbawamba, ‘Love Me’, *Anarchy*, One little indian, London, 1994). In an endless circle, both CCCP in Italy and Chumbawamba in the UK were later accused of being sell-outs for signing with a *major*.

from their mindless violence. There were screams of terror as people were dragged off into the darkness to be given lessons on peace and love; it was hopeless trying to save anyone because, in the blackness of the night, they were impossible to find. Meanwhile, the predominantly hippy gathering, lost in the soft blur of their stoned reality, remained oblivious to our fate.

Weeks later a hippy news-sheet defended the bikers, saying that they were an anarchist group who had misunderstood our motives. Some misunderstanding! Some anarchists!

If [...] the first Stonehenge festivals were our first flirtations with ‘real’ hippy culture, this was probably our last.<sup>74</sup>

Since 1976 another group had also been forming: a community – or a network of communities – more than a movement, whose legacy would shape the imagination and life choices of later countercultural and political activists. The *New Age Travellers* started to join together when moving from one free festival to the next in their live-in vehicles. If the existence of a *Convoy* had the free festivals as its birthplace, the roots of a *travelling life*, of opting to live in trucks, buses or vans had other roots. As seen, the nineteen seventies had witnessed “the worst housing crisis since World War Two” and the implementation of new laws that culminated in the ‘Criminal Law Act 1977’, which produced a simplification of “eviction procedures that followed the squatting boom of the early to mid-nineteen seventies”.<sup>75</sup> While some opted for experiments in communal living,<sup>76</sup> others chose a nomadic life. During this time, the *Albion fairs of East Anglia* had sparked the rediscovery of the traditions and lifestyles of old-England peasants and medieval rites and celebrations. Material conditions and idealistic inspirations brought thousands of people<sup>77</sup> facing the housing problem to the point of refusing to live in a house. Second-hand large vehicles were adapted into living spaces, decorated with pleasant decorations or provocative messages. The differentiations within the *new age travellers* were many and multiplied through time as new

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<sup>74</sup> Rimabud Penny, *The last of the hippies. An hysterical romance* (London, 2009), pp. 28-29

<sup>75</sup> Oubridge, ‘The convoy myth’, *Festival Eye 1986*: <https://sites.google.com/site/travellersarchive/festival-eye-86>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>76</sup> Rimabud, *The last of the hippies*, p. 29-32

<sup>77</sup> In 1982 the Convoy “compris[ed] 250 vehicles and more than 1,000 people”: Oubridge, ‘The convoy myth’. For the nineteen eighties and nineteen nineties official estimates counted around 8,000 travellers with 2,000 vehicles: McKay, *Senseless acts of beauty*, p. 47-48

generations of travellers appeared in the following decades. The alternative lifestyle that the free festival had momentarily offered was turned into a full time reality:

the first wave of these ‘new Travellers’ had grown up with a loosely defined hippy lifestyle of marijuana, Hawkwind and indigenous third world clothing. They were the traders, stage builders and sometime performers of the festivities. And, shock, horror – some may even have traded in drugs! Add to them a ‘new wave’ of anti-Thatcher, town and city kids nurtured on 1976-78 anarcho-punk, and you have some idea of the melting pot that brewed up the Traveller culture that was to become the most despised scapegoat of successive Conservative governments.<sup>78</sup>

Traveller communities, more than any of other radical countercultures, were overwriting the essence of being British. Inspired by gypsy traditions and native Americans culture, mashing it up and remixing it with hippy and punk defiant ethos, *return to the land* and mistrust towards authority, they played with the symbols of Britishness, to create alternative circuits of nomadic and sedentary villages and communities. This was one of the reasons behind the Government's disproportionate reaction. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1986 Prime Minister Thatcher declared she was “only too delighted to do anything [she could] to make life difficult for such things as a hippy convoy”.<sup>79</sup> It was the time of the *enemy within* and the rhetoric of the annihilation of dissent facilitated the creation of a moral panic against the chosen *folk devils*. Between 1984 and 1986 the army was deployed, together with the police force, against Traveller gatherings, in some of the largest operations since the end of the war:<sup>80</sup> evictions, mass arrests, the destruction and requisition of vehicles, beatings and brutalities. The first stones in this path to violence had been laid in the nineteen seventies.

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<sup>78</sup>Dearling Alan, ‘Not only but also. Part 3.1’, *Enabler publications*, [http://www.enablerpublications.co.uk/pages/not\\_only.htm](http://www.enablerpublications.co.uk/pages/not_only.htm), accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>79</sup>*HC Sitting*, 5 June 1986; c. 1086,

<https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t71.d76.cds6cv0098p0-0008?accountid=14783>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>80</sup> McKay, *Senseless acts of beauty*, p. 59

The election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in May 1979 remains in the memory of many activists and observers as the symbol of the end of a decade of wide-ranging protest and activism. Acute observers, such as Stuart Hall<sup>81</sup> and Eric Hobsbawm<sup>82</sup> anticipated “the fundamental shift in British politics” brought forward by Thatcherism and recognised “that traditional Labour strategies had reached an impasse”.<sup>83</sup>

Although both Italy and the England saw a political shift towards the end of the decade, this “turmoil” did not affect groups on the outskirts of the labour movement, such as the squatters, in the same way. At the end of the nineteen seventies England actually saw a growth in the number of squats<sup>84</sup> and an increase in countercultural groups. Thus, terms such as *tabula rasa*, or *the lost generation*, used to describe the political, social and existential watershed represented by the end of the nineteen seventies in Italy did not fit the English or British scenes. Nonetheless, changes had taken place and activists had to reinvent modalities of action and identity. While in the nineteen seventies hippies, squatters, and environmental and queer activists were immersed in a landscape of mass action, with the turn of the decade this landscape largely disappeared as a result of the policies of the Thatcher government, the rise of unemployment, and the general crisis of the revolutionary Left.<sup>85</sup>

The crisis of the traditional agencies within the extra-parliamentary left opened up space for new forms of political participation, such as the development of anti-fascist campaigns including *Rock Against Racism* and the *Anti-Nazi-League*. This signalled a new encounter between politics and countercultures, but also gave room to anarchist action, renovated – in very different ways – by the DiY ethics of anarcho-punk and the more militant approach of *Class War*.

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<sup>81</sup> Hall Stuart, ‘The great moving right show’, *Marxism Today*, 23, January 1979, pp. 14-20

<sup>82</sup> Hobsbawm, ‘The forward march of Labour has halted’

<sup>83</sup> Smith, Worley, ‘Introduction: the far left in Britain from 1956’, p. 9

<sup>84</sup> Anonymous, ‘Myths and Facts’, p.230

<sup>85</sup> Franks, *Rebel Alliance*, pp. 67-70; Cross Rich, ‘British Anarchism in the era of Thatcherism’, in Smith, Worley, eds., *Against the grain*, 133-152

During the nineteen eighties, the anarchist movement was made up of dynamic, albeit highly localised<sup>86</sup> communities, which were the site of differentiated struggles, and adopted innovative action repertoires, channels of politicisation and modalities of communication, while in search of wider networks, to replace those which had failed in the earlier decade. At the same time continuities within the radical underworld provided important tools and frameworks for such innovations. The birth of the first social centres is set within this landscape and it was the social product of both the successes and failures of the squatters' movement and countercultural experiences of the decade before.

### **3.3 Which turning point?**

These last chapters described the salient elements of the evolution of radical politics and oppositional cultures during the nineteen seventies in both Italy and England. They also touched upon the role of the nineteen seventies – or of their last years – as a far-reaching watershed. Public discourse is never neutral, and particular perspectives on the nineteen seventies have been transmitted and reinforced by media and political authorities. While this is valid for all periods, the nineteen seventies had a particularly politically and socially divisive nature in both countries. In England – and in the whole of the United Kingdom – the decade is a symbol of decline, tainted by economic crisis, political short-sightedness, violence and excess. This grim picture was shared by both contemporary observers and later analysts and it acted as a touchstone against which Thatcher's – and later Blair's – fortunes were built: industrial actions and class conflict were depicted among the causes of economic and political decline, exemplified by the miners strikes in 1972, 1974 and 1978, first “scuppering the

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<sup>86</sup>Vasudevan, *The autonomous city*, p. 61; 56a Infoshop, 'Local traditions, local trajectories and us: 56a Infoshop, Black Frog and more in South London' in VA, *What's this place?*

British ship lead by Sailor Ted”<sup>87</sup> and later humiliating PM James Callaghan during the Winter of Discontent, all inscribed in a Cold-War framework where ministers feared the ‘Reds under the bed’.<sup>88</sup>

At the same time, a different tale of the nineteen seventies has also been told: the story of a decade in which the effects of the ideas born out of the ‘swinging sixties’ were put into practice, with new peaks in grass-roots political participation and union membership, the introduction of important legislations on equal pay, domestic violence and race relations, and with the flowering of new cultural markets. More modern understandings of the decade have challenged stereotypical one-directional representations, taking into account the impact of the international crisis on both the United Kingdom and other countries, and in so doing defying the image of British singularity developed during these years.<sup>89</sup> The very idea of a declining Britain has been brought into question, and declinism analysed as an ideological construct.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless, the nineteen seventies were a crucial moment for the “replacement of the social and political values of one generation by those of one another”.<sup>91</sup>

In Italy the depiction of the nineteen seventies as a decade of deprivation and economic crisis is as widespread, but less dramatic, even if according to some studies the conditions were similar or worse.<sup>92</sup> The country’s production system was less modernised, and the first effects of the global crisis were noticeable only after 1975, at which point they were added to the

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<sup>87</sup> Lowe Rodney, ‘Life begins in the seventies? Writing and rewriting the history of postwar Britain’, *Journal of contemporary history*, 42.1 (2007), p.162

<sup>88</sup> Among many others: Routledge Paul, ‘Miners v Tories, the supreme test that faces Mrs. Thatcher’, *The Times*, 17 February 1981, p.12; Evans Micheal, ‘Ministers were encouraged to fear ‘Reds under bed’’, *The Times*, 27 August 1997, p.7 ; Sandbrook Dominic, ‘Why does the 1970s get painted as such a bad decade?’, *BBC Magazine*, 16 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17703483>, accessed 1 February 2019

<sup>89</sup> Addison Paul, Jones Harriet eds, *Companion to contemporary Britain. 1939-2000* (Oxford, 2005); Beckett Andy, *When the lights went out. What really happened to Britain in the seventies* (London, 2010); Harrison Brian, *New Oxford History of England. Vol. 2 Finding a Role?The United Kingdom. 1970-1990* (Oxford, 2010); Sandbrook Dominic, *State of emergency. The way we were. Britain 1970-1974* (London, 2010); Sandbrook, Dominic, *Seasons in the sun. The Battle for Britain, 1974-1979* (London, 2012)

<sup>90</sup> Hay Colin, ‘Narrating crisis: The discursive construction of the ‘Winter of Discontent’’, *Sociology*, 30, 2 (1996), pp. 253-277; English Richard, Micheal Kenny, eds., *Rethinking British decline* (Basingstoke, 2000); Hay Colin, ‘The Winter of Discontent Thirty Years On’, *The Political Quarterly*, 80, 4 (2009), pp. 545-552

<sup>91</sup> Lowe, ‘Life begins in the seventies?’, p.162

<sup>92</sup> Crainz Guido, *Il paese mancato* (Roma, 2005); Black Jeremy, *Britain since the seventies* (London, 2009)

broader narrative of general decay whose main features were the degeneration of the anti-systemic struggles started in 1968 and especially the rise and diffusion of political violence and armed struggle which led to a serious crisis of the Republic. As the narratives of decline helped Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, narratives focused on the *anni di piombo* and the ‘opposed extremisms’ fuelled the success of Bettino Craxi’s governments in the nineteen eighties, and traces of this narratives can still be seen in the rhetoric of political leaders right up to present day. Historian Guido Crainz titled a volume based on Italian developments from the nineteen sixties to the nineteen eighties *Il paese mancato*<sup>93</sup> (the missed country) describing the decade as dark and violent, while Lucio Dalla sang that “in 1970 everything was thought, in the nineteen eighties everything was lost”.<sup>94</sup> Obscured by such narratives, the Italian nineteen seventies were also the setting for an unprecedented growth in personal income and possibilities, just as they were in the United Kingdom. Italian society went through an important phase of modernisation: there was a rise in schooling and university enrolment, new laws on divorce and gender equality, as well as on workers’ rights, mental health and against organised crime, among others.

Regarding radical politics – as was mentioned – the nineteen seventies are remembered in both countries in several different lights: the end of the decade represented the watershed between a traditional framework of class struggle and new forms of mobilisation, and as a result the whole decade is often narrated as both the last moment of grandeur and a symbol of failure, thus feeding the nostalgia market of alternative cultural and political production.<sup>95</sup> Large industrial mobilisations, social movements on various issues, sexual freedom and feminism, new environmental sensibilities, democratisation and secularism, alternative

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<sup>93</sup> Crainz Guido, *Il paese mancato*

<sup>94</sup> Curreri Gaetano, Dalla Lucio, D’Onghia Giuseppe, Roversi Roberto, ‘Il duemila, un gatto e il re’, *Dalla/Morandi*, (RCA, 1988)

<sup>95</sup> Beckett, *When the lights went out*, pp. 1-6



lifestyles, access to drugs and music festivals: radical narratives are composed by these and many other components.

The widespread radicalism and the rigidly political – and Marxist – approach expressed by the Italian radical scenes had reduced the manoeuvring space for countercultures, which developed at the margins of the scene. In England however, the limited appeal of ‘heretic’ Marxist theories fostered the growth of important countercultural movements that shaped urban and rural communities. Squatters were among them, promoting at the same time a direct-action approach to politics and relevant transformations in lifestyle.

In Italy the first occupied social centres and proletarian clubs appeared in 1975. However, they were very different to the ones that will be analysed in the next chapters. Far from being a homogeneous phenomenon, they nonetheless expressed the revolutionary ethos of the surrounding context. Some were extensions of the political headquarters of New Left parties, some – extremely well rooted in the local communities of a peripheral borough – represented their territorial approach to politics, and others were cultural workshops and ‘simple’ gathering spaces for a disoriented youth. In a different ways, in England squatters had opened community spaces, especially in London and in those boroughs which hosted the largest communities. The role of such spaces varied greatly, but they responded to a very similar ‘need for space’ that went beyond basic housing needs.

Within the differences between the two countries, the already mentioned “replacement of the social and political values of one generation by those of one another”<sup>96</sup> allowed for the development of a social centres’ scene in both countries. These were characterised – especially in the first half of the nineteen eighties – by comparable and analogue traits regarding both political activism and cultural phenomena.

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<sup>96</sup> Lowe, ‘Life begins in the seventies?’, p.162

## **Chapter 4. SOCIAL CENTRES. A TRANSNATIONAL PHENOMENON?**

In the last chapters, the factors that prompted and allowed for the birth of social centres in Italy and in England were highlighted. The analysis focused on the peculiar features of both countries during the nineteen seventies. A process of rapid transformation in both economy and politics – symbolically represented by the removal of industrial labour from its position as centrepiece to societal organisation – was both cause and background to important shifts and transformations within the realm of radical politics.<sup>1</sup> Here as well the barycentre of social movements was “moving from the dimension of the factory to that of social appropriation”<sup>2</sup> (housing, utilities, goods, but also culture and sociality). Such changes prompted many observers to see this decade – or at least its final years – as an extremely significant watershed, the end of an era. A watershed that did not just casually coincide with the significant shifts “in the structure of feeling”<sup>3</sup> of late capitalist societies widely recognised as the passage from modernism to postmodernism. Indeed, Marxist scholars such as Ernst Mandel, Fredric Jameson and David Harvey have underlined the connections between transitions in the economic regime and the cultural turn.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, the evolution of social centres in the nineteen eighties and nineteen nineties will be traced in both Italy and England. It will provide a deeper investigation of the forms and contents of the political campaigns they promoted, giving particular attention to the development of tensions between the concepts of legality and legitimacy. Furthermore, cultural activism and modalities of relationship with relevant communities will be taken into account. Cultural and social activities played a pivotal role in rooting of centres within their

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 121

<sup>3</sup> Pfeil Fred, ‘Postmodernism as a "Structure of Feeling"’

<sup>4</sup> Mandel Ernst, *Late Capitalism* (London, 1975); Jameson Fredric, *The cultural turn* (London, 1998); Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity*

territory, encompassing with this term not only its spatial meaning but also the social fabric of the city- and neighbourhood-wide activist networks created by the centres. It will, therefore, be argued here that social centres were – and are – a by-product of the global shifts mentioned above, a radical response to the innovations posed by post-Fordist capitalism and the rise of neo-liberalism in terms of the grouping and identity building of an antagonistic subject, of the localisation of new battlefields for social struggle and of the development of new frameworks and action repertoires.

Social centres are not alone in this position. As described in the literature review, ‘new social movements’ is a locution often used to describe movements influenced by these shifts in the modes of organisation of western societies in the late twentieth century. Concepts such as difference and otherness – as well as a renewed focus on the ‘individual’ – could finally assume a “liberatory potential”,<sup>5</sup> which empowered a great variety of new struggles.

#### **4.1 Breaking with the past? The first social centres in Italy and England.**

The locution *centro sociale* (social centre) in the Italian context identified public community centres that provided cultural, recreational, educational and basic health care services, especially for low-income and marginalised sectors of the population. They had a modest diffusion before the nineteen sixties, but were progressively abandoned in the following decade due to the transformation of large cities and the spread of mass media. Since the economic boom these structures failed to keep up with social changes in interests and behaviours: television reduced the social life of families within the boroughs, cars allowed for a new freedom of movement, and new styles and ambitions were imported through magazines and movies. The majority of these centres were then externalised to become private

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity*, p. 48

cooperatives or preserved by exceptionally active local councils, but no new initiatives were introduced.<sup>6</sup>

The focus of this work – squatted and self-managed social centres – lies in the *detournement* of the role of these spaces. Where they had been originally created “as front-line institution[s] for the management of citizens’ approval”,<sup>7</sup> self-managed social centres were instead alternative projects against the exploitation of the urban territory, in which contradictions were not defused but enhanced. They acted as incubators of dissent and ‘class recomposition’<sup>8</sup> for urban communities which had been failed by traditional working-class agencies.<sup>9</sup>

The locution started to be used with this meaning in the second half of the nineteen seventies in Milan. At this point, squatted social centres perceived themselves as a legacy of the public social centres: being the product of the surrounding territory, they attempted to connect with a working-class tradition and way of life that had been gravely compromised by recent economic development and urban reorganisation. By the nineteen eighties this connection had ended. The new centres that started to appear at the beginning of the decade had an extremely different ethos and the desire to create a discontinuity from the rest of society prevailed. In their intentions, they represented an otherness from society, from working class traditions and from the previous experiences of the radical left. They were reclaiming for themselves the ‘prefiguration’ of a world of renewed social relationships.

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<sup>6</sup> Cecchi et al. (eds.), *Centri sociali autogestiti e circoli giovanili*, p. 16

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Class recomposition’: it is a notion developed within the workerist and autonomist Marxist traditions. It encompasses both the transformations in the composition of the working class caused by the reorganisation of the industrial sector in the nineteen seventies and the search for new conditions for working class cohesion within the new economic, social and political background. More classist approaches to social centres posit this centrality of this element among centres’ scopes: Negri Antonio, ‘Partito operaio contro il lavoro’, in Bologna Sergio, Carpiagnano Paolo, Negri Antonio *Crisi e organizzazione operaia*, (Milano, 1974) pp. 99-160, translated in: Negri Antonio, *Books for burning. Between civil war and democracy in 1970s Italy* (London, 2005) pp. 51-117; For a different approach to class recomposition, written more recently: Bowman Paul, ‘Rethinking class: from recomposition to counterpower’, *The Irish anarchist review*, 6 (2012): pp. 3-7

<sup>9</sup> Cecchi et al. (eds.), *Centri sociali autogestiti e circoli giovanili*, p. 16

The radical milieu of nineteen eighties Italy has often been described bleakly: as the decade of hedonism and opportunism, which was the product of the obliteration of the experiences of the previous decade. Milan was the epitome of this transformation. An advertising slogan defining Milan as the *Milano da bere* (literally, the Milan to be drunk), published in 1985,<sup>10</sup> became the symbol of the decade “as years of moral reflux and of economic wealth”<sup>11</sup> in both the city and the country.

For the wealthier sectors of the population and for all those who had been tested by years of widespread radicalisation and political violence, the nineteen eighties represented a new land of milk and honey: years of economic and political modernisation, a high number of privatisations, the prioritisation of new sectors of the economy, the growth of information technologies and the enshrinement of Milan as financial capital of the country. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher abroad had, in the *decisionismo* of Bettino Craxi, their faded counterpart in Italy: a *decision-ism* that was more a style of behaviour and communication than an actual capacity for national governance. Politicians definitively gave up their role of guidance regarding economic development, a turn that was symbolically reflected in the rise of the newly reformed PSI – which had undergone a steady process of detachment from the last remnants of Marxism.

The steady demobilisation had affected all radical groups and was a nation-wide phenomenon. While participation faded, armed struggle and state repression were feeding into each other, reproducing a cycle of armed actions and anti-terrorism operations that stopped only after 1984-85. Arrests were “so many that following the fate of prisoners, or clarifying who [was]

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<sup>10</sup> Mignani Marco, ‘Amaro Ramazzotti Milano da Bere 1987’ [video], *Youtube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8jZb-Lj3GQ>. Accessed 1 April 2019; Santolini Egle, ‘L'uomo che inventò la Milano da bere’, 1/04/2004, *LaStampa.it*, retrieved through *Archive.is*: <https://archive.is/20120803041111/http://www.lastampa.it/redazione/cmsSezioni/cultura/200804articoli/31497gi-rata.asp#selection-1743.0-1743.36>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>11</sup> Tronti Mario, ‘Una preziosa amicizia: Modernissima donna dello spirito’, *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà*, XX, 2007, 447-449

clandestine, who [was] part of an armed group, who [was] of the ‘movement’ was an arduous task”.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, the weakness of decisional policies had an unwanted effect in the empowerment of civic society, with an important growth in the numbers of associations and cooperatives. The nineteen eighties acted as a laboratory of ‘class recomposition’ and innovation of some of the forms of activism deemed lost at the end of the previous decade. These were transformed and actualised thanks to a differentiation of approaches and modalities of ‘doing politics’.

Within the social centres’ scene two separate lines of development can be identified. The first was represented by the slow decline of those social centres that had survived from the earlier decade. The impact of anti-terrorism operations on these spaces had been heavy-handed, causing a drain on energy and a drop in public-oriented activities, which resulted in an increased self-referential attitude and in the inability to reach new sectors of society. The second was the appearance of a new wave of occupations of social spaces. Firstly timid, limited to a few dots on the map of the country, these new self-managed spaces became able to offer new channels of politicisation to younger strata of the population, and to build an often uneasy dialogue with older militants.

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The first social centre to be squatted in the nineteen eighties was the Virus in Milan. It became the symbol of this second wave of Italian social centres. The modalities of its founding are of particular interest, as they exemplified characteristics which became common to this entire new wave.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibba Alberto, *Leoncavallo. 1975-1995. Vent’anni di storia autogestita* (Genova, 1996) p. 98

As it was previously noted, the passage between the nineteen seventies and the nineteen eighties was an extremely traumatic time for radical left activists. Presenting several similarities with war memories, the memory of those year makes for a difficult heritage, which is “too crucial to be forgotten, but also too traumatic and conflictual to be remembered”,<sup>13</sup> especially because it hinders the pacification of personal and collective past. As Portelli argued in his work on the memory of the Italian Resistance, these characteristics could be defined as ‘oxymoron memory’<sup>14</sup> in which silence was as important as words. What was remembered and what was forgotten were functional to each other. In a similar way the narratives over the end of the nineteen seventies were built on both aphasia and a traumatic and “apparently sudden separation”.<sup>15</sup>

Retellings of those years were never dealt with directly. In first-hand narratives of the nineteen seventies, the last years of the decade were a brief *post scriptum*, rather than a conclusion:

[...] in the big metropolitan labyrinths, the silence of separateness reigns; ‘serialised’ faces of politicians repeat meaningless words from the television screens.

The eighties have started.

The years of cynicism, opportunism and fear.<sup>16</sup>

While these sources are reluctant to *talk* about the post-1977, precious information can be found in sources that narrates a different story: the political and cultural resistance to the just mentioned cynicism, opportunism and fear, which symbolised the new decade. In this story, the years 1978-1980 were the very beginning, sometimes the preface.<sup>17</sup> “The ‘text’ in which

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<sup>13</sup> Portelli Alessandro, ‘Colori, odori, sapori nuovi nei giorni della Liberazione’, *Patria indipendente*, 1 (2009) pp. 16-17

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> De Sario, *Resistenze innaturali*, p. 37

<sup>16</sup> Moroni, Balestrini, *L’Orda d’oro*, p. 209

<sup>17</sup> As reported in many sources focused on the new Milanese punks. The CS Santa Marta is often nothing more than a mention: Anonymous, ‘Luigi Schiavone’, *VideoRadio*, <http://www.videoradio.org/luigi-schiavone.html>; Bassi Davide, ‘Jo Squillo. La parabola di una generazione’, *Onda Rock*, <http://www.ondarock.it/italia/josquillo.htm>; Cervasio Marco, ‘Brutti, sporchi e cattivi. Ovvero come nacque il

memory and forgetfulness cohabited was the juvenile experience and a fascination for new cultural practices” of young activists and punks, who “at the time were able not only to mention the trauma, but also to translate it into new aspirations and desires”.<sup>18</sup> The first encounter of young punks with the remnants of the social centres scene, which had developed in the previous decade, was symbolic of this difference. In 1979 a group of extremely young high school students started to frequent the *CS Santa Marta*, one of the first wave of Milanese social centres occupied in 1975. Many of the activists who had worked in the centre for the previous few years had already left, considering the experience as finished.<sup>19</sup> Those who were still active in the centre highlighted the different attitude of the new arrivals.<sup>20</sup> These young people were attracted by the presence, in the basement of the centre, of two rehearsal studios used by two of the first punk bands in Milan.<sup>21</sup> As can be seen in this segment of the fictionalised autobiographical account of Marco Philopat, who in the following years became an important figure in the anarchist punk scene in Milan, this new generation did not suffer of the same aphasia and was able to enlighten aspects of the crisis of earlier modes of militancy and activism:

On the ground floor there are several rooms used for meetings – freaks and chillum-smokers have found their place in what had once been a living room with a fireplace, while in the basement there are two rehearsal studios – one of the Kaos Rock and the other of the Kandeggina Gang - [...] on the first floor, the workers school – graphics workshops and meeting rooms – up a winding staircase there’s a dark wooden space –the theatre groups work here. Piero [...] is making the bottles for Saturday’s demonstration. He brings me to the large cement basement where they try out the launches - «It’s super cool» – you’ll see – he tells me excited – he grabs a bottle – he fills it with petrol – adds flakes of washing soap – the soaked wick with a windproof match – then he fires and throws it twenty metres ahead – the immediate and violent blow makes the walls shake – we almost fall from the recoil... Piero explains that the Santa Marta has always been considered one of the most creative places of the movement [...] «Here you can relax - No one will annoy you if you smoke a joint or have some fun with Molotov cocktails».<sup>22</sup>

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punk’, *Appunti Oristanesi*, 12 November 2015: <https://appuntioristanesi.wordpress.com/2015/11/12/appunti-musicali-3-brutti-sporchi-e-cattivi-ovvero-come-nacque-il-punk-italiano-marco-cervasio/>, all accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>18</sup> De Sario, *Resistenze innaturali*, p. 37

<sup>19</sup> Arduini Carla, Legge Doriana, Pompei Fabrizio, ‘Milano 1974-1980. Storia di Santa Marta, centro sociale, *Teatro e storia*, 3 (2011) pp. 81-135

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Cervasio, ‘Brutti, sporchi e cattivi’

<sup>22</sup> Philopat, *Costretti a sanguinare*, p. 28



The CS Santa Marta closed down in 1980, but the young punks who had started to frequent the space had expanded their exploration of the city. In the following two years the processes of politicisation and activation of an anarcho-punk scene moved forward through the discovery and collaboration with two other self-managed spaces: the *CS Conchetta*, and the occupation of *via Correggio*. In the *CS Conchetta*, the *punx* – as they used to call themselves in order to distance themselves from the non-politicised punks – organised the first concerts and events, mixing music and a stance against heroin diffusion in the area.<sup>23</sup> Other connections were established through *Nero*, a crossover between an anarchist political magazine and a punk zine, edited by a group of anarchist activists, particularly attentive to countercultures.<sup>24</sup> The collaboration had a brief life, but it opened the doors of the squat in *via Correggio* to the punx.

Since May 1980, one of the warehouses situated within the squatted area of *via Correggio* had been opened by a group of art students as the *Vidicon*, an alternative bar. It acted as art gallery, projection hall, and club, trying to “widen the practices of socialisation through artistic production”.<sup>25</sup> *Vidicon*’s activities were often experimental and innovative, attracting a small but active following and being defined as “the most ground-breaking space in Milan”.<sup>26</sup> It closed towards the end of 1981 for economic reasons, but its presence allowed for the first punx community to mix with a “multifaceted universe of behaviours, lifestyles, personalised fashion choices, but at the same time with new media technologies”<sup>27</sup> and to tighten their relationships with the inhabitants of the adjacent squat.

As *Vidicon* closed, the group of punx proposed to the assembly of the squat that they could transform a second and larger warehouse into the first punk social centre in Italy: the *Virus*.

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<sup>23</sup> Anonymous, *Ruin Party* [poster], undated (1980) : APM

<sup>24</sup> *Nero, Foglio Anarchico Milanese*, 1, 1981 : API

<sup>25</sup> Guarnieri ‘Gomma’ Ermanno, ‘Documentazione.’, *Primo Maggio*, 22 (1984), p. 31

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Consorzio Aaster et al., *Geografie del desiderio*, p. 112

The activities of *Virus* lasted two years, from February 1982 to May 1984, when it was evicted together with all of the occupants of the squat.

The centre was run by a *management collective*, open to anyone willing to participate. During its peak it was formed of around one hundred people.<sup>28</sup> Modalities were horizontal, and characterised by a spontaneous anarchist ethos.<sup>29</sup> Their main activity was the organisation of hundreds of concerts, focusing on local punk bands outside of commercial circuits, and becoming an *attractor* for young punks in Milan and in the north of Italy. Activists created *Antiutopia produzioni e creazioni* (productions and creations) and *Virus distribuzioni* (distributions) to produce and promote music, zines, books and other artistic products, and to strengthen an alternative network with other groups and spaces throughout the country. In 1984 the *Virus* was named in an article about the European tour of the American punk band MDC, published on the San Francisco based *Maximum Rocknroll*. Not only did it show the importance of the centre as an alternative venue within the international punk scene, the article gave also a hint to the dimensions of the phenomenon of squatted venues around continental Europe as 31 gigs out of 35 were played in squats or anarchist youth centres.<sup>30</sup> Published in June 1984, this article showed the vicissitudes of *Virus*. Even though it temporarily closed down following an agreement with the squatters sought by the owners of the area, who claimed back one of the warehouses in November 1982, it re-opened in the warehouse that had hosted *Vidicon* in 1981.

The attitude of punx to politics was very different from that of the older generation of militants. From the outset, young punks had often been seen as fascists and provokers, and had been attacked for this reason by militants of the radical left. The concept of militancy as compulsory set of behaviours and modalities of communication was wholly refused, and

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<sup>28</sup> Philopat, *Costretti a Sanguinare*, p. 37

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, 'MDC – Touring the squats and anarchy centres – Take your band to Europe', *Maximum Rocknroll* 14, 1984, pp. 58-60

instead a more individual approach to politics was proposed. Nonetheless, the *Virus* collective, thanks to the close bonds that they had developed with anarchist and left-libertarian squatters and militants, started to create a network of relationships with other radical and countercultural groups in Milan, breaking with the dogmas of purity and authenticity, which were widespread in the punk scene.<sup>31</sup> On one side, this network moved towards other youth countercultural experiences in the city, such as *skins* and *goths*, or at least their more politicised elements. On the other side, it extended to the wider community of radical groups and social centres squatted in the nineteen seventies. The first common initiatives were organised to fight heroin diffusion in the neighbourhoods and to demonstrate against the deployment of Italian troops in the Lebanese war in 1982.<sup>32</sup> In the following years closer links were forged with different anarchist groups, especially with the libertarian grassroots syndicalist organisation *Wobbly*. From this collaboration initiatives against local councils' policies and public talks on topics such as *social precariat* and *income* came forth.<sup>33</sup> While the common anarchist ethos fostered these connection, the approach to anarchism of punx was very different, steering clear from class war related arguments and instead focusing on the refusal of violence as a political tool, and on the formation of separate lifestyles and ethics. Punx also participated in meetings and initiatives for the campaigns against repression, which were mainly organised by Marxist groups of the *Autonomia*. The presence of punx in these initiatives was not always easily accepted, but it was a step towards mutual recognition between militants still extremely linked to the mentality and behaviours of the earlier decade and punk activists.<sup>34</sup>

The punx' approach to such campaigns was illustrative of a peculiar path towards politicisation and radicalisation. For example, their experience of policing was only partly

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<sup>31</sup> Gordon Alastair, *The authentic punk. An ethnography of DiY music ethics*, PhD, Loughborough University, 2005

<sup>32</sup> *Risi e Sorrisi* [zine], 1 (1984) : CDA

<sup>33</sup> Guarnieri 'Gomma', 'Documentazione.', pp. 31-44

<sup>34</sup> Ibba, Leoncavallo, pp. 22-35

mediated by politics; their appearance had often been enough to attract police interest, long before the opening of the *Virus*. From this point of view, the opening of the social centre was an answer to the pressure applied by law enforcement agencies on punx during their gatherings in the city's streets and plazas. After the founding of the *Virus*, police presence was a constant at its concerts and other initiatives, due to its difficult relationship with the residents of the surrounding area. Personal experiences had thus formed the initial channel of politicisation. They had been essential to deciding to squat a social centre and to participate in wider campaigns against repression, which expanded their set of demands from individual to general: from an oppositional stance against the role of police against youth expression, to the liberation of political prisoners, and from there to a more organic approach to the role of policing, repression and prisons in modern society.<sup>35</sup>

The *Virus* collective also participated in the national protest camp in Sicily against the use of the Airport of Comiso as a NATO base,<sup>36</sup> and to several anti-nuclear demonstrations, a struggle that in Italy had just started to gain momentum. This series of actions attracted media coverage of the *Virus* but also a different kind of interest from law and order agencies. For the first time, punx started to be identified as political actors. They were indeed acting as a driving force for socio-political experimentations and intergenerational exchanges, proposing a 'recomposition' of the fragmented urban youth around the need for self-managed social centres. A media campaign on the danger of youth gangs was launched, in which young punks were portrayed as unsocial elements on the edge between addicts and terrorists.<sup>37</sup> Several articles reported on knife wars between gangs,<sup>38</sup> on the "violence fever"

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<sup>35</sup> An example of this wider approach is: VA, Chiana Adriana, ed., *Il proletariato non si è pentito* (Milano, 1984)

<sup>36</sup> Alcuni punx anarchici presenti a Comiso, 'Parola di punx', *A Rivista Anarchica*, 112, 13 (1983) p. 13 : API; Finzi Paolo, 'Intervista ai punk anarchici', *A Rivista Anarchica*, 113, 13 (1983) pp. 8-13, API

<sup>37</sup> Berticelli Alberto, 'I nuovi contestatori già in via di estinzione. La strana voglia di essere brutti a tutti i costi', *Corriere della Sera*, 18 November 1984 p. 26

<sup>38</sup> Anonymous, 'San Babilini e Punk evitata una guerra a coltello', *Corriere della Sera*, 27 May 1984, p. 21

between punks, mods, skins, *neo-sanbabilini*, *paninari* and goths,<sup>39</sup> and on the “metropolitan anger of the good people of Milan”.<sup>40</sup>

As mentioned, the negative relationship with the surrounding territory represented the major discontinuity with earlier social centres. This played an important role in the decision to evict the centre: late night loud music, ‘that’ kind of music, the presence of hundreds or thousands of different people every weekend, graffiti, and alcohol consumption were among the complaints from a consistent part of the neighbourhood. The eviction of the Virus, carried out on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1984<sup>41</sup> was indeed a consequence of both the mobilisation of the middle-class residents of the area and of the new – more politicised and more radical – role, played by the punx in the earlier months within the political geography of the city.

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The inception of ‘anarchy centres’ and ‘autonomy centres’ in London in the early nineteen eighties presented several key similarities to the experience of the Virus. Like in Italy, the decision to open a centre was the result of the connection between anarchist militants and young anarcho-punks. As with the Virus, music played a pivotal role in the experience of the first English centres. However, unlike in Milan, the intergenerational dialogue attempted in London failed to foster further cooperation between the different groups.

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<sup>39</sup> *Neo-Sanbabilini* and *paninari* were terms used in Milan to indicate a youth scene which grew around the first fast-food chains (*panino* is the Italian for both sandwich and hamburger, *San Babila* was the square where they used to gather). While newspapers and tabloid often exaggerated the contraposition with punks and other groups, they represented the hedonist and consumerist nature of the decade. Ambrosini Gainfranco, ‘I guerriglieri del sabato sera’, *Corriere della Sera*, 25 March 1985, p. 21

<sup>40</sup> Pozzoli Augusto, ‘Dilaga la follia punk’, *Corriere della Sera*, 27 January 1983, p. 19

<sup>41</sup> ‘La polizia sgombera i punks dal covo di via Correggio’, *Il Corriere della Sera*, 16 May 1984, p. 28

At the beginning of the nineteen eighties the number of squatters in London was still high. Yet squatters' communities had been mainly disbanded.<sup>42</sup> This resulted in the lack of a supportive context for the young anarcho-punks in the city, who had nonetheless started to squat houses and to search for places to gather. The formation of this community at the fringes of the punk scene was remembered on the pages of *Punk Lives* magazine by one of the editors of the *Kill your pet puppy* punk zine:

SUDDENLY, SOMEHOW, things changed. Gigs in a church, a squat on the Pentonville Road. No bouncers, no more 'them' and 'us'. 50p to see bands like Rubella Ballet the Synix and Tinsel jumping up to sing with them. Gigs organised by punks, for punks. Not safe punks in mail order leather jackets. No, this lot were still outrageous, gay punks living in squats, anarchist punks, with dazzlingly bright hair and make-up. The survivors, the ones who passed through the abyss. And now they were finding each other again, discovering a network of people and bands and squats and fanzines.<sup>43</sup>

From 1980 onwards a series of spaces had been squatted and rented in order to set up venues for concerts and 'social centres'. Most of them were squatted by anarchist punks and activists. The label 'social centre' was still not used at this time in England. Moreover, the name of each space was changeable over time and often depended on the particular group using it – the term 'A-centre' will be used from now on as a collective reference to this first typology of centres, which included denominations such as 'anarchy centre', 'autonomy centre', 'alternative centre' and 'peace centre'.

Some sources<sup>44</sup> traced the first 'A-Centre' to the squatted church mentioned in the above quote from *Punk Lives*, but most pointed towards the 'Autonomy Centre' in Wapping as the first of such spaces. In 1979 anarcho-punk bands Crass and Poison Girls became involved in a solidarity campaign for the defendants of a court case against six anarchists charged with "conspiracy to cause explosions", which became notorious as the Persons Unknown Conspiracy Trial.<sup>45</sup> In the same year the two bands produced a record to raise money for the

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<sup>42</sup> Platt, 'A decade of squatting'

<sup>43</sup> Al A, 'Punk lives in the strangest places', *Punk lives*, 4 (1982) pp. 27-28

<sup>44</sup> Anonymous, 'Alternative - We're working working', *Kill your pet puppy* [zine], 5, June 1982, p. 17

<sup>45</sup> Anonymous, 'Have you conspired with persons unknown?', *Black Flag*, 10.5 (1979) p. 1-8, 16

defendants.<sup>46</sup> Between £10,000 and £20,000 were raised and, after the acquittal of all defendants, this money was used to set up a social and political centre, which was intended as a common space for young punks and older anarchist and autonomist activists. The scope of the initiative was summed up on the sleeve of the 'benefit record' *Bloody Revolutions/Persons Unknown*, as well as the investment of the bands in the project:

All the money made on this record will go towards the setting up of an anarchist centre in London. The aim is to get enough money together to get the lease on a place that will not only give us all somewhere to drink a cuppa and meet people of possibly similar views, it is hoped that we can get enough to set up a gig facility, at the moment we are looking at an old factory as a possibility, so bands that don't want to play the usual commercial circuit will have an alternative. It could mean that, at last, anarchist punks will have somewhere of their own to go. Southern studios/poison girls/crass & crass studios have charged nothing for the production of this record and rough trade are distributing it at cost, which means, that apart for the cut that the record shops take, all the money will go to the centre. The aims of the centre are both political and social, the political aim is to make anarchist literature and ideas more easily available, the social aim is to offer a meeting place for people interested in anarchy and its various outlets, music, etc. IT'S UP TO US ALL TO MAKE IT WORK.<sup>47</sup>

Key rationales for opening an anarchist centre were the provision of a safe space for the diffusion of anarchist ideas and punk music, fostering a dialogue between different approaches to anarchism and the construction of an alternative, non-commercial music circuit. Squatting was not considered a viable option to secure a stable place. In 1981 a space was rented within the Metropolitan Wharf in Wapping and it was named 'Autonomy centre'. Weekly concerts were organised to help cover the running costs and rent, and a rehearsal studio was set up. Andy Martin, frontman of The Apostles, and the collectives of editors of the fanzines *Kill your pet puppy* and *Pigs for slaughter* played a major role, hosting virtually all anarcho-punk bands of the area. Martin recalled: 'We provided 'the punks', [the London Anarchists] and the London Autonomists provided the words written in hundreds of pamphlets and leaflets handed out or left around the social centre.'<sup>48</sup> Throughout its short life – the centre closed in February 1982 – "book fairs, fanzine conventions, discussion groups,

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<sup>46</sup> Crass, Poison Girls, *Bloody Revolution/Persons Unknown* [record], (Southern Records/Crass Studios, 1981)

<sup>47</sup> From the sleeve of: Crass, Poison Girls, *Bloody Revolution/Persons Unknown*

<sup>48</sup> Andy Martin in: Penguin, 'Autonomy Centre, Wapping Wall, London E1: August 1981 – March 1982', *Kill your pet puppy*: <http://killyourpetpuppy.co.uk/news/wapping-autonomy-centre-061281/>, accessed 1 April 2019

films, debates and political workshops”<sup>49</sup> were organised. The cohabitation was not easy, revealing tensions between the different groups<sup>50</sup> and between punks and other activists, as shown by the words of Albert Meltzer, co-founder of the anarchist magazine *Black Flag* and long-time member of the solidarity organisation *Anarchist Black Cross*:

With the punks' money came the punks, and in the first week they had ripped up every single piece of furniture carefully bought, planned and fitted, down to the lavatory fittings that had been installed by Ronan from scratch, and defaced our own and everyone else's wall for blocks around. In the excitement of the first gigs where they could do as they liked, they did as they liked and wrecked the place. Loss of club, loss of money, loss of effort.<sup>51</sup>

As revealed by other sources, punk gigs were the only source of income for the centre, and they became soon the main, if not only, activity of the place.<sup>52</sup> The reach of the centre as a venue – gathering a few hundred people on the busiest nights – was a surprise even for the organisers: ‘I don’t think any of us who were involved [...] had any idea that there were hundreds of punks with a vague interest in ‘anarchy’ who would turn up for a gig at Wapping.’<sup>53</sup>

As Tony Drayton of the *Kill your pet puppy* zine recalled, the centre broke down the barriers between roles: activists, musicians, writers, and organisers:

It was a chance to put theory into practice. About making a change rather than writing about the need for change. And it was the chance to make a positive change – putting on cheap gigs for likeminded people, offering food and sometimes somewhere warm and comfortable to be for a few hours (some of those squats were grim places).<sup>54</sup>

Drayton underlined one of the rationales behind the decision to rent a place instead of occupying one: being able to offer a stable and comfortable space for gathering. In the

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Andy, ‘Autonomy centres, riots and the big rummy’, *Smile*, 12, 1995, p. 7 : 56AI

<sup>50</sup> Berger George, *The story of Crass* (Oakland, 2009) pp.169-86, 191-2

<sup>51</sup> Meltzer Albert, *I couldn't paint golden angels. Sixty years of commonplace life and anarchist agitation* (Edinburgh, 2001): <http://www.spunk.org/texts/writers/meltzer/sp001591/angels21.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>52</sup> Anonymous, ‘National tragedy! 22 million people still employed’, *Alternative centre Sunday supplement 2*, March 1982 : 56AI

<sup>53</sup> Al Puppy, ‘Like pigs to the slaughter’, *Kill your pet puppy*, 6 February 2008: <http://killyourpetpuppy.co.uk/news/like-pigs-to-the-slaughter/>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>54</sup> Repartiseren Ren, ‘Interview with Tony Drayton of Kill your pet puppy!’, *Repartiseren ren*, 22 July 2013: <https://repartiseraren.se/2013/07/22/interview-with-tony-drayton-of-kill-your-pet-puppy/#more-7611>, accessed 1 April 2019



months before the opening of the centre, an accidental fire had destroyed a squatted punk venue.

The centre has mainly been recalled by the 'punk side' of its adherents, signalling an early detachment of the other components. In February 1982 financial problems, together with the lack of support by the wider activist and punk communities, caused the eviction and the closure of the 'autonomy centre'. A document published not long after the eviction, stressed the issues that had arisen during the centre's activity: while it had offered an inexpensive and less regulated alternative to mainstream punk venues, it had also called for active participation:

This isn't just a gig venue run by an elite clique of people. [...] 'If you don't put energy into the centre we'll all get pissed off and put none in ourselves and then where will you be? The Lyceum? The Clarendon? The 100 club? Twice the cost, half the bands and bouncers = no fun. Thieves, no-one paying, no participation = no [Anarchy] centre. It's your centre, use it, don't abuse it' etc. etc.<sup>55</sup>

If for the anarcho-punks this was one of the first of many centres, for the more traditional anarchist groups it was framed by a series of other attempts to establish a social presence within different areas of the city, a process which had begun in the late nineteen seventies. Among their inspirations were the first wave of Italian social centres, similar experiences throughout Europe and the Republican Clubs in Northern Ireland.<sup>56</sup> The autonomy centre was the last one of such attempts. It had failed to meet the aims for which it had been set up. The non-punk component had left or had drastically reduced their involvement and the space was used almost exclusively as a venue. Crass themselves expressed bitter disappointment:

The Anarchy Centre closed down after a year in which, apart from some very good gigs, very little happened. The general feeling is that we were ripped off and that a lot of the money that we, Poison Girls and many others put into the centre was wasted.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> 'National tragedy! 22 millions people still employed'

<sup>56</sup> Meltzer, *I couldn't paint golden angels*

<sup>57</sup> From the introduction to *A series of shock slogans and mindless token tantrums*, booklet enclosed in Crass, *Christ the Album* [Record] (Crass Records, 1982)

At the same time, the ‘autonomy centre’ had been successful in providing a channel for the politicisation for many young punks and in offering a breeding ground for the growth of an anarcho-punk community in the city:

The people who put on the gigs at the centre have stuck together and are continuing to arrange gigs in London in the hope they will eventually find another permanent home for their activities. We are putting any money that we receive for the centre into a fund which is available to those people whenever they should need it. We hope that the original ideas that we had for a centre will eventually again become a reality.<sup>58</sup>

The community created through the self-management of the centre in Wapping continued their activities in a new space. Now called ‘Anarchy Centre’, it found its second home in the already squatted *Centro Iberico*.<sup>59</sup> The Centro had already hosted a number of punk concerts,<sup>60</sup> but the move of the ‘Anarchy Centre’ to within its walls brought with it a new pace and a new sense of continuity to the activities of the space.

The divisions which had hindered the activities of the centre in Wapping soon reappeared, but were lessened by the fact that all of the activists belonged to the same generation. Engagements with the Spanish anarchists living in the upper floors of the *Centro* appear to have been limited but were less antagonistic than in Wapping.<sup>61</sup> Being squatted, the potential for financial problems was reduced and adjustments had to be made to accommodate the spaces utilisation as both a venue and a housing project. The *Centro* lasted up until the end of 1982, when it was evicted and demolished. As pointed out by a member of the *Kill your pet puppy* zine, throughout the 7-8 months of initiatives in the space, it represented a recalibration of the targets set for the first A-centre:

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> The first Centro Iberico had been founded in the early nineteen seventies by a Spanish anarchist refugee; it was an “internationally known place to go if you needed help in London; somewhere to find a welcome, food, a bed for the night, or a place to squat” and also a magnet for Spanish refugees and for local anarchists. Since the late nineteen seventies the name was taken by a former school building squatted as Spanish Community Centre in the area of Portobello: Garcia Miguel, *Franco's Prisoner* (London, 1972); Meltzer, *I couldn't paint golden angels*; Christie Stuart, ‘Remembering Miguel Garcia’, *KSL notes*, 28 November 2010: <https://kslnotes.wordpress.com/2010/11/28/remembering-miguel-garcia-by-stuart-christie/>, accessed 1 April 2019; VA, *Peace News for nonviolent revolution, issues 2087-2110* (London, 1979), p. 78

<sup>60</sup> ‘Throbbing Gristle at the Centro Iberico 1979’, *Brainwashed*, <http://brainwashed.com/common/htdocs/discog/irc17.php?site=tg08>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>61</sup> Al A, ‘Punk lives in the strangest places

And so to the Centro Iberico where the chaos continued, but on a slightly larger scale. [...] More relaxed than Wapping, the styles a bit wilder, the music a bit broader – expanding the boundaries of punk.<sup>62</sup>

For many of those involved, it also became a space in which to test run and develop practical skills related to squatting, activism and gig organisation:

That centre is the reason for [the fanzine Kill your] Pet Puppy not appearing for so long – too much was happening to capture the mood. The mood was ‘Do It’ not ‘Write About People Doing It’ so we were doing it.<sup>63</sup>

If it again failed to create an environment of political contamination between punks and non-punks, it nonetheless allowed for the debate within the anarcho-punk community to continue and grow. Different internal strands and political positions were delineated, and themes and topics were debated and clarified through the channels typical to that community: zines, the organisation of concerts, the choice of bands to host, lyrics, graffiti, etc.

An unorganised mix of contradictory instances was well represented within the community at this time, before the inception of experiences such as Class War or Stop the City, which allowed for a widening of the debate and for further experimentation with different modalities of ‘doing politics’.

These centres had been “a way of showing that it [was] possible to create our own lives, to live our own lives”.<sup>64</sup> As a spectator recalled:

It wasn’t about the ‘Anarchy Centres’, the bands who played there, or even the ‘message’, it was the people who made it what it was [...].<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 28

<sup>63</sup> Penguin, ‘Recent interviews with Tony Drayton’, *Kill your pet puppy*, <http://killyourpetpuppy.co.uk/news/recent-interviews-with-tony-d-about-kill-your-pet-puppy-for-noisey-vice-and-doomed-to-extinction/>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>64</sup> Al A, ‘Punk lives in the strangest places’

<sup>65</sup> Low Chris, ‘The Centro Iberico – August 1982. A spectator’s point of view’, in Bull Greg, ‘Penguin’ Mickey, eds., *Not just bits of paper* (London, 2015)

In Italy and in England the occupation of these first centres played a seminal role on both a local and national level. In England, ‘A-centres’ had shown what could be done, especially for the anarcho-punk communities in London and other major cities, but also for other activist groups. After the eviction of the *Centro Iberico*, other ‘A-centres’ were squatted in London by different groups. As recently recalled by Tony Drayton, in less than two years since the opening of the first ‘A-Centre’, squatting had assumed a central role, “becoming an integral part of the anarcho-scene”.<sup>66</sup>

It also helped that there was no charge to put on bands at these places so we could just go ahead, experiment and do it. If the gig was a disaster it didn’t really matter, it was just a laugh. [...] Squatting was a way of maintaining a very low-income life-style as there was no rent to pay, the only cost being very little security.<sup>67</sup>

The new occupations were essentially squatted venues, offering “squat gigs for squat people”.<sup>68</sup> There were one-night occupations, such as the ‘Zig-Zag Club’ in London in December 1982, occupied to host a specific event, or projects which entailed more long-term planning and continuity.

Outside of London the largest anarcho-punk community was in Bristol. Sources on *social* squatting in Bristol in those years are scattered at best. Mentions of *legendary* squats and venues were left in a handful of band bios,<sup>69</sup> concert lists,<sup>70</sup> zines,<sup>71</sup> and in address books for radical groups in anarchist magazines,<sup>72</sup> and their heritage can be found in the name of a local record label.<sup>73</sup> At least two centres were occupied between 1983 and 1984 and were not

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<sup>66</sup> Penguin, ‘Recent interviews with Tony Dryton’

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Finch John, ‘Lunatic Fringe’, *Bristol Archive Records*, March 2010:

[http://www.bristolarchiverecords.com/bands/Lunatic\\_Fringe\\_History.html](http://www.bristolarchiverecords.com/bands/Lunatic_Fringe_History.html), accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>70</sup> Anonymous, ‘Gigs 1982-1988’, *The Chumbawamba fan page*: <http://www.kipuka.net/chumba/gigs/gig1.html>; Anonymous, ‘Where were you?’, *Dirt*: <http://www.dirt.gagsdirt.co.uk/gigs.php>; ‘Anonymous, Gigs in Bristol 1978-1985’, *Bristol Archive Records*: <http://bristolarchiverecords.com/gigs2.html>, all accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>71</sup> Lester Ken, ‘Crossing the frontier of music’ *Maximum Rocknroll*, 16 (August 1984) pp. 49-52

<sup>72</sup> Anonymous, ‘Feedback’, *Black Flag*, 108.7, 1984, p.8

<sup>73</sup> *Demolition Diner Records*: <http://demolitiondinerrecords.com/>, accessed 1 April 2019

evicted in the first few days or weeks. In the then desolate area of Cheltenham road/Stokes Croft the occupation of a building gave life to three different projects: the ‘Demolition ballroom’, the ‘Demolition diner’, and the ‘Full Marx bookshop’, which together “provided a valuable organisational focus, with the activities of the squatted venue and cafe supplemented by the information and contact address of the lefty book shop”.<sup>74</sup>

The Full Marx bookshop had in fact been squatted since 1981 and in the following years the anarcho-punk community expanded the occupation to the adjacent abandoned ex-Volkswagen shop, condemned for demolition, which was converted into a cafe – the ‘Demolition diner’ – and later to the showroom next door – the ‘Demolition ballroom’ – as a venue for initiatives and concerts. Bear Huckenbush was among those who occupied the ‘diner’ and the ‘ballroom’:

We took it in turns to work in the cafe, serving vegetarian and vegan food. Locals came in all the time too, not just the anarchists and the lefties, as it was only about 50p a meal. The Ballroom became an established venue on the touring circuit, and we also started a market during the day.<sup>75</sup>

This squat was home to the Bristol Housing Action Movement (BHAM), a group offering support to squatters and would-be squatters. In 1984 BHAM opened a separate centre in the Montpellier borough, The ‘Bristol peace centre’, as an information centre which hosted talks, meetings and concerts.

As in London, the anarcho-punk community had been looking for a place to squat for months.

This is stressed by the activities of local bands, such as Lunatic Fringe:

a group of punks, squatting activists and anarchists collaborated to create an alternative Easter celebration in a former church on Midland Road. The band played a short set in a line-up that included Disorder, Chaos UK, Rancid (the originals!), Amebix and Chumbawamba. Still well remembered, the gig has passed into local history and even featured in Venue Magazine’s recent ‘Best Ever’ Bristol gigs listings. This was the first of a number of successful squat gigs which led

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<sup>74</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kill or Chill? Analysis of the opposition to the Criminal Justice Bill’, *Aufheben*, 4, Summer 1995, p. 6

<sup>75</sup> Bateman Jessica, ‘From the Magpie to Demolition Diner: memories of Bristol’s best loved squats’, *Vice*, 15 October 2016, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/7bmapz/bristol-squats-magpie-telegraphic-heights-riots-demolition-diner](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/7bmapz/bristol-squats-magpie-telegraphic-heights-riots-demolition-diner), accessed 1 April 2019

to the eventual creation of a permanent squatted venue, the legendary ‘Demolition Ballroom’ on Cheltenham Road.<sup>76</sup>

From 1984 onwards the ‘demolition diner’ and the ‘ballroom’ hosted political events as well as gigs and were home to a number of reggae and dub parties, signalling the powerful combination of Caribbean music and punk, which proved particularly significant for the Bristol music scene in the following years.<sup>77</sup>

The Bristol’s anarcho-punk scene of the early nineteen eighties was characterised by a different nuance of *anarchy*. It was one of the birthplaces of the term *crust-punk*,<sup>78</sup> indicating a more extreme approach to both music and lifestyle: dogmas and explicit political messages were refused; the squatting experience was pivotal to a vagrant and extremist lifestyle and ‘getting wasted’ was an inherent part of it. Politics were not refused as a whole, but anarchist political engagement presented fewer certainties and was shaded with bleak and nihilist tones.<sup>79</sup> Squatting, hunt sabotaging, and animal rights were as important as the celebration of alcohol and the use of hard drugs.<sup>80</sup> A nihilistic “not caring” attitude was a response to the inevitability of a world where “we are all gonna get blown up”.<sup>81</sup>

This nihilistic approach was reflected in the usage of a space like the ‘Demolition ballroom’.

A brief section from a 2012 entry in the *Antsy* blog, one of the many editorial projects of Ted Curtis, conveys such attitude:

There is no electricity there, they have been stealing power by discreetly running cables from nearby lampposts. [...] They have made up stickers to encourage donations, stickers that read dig deep for the diner! [...] a pastiche of the ubiquitous NUM stickers that said dig deep for the miners. [...] In the ballroom there is also no running water. The toilets are situated down a slimy set of stone steps. You go down them in complete darkness, although candle stubs have been left lying around here and there. Few people bother with the steps unless they are truly desperate, or have dysentery. You stand at the top of the steps and you piss down them, into the void. If you do

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<sup>76</sup> Finch, ‘Lunatic Fringe’

<sup>77</sup> Brooks Ann, *Popular culture: global intercultural perspective*, (Basingstoke, 2014)

<sup>78</sup> Glasper Ian, *Trapped in the scene. Uk Hardcore 1985-89* (London, 2004) p. 185

<sup>79</sup> Curtis Ted, ‘Weighed down with stones’, *Antsy*, 28 December 2012, <https://antsy-pantsy.blogspot.co.uk/2012/12/>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>80</sup> Webb Peter, ‘Dirty Squatters, anarchy, politics and smack’, in Bull Gregory, Dines Mike, eds., *Tales from the punkside* (London, 2014) pp. 179-98; Butler Justine, ‘Disgustin’ Justin’, in Bull, Dines, eds., *Tales from the punkside*, pp. 85-94

<sup>81</sup> Paraphrases of Disorder, ‘Today’s word’ [Song], *Complete Disorder* (Disorder, 1981)

not have dysentery before you go down the steps you will have it by the time you come back up. There is no door at the top of the steps – it has been removed for firewood and beside the doorspace somebody has helpfully painted an arrow and a trilingual sign: the bog, les bogs, el bogò.<sup>82</sup>

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In Italy, the *Virus* had become a symbol of what could be achieved through squatting and self-management, while punx living in other cities had to put in long lasting effort and endeavour in order to secure a space for themselves. In the first half of the decade centres were squatted in Bari, in south-eastern Italy (*La Giungla*, The Jungle, 1983-85) and in Modena (*La Mongolfiera*, The Hot-Air Balloon), in the central regions of the country. Attempts had been conducted in many other cities also, but they had been evicted before being able to run with any sense of continuity. In other cities punx gathered around pre-existing pubs and clubs (Naples, Piacenza, Rome) or found hospitality in spaces rented by anarchist groups (Bologna, Turin). In some cases, punx kids opted for a legal route: formally renting and opening a club and relying on pre-existing aggregative structures. This was the case of the ‘Victor Charlie’ in Pisa. The club officially only lasted for three months: after complaints and petitions from the neighbourhood, it received an injunction to close due to a lack of permits. Through appeals and a further occupation of the club, the ‘Tuscan Viet Cong’<sup>83</sup> – as it had been dubbed on the pages of several zines due to its resilience – remained open for over a year between 1984 and 1985, becoming a recognised venue for international and local concerts and acting as the centre for the punk-hardcore scene of central Italy. Each scene developed in different a way: the common goal of a safe and independent political and social space was achieved through many diverse modalities. The obstacles faced were also varied. For example,

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<sup>82</sup> Curtis, ‘Weighed down with stones’

<sup>83</sup> Sabrina, ‘Moicano girl’, Philopat Marco, ed., *Lumi di punk. La scena italiana raccontata dai protagonisti* (Milano, 2006) pp. 185-189

squatters of *La Giungla* recalled the issues related to the diffusion of organised crime in the area in which their centre was located:

It was a very difficult area, full of criminals who used the area to unload stolen goods. For months we had guns pointed at our heads and we received threats. We had everyone against us, crime, the bourgeoisie, left-wing and right-wing extremists. [...] One morning the centre was targeted with gunshots by criminals. [...] The centre closed.<sup>84</sup>

The characteristics of the local scenes during the first half of the nineteen eighties influenced the next stages in development of the social centres' movement throughout the rest of the decade, but by the first half of the nineteen eighties this nation-wide scene already became pivotal to the diffusion of punk and hardcore music. This mix of squatted social centres, clubs and semi-legal spaces worked as the backbone of a self-managed alternative music scene.

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The fame of a place like the *Virus* and the growth of this scene also affected the hopes and projects of young activists and punx in Rome. The city presented important differences to the rest of the country. Groups of the *Autonomia* were still based and deeply rooted in many neighbourhoods and as a result were still relatively strong. Rome suffered the same 'reflux' as the rest of the country, but the highly 'localist' character of radical politics in the Capital diluted the rift between the decades: within its vast urban sprawl, local narratives centred on the boroughs had often prevailed on city-wide approaches.

While experiments in the occupation and self-management of social spaces had appeared throughout the period from 1975 to 1985, none of them had left important traces either in the

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<sup>84</sup> Gaeta Antonella, 'Noi ragazzi della giungla di Bari', *La Repubblica.it*, 8 November 2006, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2006/11/08/noi-ragazzi-della-giungla-di-bari.html>, accessed 1 April 2019



collective memory or upon the urban fabric of the city. Without a space to welcome them, the streets had become the arena of an intense personal and political confrontation between different generations: acts of roaming and grouping throughout the city allowed for the need to reinvent approaches to ‘doing politics’ of groups of older militants to meet with the new modalities of territorial discovery and socialisation enacted by the new generation of activists and punx.

In the *Centocelle* borough – in the north-eastern quadrant of the city – the occupation of a social centre was anticipated by years of campaigning activities, which provided both a ‘sentimental education’ for the new decade and the essential common ground for a dialogue that was both intergenerational and positioned between different political views. Such dialogue was based on localist and territorial politics and activities: the organisation of concerts and the production of political zines went hand-in-hand with direct actions and the lobbying of local institutions for the defence of the neighbourhood from gentrification and speculation. The groups working in the area were characterised by the ability to mix a wide range of interests and approaches: their initiatives and publications suggested a special attention to youth cultures in the area, an interest in identity politics, the – somewhat provocative – coexistence of Marxist and anarchist symbolism and ethos, and the use of new codes and languages, often taken from contemporary countercultural experiences, as a vehicle for updated radical political messages. A joint campaign for the opening of a social centre soon became the glue that kept these groups together: these were the first steps towards the squatting of the *Forte Prenestino*.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> The Fort, originally called Prenestina, feminine, from the ancient Roman road with the same name on which it is built, was erected in the years following the capture of Rome and the definitive unification of the country in 1870. It was built as part of the *campo trincerato*, a defensive structure of 15 forts and other buildings to protect and enclose the new Capital. Its total surface comprised 13.8 hectares, several internal structures, numerous underground corridors and tunnels, expanding much further than the external walls, and hundreds of rooms. During World War II it was used as a secret weapons storage by the Roman Resistance. The Fort had been underutilised since then, becoming an informal playground for local kids in the following decades.

While for the Virus the path towards the occupation of the centre started with the definition of the need – a self-managed social centre – and then proceeded to the identification of a suitable building, in the case of the *Forte Prenestino*, these two steps were unified. The fort represented the epitome of a space which had been taken away from the social fabric, locked up and left in a state of abandonment by the public authorities. Its closed gates symbolised the de-legitimation of local policies towards young citizens, peripheral neighbourhoods and public heritage. Campaigns for the restitution and reconversion of the fort, and of the other forts built around the city, had been ongoing since the nineteen sixties. The need of a social space and the desire to open the Fort to the citizenship were one and the same. The prefigured occupation was charged with a conservationist approach to a building that was inherently connected to the history of the neighbourhood. Other spaces were taken into consideration, mostly because the occupation of the Fort seemed too difficult to achieve, and – once squatted – an eviction was expected to happen soon afterwards.

In the years before the occupation, groups in the area created *ACAB – Associazione Culturale Adesso Basta* (Cultural Association Enough is Enough), a formal cultural association. Since its inception the campaign had moved forward on two different levels, as it was well represented by the choice of the name: a radical, conflictual one – the acronym ACAB<sup>86</sup> – and a more lawful one. Through the association a series of legal actions were devised: surveys, petitions, public talks, meetings with local councilmen, etc. ACAB became the voice and the symbol of the ‘recomposition’ of different local actors and groups: “collectives, committees, loose cannons and mavericks, anti-militarists and anti-nuclears, feminists and fags, prisoners and not”.<sup>87</sup> It represented a vehicle for the collective growth of the Roman youth of the nineteen eighties from the *tabula rasa* in which they were born. Their references were more

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<sup>86</sup> Diffused since the late nineteen seventies, firstly within the prison system and later within hooligan and radical political scenes, it symbolises the hatred for police forces, meaning: All Cops Are Bastards. In this case, Roman activists first opted to use this acronym and only later devised the full name of the association.

<sup>87</sup> Vuoto a Perdere [zine], 1 (Rome, 1983) : BACZ

often directed at outcasts and outsiders rather than to the working-class and proletariat; also the colour-code had changed, from the ‘ancient red’ of Communist flags to the ‘alien green’ of the Martian, which acted as a logo of sorts, becoming the brand of ACAB in fanzines, banners, flyers, and graffiti.

Since 1983, ACAB had been organising ska and punk concerts for May 1<sup>st</sup> in the park surrounding the fort, as an alternative celebratory event for the International Workers’ Day called *Festa del non lavoro* (No-work Fest). It was a city-wide gathering of young activists, punks and skins: over 50 groups of different kinds (political, countercultural, music bands, single-issue committees, punk-zines and magazines, etc.) participated in its first editions.

As recalled in a publication celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> birthday of the *Forte*, on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1986:

That rainy day didn’t stop the thousands of people who had remained until midnight, when we should have turned the music off and taken the stage apart. That moment arrived but, after the last notes, which should have ended the day, a banner was unrolled on the stage [...]: ‘The party carries on inside’.<sup>88</sup>

Personal memories added a touch of irony:

Behind the stage a group of people were ready to cut the chain that was keeping the Fort closed. As in a comic book, they realised that they had forgotten the shears. The solidarity and complicity of the Blitz, a social centre occupied the day before, was crucial for the success of the endeavour.

A river of people flowed through the gate with the joy and the excitement of those who, lost at sea, look for land to dock. A military structure, a symbol of suffering, death and destruction was becoming a social centre: the Occupied and Self-managed Social Centre Forte Prenestino.<sup>89</sup>

The fort had been squatted:

A green area of 5 hectares had been reopened to the neighbourhood, there our breath, for so long short, became long and deep. Like ants, in that tangle of bodies, everyone knew what to do. Brushes and rakes appeared; people started to clean. From the megaphone a voice was shouting the reasons and expressing the joy of that moment. The air was soaked in pure adrenaline. The party carried on for hours.<sup>90</sup>

The *CS Forte Prenestino* established itself as the largest social centre in Italy and one of the largest in Europe. Also, since its inception it remained one of the most heterogeneous centres

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88 Anonymous, ‘Apertura’, in CSOA Forte Prenestino, *Fortopìa. Storie d’amore e d’autogestione* (Roma, 2016) p. 6

89 Ibid., p. 7

90 Ibid.

in the country. This was a consequence of the capacity of ACAB to make use of the variety of political inputs which had created it. After the occupation, this collective ethos managed to grow and to enrich this experience despite these differences, and the political allegiances of each member. The grand dimensions of the Fort were a further reason for a broad approach: a high number of initiatives were needed to activate all the different spaces within its walls, and these required an even higher number of activists to run them. One month after the occupation, the *CS Forte Prenestino* provided a bar, English language classes, music workshops, dance classes, amateur sports tournaments, concerts, film screenings, and theatre shows.<sup>91</sup> In the following years, several physical training courses, more language classes, a theatre school, a recording studio, a projection room, a computer workshop and a kitchen were added.<sup>92</sup>

In the months before the occupation of the *CS Forte Prenestino*, the need of social spaces had become a rallying call in several boroughs of the city, from both the punx community, groups of the *Autonomia* and local committees. The *Comitato Promotore Centri Sociali* (Committee for the promotion of social centres) was created as a platform for all these groups to come together and support each other's campaigns. Through this committee other centres were occupied in the same year: *Hai Visto Quinto?* in an abandoned primary school, *Blitz* in an ex-kindergarten, and *Torre Maura*. In the following years the committee was dissolved and other forms of coordination took its place, but between 1987 and 1989 another eleven centres were squatted.

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<sup>91</sup> From a survey of the material dated May 1986 : BACZ

<sup>92</sup> From a survey of the material dated 1986-1988: BACZ

In Milan, the eviction of the *Virus* led to a break in the unity of the collective who had run it up until this point, but also allowed for the dissemination of its members to different projects and for the birth of new collaborations. The *Virus* collective tried to carry on the ethos of the *Virus* by occupying a series of buildings in 1984-85, but they were all short-lived. After the failure of these initiatives, new links were created with both the *Calusca* bookshop of Primo Moroni<sup>93</sup> and the *CS Leoncavallo*.

The *CS Leoncavallo* belonged to the earlier generation of centres, of which it was one of the largest, and had been defined as “the more serious and political”.<sup>94</sup> At the turn of the decade it had been marked by the choice of a number of its members to adhere to armed groups and by mass arrests of its militants.<sup>95</sup> During the first years of the nineteen eighties it had been forced in a defensive position, but from 1983-84 it began to participate in city-wide protests and to tighten relationships with the punx of the *Virus*. During the first half of the decade cultural activities in the *CS Leoncavallo* had been drastically reduced, but some persisted. Theatre groups had a studio there, but lived a separate life from the rest of the centre, ‘living’ their space and not being involved in the political management of the centre.<sup>96</sup>

Punx activists started to organise concerts within the walls of the *CS Leoncavallo* in 1985. The previous year, a few weeks after the eviction of the *Virus*, the *Cs Leoncavallo* had hosted a concert previously planned there. Atomo Tinelli, a punk graffiti artist, remembered how differences outnumbered affinities – “the young people [...] of the centre looked more like old people than peers”<sup>97</sup> – and how from the very beginning of the collaboration there was friction:

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<sup>93</sup> Philopat, *Costretti a sanguinare*, p. 109

<sup>94</sup> Moroni, Martin, *La luna sotto casa*, p. 180

<sup>95</sup> Moroni Primo, ‘La testimonianza di Primo Moroni’, *Centro Sociale Leoncavallo (old website)*: <http://www.ecn.org/leoncavallo/storic/moroni.htm>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>96</sup> Ibba, *Leoncavallo*, p. 88

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p. 105

we managed to propose and organise the first punk concert, but not of any band, of a Canadian band, D.O.A. [...]. A really good and well-known band. It was the first time that the Leoncavallo found itself with 5.000 people, who couldn't all fit in.<sup>98</sup>

The size of the initiative was unexpected and without precedent in any squatted space in Italy. The *CS Leoncavallo* had until then opted for a low profile regarding music and cultural activity. Recalling closely the physical disruption punks caused at the Autonomy Centre in London, “at the [Leoncavallo], just to understand, all the walls were white with pink columns [...], at the end of that concert there was no more white left.”<sup>99</sup>

It also had a tradition of disregarding countercultural phenomena, and the punx had to go through several weeks of meetings with the occupation committee and the cultural commission before a more stable cooperation was accepted. Nonetheless, the concert of the D.O.A. had for the first time shown the potential of hosting large events and had brought in a considerable amount of income: some of the activists of the *CS Leoncavallo* started to ‘think bigger’, and looked at this new challenge as an opportunity to rejuvenate the centre.

‘Helter Skelter’, a weekly event organised by punx and *creature simili* (kindred creatures), as Milanese goths had labelled themselves, was the fruit of this encounter. They ran it for two years but never fully integrated within the political management of the centre. ‘Helter Skelter’ had a destabilising effect on the collective of the *CS Leoncavallo*. The diversity it had brought within the walls of the centre had caused internal debates on the very nature of the centre, on its *raison d’etre*. At the core of this debate was a generational and political difference between two internal groups and their relationships to the struggles of the nineteen seventies. A part of the collective was still entrenched in the remnants of the radical politics of this earlier decade: this could be seen in the decisional structure of the centre, composed of committees and sub-committees, but also in the prioritisation of initiatives on police

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<sup>98</sup> Atomo Tinelli, quoted in: *Ibid.*; The concert of D.O.A., Crash and Rappresaglia was held on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1984.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

repression and solidarity with political prisoners over other activities. The youth of the centre were instead proposing a modernisation of both theories and practices, and the space given to the punx was a clear example of this. This contraposition ended with the younger activists taking over. Symbolically, the debate reached its climax – and was brought to a physical level – during another concert of a Canadian punk band.<sup>100</sup>

The new generation of *Leoncavallini* – as the activists of the centre became known – was part of a new wave of activism that came out of the students' protests of the autumn of 1985. This impacted positively on already existing groups and centres and fostered a new wave of occupations. Squats like *Via dei Transiti*, *Garibaldi* and *Conchetta*, all occupied in the second half of the nineteen seventies, were revitalised and transformed into social centres. Around ten new centres were squatted between 1985 and 1986. Some were short-lived, and were evicted within a few weeks or months; others resisted until the end of the decade. New activists added to the diversity of the Milanese radical landscape, sharing the non-militant ethos of the punx, but carrying new typologies of democratic and cultural instances. A consistent number went on to revive and update strands of thought of the *Autonomia* movement, especially in its more 'diffuse' version.

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In England, as in Italy, social spaces started to be squatted not only by punk activists. The wide array of possible ways in which to fulfil the need for space were represented by two main experiences, that in different ways developed a long-term contamination of traditional

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<sup>100</sup> No Means No, Irha and Ifix Tcen Tcen played at the CS Leoncavallo on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1988: CS Leoncavallo. *No Means No, Irha, Ifix Tcen Tcen* [Poster], 1 July 1988 : APM; Vandalo, 'Per le strade di Lambrooklin', *Vandalo*, 14 December 2004, <https://vandalo.blogspot.co.uk/2004/12/per-le-strade-di-lambrooklyn.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

radical politics and countercultural ethos, class struggle and single-issue campaigns. One – the ‘121 Centre’ – had been occupied since 1981 in Brixton, South London, the other – the ‘1-in-12 Club’ – was opened in Bradford at the end of the decade. They also exemplified two different routes to achieving a long-term and participatory presence within a territory, the former through squatting, and the latter through legal channels.

121, Railton Road in Brixton – where the ‘121 Centre’ took its home – had been squatted since the early nineteen seventies, and used for much of the decade as a meeting place for the black community and for black liberation organisations, and had been home to the black bookshop ‘Sabaar’.<sup>101</sup> At the turn of the decade, Brixton still hosted strong squatter communities, of mixed backgrounds. Several community centres were still in place, supporting and fostering political activity in the area.

By 1981, the building was set up as an anarchist bookshop and social centre by local and international activists. The re-occupation anticipated by a few months the opening of the centre in Wapping, and it soon attracted the energies of those anarchists who had left the ‘Autonomy centre’, deluded by the experience of cohabitation with the punks.<sup>102</sup>

The centre was set in the middle of the Brixton’s Frontline – a highly contested space upon the map of nineteen seventies and nineteen eighties London<sup>103</sup> - and in April 1981 the Brixton uprising exploded right in front of the newly squatted centre. Meltzer recalled the events from the centre’s point of view:

When the Brixton riots began in 1981, the police did their best to blame anarchists, who had just squatted an empty shop at No.121 Railton Road, and might otherwise have been the perfect patsy. It was rather difficult as the rioters were Black youths pushed by harassment, and few of them at that time knew what anarchism was about, certainly theoretically. The riots started in Railton

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<sup>101</sup> Needle collective, ‘Squatting in England and Wales. Heritage and perspectives’, CrimethInc., 13 May 2014: <https://crimethinc.com/2014/05/13/squatting-in-england-heritage-prospects>, accessed 1 April

<sup>102</sup> Col, ‘Some notes on the founding of the Kate Sharpley Library’, *Bulletin of the KSL*, 40 (2004), p. 2

<sup>103</sup> “From one perspective, centres of black criminality and lawlessness; or, from the other, political resistance and insurrection”, in: McLeod John, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the metropolis* (London, New York, 2004), p. 128



Road, and 121 was left untouched when the pub that had operated a racist policy opposite was burned down.<sup>104</sup>

The activities of the centre in the neighbourhood had led to a general acceptance of the centre by the local communities, but squatters of the ‘121 Centre’ were white and the relationship with the Afro-Caribbean community in the area was not always easy.<sup>105</sup> While squatting had enabled important connections with sectors of the black community, race divisions were still common in many radical groups for both a difficulty to prioritise anti-racist instances and the separatist line on which minorities developed their campaigns:

Despite living side by side and having cordial relations, Black and White squatters did not organise themselves together. [...] Some white squatters came to help them turn on the gas and the electricity. During evictions some women from the ‘White Women Centre’ also came to show support, but that was as far as the relationship went. [...] The absence of joint activity might explain why in most accounts of the Brixton squatting movement written in later years, there are no references to the early Black squats of the 70s.<sup>106</sup>

Activists of the ‘121 Centre’ remembered tensions with the Rastafarian community on themes such as religion and feminism, which were often resolved thanks to the involvement and the support of the more sympathetic sectors of the neighbourhood.<sup>107</sup>

During the nineteen eighties the *121* became the centrepiece of local and city-wide networks of activism, acting as a base for groups such as the Fare Dodgers Liberation Front,<sup>108</sup> the Brixton Squatters Aid (BSA), and many others including the “Brixton Hunt Saboteurs, Food not Bombs, Community Resistance Against the Poll Tax, Anarchist Black Cross, the Direct Action Movement, London Socialist Film Co-op, the Kate Sharpley Library, and the Troops Out Movement”.<sup>109</sup> A printing press workshop was established, publishing many radical

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<sup>104</sup> Meltzer, *I couldn't paint golden angels*

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> De La Torre Lopez, ‘Squatters handbook’, *Remembering Olive Morris*, 27 September 2007: <https://rememberolivemorris.wordpress.com/2007/09/27/squatters-handbook/>

<sup>107</sup> Meltzer, *I couldn't paint golden angels*

<sup>108</sup> Mudlark121, ‘Today in London policing history, 1984: cops raid anarchist 121 Centre, Brixton, looking for guns...’, *Past tense*, 14 August 2018: <https://pasttenseblog.wordpress.com/2018/08/14/today-in-london-policing-history-1984-cops-raid-anarchist-121-centre-brixton-looking-for-guns/>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>109</sup> Needle Collective, ‘Squatting in England and Wales. Heritage and perspectives’

papers such as *Crowbar*, the Class War influenced punk and squatter journal, the local *South London Stress*, and also *Black Flag* and *Bad Attitude*, anarchist and feminist magazines.

While not based in either London or Bristol, and officially opened only in 1989, the ‘1-in- 2 Club’ in Bradford represented a different path towards the creation of a social centre, which inspired many others in the following decades. The group had originally formed as a particularly active unemployed benefit claimants union, against the backdrop of de-industrialisation and increasing unemployment in 1981; when “a government investigation into benefit fraud (the ‘Raynor Report’) found that ‘1 in 12’ claimants were actively ‘defrauding the state’, the union lost no time in adopting this statistic for themselves”.<sup>110</sup>

The group decided to organise punk concerts in several locations in Bradford, bonding through the union of anarcho-punk ethics and a classist analysis of the attack on workers’ rights deployed by the Thatcher government. The objective was to “create a lively and participative social scene” and “stimulate a culture of resistance”,<sup>111</sup> through the organisation of cheap concerts, based on DiY ethics, “free from sexist, racist and statist hassles, the usual promoters and rip-offs, dress restrictions and bouncer intimidation”.<sup>112</sup>

In the second half of the decade the ‘1-in-12’ decided to find a space of their own, instead of moving between different venues, and opted for a legal path. As the group explain, introducing their constitutive document:

There were 3 legal models available:

[...]

1) A **‘public’ bar**. It’s hard to get new public licenses and the decision to allow such by the council and the magistrates is at their discretion. Also the cops have automatic access at all times. A non-starter really.

2) A **private ‘proprietary’ club**. Which has members but is owned and controlled by an individual or company [...]. Not for us.

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<sup>110</sup> *What is the 1in12 club?*, (Bradford, 1995), quoted in: Gordon, *The authentic punk*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p. 143

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

3) **A private members club owned and run by its members.** Providing that certain legal requirements are met, then the ‘licence’ (technically a ‘Registration Certificate’) cannot be refused! Also, the cops have no automatic right of entry to such a club. This is the law under which traditional Working Men’s Clubs operate. [...] This is the option we chose.<sup>113</sup>

The importance of autonomy and collective ownership was underlined in the choice of a private member-owned club, where an alcohol licence was not required because beverages were considered collective property, as was the entire club. In addition, control by the authorities was reduced to a minimum, protecting members from unrequested police attention and providing a *safe space* within the club. Since 1988, thanks to a grant from the local administration, the ‘1-in-12 Club’ bought the building that became its home for the following decades – and where it still resides. Mechanisms to reduce the role of the formal structure, and to empower informal participation were developed: the cost of annual membership was kept as low as possible,<sup>114</sup> the membership was open to everyone, and everyone was invited to meetings, even though they were formally only open to elected members.

Although in a different form, the club experienced some of the same internal tensions that existed in the London based ‘A-centres’: contrasts over different political approaches, priorities and expectations were “empowered by the open and active process of decision-making”,<sup>115</sup> but had also created deep internal conflicts: “sometimes members have left, disillusioned and occasionally bitter, but this is the uncomfortable reality of taking responsibility and control”.<sup>116</sup>

Throughout the country, experiments with self-managed and often squatted centres were growing in number. Besides London, a handful of centres had been open for different periods of time in every major city. In the capital, the map of social squats followed the map of

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<sup>113</sup> The 1-in-12 Club, ‘The 1 in 12 Club Constitution’, *The 1-in-12 Club*: <http://www.1in12.com/our-constitution.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>114</sup> Grrrt, Wakefield Stacy, *Not for rent. Conversations with creative activists in the u.k.*, (Amsterdam, 1996), p.57; ‘How to join the club’, *The 1in12 Club*, <http://www.1in12.com/how-to-join.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>115</sup> *What is the 1in12 club?*, quoted in: Gordon, *The Authentic punk*, p. 144

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

housing squats from the previous decade,<sup>117</sup> being concentrated only in a few boroughs. South of the Thames these were Lambeth and Lewisham; north of the river most centres were in Hackney, Islington and Camden. More frequently than in Italy, squatting for housing and social squatting went hand-in-hand: a number of places hosted both residential and communal areas, while almost all centres were home to local squatters support groups. Squats like the Blue House in Hackney (1985-86)<sup>118</sup> and the South London Women's hospital<sup>119</sup> – which became a women-only squat after the closure of the main building between July 1984 and March 1985 – operated as both housing squats and social centres. The 'Ambulance Station', occupied in 1984 in Southwark, was also home to a series of flats, artists' studios, a communal space and concert venue, a printing workshop and a series of activist groups' offices,<sup>120</sup> but – more interestingly – it housed the Squatters Network Of Walworth (SNOW) which in 1985 ran an important housing campaign, which gave a home to thousands of people, thanks to the collaboration between anarchist squatters, who “liked to break into properties and bring the keys back” and members of the Socialist Worker Party (SWP), who “liked to do the administration and ran productive meetings”.<sup>121</sup>

The 'Ambulance Station' was the last of the direct heirs of the 'A-Centres': it had been squatted by a multifaceted group of bands and activists, among which were the Bourbonese

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<sup>117</sup> Platt, 'A decade of squatting'

<sup>118</sup> Anonymous, 'Champagne socialists and punk squatters at Sutton house', *The radical history of Hackney*, 9 August 2012: <https://hackneyhistory.wordpress.com/2012/08/09/champagne-socialists-and-punk-squatters-at-sutton-house/>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>119</sup> VA, *Occupational hazards. Occupying hospitals: some inspiration and issues from our history. A past tense dossier* [pamphlet] (London, 2013) : 56AI

<sup>120</sup> Anonymous, 'Live series 2 & the London ambulance station', *Stalker*, 28 November 2008: <https://crab.wordpress.com/2008/11/28/live-series-2-the-london-ambulance-station/>; Anonymous, 'Hope', *Bourbonese Qualk Archive*. 2016, <https://bourbonesequalk.net/28-2/>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>121</sup> Belton Colin, 'Homelessness prevention officer... with a twist', *Rental Joy*, October 2010, retrieved via Wayback Machine, version of 6 September 2015: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150906054707/https://www.rentaljoy.com/blog/2014/10/homelessness-prevention-officer-with-a-twist/>, accessed 1 April 2019

Qualk, an experimental band who aimed to create a radical “cultural-political centre” and a headquarters for their enterprises: “performance space, recording studio and [label] office”.<sup>122</sup>

The Station remained occupied until 1987 and became an important node in the activist networks of the city. It also hosted several punk concerts and internationally renowned experimental music festivals. As one of the main centres of the wider anarchist movement, in April 1986 it hosted a part of the London Anarchist Festival.<sup>123</sup>

The presence of SNOW in the building and of a large squatters’ community in the surrounding area was a strengthening factor for the centre. It allowed for close relationships between groups and created widespread support in some sectors of the local population, playing especially on the capacity of SNOW to put pressure on the local council and to delay or halt eviction orders. Nonetheless, severe difficulties arose with local criminal gangs and far-right skinhead groups who assaulted and firebombed the building on multiple occasions, so that concerts had to be performed “behind coils of barbed wire, armed with crowbars and baseball bats. What was thought of as a stylised ‘industrial’ affectation was in fact a serious self-defence measure”.<sup>124</sup>

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This overview of the diffusion of particular modalities of squatting and of self-management of social centres in both England and Italy for the greater part of the nineteen eighties has brought to the fore some common trends. In both Italy and England, discontinuities with the

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<sup>122</sup> Anonymous, ‘Live series 2 & the London ambulance station’

<sup>123</sup> Anonymous, *A Pinch of Salt, C.I.A. Gathering* [leaflet], undated (1986), p. 6 : 56AI; Also in: The Ruinist, ‘Walworth Graffiti: Ambulance station squat’, *homelesshome*, 1 December 2010: <https://homelesshome.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/walworth-graffiti-again-ambulance.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>124</sup> Anonymous, ‘Live series 2 & the London ambulance station’

previous decade had left sectors of the younger generation without up-to-date models of activism and channels of politicisation. Punk counterculture became an attractor for new energies and, in its ‘anarcho’ version also grew in popularity, offering a somewhat vague framework through which contemporary society was viewed, and new action repertoires and modalities of grouping and communication were developed. Furthermore, in both countries the role of intergenerational exchange was pivotal to the opening of the first centres – the *Virus* in Milan, the ‘Autonomy Centre’ in London and the *CS Forte Prenestino* in Rome. Often pictured as an exclusively youth related phenomenon, the role of this exchange has largely been downplayed and overlooked but – as Mudu and Piazza also noted<sup>125</sup> – it remained an important feature for a large number of social centres during both the nineteen eighties and the nineteen nineties. In England, the results of this dialogue have been more difficult to ascertain. The experience of the centre in Wapping exemplifies a failure in the attempt to build long-term relations between traditional anarchists and punks. Yet, centres such as the ‘121’ in Brixton, the Ambulance station in Southwark and the ‘1-in-12’ in Bradford proved that such dialogues could exist and bear fruitful results. It has to be noted that in Italy, where experiments in multi-group cohabitation had worked, as with the case of the *CS Forte Prenestino* in Rome, the relationship between the different components had been previously cemented by years of campaigning prior to the moment of taking a space. In Milan, while the dialogue between generations was pivotal in providing punx with much needed experience and an already squatted space, the spatial division between the *Virus* and the housing squat, which occupied the same area, was very clear from the very inception of the projects.

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<sup>125</sup> Mudu, Piazza, ‘Not only Riflusso’

## **4.2 Growth and consolidation: The nineteen nineties**

The turn of the decade assumed different characteristics in England and Italy, but it can be used as a symbolic moment of periodisation for both countries. For Italy, the rift between the decades was more poignant to this narration as social centres ‘exploded’ as a mass phenomenon. For England, the campaigns against the Poll-Tax signalled important transformations within the radical milieu and have often been considered as the highest point of consensus for those oppositional stances developed throughout the earlier decade.

The changes in both countries were inscribed within the transformation of the global political landscape. The collapse of the Soviet bloc was the last brick in the ideological composition of neo-liberal modernity as triggered by the paradigm-shift of the global economy: the path towards the globalisation of markets was freed from the remnants of ideological warfare, signalling the ‘end of history’, interpreted as the definitive consolidation of liberal democracy across the planet. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were at the end of their mandates, but had nonetheless proposed a model that was adapted, renovated – and strenuously fought against – for the decades to come.

The passage into the nineteen nineties for the Italian political system was everything but smooth. All traditional parties dissolved or transformed between 1991 and 1994. The flimsy governance of the PSI of Bettino Craxi revealed the house of cards that had supported it. The political crisis, which reached its zenith with the *Mani Pulite* enquiries in 1992 and with the end of the First Republic in 1994, had its inception in the slow erosion of the consensus of traditional parties. The ‘swamp’ – as the Italian system before the crisis has often been referred to – represented a complex mix of relationships between the governing parties, media and the industrial world, built on ‘familism’, cronyism, political patronage and corruption, which had characterised the Italian Republic since its inception, but that were only just being

exposed. From the debris of the First Republic, a ‘New Right’<sup>126</sup> took shape: after a series of technical governments, *Forza Italia*, the *partito-azienda* (party-business) of Silvio Berlusconi, unexpectedly won the general election in March 1994, in coalition with the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement, MSI), and the *Lega Nord* (Northern League). The figure of Berlusconi, and the controversial innovations he introduced, shaped the following decades of Italian public life, featuring a mix of liberalism, neo-conservatism, machismo, anti-communist rhetoric and a marketing-lead approach to politics. On the left, the PCI was dissolved and most of its members formed the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (Democratic Party of the Left, PDS). Both PSI and DC were crushed by the gradual exposure of the levels of corruption operated by *Mani Pulite* magistrates. On the Right, the MSI started a process of partial refusal of its fascist past, which culminated in 1995 with its transformation into *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance, AN). New post-ideological parties were formed. In the north, the ‘neo-localist’ phenomenon of the regional *Leagues*, which had begun in the early nineteen eighties, was undergoing a process of unification and reorganisation with the creation of the *Lega Nord*. The *Verdi*, the Italian Green party, and *La Rete* (The Network) - ‘movement for democracy’, were different expressions of the same ideological shift. They represented a renovated approach, attentive to ecology, civic rights, culture and, especially *La Rete*, to the fight against corruption and organised crime.

Labour markets instead developed in continuity with the nineteen eighties, along the lines of fragmentation, flexibility and ‘precarisation’.<sup>127</sup> The process of European integration opened up international markets for Italian firms, leading to the growth of export markets and the chance to outsource and relocate. Unemployment rates, which had dropped at the end of the nineteen eighties, started to rise again in 1992-93, especially for the younger generation, who

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<sup>126</sup> Revelli Marco, *La destra nazionale* (Milano, 1996)

<sup>127</sup> Revelli Marco, *Oltre il Novecento. La politica, le ideologie, le insidie del lavoro* (Torino, 2001); Foti Alex, *General theory of the precariat. Great recession, revolution, reaction* (Amsterdam, 2017)



was virtually excluded by the traditional labour market. Instead the numbers and relative influence of the tertiary sector and informal labour increased: self-employment, casual jobs, temporary jobs, agency work, working students.<sup>128</sup>

Milan was once again the symbol of these changes: it had been the cradle of yuppie-ism and ‘champagne socialism’ in the nineteen eighties, and it was home of Berlusconi and *Forza Italia* in the nineteen nineties. *Mani Pulite*’s enquiries started from there, and Milan hosted the first important Mayoral elections won by the Northern League in 1993.<sup>129</sup>

The turn of the decade was also characterised by traumatic moments in England, but the crisis had not been as far-reaching as in Italy, at least regarding the solidity of institutions and the structure of governance. Nonetheless, the end of Margaret Thatcher’s decade-long reign signalled a crisis in her model of governance. Her attempt at transforming British society in a land of small private share-holders<sup>130</sup> – “[the] first stage of a profound and progressive social transformation: popular capitalism”<sup>131</sup> – and her direct attack on the social-democratic welfare state system were proving more unpopular than expected. The widespread and long-lasting protests over the introduction of the Poll Tax had brought this discontent into the streets. Divergences over proposed integration with the rest of Europe had created serious fractures within both the government and the Conservative Party and eventually forced Thatcher to resign. Nonetheless, the Conservatives managed to remain in power for another seven years. The new Prime Minister, John Major, failed to strike a distinctive note, despite following the lines traced by his predecessor, especially regarding economic policies. Economic growth had been stalled since 1987, and by 1990 the country was moving into recession.<sup>132</sup> The roll-

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<sup>128</sup> ISTAT, ‘Tasso di disoccupazione – Serie ricostruite dal I 1977, livelli ripartizionale’, *Istat Serie Storiche*: [http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV\\_TAXDISOCCU1](http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV_TAXDISOCCU1), accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>129</sup> Zaccaria Angelo, ‘Cari compagni e compagne dell’altra sponda’, *Vis-à-vis*, 5 (1997) p. 214 : APM

<sup>130</sup> Harrison, *Finding a role?*, pp. 534-540

<sup>131</sup> Anonymous, ‘1987 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto’, *Conservative Party Manifestos*: <http://www.conservativemanifesto.com/1987/1987-conservative-manifesto.shtml>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>132</sup> Black, *Britain since the seventies*, pp. 124-142

back of the frontiers of the British state had resulted in an increase in inequality. Homelessness was again rising, as well as unemployment.<sup>133</sup>

In this context, the protests against the Poll Tax had been interpreted by large sectors of the radical milieu as the biggest ever victory for an extra-parliamentary movement. Never had a campaign “involved so many people in direct confrontation with the law”.<sup>134</sup> It empowered radical activism as a nation-wide battle, which had been so successfully won, and led to an increase in numbers in almost all radical groups. The campaign had brought in a wide spectrum of supporters, from the Labour Left and multiple unions to anarcho-punks and groups such as Class War. This combined front broke down when protests turned into riots but, as it was noted:

If the poll tax is dead it was killed by non-payment, a tactic which each of the three main parties insisted was pointless and wrong. Extra-parliamentary action, that nightmare of Westminster politicians, proved itself and in the process exposed the hollowness of our claims to democracy.

[...] In an effective democracy such recourse to illegality should be unnecessary, of course. But the imposition of the poll tax was the clearest demonstration of the fundamental flaws in our system [...]. It took a popular rebellion of the purest sort to redress the balance.

[Few] politicians have much to be proud of at the end of this episode. When most needed they were found wanting and it was left to a rag-tag army of ordinary people to destroy a bad law.<sup>135</sup>

Against these differing backdrops, the evolution of social centres in Italy and England started to assume extremely divergent features. By the end of the nineteen eighties, Italian centres had already started a far-reaching debate as to the role of the centres within urban society. As a result of this ongoing conversation, various groups experimented with different modalities of ‘inhabiting’ and reclaiming the city. Italian centres attempted – and for the large part failed – to become a political actor able to impact upon local and national policies, proposing wide-ranging political platforms and establishing synergic collaborations with the Parliamentary Left. In England, the development of a collective political identity was not prioritised among

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<sup>133</sup> Harrison, *Finding a role?*, p. 538; Black, *Britain since the seventies*, pp. 22, 177

<sup>134</sup> Burns Danny, *Poll tax rebellion* (Stirling, 1992) p. 7

<sup>135</sup> Bell Ian, ‘A plague on both parties: Labour as well as the Tories miscalculated over the community charge and the Scots' rebellion paved the way for its abolition’, *The Guardian*, 24 March 1991, p. 22

centres' activists and the separation lines between radical and mainstream politics were much harder to overcome. The centrality of London was accentuated: there were approximately 60 centres in existence during the nineteen nineties, as opposed to a single long-term occupation in Bristol.<sup>136</sup> English centres came together on a number of occasions, but always as a response to attacks or to attempts to criminalise squatting and other forms of dissent. In both countries, the predominance of punk as a vehicle for political expression was reduced by the emergence of new countercultural vectors: among others, the phenomenon of hip hop posses, intrinsically connected to social centres in Italy, a rise in the number of New Age Traveller communities in England, and the rave and free-party scene, which developed in both countries.

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In England, in the early nineteen nineties, far from the large urban centres, the experience of free festivals, which had been seriously weakened by the repressive wave of 1984-86, was being reinterpreted, updated and deeply transformed by the inception of the free party culture. A new sound – “a succession of repetitive beats”, as it was later described in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994<sup>137</sup> – was at its core. For those involved in this culture, techno music represented:

a Psycho-social tumult, [...] the cultural contaminant that propels us towards the collectivity of the rave party with the resultant group noise being the catalyst for a game of risk, gambling on slavery or freedom.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> E.T.C.Deer, ‘Squatted social centres in London: temporary nodes of resistance to capitalism’, *Contention*, 4.1-2 (2016) p. 113

<sup>137</sup> *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994* (c.33), Part V, section 63

<sup>138</sup> Newsletter from TechNet group, undated, quoted in Fringeli Christoph, ‘Radical intersections’, *Datacide* 10 (2008), in Fringeli Christoph, Lynx, Nemeton, eds., *Everything else is even more ridiculous. A decade of noise & politics. Datacide magazine issues 1-10* (Berlin, 2015), p. 311

As some observers have noted with hindsight, free party culture sampled and mixed contents and forms from the countercultures of the previous three decades.<sup>139</sup> It was a process of rewriting aspects of the hippy counterculture, through the liberation and democratisation espoused by the radical simplicity of DiY punk ethics and by new technologies. Escapism, hedonism, a spiritual connection with music, nature and drugs could be found among the festivals and fairs of the nineteen seventies and the rave parties of the nineteen nineties. Parties had been organised since 1989 in remote and hidden areas of the countryside. The scene soon mixed with the travellers' community: some adopted a full-time traveller lifestyle, others kept their base in the city.

While the debate over the politicisation of free party culture spanned the entirety of the nineteen nineties and beyond, in practice its radicalism had to come to terms with the division between a core of organisers, who interpreted free parties as oppositional, and large masses of party-goers more interested in the temporary escape from reality they offered.

While in the countryside rave parties entailed the squatting of unused land, when parties started to be organised within the cities, they began to support and transform the pre-existing squatting scene. Hundreds – maybe thousands – of squat parties were organised during the nineteen nineties, becoming a trademark of squats.<sup>140</sup> Warehouses and industrial sites were the place of choice: the transformation of 'work temples' into 'party temples' added to the specific post-industrial feature of this culture. Occupations lasted for the length of the party – a night, a weekend or longer – but when a good location was found it tended to be squatted more than once.<sup>141</sup> This was the case of the former school in Priory Grove, South London, which was squatted for several months between 1991 and 1992, with a number of permanent

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<sup>139</sup> Free Association, 'The kids were just crass', pp. 299-310

<sup>140</sup> For a large collection of flyers and posters from squat parties since the nineteen nineties: *90's+ Gigs Squats Parties*, <https://gig-squat-parties.blogspot.co.uk/>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>141</sup> Needle Collective, Bash Street Kid, 'Ebb and Flow: Autonomy and squatting in Brighton', in van der Steen, Katzeff, van Hoogenhuijzep, eds., *The city is ours*, p. 153-57

residents and “travellers living on site as well as putting on parties”. One resident, participating at an online discussion on the activities of the squat, recalled:

[...] I used to live in the main building until shortly after the last party got busted and we lost electricity. Some great parties there, winter of 1991/2. Rave on the ground floor. Bands on the first floor. Fairshare reggae sound system on the top floor.<sup>142</sup>

Squat parties were able to reach a very wide audience and many people came into contact with the squatting scene through such events. Parties were also the site of encounter between the more politicised squatters’ communities and the ravers, providing an urban political education, especially regarding their relationship to local police forces. Evictions of parties were frequent and sometimes enacted through illegal tactics.<sup>143</sup>

In other cases, deejays, producers and organisers became involved in already existing centres, holding events and – not always with the same level of enthusiasm – participating in campaigns and everyday activities. The ‘Dead by Dawn’ nights at the ‘121 Centre’ in Brixton became highly appreciated events between 1992 and 1994, assuming the feature of cult nights. They were presented on *Praxis Newsletter*, one of the zines of the free party scene:

The idea is so simple, but very effective. An evening of noises that assault the mind and body, kicking off with a talk/discussion for the party-goers to digest and then the hardest, fastest, weirdest techno available on vinyl, mixed together, at no expense spared, by the wickedest DJs in London.

Dead by Dawn has never been conceived as a normal club or party series: the combination of talks, discussions, videos, internet access, movies, an exhibition, stalls etc. with an electronic disturbance zone upstairs and the best underground DJs in the basement has made [Dead by Dawn] totally unique and given it a special intensity and atmosphere<sup>144</sup>

Talks and screenings were profound in contents and often experimental in form; they were informed by post-structuralism, situationism and cyberpunk philosophy, and often hosted by

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<sup>142</sup> Transpontine Neil, ‘Priory Grove Squat in Stockwell 1991/92’, *History made at night*, 18 May 2011; <https://history-is-made-at-night.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/priory-grove-squat-in-stockwell-199192.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>143</sup> Anonymous, *Squats and cops* [dossier], undated (1993), p.1 : 56AI; Anonymous, ‘Hackney: arrested development’, *Private Eye*, 10 April 1992, p.6; Anonymous, ‘Crock that! Police pelted by Jugglers’, *Daily Mirror*, 20 May 1993, p. 7. Also: Dee, ‘Squatted social centres in London’

<sup>144</sup> Praxis Newsletter #7 (October 1995), quoted in: Transpontine Neil, ‘Dead by Dawn, Brixton 1994-1996’, *History is made at night*, 29 September 2007; <https://history-is-made-at-night.blogspot.co.uk/2007/09/dead-by-dawn-brixton-1994-96.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

groups such as the Neoist Alliance, the London Psycho-geographers Association, the Luther Blisset project and the Association of Autonomous Astronauts. Themes varied but generally remained within these coordinates, occasionally tackling some more practical issues, such as the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJA), and others more relevant to the techno music scene.<sup>145</sup> ‘Dead by Dawn’ was the brainchild of the encounter between activists of the ‘121 Centre’ and the more culturally and politically aware sectors of the party scene, who were proposing an approach to techno music and party culture that was consciously political and oppositional. The choice of hosting performances of the most varied and experimental electronic music was intended as both a tactic against commercialisation and a rebellion against the divisions that had appeared within the scene. As Monroe argued, analysing the connections between music and politics in London, “the conceptual sophistication and political awareness of the writers, producers, and those attending the events does not contradict so much as complement the music’s emphasis on brutal sensuality that to the outsider seems nothing more than a soundtrack to the temporary obliteration of the self”.<sup>146</sup>

In other cases, party crews and ‘tribes’ themselves promoted and participated in the occupation of new centres. Among others, this was the case of the ‘CoolTan Arts’ centre. ‘Pullit’, a group of activists and artists, squatted a disused CoolTan Suntan Lotion factory in Brixton in June 1991. Before it was evicted from this location in February 1992, it had become an “underground cultural centre”<sup>147</sup> housing a cafe and a performance space, a gallery and both a theatre and a cinema. After the eviction the collective decided to retain the name of the ex-factory and after a few months occupied the Old Dolehouse, a disused unemployment benefit office in the same area. In this second location the centre thrived, having gathered

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<sup>145</sup> Praxis Newsletter, unnumbered (August 1994), quoted in: “More Dead By Dawn”, *History is made at night*, 7 October 2007, <https://history-is-made-at-night.blogspot.co.uk/2007/10/more-dead-by-dawn.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>146</sup> Monroe Alexei, ‘Bread and (Rock) circuses. Sites of sonic conflict in London’, in Gilbert Pamela K., ed., *Imagined Londons* (Albany, 2002), p. 155

<sup>147</sup> Anonymous, ‘The Strange history of the exploding cinema’, *The Exploding cinema*, <http://www.explodingcinema.org/history.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

new activists and local political groups. The second life of 'CoolTan Arts' was characterised by the attention they garnered for grass-roots arts, a series of community-lead activities and large parties. Different projects were started by various sub-groups. The cafe, ran by the local hunt sabotaging group, acquired notoriety as a venue among local bands who could also use the newly built rehearsal studios. There was a darkroom and a gallery space. CoolTan became embedded in the community-based mutual help network LETS (local exchange trading system), providing a number of weekly workshops offering "anything from yoga to photography":<sup>148</sup> "there is a monthly craft market, poetry and story-telling evenings, children's workshops, lectures and alternative film and fashion shows. The building is also home to six 'housekeepers'".<sup>149</sup>

This attitude produced strong links with a multifaceted array of local and metropolitan actors. Ties with the Green Party, both at a council and city level, were solid, with the party opening a local section within the building and the then candidate for the European Parliament for South London Shane Collins being described as a spokesperson and main mover for the centre.<sup>150</sup> Connections were also made with the London Friends and Families of Travellers, the Freedom Network and the radical environmentalist group Earth First!. It became one of the hubs for the resistance to the approval of Criminal Justice Bill (CJB) in 1994, and for the loose organisation of Reclaim The Streets (RTS) in the following years. Benefit parties played an important role in the activities of 'CoolTan Arts', becoming an invaluable source of funds for the centre and campaign groups in it. They were held on a weekly basis and managed to attract up to 1,500 people.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Anonymous, 'Brixton: CoolTan arts centre', *Urban75*, <http://www.urban75.org/brixton/features/cooltan.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>149</sup> Berens Camilla, 'Tribal Britain: Cool Tan Arts', *The Independent*, 12 November 1993, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/tribal-britain-cool-tan-arts-1503739.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

After an attempt at acquiring the building legally in 1994, when the council put it for sale, and a ‘tenancy at will’ with the new owner, ‘CoolTan’ was evicted in 1995.<sup>152</sup> The building was then re-squatted in 1997, but only for a fortnight, and again in 1998 for one last party. Summarising the activities of the centre after the eviction, Collins stressed the innovation introduced by ‘CoolTan Arts’:

We have trod a new path. We have exposed new art in new circumstances; we have been part of the social changes and the cultural rumblings of the last few years. We have provided music, pictures, parties, politics, poetry, food and shelter for many people who might not have otherwise come across it, or been able to afford it. Maybe, and not just in our wildest dreams, we have offered a new perspective for some people on life and other ways of living it.<sup>153</sup>

The Exodus Collective took a different approach in the Dunstable/Luton area, in Bedfordshire. Started in June 1992 as a local group of reggae and dub fans organising small parties in the countryside around Dunstable with three speakers and a microphone,<sup>154</sup> by New Year’s Eve of the same year the speakers “formed a wall 30 foot long by 12 foot high, and 10,000 had joined the party.”<sup>155</sup>

The Exodus Collective grew in popularity among the local youth of the Northern peripheries of London. Soon the collective occupied Longmeadow Farm, an abandoned farm where they had held their first parties, and a derelict hotel in Luton, housing 14 people. In the following few years they occupied different warehouses and buildings in the area, within a “campaign of non-violent civil disobedience in the form of large scale free parties held every fortnight without fail”.<sup>156</sup> Many of the occupations were turned into venues and community centres, hosting parties, concerts, workshops and housing projects. Their relationship with Luton local council and local police forces was extremely difficult, being at the receiving end of

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<sup>152</sup> Letmelooktv, ‘CoolTan Arts Birthday Party Protest 224-236 Walworth Rd, London SE17 1JE 26JULY16’ [Video], *Youtube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5B41ukdgMiQ>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>153</sup> Anonymous, ‘Brixton: CoolTan Arts Centre’

<sup>154</sup> Malyon Tim, ‘Tossed in the fire and they never got burned: the Exodus collective’, in McKay, ed., *DiY culture. Party & protests in the nineties Britain*, pp. 187-207

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187

<sup>156</sup> Leviticus Collective, ‘Timeline of our history’, *Leviticus collective*: , retrieved via Wayback Machine, version 28 May 2014: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140528123959/http://www.leviticuscollective.co.uk/print-media/Exodus-Leviticus-Timeline.pdf>, accessed on 1 April 2019



several police operations and raids at parties, squatted centres and houses. Several charges – from misdemeanours to squatting and drug related crimes, violence and even murder – were brought forward against the members of the collective and their families. It was proven in the following years that all these charges were unfounded and were the results of active misconduct on the part of the police force. Unexpectedly, the Exodus collective won the support of a few members of the local council and the local police. Following the scandal of the police abuses against the collective, these unexpected acolytes supported the licensing of two of the occupations carried out by Exodus, noting that, when their parties were on, “there was a lessening of alcohol-related offences, gratuitous assaults, bottle throwing, the random public disorder that generally goes with town centres and drink”.<sup>157</sup> On the pages of *Squall*, a magazine that was particularly attentive to the political side of the free party scene, the community-driven approach of Exodus was stressed:

The telling of the Exodus story is an exposure of what can be achieved with positive community aspirations and also the barrage of opposition and malicious plotting from the authorities, designed to steal the momentum of that aspiration at every stage of its development. Telling the story of Exodus is a testament to perseverance and a testament to the power of necessity breeding ingenuity.<sup>158</sup>

The dispute brought the Bedfordshire County Council to unanimously call for a “full public enquiry into Bedfordshire Police’s and other’s activities against members of the Exodus Collective”.<sup>159</sup> This was the first and only case of a local council voting to investigate its own police force,<sup>160</sup> for which the then Home Secretary Michael Howard later refused to allocate funds.

Tim Malyon in his contribution to the collective work on ‘party and politics’ edited by George McKay, argued that one of the peculiarities of Exodus was the ability to overcome perceived difference and divisions:

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<sup>157</sup> Mick Brown quoted in: Malyon Tim, ‘The New Exodus’, *United you’re nicked: Criminal Justice Bill Supplement, New Statesman & Society*, 24 June 1994, p. XI

<sup>158</sup> Carey Jim, ‘Introducing Exodus’. *Squall* 8 (1994), p.40

<sup>159</sup> Malyon, ‘Tossed in the fire and they never got burned’, p. 198

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

“[dances are] our minarets, gatherings which draw people in from the cold. Music is the calling force which pulls people together [...] from teenagers to middle-agers; employed and unemployed; politically aware, or just wanting a good time; black and white; male and female; urban and rural youth; old hippies, punks and Hell’s Angels; New Age and traditional travellers; road protesters and squatters.”<sup>161</sup>

The entire free party scene had managed to cross and break boundaries which earlier movements and scenes had struggled to recognise, let alone overcome. As Chris Liberator<sup>162</sup> put it, “more race and class divides are broken within it than anywhere else”.<sup>163</sup>

Despite the central role that the combination of parties and politics was playing in much of the social centres scene, a number of centres steered clear of this ‘contamination’. This was the case of the ‘Infoshop 56a’, another long-lasting centre in South London. Squatted in 1987 in Elephant and Castle within an abandoned grocery shop front, the space was first converted into artists’ studio and then into the Rabbit Hole Foodshop. The occupation expanded at the beginning of the nineteen nineties: “a room that was full of rubbish was converted into the infoshop and was opened on 27 June 1991”.<sup>164</sup> Inspiration arrived from the squatting experiences accumulated during the previous decade – many had been involved in SNOW or BSA – and from the Northern European autonomist scenes, especially in Germany and the Netherlands, where the activists “discovered what were called ‘Infoshops’, basically squatted or rented social spaces that functioned as meeting points for information about what was going on but more importantly as a place to meet people, make alliances and do stuff”.<sup>165</sup> In many ways, together with the ‘121 Centre’, the ‘56a Infoshop’ maintained this European shade, influencing the developments of the scene of the following decade.

The path towards the approval of the 1994 CJB prompted an intensification of the activities of the centres. As opposed to the 1977 Criminal Law Act, the new bill proposed in 1993 was

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 193

<sup>162</sup> London-based DJ, then part of the crew *Liberator*.

<sup>163</sup> Anonymous, ‘Chris Liberator’, *Trust the DJ*, , retrieved via Wayback Machine, version 9 October 2009: <https://web.archive.org/web/20091009184316/http://www.trustthedj.com/ChrisLiberator/bio.php?djid=804>, accessed April 2019

<sup>164</sup> Finchett-Maddock, *Protest, property and the commons*, p. 58

<sup>165</sup> 56a Infoshop, ‘Local traditions, local trajectories and us’, pp. 55-58

supported by the entire Parliament. The campaign to oppose it became a driving force for all of the different sectors of the scene. The Bill dedicated specific attention to the cultures of resistance which had developed since the late nineteen eighties. Free party scene, traveller communities and direct-action environmentalists were all targets; laws on squatting were tightened through the creation of aggravating factors. The law passed in November 1994, but – at least in the short-term – produced an increase in the practices of defiance against the new imposed restrictions.

In particular, models of social squatting proposed by collectives such as London-based ‘121 Centre’, ‘56a Infoshop’ and ‘CoolTan Arts’ spread throughout the country. *Squall* magazine wrote of a “proliferation of squat community centres and cafes, daring to operate an open door policy in the middle of the cities”.<sup>166</sup> Two ‘Rainbow centres’ were squatted in both Kentish Town and Cardiff, the ‘Alamo’ in Blackburn and the ‘Courthouse’ in Brighton were among a number of such projects springing up throughout the country.<sup>167</sup> Many more were squatted in the following years: the ‘Okasional cafe’ in Manchester, the series of ‘Anarchist Teapot’ in Brighton, and the *Kebele* in Bristol. Unlike almost all the other squatted social centres occupied in the months following the introduction of the CJA, *Kebele* was the only one able to survive for more than a few months.

Squatted in the December of 1995<sup>168</sup> as a housing project for a small number of activists, it was soon transformed in a centre that combined housing and social activities. Facing an immediate eviction threat, activists converted the ground floor of the building into a space for events, in search of wider participation in the project. The name, *Kebele Kulture Project*, symbolised the community-driven spirit that had informed this transformation. Standing for ‘community place’ in Amharic language, the term *Kebele* “refers to community institutions,

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<sup>166</sup> Anonymous, ‘DiY Community Care’, *Squall*, 9 (1995) p. 5

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kebele Kulture’, *SchNEWS*, 171 (12 June 1998) p.2 : KCCI

which dealt with their own needs and concerns, such as justice, health and community democracy”.<sup>169</sup> The activists traced the story of the term from Ethiopia to Easton, the borough where the centre had been squatted:

During the revolution in Grenada in 1979, Rastafarians involved in the struggle used the term ‘kebele’ to refer to the community centres in each neighbourhood from which, in theory at least, the revolution was based. In 1983 the USA invaded the tiny island of Grenada to crush the rebellion.<sup>170</sup>

As only long-term squatted centre in the city, *Kebele* thrived in the local activist scene, offering space for meetings, events, benefit parties, debates, or simply as a place to hang out in for a scene that was sorely missing a ‘home’. Influences came from experiences in London and continental Europe, as at least one of the founding members came from the Basque country. The local community – Easton – and the elective community – the activists – produced a positive mix throughout the first years of the *Kebele*, which became a self-managed centre hosting events of interest to both. The centre’s activists expressed these belongings on the page of the local sheet *Bristle*:

Acknowledging and including people is the only way of creating community.

Being committed to community values, we are proud of being part of one of the most plural, tolerant and active communities in Bristol, where our project has always been respected. As Kebele has developed [...] it is clear that we will never be host to all the different communities around us, nor will we ever be the community’s representatives as not everyone shares our views. However, we are all members of the larger community and there are many other spaces, organisations, clubs, associations or affinity groups within that community where everyone can contribute.<sup>171</sup>

Decision-making was consensus-based,<sup>172</sup> and anarchist principles informed the organisation and the day-to-day activities. Kitchen, cafe, women’s cafe, bike workshop, video library, children’s workshops, healing sessions and Spanish language lessons were among the first activities.<sup>173</sup> The kitchen became a central activity for the space. A project of collective

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<sup>169</sup> Anonymous, ‘Ourstory’, *BASE Community Co-op*: <https://network23.org/kebele2/ourstory/>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kebele in the community’, *Bristle*, 10 (2010 p.6 : KCCI

<sup>172</sup> Firth Rhiannon, *Utopian politics. Citizenship, and practice* (London, New York, 2011), p.35-36

<sup>173</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kebele’, *SchNEWS* 176 (17 July 1998) p. 3 : KCCI

cooking catered for both the need for small but constant funding and the promotion of affordable vegan food.<sup>174</sup> Musical events ranged from impromptu folk music to parties launched by a network of deejays and sound systems that offered collaboration. *Kebele* became an important node of several activist networks: the Animal Rights Network, RTS, Palestinian Solidarity Group, Bristol Free Mumia Group, Bristol Prisoners Support Group, Bristle magazine, Earth Circus Network, West Country Activist Network, and developed a special connection with environmental groups.<sup>175</sup>

In 1998, after having resisted to a long-standing risk of eviction and a series of pressurising negotiations, the collective decided to form a Housing Co-op and buy the building:<sup>176</sup> “frantic fundraising ensured a significant deposit. By providing secure affordable housing for its resident members, the Housing Co-op was able to cover the mortgage repayments”.<sup>177</sup>

The last years of the decade saw the explosion of RTS, a mass movement that combined the experiences of many of the resistance cultures analysed in these pages. Through the creation of large Temporary Autonomous Zones<sup>178</sup> it mixed protests and parties, gathering thousands of people on the issues of land consumption and gentrification. At the same time, a new agenda appeared; mass scale anti-globalisation events in continental Europe and in the United States, redefining the language and the rationales of global radical politics for the years to come.

Squatting continued to propose an alternative ‘right to the city’, social centres continued to be active within local communities and activist networks. By the first years of the new century,

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<sup>174</sup> Worker, ‘(en) Britain, Bristol, ABOUT KEBELE - the anarchist social center [email]’, *A-infos News Service*, 23 October 2004: <http://www.ainfos.ca/04/oct/ainfos00340.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>175</sup> Kebele K.P., ‘(en) UK, Bristol, Kebele kulture projekt: what it’s all about’ [email]; *A-infos News Service*, 5 September 2001, <http://www.ainfos.ca/01/sep/ainfos00056.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>176</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kebele Kulture’, p. 2

<sup>177</sup> Anonymous, ‘Ourstory’,

<sup>178</sup> Bey, T.A.Z. *The Temporary Autonomous Zones*

especially thanks to the action of the London-based – and Italian inspired – ‘Wombles’,<sup>179</sup> a new generation of social centres grew up from within the ‘Global Justice Movement’. Generally, but not exclusively rented, more ‘European’, and more attentive to issues such as inclusivity, stability, media exposure and collective identity, the social centres of the new millennium dismissed the previous generations of squatted centres, in order to propose themselves as a genuinely new project.<sup>180</sup> A line was drawn with the past, and it was explicated in a 2007 pamphlet presenting the new social centres:

There has, however, been an attempt to move away from the “squatter” image of these places and move towards a more engaging aesthetic based on experiences from around Europe and especially Italy. The ideas which have developed around occupying private space and turning them into political and cultural hubs has come through the experimenting and experiences of those involved. A certain genealogy of social centres in London has been formed over the last few years [...]. Thousands of people have passed through social centres, attending hundreds of film showings, discussions, events, concerts and cultural events. Presence, in most cases, is guaranteed. If we build it they will come and if we present ourselves as open, inviting and our spaces as clean and accessible, the diversity of people quickly expands.

*Almost gone are the days of the pissed up punk drinking special brew whilst his/her stereotyped dreadlocked brethren rolls another joint.*<sup>181</sup>

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In Italy the transformations of the social centres scene during the nineteen nineties assumed vary different characters. Already in the first years of the decade, the growth rate of the Italian centres was exponentially higher than in England. Combining youth cultural expressions and a more varied approach to urban politics, they managed, for the large part of the decade, to assume a dominant role within the radical social movements of the country.

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<sup>179</sup> The full name of the *Wombles* was *White Overalls Movement Building Libertarian Effective Struggles*. They explicitly drew inspiration from the *Tute Bianche* (White Overalls) movement, which had started within the Italian social centres scene between 1993 and 1994.

<sup>180</sup> 56a Infoshop, ‘Local traditions, local trajectories and us’

<sup>181</sup> Alessio L, ‘The spring of social centres’, in VA, *What’s this place*, p.33

The boom of this phenomenon coincided with two of the first large scale evictions carried out in Milan since the nineteen seventies. Social centres *Conchetta* – only recently revitalised and renamed *Cox18* – and *Leoncavallo* were evicted respectively in January and August 1989. The eviction of the *CS Leoncavallo*, with the subsequent destruction of the building, became the symbol of the struggle for the legitimacy of social squatting. The eviction was met with the active resistance of the squatters – 26 people were arrested on that day and large demonstrations took place in the following days. The images of both the resistance of the activists on the roof of the building, and of the destroyed centre, spread quickly throughout the country. The echoes of the news on both mainstream media and within the radical press were unprecedented, signalling a new interest in the scene.

The socialist-led Milanese city council blamed the demolition on the property owners of the area. Shows of solidarity with the *Leoncavallo* were expressed by important cultural and political personalities and by several activist groups in Europe. Within two days, the *CS Leoncavallo* was squatted again, and slowly rebuilt. A large initiative was held the following weekend titled *Contro i padroni della città* (Against the masters of the city), gathering social centres' activists from the whole country. The call for the event stated:

The antagonist movement respond [to the eviction] with determination: the youth on the roofs, the demonstrations in the following days with more than 3000 people, [and] the decision to rebuild are concrete signs of the formation of a resistant social front in Milan against the masters of the city and their accomplices.

[...] Everyone knew about the Leoncavallo and they hoped to do a clean sweep of the communists, the subversives, the pain-in-the-ass; they instead found a hard core composed by eighteen-, twenty-year-old comrades, which have grown up through struggles for housing, against heroin, against nuclear energy, for social spaces and a different quality of life from these last years. A militant fabric with many reasons and little memory.

The Leoncavallo is a trench where the masters of the city will be stopped; but we don't care about trench warfare: we are already coming to attack.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> CS Leoncavallo, 'Sostieni la resistenza', *Centro Sociale Leoncavallo (old website)*: <http://www.ecn.org/leoncavallo/23set89/890920.htm>, accessed 1 April 2019. With this document the *CS Leoncavallo* launched the initiative.

Ten thousand people participated in a demonstration that marched through the whole city, symbolically connecting the *CS Leoncavallo* in the northern periphery and the *CS Acquario* – a building squatted by the activists evicted from *CS Cox18* earlier that year – in the south. Throughout the weekend, collective re-building activities were organised and a national meeting of the centres held. By the end of the year, *CS Cox18* had re-taken its original home as well.

Pivotal to the growth in numbers of the social centres' scene was *La Pantera* (the Panther), the largest wave of protests in Italian universities since the nineteen seventies, which chose the occupation of faculty buildings as a tool to put pressure on public authorities. This movement became the channel of politicisation for a new generation of students and student-workers, distant from both the radical ideologies that had characterised the *long 1968* and the forms of countercultural dissent enacted in the nineteen eighties. The features of this new student movement were a non-violent attitude and pragmatic demands for a more fair and modern education and for the transformation of students' representative bodies within the faculties. The *Pantera* also had an innovative approach towards modern technologies and new forms of communication. Once the protest wave was over, new activists went on to increase the rank and file of social centres, many of which had followed the protests closely and supported the students.

Between 1989 and 1991, social centres activists throughout the country carried out fifty to a hundred occupations. Following the fast-paced evolution of the map of Italian social centres was almost impossible. Occupations and evictions happened on a weekly basis. Recent research counted, as a conservative estimate, more than 260 active social centres between 1985 and 2003.<sup>183</sup> Before 1989 no more than 40 centres were squatted, meaning that more than 200 were squatted in the nineteen nineties or in the first years of the new millennium.

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<sup>183</sup> Mudu, 'Resisting and challenging neoliberalism', p. 74-75



By March 1992 a movement's address book<sup>184</sup> was created by the Milanese node of the European Counter Network (ECN), hosted by the *CS Leoncavallo*: 84 centres were listed, 12 in the south and the islands, 38 in the central regions and 34 in the north; 22 centres were occupied in the territory of Rome and 10 in Milan. These spaces were central nodes of a network made up of 226 collectives, 69 documentation centres, 94 magazines and periodicals and 32 free radio stations distributed throughout the entire national territory.<sup>185</sup> The distribution of squatted spaces in central Italy was highly uneven: Rome and Milan alone counted for one third of the country's social centres. Below Rome the number of occupations decreased drastically, with less than fifty centres active throughout the nineteen nineties. Of the twenty administrative regions in which Italy is divided only two did not have social centres within their territory: *Val d'Aosta*, an Alpine region in the extreme north-west and *Molise* in the south-east, which were the smallest and least populated areas in all of Italy.<sup>186</sup>

Social centres had emerged from the underground. The range of activities they offered and their ability to outreach had grown exponentially. The prioritisation of youth related issues did not hinder their expansion towards new fields: some formed strong ties with grass-roots unions, others became active participants in the debates over urban politics, local redevelopment and the *right to the city*, and a number of centres initiated discussions with local institutions and left-wing parties. International solidarity acted as a bond with many radical and independence movements in Europe, forging long-lasting connections especially with Northern Irish and Basque radical groups. Other centres instead focused on old and new issues such as the housing struggle, antifascism, *antiproibizionismo* – the umbrella under which campaigns for the decriminalisation and the legalisation of drugs converged –

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<sup>184</sup> ECN Milano, *Contro Italia*, March 1992 : APM

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.; Mudu, 'Resisting and challenging neoliberalism', 74-75

environmentalist campaigns, and solidarity with the first large wave of migrants and refugees who were arriving in Italy at the beginning of the nineteen nineties.

Processes of identity building became evident within the scene and went hand-in-hand with a relative crystallisation of the centres' practices. A core of activities, themes and repertoires became the trademark of the self-appointed brand *Centri Sociali Occupati e/o Autogestiti* (Occupied and/or Self-Managed Social Centres, CSOA/CSA). These branding processes were of an ambiguous nature, and were both reinforced and fought against. Ideological differences, which had always been present, were highlighted and led to the creation of internal sub-groups. A strong collective identity was a unifying element in moments of repression, during calls for solidarity in case of eviction, or to empower common demonstrations and initiatives, but it also entailed a tendency towards centralisation and institutionalisation for the different local experiences, resulting in the assimilation of minor and less exposed centres within models chosen and enacted by the more organised and media-savvy groups.

Despite many differences, both the *CS Leoncavallo* in Milan and the *CS Forte Prenestino* in Rome belonged to this second category, being able to influence and impact upon large parts of their respective local scenes; both centres opened quasi-professional press offices to deal with the increasing interest of mainstream media.<sup>187</sup> The *CS Leoncavallo* especially, became the symbol of the social centres' scene in Italy. Mainstream media used the made up term *Leoncavallini* (Leoncavall-ers) to define, at different times, the activists of the *CS Leoncavallo*, the activists of the whole social centres' scene, especially on the occasion of a shared demonstration, and also the rest of the social centres, entailing a filial relationship between the *CS Leoncavallo* and its *children*. Such predominance was not exclusively

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<sup>187</sup> Between 1992 and the end of the decade hundreds of documents detail the activities of promotion and communication by the press office of the *CS Forte Prenestino*: lists of the numbers of local newspapers and friendly journalists, copies of weekly press statements for the promotion of their activities, the minutes of organisational meetings, the receipts of faxed documents and copies of emails : BACZ

imposed from outside. The activists of the Milanese centre had started to take it upon themselves to play the role of mouthpiece for the entire movement – or at least a part of it – provoking frictions and resistance, and increasing the internal conflicts within the scene.

A conflictual and differentiated relationship with local administrations marked the decade. The eviction of the *CS Leoncavallo* in 1989 had represented the highest level of street conflict with law enforcement agencies since the end of the nineteen seventies. For the whole of the nineteen nineties none of the frequent clashes with police reached a similar level. Molotov cocktails disappeared from political demonstrations. The ‘spectacularisation’ of the urban conflict had reached its peak.<sup>188</sup> Victories and losses became symbolic and in many cases actions were enacted as much to gain media coverage as to accomplish immediate material results, a strategy that was then brought to its maximum effect by the *Tute Bianche* Movement (White Overalls) during the rise of the Global Justice Movement.

On a general level, left-wing administrations had a far more positive approach to social centres than right-wing ones. Rarely were evictions revoked, but discussions and negotiations were more likely to happen, or to bring about positive results, in cities governed by left-wing and centre-left parties. A number of administrations seemed to be willing to recognise the role of the centres in responding to a diffused demand for alternative sociability that they were failing to satisfy.<sup>189</sup> These negotiations prompted various attempts to achieve some form of legalisation for squatted centres, but also provoked harsh criticisms.

The different responses offered to such attempts by local councils highlighted the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of the movement. Where in Milan, mayor Marco Formentini of the *Lega Nord* party won the 1993 local election by campaigning for a zero tolerance policy towards social centres, in Rome, local elections were won by Francesco

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<sup>188</sup> Bianchi Roberto, ‘Il ritorno della piazza’, *Zapruder*, 1 (2003) pp.30-48

<sup>189</sup> Consorzio Aaster, ‘Polisemia di un luogo’, in Consorzio Aaster et al., eds., *Centri sociali: geografie del desiderio*, pp. 21-85

Rutelli of the Green Party, who had obtained the support of sectors of the scene, campaigning for the recognition of the role of social centres and for their legalisation.

Each local scene had its own innate characteristics. Milan had always been a *workshop* for political experimentation – from the left as much as from the right: its scene was rich and differentiated, with the *CS Leoncavallo* representing both a connection with the past experiences of the *Autonomia Operaia* and the emergence of a new conflictual generation with little memory of earlier movements. The role of post-Autonomist centres<sup>190</sup> was indeed important, but the city saw the presence and the often difficult cohabitation of all the fringes of the radical underworld. The local scene promoted important reflections on the transformation of the labour market and of labour, as well as attempts to transform the very essence of social centres. In Rome the vastness of the territory prompted many centres to solely focus on the neighbourhoods where they were situated. The vast number of centres meant that multiple separate and rival networks were created, especially during the negotiation and debate around the possible legalisation of centres between 1993 and 1995. Padua had always been the traditional headquarters of the *Autonomia* and of its more intellectual wing, influencing social centres in all of the North-East of the country, which tended to represent themselves as a partially separate network to those of others parts of Italy. Bologna was home to a large population of university students and to the *DAMS, Discipline delle Arti, Musica e Spettacolo*,<sup>191</sup> which fostered the formation of a strong cluster of cultural activism and a strong bond between radical politics and the arts. The *Isola nel Cantiere*, among the first centres in the city, played an important role in transforming countercultural languages and styles. The city had been home to a number of seminal projects, such as

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<sup>190</sup> The term refers to those political groups that had taken up the legacy of the nineteen seventies' *Autonomia*. It was widely used, together with *Nuovi Autonomi* (New Autonomists), in right-wing press' coverage of social centres.

<sup>191</sup> *Disciplines of Arts, Music and Show business*, DAMS was a course and later department active since 1971 within the Alma Mater Bologna University. It was the first academic approach to these disciplines and it still represented a nation-wide attractor in the nineteen nineties.

Transmaniacon and the Italian column of the Luther Blisset project, which focused on the transformation of political languages and praxis and the creation of a new *mythopoeia* for the radical movements.<sup>192</sup> Among the other major Italian cities, Turin was characterised by a strong and combative anarchist milieu; a large part of the occupations belonged to anarchist groups and had developed a peculiar otherness from the rest of the scene. Local activists expressed a harsh critique towards over-exposed social centres and legalisation processes,<sup>193</sup> and distanced themselves from the processes of identity building within the scene, refusing to adopt the CSAO/CSA brand, or the very name of social centres, preferring instead the term ‘squat’.

The boom of the social centres in the nineteen nineties had been possible thanks to the recognition of their role by large sectors of the urban youth population. This had been primarily achieved through an escalation in the number and variety of the activities proposed within their walls. They fulfilled a widespread need for alternative and affordable sociability. Centres started to be considered as *piazze* and often became accessible throughout the day.

Activities varied according to location, size and population of the centres, but some core actions were shared by the large majority of them, regardless of political and geographical differences. A bar and a kitchen were among the first spaces to be set up. Bars especially represented the most constant source of funding and were usually open whenever the centre was open; sometimes organised to be self-service, these activities combined financial sustainability and sociability, fostered the idea of collective ownership of the space and allowed for the exploration to possible collective responses to issues such as consumerism, alimentary choices, waste reduction and pricing. One or more rooms were dedicated to public

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<sup>192</sup> Wu Ming, *Giap. Tre anni di narrazioni e movimenti* (Torino, 2003); *Luther Blisset project*: <http://www.lutherblissett.net/>, accessed 1 April 2019; Transmaniacon Bologna, ‘Nessun futuro per I centri sociali. Addio mia amata’, in ECN Milano, *La fine del centrosocialismo reale*, ECN Milano, 3/1/1994, pp. 4-8 : APM

<sup>193</sup> El Paso Occupato, Barocchio Occupato, *Opuscolo di sviluppo del manifesto contro la legalizzazione degli spazi occupati* [Pamphlet] (Torino, 1994) : APM

events. Concerts and music parties were not the only events organised in the centres, all types of public performances were hosted – film showings, exhibitions, multimedia events, books and magazines presentations, theatre and street theatre performances, etc. Larger centres were able to differentiate their spaces according to specific usage – the *CS Leoncavallo* had multiple stages ready for different typologies and sizes of event and the *CS Forte Prenestino* had detachable stages, a cinema, a gym that hosted artistic performances, and a hall for talks and meetings etc. A differentiated, but recognisable, offer of alternative and low-cost social and aggregative events was one of the trademarks of the social centres of the decade. In Milan, the reach of these initiatives was calculated to be 20.000 users and visitors per calendar month.<sup>194</sup> Courses and workshops on different subjects were often free or very cheap. Language classes – especially Italian as a second language – were among the most widespread. According to the ethos of the centres, activities were more linked to the arts (theatre, music, video-making, photography, juggling), to technical skills (basic and advanced computer literacy, alternative operative systems such as Linux, woodwork), to sports (with the construction of gyms – *palestre popolari*, working-class gyms, as they were named – and courses of boxing, self-defence, martial arts, but also yoga and dancing styles). Documentation centres, archives and libraries were often activated, especially in spaces that felt more protected against the risk of eviction. The preservation of an oppositional memory – “the re-appropriation and socialisation of this heritage”<sup>195</sup> – was of pivotal interest to a number of activists, who worked on the accessibility of materials on different topics – international solidarity, squatting, repression, the *long 1968*, punk, countercultures, local history, etc. Production and distribution structures of material and immaterial *goods* were also initiated in many centres. These could be as basic as a mimeograph, which had survived from earlier decades, or more modern photocopiers, printers, or even small printing

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<sup>194</sup> Mudu, ‘Resisting and Challenging neoliberalism’, p. 75

<sup>195</sup> CS Leoncavallo, *Che cos'è un centro di documentazione di movimento* [leaflet] (Milano, 1994) : BACZ

workshops. Rehearsal studios were extremely common, but some centres created recording studios and established their own labels as well. Larger centres, and centres more focused on cultural production, built video-editing rooms, computer laboratories and artists' studios adaptable to many disciplines. Workshops were also common, due to the prioritisation of the self-construction of the spaces. For distribution of materials there were dedicated spaces, infoshops and bookshops, where self-produced books, pamphlets, CDs, cassettes, t-shirts, alternative publishers' books, magazines and music, second hand products and illegally copied materials were made available.

The centres' capacity to attract large crowds came with new doubts and questions. In the nineteen eighties the distance between the core activists of a centre and the visitors was minimal. Rarely more than a hundred people participated in the public initiatives of the centres, and visitors – in their vast majority – shared the same political views as the organisers. The popularity of punk concerts had started to change this, especially when a handful of large events attracted up to a thousand people in centres such as *CS Leoncavallo* or *Forte Prenestino* in the late nineteen eighties. The most pivotal event, which truly forced activists to reflect upon this transformation, was the concert of Mano Negra at the *CS Forte Prenestino* in January 1992, which attracted between 8.000 and 10.000 people.<sup>196</sup> Such a large population of users and visitors would only ever exist momentarily and they did not participate in the daily activities of the centres nor did they respond to calls for more political actions.

In this context, the number of social centres remained stable throughout the decade. Milan and Rome continued along two parallel paths: in the former, the open conflict between local governance and the centres hindered any chance of negotiations, in the latter, the negotiations had brought contradictory results and soured the relationships between centres.

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<sup>196</sup> Paoletto, 'La nostra forza', in CSOA Forte Prenestino, *Fortopìa*, p. 88; Massimino, 'I centomila pazzi', in CSOA Forte Prenestino, *Fortopìa*, p. 370

In the second half of the decade a number of centres – mainly from the north of the country – tightened their relationships with minor left-wing parties, such as *Rifondazione Comunista* (Communist Re-foundation, RC)<sup>197</sup> and the *Verdi*. It was major transformation in the approach of social centres to politics. In Rome, social centres had their local candidates in the borough or city council, but the political project entailed by this new alliance was directed at impacting national policies. In 1998, this process produced the *Milan Charter*, a document that sanctioned this alliance and its priorities: decriminalisation of radical political activity, decriminalisation of drug use, introduction of forms of universal income, closure of detention centres for migrants, legalisation of social centres and a radical reform of the welfare state.

The proposers of the *Charter* saw social centres as bastions in the struggle towards an expansion of citizenship rights:

We believe it is time to find a nation-wide political solution allowing centres to exit the dimension of precariousness where they have been forced [...].

[...] We believe it is time to situate social centres within a wider struggle for a full citizenship for everybody, starting with income. An actual conflictual reform of welfare, through the re-appropriation of social richness.<sup>198</sup>

The *Milan Charter*, much beyond its very limited concrete results, represented a drastic change in the idea of politics that had characterised social centres up to this point. While supported by only a minority of social centres – among them a transformed *CS Leoncavallo*, a few other Milanese centres, the social centres of the North-East, and a handful of centres from Rome and other cities – it reflected a need for change that was felt by many activists. For its promoters, the *charter* represented a much needed discontinuity in the centres' political action, a way out of the ghetto and an attempt to *think big*.<sup>199</sup> For those who decided not to sign the charter, it was the product of an illusion: the miscalculated capacity of the movement

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<sup>197</sup> RC party had been formed in 1991, by discontented ex-PCI militants who had refused the passage to the PDS

<sup>198</sup> L'Assemblea Nazionale del 19.09.1998, 'Carta di Milano', (Milan, 19 September 1998), *Centro sociale Leoncavallo (old website)*, <http://www.ecn.org/leoncavallo/26set98/index.htm>, accessed 1 April 2019 : Also in APM

<sup>199</sup> Anonymous, 'La svolta di Milano', *Il Manifesto*, 19 September 1998: BACZ, clipping, without page number



to influence national policies through the proposal of radical reforms. It was also seen as the abandonment of the stance of incompatibility with the system that had always been a flagship cause of many sectors of the scene.<sup>200</sup> The *Charter* polarised the scene even more, furthering already existing divides.

Within the framework of the wake of the Global Justice Movement, the *Charter*, among other factors, was nonetheless able to scramble the political geography of the Italian radical scene and open up new configurations within it. During the second half of the decade, the network of centres behind the *Charter* had developed new models of public political performance, in a search for ways to renovate the very concept of social centres, which was felt as no longer able to adequately respond to the challenges posed by the new global Movement. Since their first appearance in 1994, the *Tute Bianche* signalled these changes. They imposed themselves as the symbol of innovation in Italian radical politics. Their approach to institutional politics, the transformation of practices of street politics, the sharp use of media and the appearance of new media-savvy leaders were inscribed in the same trajectory.

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In this chapter the twenty-year-long evolution of social centres between the early nineteen eighties to the late nineteen nineties has been traced for both England and Italy. In the nineteen eighties several similarities have been highlighted. In both countries the contents and forms of radical activism needed to be renovated at the end of a season of intense radicalisations. Anarcho-punk played a pivotal role in this *reinvention*, as the preferred channel of politicisation for sectors of the youth population in both countries, providing new

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<sup>200</sup> KAS, 'Dal fuoco della rivolta alle nebbie di palazzo', *Umanità Nova*, 78.29 (4 October 1998) pp.1, 8: API

modalities of communication and a breeding ground for the creation of activists' communities. The role of intergenerational exchange with activists and militants of radical formations from the earlier decade was also key – despite the differences in results – in the inception of both *A-Centres* in London and spaces such as the *Virus* and the *CS Forte Prenestino* in Italy. The scenes proceeded on similar trends in the following years, expanding in numbers and in the range of activities. At the same time, political approaches and shades broadened, as centres became the site of encounter and interaction between different movements and groups.

The nineteen nineties were instead characterised by the diversification of the two national scenes. The construction of a movement of social centres in Italy had no equivalent in England, where unification was sought only in case of major legislative attacks – as happened with the campaign against the 1994 CJA. London hosted the vast majority of centres, with around sixty social occupations. The phenomenon reached most of the other major centres of the country, but never on the same scale. In Italy the scene was more polycentric, both Milan and Rome were home to several centres – between ten and twenty in Milan and between twenty and thirty in Rome – and most contemporaneous and later surveys agreed on a total number of two hundred centres squatted in the decade. In both national scenes, internal divisions were traced, based on interest, ethos and ideology. Also, in both countries social centres thrived in the relationship with wider campaigns, but only in Italy did they become able to act as a political actor in itself, posing the very existence of the centres as a core political demand within both urban politics and the redistribution of wealth. The reach of their activities was also a point of difference, with Italian centres *breaking into* the mainstream, hosting large events and being covered by the totality of mainstream media.

The turn of the century signalled important transformations in both England and Italy. In Italy, internal processes of reorganisation within the scene, pushed forward by some of the

more influential centres, were empowered by the transformation of the global landscape of radical politics, scrambling the political geography of the entire radical scene. Such transformations did not foster a new generation of social centres, but created a mutated scenario that forced all centres to transform their approaches to global and local politics. In England, the same global transformation signalled a much neater break within the scene, with the formation of new centres which rejected many of the previous experiences and features of the scenes of the earlier decades. They instead sought inspiration in those Italian centres and activist groups which had posited the need for transformation in the wake of the Global Justice Movement.

## Chapter 5. CAMPAIGNS AND POLITICS

The evolution of social centres in the nineteen eighties and nineteen nineties has been explored in the previous chapter. This chapter will focus on the political campaigns supported and promoted by the centres. The tension between legality and legitimacy, the role played by determining local-specific factors in the evolution of centres and their positioning within the wider political context – both mainstream and radical – are the main elements of this analysis, key to enlightening similarities and differences between the Italian and English scene.

The existing literature on social centres rarely proposed detailed analyses of social centres' political stances. A number of case studies were researched in the last years, focusing on either specific campaigns or centres,<sup>1</sup> but overarching studies are missed. Social science scholars have focused on the diffusion of centres, their composition and their variety offering valuable insights through ethnographic and participative approaches.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, for both countries, scholarly attention was often drawn towards more recent episodes of the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly surprising considering that all literature concur in recognising the nineteen nineties as the period of greater diffusion and impact of the Italian social centres.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I will lay out the great variety of centres' political activity, the passionate debates which were triggered by the different visions over their role within the wider landscape of radical politics and the positioning of centres with respect to the rapid transformation of European metropolis and society. Furthermore, English and Italian

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<sup>1</sup> Cross Rich, 'Stop the City showed another possibility: Mobilisation and Movement in Anarcho-Punk', in Dines, Worley, eds., *The aesthetics of our anger*, pp. 117-156; Membretti Andrea, 'Autorappresentanza e partecipazione locale negoziata nei centri sociali autogestiti. Milano ed il CSA Cox 18', in Vitale Tommaso, ed., *In nome di chi? Partecipazione e rappresentanza nelle mobilitazioni locali* (Milano, 2007) pp. 125-146; Casaglia Anna, 'Territories of struggle: Social centres in Northern Italy opposing Mega-events', *Antipode*, 50.2 (2018) pp. 485-487; Dines Nicholas, 'Centri Sociali: occupazioni autogestite a Napoli negli anni Novanta', *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 43.21 (1999) pp. 90-112

<sup>2</sup> Pickerill, 'A surprising sense of hope'; Ruggero, 'New Social Movements and the 'Centri Sociali' in Milan'; Starechesky, 'Squatting History: The Power of Oral History as a History-Making Practice'

<sup>3</sup> Membretti Andrea, 'Centro Sociale Leoncavallo: building citizenship as an innovative service', *European journal of Urban and Regional Studies*, 14.3 (2007) pp. 252-263; Mudu, 'At the intersection between autonomists and anarchists'; Mudu, 'Resisting and challenging Neoliberalism'

<sup>4</sup> Adinolfi, et al., *Comunità virtuali. I centri sociali in Italia*; Membretti, 'Centro Sociale Leoncavallo'

social centres are here considered as essential providers of a highly differentiated array of channels of politicisation for the youth population, which changed in time and according to the ethos of each centre.

## **5.1 Politics and legitimacy in the nineteen eighties**

Within the punk communities of both countries, once a centre opened, the first form of political activity was to reinforce the connection between music and politics, transforming the *simple* concert into a political event. Different issues and campaigns external to the centres were addressed and brought inside in this way. Since the opening of the *Virus* in Milan, a number of concerts were ‘benefit gigs’, meaning that part of the income was devolved to a political group or campaign. This became a pivotal part to every concert once the punx moved to the *CS Leoncavallo* and opened Helter Skelter. The activists of the *CS Leoncavallo* demanded that every concert had to be explicitly connected to a political cause or message. To a lesser extent, this happened also in the first *A-centres* in London. However, the capacity of these centres to raise funds for external causes was hindered by material factors. In particular, the Autonomy Centre in Wapping had to raise money to cover rental fees and that had been one of the main rationales behind the choice to use it as a venue. Nonetheless, the Centre was opened only thanks to the funding raised through a benefit release for the ‘Persons Unknown’ court case. This became a trademark activity of most centres in England and in Italy: the posters of many concerts revealed the practical support offered to political prisoners, hunt-sabotage activities, anti-nuclear movements, the Vancouver 5, the miners’ strike, etc.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Material was extensively present in APM (regarding *Virus*, *CS Cox18* and other Milanese social centres), in BACZ (regarding *CS Forte Prenestino*), CDA (regarding Roman social centres, but also centres of the first half of the nineteen eighties, as their events were promoted in several zines there archived), in KCCI (regarding Kebele’s activities) and in 56AI (regarding several London’s squats). Also documents were found in: Bull, ‘Penguin’, eds., *Not just bits of paper*; in several issues of *Maximum Rocknroll*, and at *90’s+ Gigs Squats Parties*, and *History is made at night* websites.

Anarcho-punk had transformed the way anarchism was approached by sectors of the youth population. As it was earlier noted, the prioritisation of individual transformation, lifestyle and identity politics did not facilitate the exchanges between new punx and old hands of the anarchist movement, but a dialogue was underway. On a practical level, anarcho-punks had increased the numbers of the squatters' movement – occupying houses and venues – while also starting to organise actions and demonstrations on issues like animal liberation, feminism and against homophobia, widening the reach of non-hegemonic discourses. Anarcho-punk views on politics and anarchism were well described by one of the interviewees in Jim Donaghey's work on punk and politics:

I think there was hardly any of the anarcho-punk bands that would have said that they were in any way 'capital P Political.' And you'll see that a lot of them, at the time, kind of didn't engage in discussions about anarchism. And when they did, it was often in a very very vague kind of way. Right? So they were more concentrating on what they were actually doing on the ground, which to a greater or lesser extent was squatting, it was animal rights and animal liberation, and it was stuff around ... anti-fascism and things like that.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time anarcho-punk was being transformed and 'complexified'. As a clear example, in England the relationship between the journal *Class War* and the early social centre scene was symptomatic of the contradictions and different tensions that ran within punk culture and of the diversification of the processes of politicisation within the centres. *Class War* had started its publication in 1983 in London, hailing the riots and the revolts of the inner cities of 1980-81. Characterised by an over-aggressive style, it reintroduced a classist analysis within radical political proposals which were alluring for the wider anarcho-punk scene. The publication was created with the precise aim of attracting "the Crass punk anarchists and ally them with the 1981 street rioter":<sup>7</sup>

The only band to carry the musical-politics line forward was Crass. They have done more to spread anarchist ideas than Kropotkin, but like him their politics are up shit creek. Putting the

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<sup>6</sup> Activist interviewed in: Donaghey, *Punk and anarchism: Uk, Poland, Indonesia*, PhD, Loughborough University, 2016, p. 47

<sup>7</sup> Bone Ian, *Bash the rich. True-life confessions of an anarchist in the UK* (Bath, 2006) p. 120

stress on pacifism and rural escapism they refuse the truth that in the cities opposition means confrontation and violence if it were to get anywhere.<sup>8</sup>

The journal had understood the potentiality of anarcho-punk; Crass had been able to reach “punters in towns, villages and estates that no other anarchist message could ever hope to reach”,<sup>9</sup> but *Class War* could not accept their pacifist stance, their *political paradox*.<sup>10</sup> The early issues of the paper utilised punk aesthetics, inspired by zines and album sleeves, and punk music and politics returned frequently to their pages.

The support for the vision proposed by *Class War* – which soon transformed into a political organisation – appealed to a growing number of anarcho-punks and activists in the centres:

At last bands are emerging that reject the rock music/celebrity/wealth escape route from working class boredom as much as they do the normal political escape route of the Trade Union/Labour party. [...] The Apostles and the Anti-Social Workers link with the war against the rich and make for the real possibility of taking the anger and frustration away from the gig and out onto the streets and once and for all saying 'Fuck that' to the shitty rituals that pass for pleasure.<sup>11</sup>

The Apostles were indeed among the organisers of both the A-centres in Wapping and at the *Centro Iberico* and – especially in the person of their frontman Andy Martin – of many other short-lived centres and squatted venues. Martin was also a vocal supporter for a more aggressive turn within the anarcho-punk community.

A growing number of bands and fanzines followed, challenging some of the core values of the Crass version of anarcho-punk, proposing more confrontational definitions of direct-action, reintroducing a – somewhat vague – class solidarity and rehabilitating – and exalting – the use of violence against fascists and the police. This did not come without creating divisions and reciprocal accusations, in a context of war for authenticity between different punk visions.<sup>12</sup> Similar tensions were present between different local scenes: in Bristol, as noted in the last chapter, the anarcho-punk scene had assumed a more extreme and nihilistic character, without

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<sup>8</sup> From an “early issue of the group’s paper”, quoted in: Home, *Assault on culture*, pp.96-97

<sup>9</sup> Bone, *Bash the rich*, p. 119

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> From an “early issue of the group’s paper”, quoted in: Home, *Assault on culture*, pp. 96-97

<sup>12</sup> Raposo Ana, ‘Rival tribal rebel revel: The anarcho punk movement and subcultural internecine rivalries’, in Dines, Worley, eds., *The aesthetic of our anger*, pp. 68-89; also: Gordon, *The Authentic punk*

refusing politics but approaching activism in a different way. In Italy, while the Milanese punx scene was very close to the non-violent approach developed by Crass, the Tuscan scene, self-appointed *GrandDucatoHardCore* (GrandDuchyHardCore, GDHC), which had opened the centre and venue ‘Victor Charlie’, was characterised for *not* being pacifists – “in other place punx were Crassian, anarcho-pacifists; we were not”<sup>13</sup> – and represented a more conflictual approach to anarcho-punk. Other scenes, like in Rome, were characterised by the survival of a spirit more linked to the origins of punk, to nihilism and the rejection of politics – “they had the name of *machist naff chavs*”.<sup>14</sup> While these were always generalisations that tended to obscure internal differences, the various ethos produced debates and confrontations and in some ways affected locally specific modalities of *doing* politics. Such specificities developed also based on the connections built with other activist networks. In Milan the occupation of the *Virus* had been carried out by a group of punx with very little political experience and their political growth in many ways followed the experiences of the activists of the London’s A-centres. In Rome however, the *CS Forte Prenestino* was squatted by a mixed group of activists, who had campaigned together for years. This gave the Roman activists a ‘head start’ in organisational capacity and in the development of a relationship with the pre-existing local radical network. Nonetheless, when the *Virus* was occupied, Milanese punx had already developed a number of connections with other squatters and activists of left-libertarian tendencies, but their energy was mainly focused on the organisation of activities within the centre and on the strengthening of an alternative circuit of production and distribution of punk music and zines. The presence of punks within the radical scene in Italy had not been immediately accepted. In the years of occupation of the *Virus* the participation in common initiatives started to reduce this distance and different steps were made towards a mutual recognition.

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<sup>13</sup> Sabrina, ‘Moicano girl’, p. 184

<sup>14</sup> Philopat, Vem Bindi, ‘La veria storia del gatto’, *Torazine*, 11.9 (2001), p. 147



Through this diversification, squatted centres opened up to a wide range of movements and struggles, which were very distant from their initial anarcho-punk rigidity. In England, centres became more involved in the wide front of resistance to the policies of Thatcherism. Activists tightened links and showed support for local and national industrial actions, such as the miners' strike or the Wapping printers' dispute (1986-7), but also with more radical branches of the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the peace camps' activists outside the major British and NATO military bases, and the travellers' community that was being hit by violent policing.<sup>15</sup> In addition, anti-fascist discourses regained momentum, as far-right skinheads frequently targeted anarcho-punk gigs and gatherings.

In Italy, the first initiative that saw punx as the main protagonists and produced a nation-wide echo was the protest against a highly publicised conference titled *Bande spettacolari giovanili*, (Juvenile Spectacular Gangs) which was to be held in Milan in April 1984. Since Italian mainstream media had discovered punk, they had started an intense coverage based on the stylisation of youth behaviour, defining groups of disaffected young people as gangs. The conference was the presentation of research on the topic organised by the 'marginality and deviance commission' of the County of Milan. The activists contested both modalities and results of the research, which was described as a farce and as an attempt to impose definitions on something that had not been understood, with a *dividi et impera* approach, which was only useful for tightening the social control of the young population. Their position was paraphrased later that year in an article for the radical magazine *Primo Maggio*:

Spectacular gangs don't exist, punks say, the reality is that youth gatherings and groupings are an aware response to the violence of the system, a barrier (the only possible) against the

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<sup>15</sup> A number of violent episodes occurred between 1984 and 1986: travellers were targeted by an extremely disproportionate repressive device, with the deployment of the army to support police raids against convoys resulting in some of the largest law enforcement operations since the end of the Second World War and in Margaret Thatcher commenting that she was "only too delighted to do anything [she could] to make life difficult for such things as hippy convoys". The *Battle of the Beanfield* in June 1985 remained in the collective memory of opposition cultures, transmitted through songs, books, pamphlets, public events, exhibitions and documentaries: Darling, 'Not only but also. Part 3.1; sources in: *Travellersarchive*, <https://sites.google.com/site/travellersarchive/>, Accessed 1 April 2019;

commercialisation of everyday life, a project against a political system that produces death and marginality and of which heroin is the symbolic and material equivalent.<sup>16</sup>

The *objects* of the research – the punx – were de-legitimising the researchers, comparing them to vivisectionists.<sup>17</sup> More than that, protesters were reiterating the right to self-determination and self-production of their own definitions.

The modalities of the protest introduced elements of discontinuity with the contentious traditions of the country. A group of protesters – punx and ‘kindred creatures’ – broke-in during the press conference for the event and started to cut themselves with razor blades, handing out flyers stained with blood with written: “This is my blood, analyse it! Maybe you’ll find what my real needs are”.<sup>18</sup> A 2-day-long occupation of the theatre where the conference was planned followed, so that it never took place.

The reasons for the occupation were stated in a document distributed at the theatre:

[...] On one hand it is in opposition to the conference/farce on juvenile spectacular gangs, on the other hand it is an INVITATION TO EVERYBODY TO TAKE POSITION ON THE ISSUE OF SPACES DENIED TO MILAN YOUTH.

The occupation was improvised and non-violent and we immediately developed good relationships with the theatre workers.

[...] WE INDEED BELIEVE IN THE CHANCE TO TAKING OUR LIFE BACK AND TO SELF-MANAGE OUR NEED.....

TO DO ALL THIS:

**WE NEED SPACES**

AND THIS NEED IS SO URGENT, THAT WE ARE WILLING TO TAKE THEM!!!...

...IF THEY WILL BE DENIED TO US.<sup>19</sup>

Several groups of the north Italian punk scene – centres, committees, zines, etc. – and activists from social centres as far as Bari<sup>20</sup> signed the document and participated in the action.

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<sup>16</sup> Scarinzi Cosimo, Traù Fabio, ‘Correggio’s graffiti’, *Primo Maggio*, 22 (1984) p. 28

<sup>17</sup> Philopat, Costretti a sanguinare, p. 185

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 160

<sup>19</sup> VA, *La notte dell’anarchia* [leaflet] (Milano, 8 April 1984) : APM

This protest activated new energies within the Milanese centres' scene. A second theatre, which had been abandoned many years before, was squatted a month later. In this occasion the *CS Leoncavallo* and the *CS Garibaldi* joined the punx activists in the action. The occupation was evicted the next day but it reinforced a bond that, as noted, brought the creation of the Helter Skelter nights.

The political baptism for London anarcho-punks was instead Stop the city (STC). As pointed out by Rich Cross, author of several articles on British anarcho-punk, STC represented a turning point for the nineteen eighties' grass-roots activism and an important innovation, as it illustrated "the movement's attempts to project its political practice at a collective level",<sup>21</sup> while refusing "both the prescriptions of the Left and of the mass pressure groups such as the CND".<sup>22</sup> Anarcho-punks proposed an innovative model of political expression, reconfiguring messages that were since then conveyed through musical and graphical outputs and re-proposing them in a confrontational protest within areas of the city that were considered 'the belly of the beast', the City of London.<sup>23</sup>

It lacked any kind of support from parties, trade unions or pressure groups and it ignored any type of organisational negotiation with the city authorities. STC steered clear from claims for reform or lists of rectifiable grievances, opting instead for a revolt "against modern life",<sup>24</sup> against the very "role of the *City* in the financial-military-industrial complex",<sup>25</sup> deemed responsible for war, poverty, inequality and exploitation on both a national and global scale. It had no official organisation, though London Greenpeace Collective helped to initiate it,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Cross, 'Stop the City showed another possibility', pp. 128-129

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 117-56

<sup>24</sup> Foley Palmer, 'Stop the city: identity, politics and the punks who occupied London's financial districts in 1983', *Gadfly online*, 1 October 2012, <http://gadflyonline.com/home/index.php/stop-the-city-identity-protest-and-the-punks-who-occupied-londons-financial-district-in-1983/>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>25</sup> Cross, 'Stop the City showed another possibility', p. 118

Class War activists participated and Crass played a great role in all its phases.<sup>26</sup> Crass member Penny Rimbaud recalled the day-long series of direct action events participated by around 1,500 people. In central London, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 1983:

Royal exchange messengers had been prevented from operating; British Telecom workers had refused to work in the City; restaurants and cafés had been stink-bombed; fur shops had been attacked; people had spent the whole day jamming telephone lines to banks and offices; there had been lie-ins and sit-downs, street theatre and music and unnumerable [sic] acts of individual subversion from lock gluing to flying anarchist banners from the various statues that decorate the City.<sup>27</sup>

All was done in order to cumulatively bringing the *City* to a standstill. The actual results of the day were a matter of debate among the participants. Around 200 activists were arrested.

As pointed out by the band *Conflict*:

*The carnival was enjoyed, but the City was not stopped*

They worked well under siege, even though many visited the carnival out of curiosity

Their dull day was brightened, but it left no mark

The next day most walls had been scrubbed of their graffiti messages

*But the fact remains – power has been tested*

If you try hard enough, things can work

If we go on trying, it will.<sup>28</sup>

The ethos of STC spread outside London and in March 1984 the event was repeated, attracting more people, but at the same time finding an updated police response. The number of arrests rose to 400. New Carnivals – as they were defined – were organised but the participation and impact did not meet expectations.

It is difficult to pinpoint with precision the political presence of squatted centres within these protests, but activists from most of them participated in the actions. At that point activists had

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<sup>26</sup> Franks, *Rebel Alliances*, p. 77

<sup>27</sup> Penny Rimbaud quoted in: Foley, 'Stop the city'

<sup>28</sup> Conflict, 'Stop the City' [song], *Increase the pressure* (Mortarhate, 1984), emphasis added. Lyrics quoted from: Cross Rich, Stop the city – Conflict – Increase the pressure, <https://thehippiesnowwearblack.org.uk/2014/03/18/stop-the-city-conflict-increase-the-pressure/>, accessed 1 April 2019

multiple and overlapping allegiances to different groups and often the scope of a centre was limited to the activities within its walls, to external events organised by the whole of the components inhabiting the squats, or to campaigning against evictions. STC had been the most significant attempt by the urban activist scene of those years to rally its forces and it produced a series of independent and decentralised actions, forcing other components of the wider opposition to Thatcherism to recognise the innovations in tactics and modalities of organisation it had brought forward. The confrontational ethos of the demonstration, always within the limits of a “tactical agreement not to commit violent acts”,<sup>29</sup> had introduced direct action and property damage as ‘weapons of choice’.

Both STC and The Milanese protest against the ‘juvenile spectacular gangs’ conference showed the limitations of anarcho-punk politics. The vagueness of their anarchism was revealed in the absence of clear strategies regarding the modalities of effecting change. The question over transformation agency was evaded<sup>30</sup> in favour of a symbolic display of opposition and otherness. Tensions between more individualistic approaches, where ‘sheer being’ could entail change,<sup>31</sup> and positions that tried to re-inscribe punk-anarchism within a wider class struggle framework emerged clearly during the STC preparations.<sup>32</sup> Such re-conceptualisation was not an easy task: diffidence towards the working class was diffused among punks. Anarcho-punk had expressed “a rudimentary critique to wage-labour itself”.<sup>33</sup> factory workers were seen as complicit in both their own alienation and in the *commodification* of life, as symbolised in the lyrics of End Result by Crass:

I hate the living dead and their work in the factories

They go like sheep to their production lines

They live on illusions, don’t face the realities

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<sup>29</sup> Cross, ‘Stop the City showed another possibility’, p. 138

<sup>30</sup> Franks, *Rebel Alliances*, p. 79

<sup>31</sup> Foley, ‘Stop the city’

<sup>32</sup> Cross, ‘Stop the City showed another possibility’, pp. 126-131

<sup>33</sup> Cross, ‘The hippies now wear black’, p. 8

All they live for is that big blue sign

It says... Ford.<sup>34</sup>

A reciprocal diffidence between punks and traditional class-centred activists remained for the whole decade and beyond, but it was progressively tempered by the different channels of politicisation mentioned and by the exchanges they produced. For England this distance was later summarised by the Bash Street Kids, writing in 1998 for the discussion bulletin of the Class War Federation, *Smash Hits*:

Anarchism's 'breakthrough' is usually seen in Class War circles as getting anarchos to support workers in struggle. In part, this is a fair enough point. Many did move from such threats to capital as not eating meat or buying anything on major record labels to physically contesting the State.

But the central obstacle this faced was rarely addressed, which was getting a movement subcultural in origin to support what was essentially a foreign culture. Endless arguments about Miners eating meat were never the real issue. The point was that these were the very Mums and Dads you spiked your hair up to piss off in the first place! By supporting them anarchopunks became Anarchists - became genuinely political.

However, the divisions inherent in our counter-cultural origins were at best suspended not overcome. Workers might be grateful for the practical support of these funny-looking people, but "they" we remained. At the end of the demo we'd traipse raggedly back to our squats while they returned to their semis.<sup>35</sup>

Similar analogies could be witnessed in the Italian contexts. In the second half of the nineteen eighties the relevance of anarcho-punk – and of anarchism in general – within the social centres scene was being eroded. On one side, this was related to the predominance that Marxist discourse had always had within the Italian oppositional political cultures. On the other side, it was noted that the exponential growth in numbers and influence of centres of the late nineteen eighties and early nineteen nineties would have been difficult to achieve remaining anchored to the characters of otherness and separateness typical of punx ethics.

From this point of view, major events such as London's STC or the protest against the Milanese conference were pivotal to foster political and ideological contamination between different approaches to activism. At the same time in both countries, but more consistently in

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<sup>34</sup> Crass, 'End result' [Song], *Feeding of the 5000* (Small Wonder Records, 1979)

<sup>35</sup> Bash street kids, 'Nostalgia in the UK', *Smash Hits*, 3 (1988) p.3 : KCCI

England, forms of activism more rigidly affiliated to anarcho-punk were being developed, especially under the umbrella of green anarchism. Many of these formations identified the anarcho-punk community as their principal, if not unique, referent.

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The document distributed by Italian punx activists during the occupation of the Milanese theatre – cited above – signalled the emergence of the issue of the legitimacy of social squatting as pivotal within the Italian scene. The “need for spaces” was listed within the reasons of a protest that had started on different propositions, but also the importance of such need was stressed visually in the document – “we need spaces” were the only three words written in capital and bold characters. In this instance, squatting was legitimised by the absence of available spaces for non-conforming youth, and by the refusal of local authorities to provide them.

Following the eviction of the *Virus*, activists called for an immediate demonstration, pointing out the city-wide dimension of the protest. It was a march not only against that eviction, but also against the eviction of any social centre.<sup>36</sup> In the following weeks several initiatives were held to demand the rehousing of both the inhabitants of the squatted flats and the centre. While authorities accorded alternative housing, the centre was never reopened.<sup>37</sup>

In England the issue of legitimacy of social centres was raised less frequently. In a way, a claim on the legitimacy of squatting was inherent to the act of squatting itself, but especially in the first years of the decade not many centres explicitated this claim. Documents

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<sup>36</sup> Betty23 Altomare, *Milano 1984. Tra repressione e ribellione* [Documentary] (Milan, 1984), in: Guarnieri ‘Gomma’ Ermanno, *Punx. Creatività e Rabbia* (Milan, 2006)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

presenting centres, denouncing councils' policies and call-outs for support were written and distributed on the occasions of occupations, evictions or threats of evictions, but even in such cases the issue was not raised. Interestingly, the legitimacy of squatting was raised instead by squatters' support groups such as SNOW in Walworth, BSA in Brixton and BHAM in Bristol. The motto "a threat to one is a threat to all" was frequently used in the case of the evictions of large housing squats and squatters communities, posing the issue as a collective concern. Rarely this generalisation regarded A-centres, squatted venues or other social occupations. As an example, a document from the organisers of the 'Autonomy centre', published after the eviction from Wapping and during the set up of the new centre at the *Centro Iberico*, steered clear from making any claim against the eviction or in favour of the move to the new squatted space. Raising such issues was evidently not among the priorities of the anarcho-punk activists, but the document also showed how self-referential the anarcho-punk community were at that time: the readership of the document did not need to be informed about such issues, because an almost complete political contiguity with the authors of the document was assumed.<sup>38</sup>

The '121 Centre' in Brixton represented an exception. Since its inception, it had been characterised by a certain uniqueness within the landscape of London's centres. This was due to the high level heterogeneity among its activists and to its capacity to maintain this heterogeneity while avoiding fatal internal rivalries. It was also one of the few centres that ran continuous activities on the issue of the legitimacy of social squatting. '121 Centre' activists invested in the development of outreach activities – towards the neighbourhood, other activists, the citizenship, etc. A particular attention on what was happening in the surrounding area was proven by their presence in many of Brixton's contentious moments. As noted, they participated in the 1981 uprising and they often showed their support to the

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<sup>38</sup> Anonymous, 'National tragedy!'



victims of the widespread tactics of racial profiling used by London's police forces. Furthermore, Brixton was extensively squatted – with a number of squatters' communities still running in the area – and the '121' became an organisational centre for their support, through the activities of the BSA, which started operating from the '121 Centre' in 1982. They “encouraged alarm lists, so squatters under threat of eviction or police attack could get word out to others who would rush to their aid [...], they lent out tools [and] produced lists of empties”.<sup>39</sup> BSA also published the *Crowbar* news-sheet, which attempted to stimulate a more political and proactive approach to squatting. *Crowbar* was translating communication styles and political views of *Class War* for the squatting community: “it was unashamedly pro-direct action, anarchist in its views and often savaged compromise (especially from cops), apathy (especially from squatters) and hypocrisy and bullshit – from politicians right or left”.<sup>40</sup>

Thanks to these inputs, the '121 Centre' frequently produced documents summarising its stance about the legitimacy of squatting and in a number of situations attempted to directly address the residents of the surrounding area.<sup>41</sup> The centre had a turbulent relationship with the local Lambeth council. During the first years of occupation a negotiation was started to obtain a licence, but with no results. In 1983 the council leader Edward Robert “Red Ted” Knight took upon himself the issuing of an eviction order. The eviction case was later dropped in 1985 for public order reasons.<sup>42</sup> On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1984, the centre was raided by the police in search for weapons – which were not found. On such occasion the centre published a detailed account for its non-activist neighbours. The language is different from

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<sup>39</sup> Mudlark121, 'Today in London squatting history, 1984: the eviction of Effra Parade, Brixton', *Past Tense*, 25 March 2018: <https://pasttenseblog.wordpress.com/2018/03/25/today-in-london-squatting-history-1984-the-eviction-of-effra-parade-brixton/>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> 121 Centre's documents dated 1984 to 1999 in 56AI

<sup>42</sup> Mudlark, 'Today in London squatting history, 1984: the eviction of Effra Parade, Brixton'

the one used in punk-zines, but also from the political jargon of leaflets and communiqués, suggesting an attempt to reach an ideologically distant audience:

[...] it's easy to slander us as 'criminals', and the raid as not 'political' when a "Firearms" warrant is used. It's easy to attack people if they can be divided off, isolated from others be they blacks, gypsies, foreigners, anarchists... we threaten that process with our solidarity.

[...] Our only "crime" is to seek freedom. The police attack us because we produce papers have cafes, housing aid, jumble sales and benefits for local causes and the miners. Because we oppose authority, government, imposed power groups and the ruling class in every way we can.

Probably you don't support our politics, but you cannot support police terror tactics either. It takes all sorts to make up a Community and we are here to stay. Police attacks are used first against 'minority' groups ... Tomorrow it could be YOU who wakes up to see the Thatcheroid Daleks bursting into your bedroom with guns and axes!

We should also like to protest the continuing harassment of local black youth and squatters, as well as people collecting for the miners by the police.<sup>43</sup>

A similar attention to the legitimacy of social squatting, to outreach activities and to the communication with the surrounding territory was adopted – to a lesser extent – at the 'Ambulance Station'. Again, the particularity of this centre was the presence of SNOW, another strong squatters' support group, rooted in the area. Where this link was missing, the issue of the legitimacy of squatting was opportunistically raised only in case of emergency.

In Italy, in the second half of the decade, a new wave of activists populated old and new centres, fostering connections with high school and university students and pushing forward the demand for the legitimacy of the centres, proposing the legalisation of social centres in both Rome and Milan. While in Milan this remained within the frame of intense debates among local centres, in Rome it took the form of a proper campaign, which saw the participation of most of the city's centres.

Rome hosted the highest number of social centres and a citywide platform between centres was created in 1987 to share know-how and skill-sets and to promote new occupations:<sup>44</sup> the *Coordinamento dei centri sociali autogestiti di Roma* (Network of Roman self-managed

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<sup>43</sup> 121 Centre, *Untitled* [Communique], undated (August 1984) : 56AI. The document depicts the police raid in the centre (14<sup>th</sup> of August 1984) and the related events of the following days.

<sup>44</sup> Coordinamento Centri Sociali Autogestiti, *Una Proposta di dibattito* [communique], December 1987: BACZ

social centres). This network fostered a passionate debate on the implications of self-management and on the relationships with local institutions.<sup>45</sup> This second point started a long-term series of initiatives that revealed far-reaching consequences for the local scene, signalling a specificity that had no comparisons in the country. These debates often turned into harsh confrontations, but this did not stop centres drawing up a calendar of joint activities and campaigns. The network launched, promoted and followed through on a large campaign to denounce and boycott Israeli and South African regimes.<sup>46</sup> For the first time, social centres were the promoters and the main movers of a large-scale campaign, on issues that were far from the personal experience of their activists.

While the debate within the *Coordinamento* continued in several sessions throughout the city, between 1987 and 1989 it moved to a national level, with a number of meetings organised and hosted by centres of different cities.<sup>47</sup> Three positions emerged, signalling the slow formation of ideological and methodological divisions that would turn into consolidated rival fronts in the following years.

A first strand interpreted the centres as revolutionary agencies in the territory; their function was “to create a path of struggle able to ‘sabotage’ the process of reorganisation of the Capital”.<sup>48</sup> Centres were seen as catalysts of needs of the local community, essentially instrumental to the radicalisation and politicisation of both the young population and the local community, which had to be reached through initiatives of ‘socialisation and communication’. Countercultural and marginal activities were considered a risk factor, as they tended to produce negative effects on the relationship with the surrounding area. These centres argued

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<sup>45</sup> Coordinamento centri sociali Autogestiti, *untitled* [Agenda points for debate], September 1988: BACZ

<sup>46</sup> Coordinamento Centri Sociali Autogestiti Roma, Boicottiamo Israele e Sud Africa – Centri sociali in piazza [leaflet], undated (1987) : BACZ; VA, *Mozione dell’assemblea tenuta il 2/5/88 al centro sociale Hai Visto Quito convocata dal cordinamento dei centri sociali* [communique], undated (May 1988) : BACZ

<sup>47</sup> *Bollettino Nazionale Punx Anarchici (3 Issues)* [zine], 1988-1989 : CDA; Bollettino Nazionale dei centri sociali, 0 (1988) : BACZ; CS Forte Prenestino, *Ai centri sociali autogestiti di Roma* [communique], undated (May-June 1987) : BACZ

<sup>48</sup> Mauro Punk, ‘Spazi Sociali Autogestiti: Resoconto convegno tenutosi a Milano il 20/21/22 Novembre’, *Umanità Nova*, 20 December 1987, p. 3

for a stronger coordination between centres and for the creation of a platform on which to converge, avoiding differentiations, for advancing a limited number of concrete campaigns.<sup>49</sup> The occupation–eviction–re-occupation cycle was then the only breeding ground for radicalisation, as it could multiply the number of occupations and “become an exceptional moment for the reconstruction of a revolutionary class identity”.<sup>50</sup> These centres refused the “dead ends of institutional proposals [and the] trap of mediation and negotiation”<sup>51</sup> with public authorities, not because ideologically opposed to a dialogue with institutions, but because they were wary of the possible risks in terms of independence and autonomy.

A second strand underlined the role of social centres as “socio-political workshops”,<sup>52</sup> in which to experiment forms of inclusion for non-politicised sectors of population. Centres were primarily promoters of aggregation, sociability and participation, and secondary incubators for radicalism. Self-management was interpreted as means and ends at the same time because it was a constant negotiation between different individual intelligences, a constant work-in-progress that allowed everyone to feel active, involved and participant in the decisional process. These centres criticised the calls for a stronger coordination as attempts to reduce the autonomy of each centre and to impose a centralised system upon them. In their opinion, it was a move backwards, towards the conception of centres as political headquarters.<sup>53</sup> A recognition by the public authorities – especially at a borough level – was consciously sought to nail “the institutions to their duty to develop and promote cultural activities”<sup>54</sup> and to create contradictions within the representative system.

Both these positions criticised the well-established practice of self-funding – the tendency to offer ‘everything at a cost’. It was the main mechanism centres had developed to sustain their

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<sup>49</sup> CS Cactus, ‘Editoriale’ in CS Cactus, *Dossier Centri sociali*, undated (1987) : BACZ

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 2

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> CS Forte Prenestino, *Waiting for Milan* [internal document], undated (1988) : BACZ

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

activities, but it also created an economic barrier for the access to centres' initiatives and divisions among activists. In addition, this mechanism risked introducing an entrepreneurial mentality within the centres and reproducing the service-payment system typical of market-driven capitalism.<sup>55</sup> For this reason, both groups of centres sought external public funding. Each proposed different rationales. For the first group, the demand of funding was a necessary step to keep providing free services.<sup>56</sup> For the second, funding was a consequence of the public recognition of their role within society.<sup>57</sup>

A third position was supported by left-libertarian and anarchist centres, which interpreted social centres as experiments of self-management and self-production and as “liberating and liberated moments”:<sup>58</sup> self-management acquired in this context a much wider meaning, encompassing the refusal of any dependency from institutions, capacity of self-funding and horizontal decision-making in a highly heterogeneous environment. Centres had to aim for the creation of “a different dimension of sociability”,<sup>59</sup> a “point of convergence of territorial and inter-territorial”<sup>60</sup> demands and actions. While severely criticising the demand for public funding as a possible point of penetration for institutional control,<sup>61</sup> these centres recognised the great diversity within the scene: the squatting/renting contraposition had little meaning, because it overlooked the experimental nature of each centre and – more importantly – the determining local contexts in which they developed.

Observers to one of the national meetings held in Milan in 1988 noticed that the first two positions had triggered intense discussions, while the third option had been relatively excluded, signalling a reduction of support for an anarchist approach to social centres. This

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<sup>55</sup> Hai visto Quinto?, *Doc. Sisto V Autoproduzione* [Internal document], March 1988 : BACZ. The document was circulated within the Roman Network in the context of the debate on social centres.

<sup>56</sup> Ferricelli A., ‘Destroy the ghetto. I centri sociali a Roma’, in CS Cactus, *Dossier Centri Sociali*

<sup>57</sup> CS Forte Prenestino, *Waiting for Milan*

<sup>58</sup> Mauro Punk, ‘Spazi Sociali Autogestiti’, p. 3

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> F.C.A Punx, ‘Occupare/Autogestire Spazi Sociali’, *F.C.A.* [zine], undated (1988) : BACZ

was reportedly due to the strength of the other two sides, which were represented by larger social centres and more influential political groups.<sup>62</sup> Approaching the end of the decade, discussions over the risks of ‘self-ghettoisation’<sup>63</sup> increased. The propulsive drive of punk had reached a halt and the extra-systemic ethos, which had characterised the anarcho-punk occupations and had hindered the development of stable relationships between the centres and the local territory, had started to be balanced by new and renovated approaches to territorial politics. The inputs from the oppositional countercultures of the nineteen eighties seemed no longer adequate.

## **5.2 Diverging paths: the nineteen nineties in England and Italy**

The English social centre scene at the beginning of the nineteen nineties was transformed by the encounter with the free party culture. The much wider reach and the reinforcement of the link between party and politics were among the results. New centres like ‘CoolTan Arts’ built their notoriety around parties and subsequently developed a communitarian approach directed at the neighbourhood. ‘CoolTan Arts’ was the central hub of Freedom Network, a non-hierarchical network between ‘tribes’, crews and groups of DJs,<sup>64</sup> which gained momentum during the campaign against the CJA. Parties and concerts – especially in the form of fundraising ‘benefit’ parties – were an essential and continuative activity of the centre. Considerable amount of money was raised in such events and the range of beneficiaries had widened since the earlier decade: one of these parties, held in June 1995, raised over £7,000 for the Stephen Lawrence family campaign.<sup>65</sup> The idea of triggering social transformations through arts and community-based engagement was at the core of the centre’s activities.

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<sup>62</sup> Mauro Punk, ‘Spazi Sociali Autogestiti’, p. 3

<sup>63</sup> Ferricelli A., ‘Destroy the ghetto’

<sup>64</sup> St John Graham, *Technomad. Global raving countercultures* (London, 2009), p. 159

<sup>65</sup> On the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the influence of this case on public perception of racism and police practice, see: Cathcart Brian, *The case of Stephen Lawrence* (London, 2012)

After its 1995 eviction, 'CoolTan Arts' became a charity, renting different spaces in South London and working on similar principles.

Such rooting within the local surroundings was not at all common within the scene, but not unique either. In a different context, Luton's Exodus Collective had managed to combine community and DiY ethics, transforming them in a 'Do-it-Ourselves' approach to periphery regeneration. Through parties and the re-appropriation of abandoned spaces they fostered personal and collective growth for the local youth. Throughout the decade they provided entertainment, sociability, housing, social and community centres, skill-sharing workshops and job opportunities. Since its inception, Exodus Collective saw squatting – of land, of houses and for social purposes – as a legitimate tactic to be deployed within their campaign to local authorities to commit to the community-based regeneration of the area of Dunstable and Luton. Squatting and free parties were reinterpreted as a form of non-violent civil disobedience.<sup>66</sup> In particular Exodus was campaigning for “a people owned community centre called The Ark, which would reduce poverty and social exclusion for a large number of ‘excluded’ people by creating a base for not for profit work-places [and for a] ‘Sanctioned Sites’ agreement between landowners, council, police and the community, to allow free use of agreed sites throughout the county for non-commercial outdoor parties”.<sup>67</sup> Within their campaign, Exodus' activists squatted a number of centres which were all soon evicted, but that was their way “of pushing the issue up the [authorities'] agenda”.<sup>68</sup> Through several stages, they carried on their campaign and in 2000 they obtained the inclusion of the Ark within a successful bid of the local council to regenerate the Marsh Farm area in Luton and an agreement with the Duke of Bedford – the main single landowner in the area – for the use of a

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<sup>66</sup> Malyon, 'Tossed in the fire and they never got burned'

<sup>67</sup> Leviticus Collective, 'Timeline of our history', *Leviticus collective*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

selected site for parties: “the first ever fully licensed Exodus outdoor dance took place in July 2000”.<sup>69</sup>

Exodus’ and ‘CoolTan Arts’ stances were representative of the particular transformations within the social centres scene, which had been introduced since the encounter with the party culture. While they expressed a decisive direct action oriented approach, they refused the oppositional and anti-systemic ethos that earlier centres had embraced – at least in their rhetoric. Exodus had put much effort into seeking legal agreements for their free parties and for the Ark centre. Once these were obtained, their campaign of squatting was put to an end. Also, they had stressed the importance of community self-policing in the reduction of anti-social behaviours and crime. The non-violent attitude of Exodus was described in their motto “passive but massive”,<sup>70</sup> instead of responding to the numerous illegal provocations of the local police forces, they preferred “absorbing it, dancing round it, recording it”.<sup>71</sup> Their research for non-conflictual solutions was epitomised by their reaction to the explosion of riots on the Marsh Farm Estate, home to many members of the collective, in the summer of 1995. After two days of clashes, on the Saturday night that was expected to be the climax of the revolt, Exodus “held a dance and pretty much emptied the streets of Marsh Farm, from Friday night when there was hundreds and hundreds of people. On the Saturday night there was virtually nobody”.<sup>72</sup>

At the same time, most of the centres which had promoted more oppositional stances in the earlier decade had by then been evicted and the few that had survived were experiencing an ebb of participation. At the ‘121 Centre’ the situation was precarious: many of those who had been active in the previous years had left and this resulted in a marginalisation of political

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Carey, ‘Introducing Exodus’, p. 40

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 42

<sup>72</sup> Carey Jim, ‘To Rave or to Riot?’, *Squall*, 11 (1995) p. 30



activities.<sup>73</sup> The situation was recalled as extremely transient: “sometimes it looked like it was dying, but then it would come back to life a bit for a few months as a bit of new enthusiasm was put into the place”.<sup>74</sup> Many of the groups that had their base in the centre had collapsed or moved elsewhere. The centre had also suffered an attempted arson attack in 1992, which resulted in the destruction of the front door.<sup>75</sup> Both the ‘121 Centre’ and the ‘56a Infoshop’ still hosted squatters’ support groups, but none was as rooted as it was before.

The divergence between these two stances became a fracture during the campaign against the approval of the CJB in 1994-95. Since 1992 the Conservative Party had started working on a new criminal bill, which was presented the following year. ‘Part 5’ of the bill was “devoted almost entirely to an attack on squatters, travellers, hunt-sabs, road protesters and, more importantly, ravers”.<sup>76</sup> Squatting was not made illegal, but the bill was proposing a severe restriction of squatters’ rights. The campaign against the bill coagulated all these groups and gained momentum in the second half of 1994, following a particularly well-participated demonstration on May 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>77</sup> During the following months, several actions and demonstrations were held. One of the main movers of the campaign was the Freedom Network, and especially its London node housed at the ‘CoolTan Arts’, which had become the official voice of the entire network. An internal debate among the campaign was triggered by a number of moments of tension between demonstrators and police forces. Freedom Network and much of the free party scene was pushing for marches and demonstrations to be peaceful events, “the triumph of joy over despair”.<sup>78</sup> Other sectors – among which were Class War militants and anarchist squatters – were proposing a more confrontational and aggressive approach. The

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<sup>73</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kill or Chill?’, *Aufheben*, p. 10

<sup>74</sup> Petard Paul, ‘121: A brief personal trip down memory lane’, *Libcom*, 9 July 2009: <https://libcom.org/library/121-brief-personal-trip-down-memory-lane-paul-petard>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>75</sup> Bennet John, *Mob Town. A history of crime and disorder in the East End* (London, 2017) p. 272

<sup>76</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kill or Chill?’, p. 8

<sup>77</sup> Transpontine Neil, ‘Revolt of the Ravers – The Movement against the Criminal Justice Act in Britain 1993-95’, *Datacide. Magazine for noise and politics*: <http://datacide-magazine.com/revolt-of-the-ravers-the-movement-against-the-criminal-justice-act-in-britain-1993-95/>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>78</sup> Stone CJ, ‘The triumph of love over pain’, *Squall*, 8, p. 20

partisans of these two positions became famously nick-named respectively as ‘fluffies’ and ‘spikies’. The confrontation, it has been noted,<sup>79</sup> was also a competition in terms of influence over the campaign. Freedom Network had acquired a predominant role, especially in terms of sympathetic media exposure, and was attempting to transmit an unthreatening and positive image of party-goers and protestors:

beneath the dreadlocks and funny clothes, strange ideas and new-fangled music, the marginalised community was really made up of respectable and honest human beings making a valuable if unorthodox contribution to humanity.<sup>80</sup>

‘Keep it fluffy’ and – to a lesser extent – ‘keep it spiky’ banners, stickers and mottos became widespread during the campaign’s events. This confrontation brought harsh accusations, especially during a London demonstration on the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 1994, when a group of protestors tried to pull down the defence barriers which had been set up to block the access to Downing Street. In the preparation of the event tens of thousands of ‘keep it fluffy’ stickers were printed and stewards were appointed to assure the peacefulness of the event. The brief disorder attracted the interest of much of the mainstream media,<sup>81</sup> which – according to the peaceful protestors – used the incident to refuse to acknowledge how “the March [...] in the main passed peacefully and without incident”.<sup>82</sup> Recriminations were expressed on both fronts, with Squall magazine hosting an article in which “the gaggle of largely mischievous protestors” was described as “agent provocateurs [...] paid agents of the State, serving its purposes not ours”<sup>83</sup> and ‘spikey’ supporters claiming that the ‘fluffy’ stewards had sided with the police in stopping and unmasking the protestors.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Needle Collective, Bash Street Kid, ‘Ebb and Flow’, p. 153-157

<sup>80</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kill or Chill?’, p. 8

<sup>81</sup> Kennedy Milton, Dominic Catherine, ‘Mounted police charge protestors’, *The Times*, 25 July 1994, p. 2; Penman Danny, ‘Protest at Justice Bill turns violent’, *The Independent*, 25 July 1994, p. 2; Webb Gervase, ‘Police praised for ‘softly’ approach over No10 demo’, *The Evening Standard*, 25 July 1994, p. 6

<sup>82</sup> Anonymous, NEWS Of The SKEWS, Squall, 8, 1994, p. 14

<sup>83</sup> Stone, The triumph of love over pain, p. 20

<sup>84</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kill or Chill?’, pp. 11-12

It was the height of the whole 'keep it fluffy' moral righteousness crusade and some fucking pacifist wanker took it upon themselves to spray pink paint on people they saw being a bit more active, shall we say.<sup>85</sup>

In the context of the campaign, a series of social centres were squatted in several English cities: Brighton's 'Courthouse' and London's 'Artillery Mansion' surged to symbols of this wave of occupations but centres were opened also in Blackburn, Huddersfield, Sheffield, Nottingham, Rugby, Oxford, Hastings, Lewes, the Isle of Wight and in Cardiff and Swansea in Wales.<sup>86</sup> The bill was eventually turned into act on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1994 and not a single comma had been changed. Protests carried on for a few months, principally in the form of symbolic acts of trespass in high visibility situations, as collective defiance of the law, but the campaign had been defeated.

The scope of the campaign – and of the divisions within it – went much beyond the social centre scene. Nonetheless, the ripples produced by the confrontation between 'fluffies' and 'spikies' were the symptoms of a wider transformation within radical politics, which affected and transformed the scene.

The rejection of violence as a tool for political action, the search for positive coverage by mainstream media, the insistence on the capacity of self-control and self-policing and the building of connections with sectors of mainstream political parties and liberal pressure groups signalled an important shift within the whole of the radical scene. If in the nineteen eighties the work of groups such as Class War managed to bring 'the class' back within the realm of radical youth politics, in the nineteen nineties the distance of the new countercultures from any classist interpretation of society and politics seemed even bigger. According to their critics, and especially to the Brighton-based *Aufheben* magazine, this youth had internalised

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<sup>85</sup> VA, 'Reports from the anti-CJB Marches of 1994', *Urban75*: <http://www.urban75.org/photos/protest/cjb.html>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>86</sup> Anonymous, 'Protest Squats On The Increase', *Squall*, 8 (1994), p. 6; Anonymous, 'Kill or Chill', p. 13

the idea of society as nothing more than an aggregation of individuals, which had been heralded by almost fifteen years of Conservative governance:

The fluffy view of society as an aggregation of individuals denies the possibility of recognising the state as a social force; below their suits and uniforms the bailiffs, police, property speculators, industrialists and even Michael Howard and his cohorts are just individual human beings. Fluffies assume therefore that all individuals have a common human interest. Any conflicts which arise in society can, by implication, only be the results of misplaced fears or misunderstandings.<sup>87</sup>

Among other factors, the reduction of the welfare state, the retreat of the state from its role as a space of mediation in the relationship between classes and the defeat of all the large industrial mobilisations of the previous years had impacted on the paths of politicisation available. It was also noted how both identity politics and DiY ethics had played an important role in such a shift: not only had they been a vehicle for the dismissal of collective categories in favour of individual freedoms, they had also fostered the introduction of absolute and moral justifications for direct action. Free party culture especially was interpreted as “anarcho-punk stripped of its subversive potential, with neither punk's anger nor anarchism's politics”.<sup>88</sup> Nonetheless ravers, travellers and squatters were the main target of the new repressive device:

What unites these groups in such a way that they have become such hate targets of the government is that, although they may be a long way from consciously declaring war on capital, they share a common refusal of the work-ethic, of a life subordinated to wage labour. As such, they pose an alternative to the life of desperately looking for work, which must be made unattractive.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kill or Chill?’, p. 10

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 8

Despite being often described in different terms, around the same time a similar contraposition was running through the Italian social centres scene. It emerged, as mentioned, in the debates in Rome and on a national level between centres at the end of the nineteen eighties. Ideological differences and contrasting point of views on the role centres had within both urban society and radical politics fostered the formation of strands along divides which have proven difficult to overcome.

Three main political groups crystallised during the nineteen nineties. Anarchist centres, despite having been the driving force of the rebirth of the centres at the beginning of the nineteen eighties, were a minority. Also they often promoted a more separatist approach, very critical of negotiations with local authorities, of the relationship that some centres had developed with mainstream media and of approaches to social activities considered too apolitical. Such critiques were formalised in 1994, when in Rome and other cities local councils were developing modalities for the legal recognition of centres and the debate on this opportunity was at its peak. Two Turin centres – *El Paso Occupato* and *Barocchio Occupato* – published a zine / pamphlet explicitly titled “Against the legalisation of occupied spaces”.<sup>90</sup> It was a harsh critique to three main points that were developed in the debates among centres in the previous years. The first was the ‘self-management of misery’, recognised as a tendency of those social centres that had focused entirely on internal activities – social, creative or related to self-production – abandoning instead a subversive outwards approach. This had led to the privatisation of occupations: self-management “dies when trapped within

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<sup>90</sup> El Paso Occupato, Barocchio Occupato, *Opuscolo di sviluppo del manifesto contro la legalizzazione degli spazi occupati*; This pamphlet had a seminal role in the critique to the ‘social centre model’ and in the last 25 years has been translated in several languages and circulated in most European countries. Following excerpts are quoted from the English translation by Venomous Butterfly, available at The Anarchist Library: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/el-paso-occupato-barocchio-occupato-against-the-legalization-of-occupied-spaces.pdf>, Accessed 1 April 2019. Such translation uses a subsequent version of the original Italian, published in 1995. Similar positions were expressed around the same time by other anarchist activists: VA, Acrata 415, *Varsavia Brucia* [Pamphlet] (Turin, 1994)

the walls of an occupied space”.<sup>91</sup> The second was the ‘massification’ and ‘spectacularisation’ operated by larger and more exposed social centres, for which mass aggregation had become the only purpose:

some of these CSA [...] stand out for an instrumental, spectacularized and centralized management of music. Very accommodating to commodification and the star system.

If the aim is to bring in a lot of people, then it is better that the big name Group plays, even if whores in the service of the capitalists of the big recording multinationals more people will come. And when the Great Group plays in the Great Social Center of the metropolis... even more people will come.<sup>92</sup>

Such centres were criticised because they offered “only a sham form of self-organization”,<sup>93</sup> reinforcing instead party-like hierarchies. The third point was the legalisation of occupied spaces, seen as incompatible with the very idea of self-management. The path towards a legal status was a path of sterilisation, through which social centres would lose their antagonistic and subversive features, retaining only those aspects which were compatible with those in power.

All these key points were interpreted as a process of *recuperation* of the experiences of squatted spaces within the realm of accepted and harmless mainstream politics:

Through the mainstream press, the social spaces have been able to present their spectacular-welfare aspect to the great masses while everything else is censored or distorted, creating a significant and not uncertain mutilation in the collective imaginary.

[...] And with spectacularization comes sterilization. Everything occurs within a great spectacle and the spectacle dominates all of life.

[...] In the end, many CSA are more than available for a self-reformist and compromising practice with the powers that be, with opposition parties, go-betweens from which they hope to gain security, recognition, guarantees, contracts, rights and money [...] Feigning ignorance, they reach the point of passing legalization — that has put an end to occupations in the rest of Europe — off as a political victory.<sup>94</sup>

Underlying the whole critique, the authors of the pamphlet were launching an attack towards the *Autonomia* groups, which were influential in a large number of centres. While in the

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<sup>91</sup> El Paso Ocupato, Barocchio Ocupato, Venomous Butterfly, *Against the legalization of occupied spaces* [Pamphlet] (1995), p. 5

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 7

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. pp. 8, 9

pamphlet they were described as a rigidly united front, two different strands had instead emerged since the late nineteen eighties and were taking quite different paths. Both these strands had been pivotal in the diffusion of the model and brand of the CSOA/CSA: since the early nineteen nineties its adherents had promoted hundreds of occupations throughout the country, exporting a very loose model of organisation and set of activities. Divisions turned into fractures within the context of a re-conceptualisation of social centres as *imprese sociali* (social enterprises), which was fostered both from within and from outside the centres. As described, the first few years of the nineteen nineties represented a *boom* for the centres: their number grew, the reach of their social activities grew even more, they attracted the interest of mainstream media, they were the protagonists of negotiations for recognition with a number of local administrations and they became an ‘obscure object of desire’ for the entire radical milieu. Social centres had built relationships with the most disparate groups and the number of their visitors was envied by most cultural institutions and political forces – radical or otherwise. Mainstream media as well offered analyses and interpretations of the social centre phenomenon, in which centres were seen as refuges for terrorists by right-wing media and as a curious alternative fashion of the modern youth by liberal magazines and newspapers. Other – more poignant – analyses were proposed from within the radical milieu. Each focused on different aspects and highlighted particular features useful to specific political agendas: expression of marginality, anti-systemic actors, promoters of new rights, welfare providers, etc. Among these, one had managed to encapsulate a great number of the facets of the phenomenon and triggered an important debate among the centres and beyond. Centres were situated in relationship with the re-organisation of capitalist societies which had followed the crisis of the nineteen seventies, especially with the emergence of new typologies of labour – entrepreneurship and self-employment – and the growth of the *terzo settore*.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> “literally the ‘third sector’, which refers to those services previously provided by the welfare state but now delegated out to voluntary organizations”: Dines Nicholas, ‘What are ‘social centres’?’, *Transgressions. A*

Social centres were seen as possessing many of the “characteristics observable in the private-social sector or in no-profit enterprises”:<sup>96</sup>

[social centres] not only act as self-managed and informal job centres, but are also to all intents and purposes [nodes] of vast networks of production, exchange and consumption of cultural products and goods, both self-produced and already available on the market.<sup>97</sup>

These networks were interpreted as experiments of alternative market,<sup>98</sup> which were characterised by their illegal nature and by the capacity to attract vast sectors of the young urban population situated on the verge between social exclusion and integration – “fearing the constant risk of homogenisation connected to integration, and moving against exclusion affirming new [citizenship] rights”.<sup>99</sup>

Practices and languages of the centres seemed to relate to those of entrepreneurship, of self-employment and social work, “representing in this way a paradoxical fragment of future capitalism”.<sup>100</sup>

This interpretation was promoted by those who envisioned the centres as both ‘within and against’ the system, in neat contraposition with the stance of the anarchist activists. This position was also contrasted by a number of centres of the *Autonomia*, causing an internal split between those open to – somewhat conflictual – forms of negotiations with the authorities and those centres that refused the very idea of a dialogue with what was considered the enemy. While these centres had actively sought forms of recognition from the authorities in the previous years, this was done to nail institutions to their role of providers of public services, not to participate in such provisions instead of the institutions. Despite important

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*journal of urban explorations*, 5 (2001) p. 26

<sup>96</sup> Consorzio Aaster, ‘Lo spazio sociale metropolitano’, pp. 17-18; the volume represent an important step – if not the conclusion – of this debate. The volume contains all the material published in the preparation of a conference in Arezzo in 1995. The conference was organised as a point of contact between local administrations, third sector entrepreneurs and social centres. Planning meetings triggered harsh confrontations, which were diffused on the communication channels internal to the radical milieu and on the left-wing newspaper *Il Manifesto* and the conference was cancelled.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.



ideological differences, on this issue they agreed with the critiques posed by anarchist squatters from Turin. They feared that the very idea of being able to carry on antagonistic struggles while cooperating with local or national institutions was an illusion<sup>101</sup> and a foolishness.<sup>102</sup> In addition, in this way, centres risked to be transformed into “Indian reservations for the destitute and the troubled or in simple low-cost providers of services”<sup>103</sup>, and they would lose their ability to play a role in “the fields of anti-institutionalism, direct action, self-organisations and from the participation to conflict in the territories [...]”.<sup>104</sup>

For a few years, social centres were central to the discussions over the state of radical politics in the country, which reflected the transformations within labour organisations and society as a whole. At the core of such debates was the recognition of the innovations posed by ‘post-Fordist’ economy, the diffusion of IT technologies, market globalisation and neo-liberal governance. Traditional form of wage-labour and employment were declining in number, especially in the modern sectors that were driving the economy. New forms of labour – flexible, cognitive, entrepreneurial, creative, cooperative – were emerging and the state seemed incapable of and unwilling to control the modifications of the economy, which was expanding beyond national-borders at a great pace. Such transformations required an innovation of practices and theories of radical politics, “a farewell to the twentieth century”.<sup>105</sup>

The arena of the struggle needed to shift from the national level to both the global and the local ones. The municipality was seen as the new battlefield for politics that were no longer transformative – in the sense of systemic transformations – but participative, fostering an increment of the array of opportunities and a widening of citizenship rights. The focus on the

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<sup>101</sup> Mauro Punk, ‘Spazi Sociali Autogestiti’, p. 3

<sup>102</sup> El Paso Occupato, Barocchio Occupato, Venomous Butterfly, *Against the legalization of occupied spaces*, p. 8

<sup>103</sup> Zaccaria, ‘Cari compagni e compagne dell’altra sponda’, p. 225

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Revelli Marco, *Oltre il novecento*, p. 3

*terzo settore* reflected this shift. Principles such as collective interest, no-profit, and public usefulness, once prerogative of public economy, were now devolved to the private sector – foundations, co-operatives, cultural associations, private hospitals and universities, environmental groups, fair trade organisations, etc. Under the name of ‘social enterprise’, such principles were seen as the key to a radical approach to labour and social policies, fostering the creation of innovative forms of representative democracy based on social cooperation, solidarity and egalitarianism, re-instating the supremacy of the *social* over the *economic*. Social centres were seen as a contradictory element of this sector, struggling between the acceptance and the refusal of the *social enterprise* model.

After 1995 the debate shifted from the relationship between centres and third sectors towards the more general and wide-ranging consequences of the “epochal transformation” brought forward by globalisation. A number of centres had started experimenting in practice with the opportunities and the difficulties of forms of organisations inspired by the ‘social enterprise’ model. Access to funding, practicality and effectiveness of the mixture of labour and activism, the risk of recreating unfair labour conditions and hierarchies: these were some of the issues which were no longer a matter of debate, but were faced in the everyday experience by many activists.

New participatory politics and the expansion of citizens’ rights became instead the flagship of those centres that formed the *Tute Bianche* movement and in 1998 proposed the Charter of Milan. At the end of the decade these centres deemed necessary “to find spaces and forms of a possible narrative on the future of Europe”<sup>106</sup> and proposed to the PRC to host a number of candidates from the centres in its lists for the elections for the European Parliament of June 1999.

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<sup>106</sup> CS Leoncavallo, *Laboratorio Nord-Ovest*, *DeriveApprodi*, 18 (1999), p. 43

Large campaigns, more or less abstract debates and the definitions of ideological strands tend to overshadow the broad range of experiences, shades and activities and the high variety of “local determining factors”<sup>107</sup> alongside these general stimuli. They also fail to do justice to the internal shifts and transformations of each centre. The transformation of the stances of the *CS Leoncavallo* during the nineteen nineties was symbolic of the variety of the scene and provoked both positive and negative reactions. In the nineteen seventies and for most of the nineteen eighties the *CS Leoncavallo* had been part of a hard-core of centres tightly linked to the *Autonomia* and to its stance of incompatibility with capitalism. The arrival of punx and the opening up to countercultural forms of dissent had triggered internal confrontations, resulting in a generational takeover of the centre. This diluted the nostalgia of the nineteen seventies that had characterised the centre until then, but maintained its conflictual and anti-capitalist stance. This was the situation of the centre at the time of the 1989 eviction. Throughout the following years its activists faced a continuous campaign for their eviction promoted by the right-wing city council and the increased sympathy of left-wing cultural and political organisations. The centre started to table discussions and confrontations with different subjects and was among the promoters of the mentioned debate on social enterprises. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1994 the centre was evicted for a second time. By that time its most known spoke-person Daniele Farina and a number of its militants had already entered the orbit of left-wing parties such as PRC and the *Verdi*. The difference in the response to this second eviction signalled the transformations the centre had undergone in the last five years: “the social centre that chose the molotov to defend itself in 1989 now chooses to defend itself through negotiation with its evictors”<sup>108</sup>. No resistance was opposed to the eviction, instead a campaign of lobbying and pressuring the authorities to find alternative solutions for the centre

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<sup>107</sup> Dines, ‘What are ‘social centres’?’, p. 24

<sup>108</sup> El Paso Ocupato, Barocchio Ocupato, Venomous Butterfly, *Against the legalization of occupied spaces*, p.

was organised. This campaign combined large demonstrations, which entailed limited clashes with the police in the streets of the city, and negotiations supported by left-wing councillors and parliamentarians. The campaign seemed to bring positive results, especially because it had played on the contraposition between the right-wing city council guided by the *Lega Nord* party and the national government supported by a left-wing coalition.<sup>109</sup> Local authorities first requisitioned an area in the southern outskirts of the city as a temporary home for the centre, while defining the centre's future situation. The reliance on mainstream politics would prove wrong when in April 1994 Silvio Berlusconi won the general elections and a new right-wing government was sworn in, ending the contraposition between local and national powers. Negotiations and talks were halted and the *CS Leoncavallo* was evicted from its new home on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 1994. Only a month later, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September, the activists squatted a disused warehouse in the northern periphery of the city, which has been the new home of the *CS Leoncavallo* since. During the campaign against the eviction, connections with left-wing mainstream parties were tightened and the *CS Leoncavallo* became one of the most vocal supporters of the transformation of radical politics in a participatory sense. The centre fostered the birth of the *Tute Bianche*, its activists supported the *Carta di Milano*, and other political experiments, such as the *Laboratorio Nord-Ovest*, through which they explored new alliances and allegiances in order to overcome the deadlock in which they perceived social centres had ended in.<sup>110</sup>

Remaining within the field of legitimacy issues, the Roman negotiation between the city council and local centres over their recognition was an example of the uneasy encounter of abstract positions and everyday practices. As described, many Roman centres had maintained, since their inception, a peculiar attention to keeping open a dialogue with

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<sup>109</sup> CS Leoncavallo, 'Via Salomone 71', *CS Leoncavallo (old website)*: <http://www.ecn.org/leoncavallo/salomone/index.htm>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>110</sup> CS Leoncavallo, *Laboratorio Nord-Ovest*, p. 43

borough councils. Such attitude contributed to the approval in 1995 of the ‘resolution 26’ by the city council, which opened a space for legalisation and regularisation of those social centres that were squatted in publicly owned properties.<sup>111</sup> The electoral campaign for the 1993 mayoral elections was a turning point in this direction, as Roman social centres mobilised: for the first time, the candidate of the right-wing coalition was a member of the post-fascist party MSI. In various ways and with different enthusiasm, many centres were drawn towards forms of support for the candidate of the left-wing coalition, Francesco Rutelli of the *Verdi* or towards campaigns against his opponent.<sup>112</sup> For the first time, a mayoral candidate participated in public assemblies in squatted centres with activists from social centres and, in order to draw their support, Rutelli had opened up to forms of recognition and cooperation between centres and local authorities. Once Rutelli had won the elections, a series of meetings were held between the *Coordinamento dei centri sociali e delle associazioni di base* – a newly formed network of social centres and grass-roots associations – and exponents of the council. The network gathered ten thousands signatures in support of a *delibera popolare*, a local variant of the citizens’ initiative, calling for a halt to evictions and for the recognition of the role social centres were playing in peripheral boroughs.

The path towards the approval of the *Resolution 26* was anything but linear: a general agreement was reached on the utility of this resolution, but criteria for the recognition and modalities of licensing triggered unexpected resistances, which highlighted the different visions underlying the positions of centres and council. The citizens’ initiative proposed by social centres and associations promoted a bottom-up approach, characterised by the empowering of the local population through their direct involvement in the control over the selection of the pool of buildings which could be licensed and over the modalities of

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<sup>111</sup> Comune di Roma, ‘Deliberazione 26/1995’, *Comune di Roma*: [https://www.comune.roma.it/PCR/resources/cms/documents/CC26\\_1995.pdf](https://www.comune.roma.it/PCR/resources/cms/documents/CC26_1995.pdf), accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>112</sup> VA, Appello. Roma non merita un sindaco fascista [Communique and Poster], undated (1993) : BACZ

licensing. The council was instead pushing for the approval of a redacted version of the resolution, which delegated the definition of all licensing procedures to a technical committee selected by the council. A principal point of division was the expansion of the recognition to social centres squatted in privately owned buildings: the city council was asked to act as a mediator between centres and property owners to foster legalisation procedures and to find alternative solutions in order to avoid evictions. Instead, the resolution proposed by the council excluded privately owned squats. Over this divergence, a number of social centres abandoned the network, refusing to support the modifications in the resolution, while others decided to accept the council's position. On one side the *coordinamento* commented:

After one year and a half of struggle the negotiation for the approval of the resolution [...] ended. The deliberation was approved by the city council.

This was an important victory that sanctioned for the first time on a national level the political and social legitimacy of the experience of self-managed social centres, which until now was always dealt with as a matter of public order [...].<sup>113</sup>

On the other, *Pirateria*, one of the centres who had abandoned the negotiation, remarked the perceived issues:

Now, [the social centre] Pirateria refused the resolution long ago, [...] criticising its key-points:

- licensing criteria, based on a licence of *non-violence-democraticity* and on offered charitable-services;
- the rent, equal to 20% of the value of the building, which becomes an economic tool to impose a business-like management of the activities [...];
- its *amnesty-like* nature, covering only centres occupied before 31 December 1994. The threatening message of the Council towards the first centres that will be squatted after this date is clear: [...] immediate eviction.<sup>114</sup>

The results of the resolutions were indeed quite limited, at least for the aspects of it which concerned social centres. Only a few centres – of the 22 that had supported the initiative – accepted to undergo the regularisation process and remained for years in a state of uncertainty

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<sup>113</sup> Coordinamento cittadino dei centri sociali e delle associazioni di base, 'Dopo l'approvazione della delibera sull'assegnazione degli spazi: I centri sociali tra rischio di omologazione e nuove prospettive' [leaflet], undated (1995) : BACZ

<sup>114</sup> Pirateria di Porta, *untitled* [Leaflet], undated (1995) : BACZ

marked by an increase in bureaucracy but also by the assurance against evictions. For those centres who had opted out the situation was the same as before the start of the negotiations: evictions of both new and old centres resumed, as well as under-the-radar informal ‘truces’ with local authorities and private owners. By the end of the decade, none of the social centres were formally legal: mainly due to bureaucratic obstacles and rising costs for both the centres and the council, all licensing applications were halted.

While the issue of legitimacy was pivotal to the centres’ existence, they also promoted and participated in local and national political campaigns on different issues with varied commitment and uneven results. Many campaigns depended on determining factors specific to each local context; others assumed larger dimensions; others again became part of the social centres’ trademark. In Naples, the chronic presence of a high number of unemployed and underserved population influenced the activities of local centres such as *Officina 99* and *Ska – laboratorio occupato di Sperimentazione e Cultura Antagonista*,<sup>115</sup> which were involved in long disputes on the side of these sectors of local population.<sup>116</sup> In Bologna, students were a considerable percentage of the centres’ activists and many local spaces became nodes for alternative cultural production and an extension outside the university of students’ politics.

Between 1992 and 1994 centres from Bologna provided much needed input to the discourse around the rise of the ‘new right’ and around historical revisionism. Such discourse was carried out through local and regional meetings and through the internal channels of the radical movements, especially the European Counter Network (ECN), a virtual platform for radical movements. It had been triggered by a rise in far-right violence on one side and by the definitive acceptance of the MSI party, the direct heir of the fascist regime, within the ‘moderate’ right-wing coalition. Furthermore, new historiographical research was shaking the

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<sup>115</sup> Occupied laboratory of Experimentation and Antagonist Culture

<sup>116</sup> Dines, ‘Centri Sociali: occupazioni autogestite a Napoli negli anni Novanta’

basic assumptions of many activists regarding recent European history, and was being publicised as the debunking of left-wing myths. Activists from Bologna proposed acute and provocative analyses on the need for the re-appropriation of historical revisionism as part of a process of deep innovation of activism,<sup>117</sup> despite – and because of – the use and abuse that far-right thinkers and groups were doing of this strand of research. Beside accurate criticisms of authors such as Ernst Nolte and François Furet,<sup>118</sup> these post-situationist activists also published provocative and debatable ‘negationist’ positions.<sup>119</sup> They were attempting to expose the limitations of the mind-set of many activists when presented with arguments supporting the validity of the backbone of revisionist approaches, in order to “break the chains of anti-fascism which [had limited] the understanding of modern history”.<sup>120</sup> New historiography and the rise of a New Right were considered intertwined as part of the modification of global power relationships after the fall of the Soviet Union: a new generation of right-wing intellectuals was innovating radical right-wing culture shifting the attention from biology to culture and developing a new form of racist thought, which was no less aggressive.<sup>121</sup> Such thinkers had ‘jumped on the train’ of historiographical revisionism and distorted it to manipulate social and cultural memory, especially regarding the last World War and the role of fascism in Europe.<sup>122</sup> The positions of the activists in Bologna were highlighted when in February 1992 a right-wing Catholic student group invited Ernst Nolte to

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<sup>117</sup> Both these points of views, in their extreme versions can be found in: ECN Milano, Transmaniacon Bologna, *La provocazione revisionista*, 11 February 1994

<sup>118</sup> Criticisms were focused on the historians interpretations of the origins of Fascist totalitarianism relativism. Furet was criticised for equating Nazi and Communist regimes and Nolte for his idea of European civil war, which presented European fascisms as an effect of the Bolshevic menace on the continent: “[...] Nolte launched the German neo-revisionism, [...] which mixes in an original way pieces of academic knowledge, ‘scoops’ and mass-media manipulations, and adhesion to the ‘good old common sense’ of the silent majorities that feed their resentment with patriotic demagoguery, creeping or unleashed racism, desire for order and hate for the deviants”: Assemblée Universitaria del 24/2/92, ‘Nolte? Nein danke’, in ECN Bologna, *1992 Seminario sulla nuova destra*, undated (May 1992), p. 1 : APM

<sup>119</sup> ECN Milano, Transmaniacon Bologna, ‘La provocazione revisionista

<sup>120</sup> Lalo, ‘La Provocazione Revisionista’, in *Ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>121</sup> ECN Bologna, *1992 Seminario sulla nuova destra*; ECN Milano. *Testo dell’assemblea “Repressione di Stato e nuova destra sociale”*, 18 October 1991 : APM; Leonelli Rudy, Muscatello Luca, Perilli Vincenza, Tomasetta Leonardo, ‘Negazionismo virtuale: prove tecniche di trasmissione’, *Altreragioni*, n. 7 (1998), pp. 175-181

<sup>122</sup> Mancini Antonino, ‘Intervento all’incontro seminariale Revisionismo e Nuova Destra’, in ECN Bologna, *1992 Seminario sulla nuova destra*, pp. 3-7



the local university. On the day of the conference hundreds of activists from the university and from different centres occupied part of the university and prevented it from happening.<sup>123</sup>

In other cities the urgency of a response to the emergence of the New Right was perceived on a less intellectual level. A number of new right-wing skinhead groups had formed and episodes of violence and arson attacks against the centres and their activists were numerous, especially between 1990 and 1995. Roman centres were hit particularly hard, with the city hosting the largest number of far-right organisations in the country. Setting the level of this emergence, and its perception as a full-scale attack, was the death of nineteen-year-old Auro Bruno caused by the arson of the CS *Corto Circuito* in Rome, in May 1991.<sup>124</sup> Some social centres and political groups ‘specialised’ in anti-fascism, producing analyses on each new neo-fascist group, on their connections with the right-wing mainstream parties, such as the MSI and later AN, and the conflicts within the far-right milieu. Practices of *antifascismo militante* (militant anti-fascism) regained diffusion, especially among those groups which had traditionally given more attention to the physical element within street politics. Left-wing skinheads – redskins – were a component of various centres throughout the country and in rare cases had occupied spaces on their own. The attitude of redskin groups represented the visible layer of the *street* mind-set that characterised a part of the scene and of the ‘physical’ rhetoric that was widely shared within it, charged with testosterone and machismo: mottoes and graffiti against fascists and the police acted as conduits for this uncompromising rhetoric. Several campaigns for housing had also been launched or supported by social centres, encompassing both pressure for social housing and direct action through squatting. Rome especially had a long-standing tradition of squatting dating back to the nineteen sixties. In

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<sup>123</sup> ECN Bologna, *1992 Seminario sulla nuova destra*

<sup>124</sup> Solaro Alba, ‘Il cerchio e la saetta. Centri sociali occupati in Italia’, in Branzaglia Carlo, Pacoda Pierfrancesco, Solaro Alba, *Posse Italiane: centri sociali, underground musicale e cultura giovanile degli anni ‘90*, (Firenze, 1992) pp. 11-68

1988 around two thousand flats were squatted in the city.<sup>125</sup> At the turn of the decade a new wave of squatting for housing had started, forming a network of squatters' support groups, named *Coordinamento cittadino lotta per la casa* (City network for the housing struggle). Mass occupations were carried out in the numerous abandoned buildings of the city. These campaigns, in Rome and in other cities, had put into contact social centres' activists and categories of the population that did not fall within the reach of the centres' usual activities: homeless people and migrants. Since then, the intersection between squatters and migrants has brought forward important political experiments, enriching the panorama of both large housing squats and social centres. Up until 1989, politics – both mainstream and radical – had ignored the presence of extra-European migrants on Italian territory; very little provision existed for the safeguarding of their rights. The situation of the 600,000 migrants in Italy started to be recognised with the implementation of the *Martelli Act*<sup>126</sup> in January 1990. It was the first act to foresee forms of regulation and control of migratory flows, safeguards for migrant workers, clear and standard procedures for asylum seekers and the creation of *Centri di Prima Accoglienza* (CPA), the first reception centres for migrants built in the peripheries of several large cities. In the same year in Rome, students of the *Pantera* and social centres' activists witnessed the self-organised occupation of the *Pantanella*, a disused pasta factory, renamed *Shish Mahal* (gathering place in Urdu language), by around 2,600 migrants.<sup>127</sup> The relationships born out of this encounter produced the first anti-racist solidarity movement in Italy. Migration started to make headline news in the summer of 1991, when in only two days over forty-five thousand Albanian migrants arrived in Brindisi and Bari, in the southeast of

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<sup>125</sup> Anonymous, 'Chi Siamo', *Coordinamento Cittadino Lotta per la Casa*, <https://www.coordinamento.info/index.php/chi-siamo>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>126</sup> Parlamento della Repubblica Italiana, 'Legge 28 febbraio 1990, n. 39', *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1990/02/28/090G0075/sg>, Accessed 1 April 2019. In Italy often laws are known by the name of their proposers.

<sup>127</sup> Pompilio Anna, 'La Pantanella e il gatto', *La casa imperfetta*, 6 April 2016: <http://www.lakasaimperfetta.com/2016/04/la-pantanella-e-il-gatto.html>, accessed 1 April 2019

the country, following the collapse of the Communist regime of Enver Hoxha.<sup>128</sup> In the following years migrant populations kept growing and social centres attempted to establish links with the new communities in a more constant fashion. Rome hosted the largest migrant population, which fostered the growth of the *Coordinamento cittadino lotta per la casa*: in 1993 the network organised the first large-scale occupation involving a great number of migrants (around 40% of the squatters). Housing and solidarity movements reinforced each other, effecting changes in the urban policies on housing in the capital.<sup>129</sup> In each city the actions' repertoire of the housing movements varied, but the early nineteen nineties saw an increase in numbers and relevance. While only in Rome the movement had the capacity for mass occupations, all large Italian cities witnessed a rise in the number of squatting actions and squatters support groups, often linked to local social centres. By the end of the decade some local housing movements had parted ways with the social centres and had managed to occupy and maintain several large squats, housing hundreds of people each, and to defend them with a combination of direct actions, lobbying and participation to representative local politics. The solidarity movement also grew in numbers and scope. Demonstrations and protests were organised against the inhumane conditions of those forced to live in the CPAs, the lack of access to healthcare and education and in general for a re-thinking of the repressive approach to 'irregular' migration. In 1998, the Italian government passed the *Turco-Napolitano Act*,<sup>130</sup> which instead went in the direction of increasing border controls and reducing the rights of irregular migrants. The Act also instituted the first detention centres for migrants, *Centri di Permanenza Temporanea*, (CPT). A campaign for their

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<sup>128</sup> Maggioni Stefania, 'L'immigrazione albanese in Italia', *Reds*, January 2001:

<http://www.ecn.org/reds/etnica/migranti/migranti0101albania.html>; Pini Valeria, 'Vent'anni fa lo sbarco dei 27,000: il primo grande esodo dall'Albania', *La Repubblica*, 6 March 2011:

[http://www.repubblica.it/solidarieta/immigrazione/2011/03/06/news/1991\\_il\\_primo\\_grande\\_esodo\\_dall\\_albania\\_verso\\_1\\_italia-13263392/](http://www.repubblica.it/solidarieta/immigrazione/2011/03/06/news/1991_il_primo_grande_esodo_dall_albania_verso_1_italia-13263392/), accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>129</sup> Results of the pressure on local authorities enacted by the *Coordinamento cittadino lotta per la casa* were the approval of resolution on the licensing of empty buildings for housing purposes and the *autorecupero*, self-restoration of occupied buildings: Anonymous, 'Chi Siamo', *Coordinamento Cittadino Lotta per la Casa*

<sup>130</sup> Parlamento della Repubblica Italiana, 'Legge 6 marzo 1998, n. 40', *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*: [www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1998/03/12/098G0066/sg](http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1998/03/12/098G0066/sg), Accessed 1 April 2019

abolition was formed while the law was first discussed in Parliament and several social centres were among its promoters. A number of direct actions targeted the structures earmarked for hosting these detention centres, and their abolition was part of the central demands of the *Carta di Milano*.

While all these and others campaigns played an important role in the activities of social centres, the trademark of their politics – especially due to the extensive and colourful media coverage it attracted – was their stance on drugs. The turning point was the opposition to the *Craxi-Iervolino-Vassalli Act*<sup>131</sup> of 1990, which made drug consumption punishable by law. Social centres and other groups formed the *antiproibizionista* movement. Among the movement, there were several different positions and social centres campaigned especially for the decriminalisation of drug-related offences, different approaches to addiction and for the liberalisation of drug consumption and of the home growing of marijuana plants. Demonstrations and events were organised throughout the decade in coordination with a multitude of actors. Social centres became, due to their extra-legal nature, free spaces where people could consume marijuana and – to a minor extent – other substances. During the decade, a number of centres decided to use their particular status to grow, produce and distribute marijuana as a mechanism for the disempowerment of illicit markets controlled by organised crime and to respond to issues related to the presence of dealers within the centres during crowded events. A diffused anti-prohibitionist culture among youth populations was demonstrated not only by the capillary diffusion of marijuana, but also by a high participation in the campaigns' events. Within the social centres' channels of communication several articles, datasets, research, surveys and proposals for citizens' initiatives were published and shared,<sup>132</sup> showing a high level of in-depth analysis on related themes. Social centres were

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<sup>131</sup> Parlamento della Repubblica Italiana, 'Legge 26 giugno 1990, n. 162', *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1990/06/26/090G0197/sg>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>132</sup> ECN Milano, ed., *Economia della droga e narcotraffico* (Milan, 13 October 1992); ECN Milano, ed., *Droghe*

pivotal in the import of harm reduction approaches towards hard drug consumption and many single-issue groups and non-profit organisations stemmed from this experience. The development of anti-prohibitionist politics was related to transformations in the habits of young people and to the exhaustion of the moral objection of the radical left towards soft drugs. It was also intertwined with the development of countercultures, such as the phenomenon of the *posses*, hip-hop and reggae collectives, which became the mouthpiece of the movement. Some centres practised the “right to self-production” and the home-growing of plants publicly and openly; others organised public events dedicated to anti-prohibitionist themes, like the *seeding* and *harvesting* parties of the Milanese *CS Leoncavallo*, which became among the largest and most famous events of the scene; others did it under the radar.

This *double illegality* – squatting and producing marijuana – provoked reactions from right-wing political sectors and from law enforcement agencies. Negative media coverage became widespread, especially in the second half of the decade, and – on a handful of occasions – police raided social centres in search of drugs. In 1996 it happened to the Pergola Tribe in Milan:

June 27th 8.00 am, everybody's asleep (there were only eight of us there at the time) suddenly the main door and a terrace window are smashed open and in come 35 policemen, guns in hand. The police took us outside, took away our plants [...] from the courtyard and gave us a citation to go to court for cultivation of marijuana. They searched the house, taking pictures and recording everything on video but didn't find anything else. 15 people, with ages between 1 and 35 have been living here for the past 6 years in complete self - government, involving 100's of people daily in a process of personal liberation. In order to fight ignorant, freedom-reducing laws, like the prohibition of marijuana, we decided to grow marijuana in the open in the sunshine, hoping to give voice to and stand up for the opinions of millions of people.<sup>133</sup>

In the second half of the decade the diffusion of techno music and rave culture modified the habits of frequenters and expanded the array of used substances. Social centres became the setting for numerous urban rave parties, fostering the diffusion of party drugs and chemical substances. While the consumption of marijuana was widely accepted, approaches to other

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*Leggere* (Milan, 15 October 1992); ECN Milano, ed., *Tossicodipendenze* (Milan, 16 October 1992) : APM  
<sup>133</sup> CS Pergola Tribe, *The police bust Pergola Tribe* [communique], undated (related to the police operation of the 27 June 1996); the original document is in English language.

drugs were and remained varied: in some centres they were accepted or tolerated, in others the diffusions of such substances was fought against because they were considered alien to a radical mind set. The approach towards raves was just as multifaceted, but the relationship between social centres and the free party culture was set to last far beyond the nineteen nineties.

At the eve of the new century a renovated interest in global movements surfaced. Until then, internationalism had been seen almost exclusively through the (often deforming) lens of anti-imperialism. It had represented a bridge with revolutionary traditions and also with practices developed in the nineteen eighties. A red thread linked the campaigns against the Lebanese War in 1982, to those against South African apartheid and in support of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in the late nineteen eighties, the long-lasting stance in favour of Palestine, the protests against the First Gulf War and the solidarity with left-wing nationalist movements in Kurdistan, Basque country and Northern Ireland. If the vast waves of protests against the First Gulf War and the solidarity with Palestine were shared by a vast spectrum of groups and all the centres, the support to Marxist-Leninist separatist armed struggle was indeed channelled through political affinity. The special relationship of several social centres with the Basque independence movement was also fostered by musical and countercultural connections. The redskin international movement and the wave of Basque punk music (*La Polla Records*, *Kortatu*, *Negu Gorriak*, etc.) allowed for the diffusion in Italy of first-hand information, the tightening of political and personal relationships and the creation of an alternative circuit of anti-imperialist politicisation. This channel allowed for a development of a two-way relationship, made up of travels, exchange of materials, and band tours that paved the way for an innovative approach to international solidarity which was triggered by the issue of the first public declaration of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas in 1994.<sup>134</sup> Into

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<sup>134</sup> In January 1994 the Zapatista Army of National Liberation released its first statement from the Lacandona

this framework were inserted the campaigns against NATO<sup>135</sup> and against the Columbus celebrations for the five hundredth anniversary of the discovery of Americas,<sup>136</sup> that was “the celebration in grand style of the birth of imperialism”.<sup>137</sup>

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Beyond what was already described in the context of the anti-CJA campaign, English social centres played a less consistent role in the panorama of radical politics of the nineteen nineties. They participated in a number of local conflictual episodes and they were part of a wider activist network which offered space and support to campaigners, but the variety of political activity described in Italy was not recorded in England.

The main exceptions were the tight connections that a number of centres had with the anti-road movement and later with the network of Reclaim the Streets (RTS). The anti-road movement had developed since 1991 as a network of local direct action campaigns against the construction of new urban and rural roads and the consequent destruction of the surrounding environment. The protestors used land and road occupation as a tool for conservationist politics, in order to slow down and increase the costs of the road expansion schemes, and eventually force the authorities to cancel them. The most famous sites of such actions were Twyford Down, in Hampshire (1991-1992) and Claremont Road in East London (1993-1995),

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jungle in Southern Mexico, declaring war against the Mexican federal army and against neo-liberalism and its globalisation. It prompted the international diffusion of slogans as ‘Ya Basta!’ and ‘Enough is Enough’. The innovations introduced by the EZLN struggle fascinated activists throughout the world, especially due to the refusal of traditional revolutionary hierarchies, the anonymity of its leaders, the combination of both Marxist, indigenous and left-libertarian tradition, and their search for renovated forms of autonomy from the central state: *EZLN Communiques*, <https://struggle.ws/mexico/ezlnco.html>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>135</sup> Documents were found in BACZ, APM, API and CDA showing hundreds of initiative against Italian participation in the military alliance from the nineteen eighties to the late nineteen nineties. Particularly high numbers of initiatives coincided with conflicts and military interventions.

<sup>136</sup> Casaglia, ‘Territories of struggle’

<sup>137</sup> ECN Roma, ‘Non credere nei media’ [Press release], in ECN Milano, *Giornale telematico* (January 1992), p.

but road protests had spread to the whole country: in 1993 the Pollock Free State was created in Glasgow<sup>138</sup> and Solsbury Hill was partly occupied near Bath.<sup>139</sup> Other important actions took place in Lancashire in 1994, and in Berkshire and Devon in the following years.<sup>140</sup> Anti-road protests encompassed the occupation of strategic outposts, in some cases – in Claremont Road, London, for example – entire streets which had been earmarked for demolition: each of these outposts had centres “offering cheap organic vegan food, DiY cultural events and a living example of anarchist politics”.<sup>141</sup> While they were characterised by a strong sense of impermanence and by the campaign-related existence of the whole area, they nonetheless acted in similar ways to squat cafes or social centres. Claremont Road attracted the support of the London centres’ scene, especially during the campaign against the CJA, tightening important links with CoolTan Arts and Freedom Network.

In the second half of the decade the movement had evolved into a large number of smaller protest sites. *Kebele* in Bristol became the centre of a network of environmental campaigning in the whole of the South West, where activists used to meet and organise or to “sleep and stay en route to campaigns and evictions”.<sup>142</sup> Bristol was touched directly by the construction of the Avon Ring Road, the “largest Local Authority road scheme of the country”,<sup>143</sup> approved in 1993 but delayed for several years. *Kebele* played a pivotal role, alongside activists and pressure groups such as Stop The Avon Ring Road (STARR) and SCRAPPIT, offering a permanent base and a centre for information exchanges especially when the number of direct actions and sabotages increased, between the end of 1998 and the beginning of 1999.

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<sup>138</sup> Anon, Glasgow Earth First!, ‘Pollock Free State Lives On!’, *Do or Die*, 5 (1996) pp. 7-10: KCCI

<sup>139</sup> Anonymous, Road Raging. ‘Top tips for wrecking roadbuilding’, *Eco-Action*: <http://www.eco-action.org/rr/ch2.html>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>140</sup> Wall Dereck, Earth First! and the Anti-Roads movement (London, New York, 1999) pp. 65-93

<sup>141</sup> Hodkinson Stuart, Chatterton Paul, ‘Autonomy in the city?’, *City*, 10.3 (2007) p. 307

<sup>142</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kebele project threatened’, *Earth First! Action Update*, 43, November 1997, p. 3 : KCCI

<sup>143</sup> Anonymous, ‘Avon Ring Road’, *Earth First! Action Update*, 52, October 1998, p. 1 : KCCI



The large part of the energies of centres' activists was focused on the everyday activities and the construction of elective communities. External campaigns, while playing a more minor role than in Italy, were essential to inform political, social and cultural experiences of their activists. In this context, centres acted as *safe spaces* where people could meet, get to know each other and table actions and discussions. This worked not only for political activists, but also – especially thanks to the popularity of the squat party scene – for a large sector of the young urban population. For many, these parties were the first point of contacts with radical ideas and politics. In this way, they provided channels of politicisation, thanks to the possibility of discovering the rationale behind squatting, the aims of various campaigns, and also the modalities of response to urban dissent of law enforcement agencies. Throughout the decade a number of squats were evicted during events and parties, causing confrontations between the police and the participants and frequently involving illegal practices on the part of the police.<sup>144</sup> This situation brought the activists of 'Nevil Arms', a squatted pub in Mile End, East London, to compile a dossier, recording police actions against their and other squats:

On 23 February 1992, a party took place at the Nevil [Arms, a squatted pub, in Mile End, East London]. It was hardly a riotous event, at least not around 10.30. This was when the cops showed up, just a couple of them, had a look around, and left. About 20 minutes later the cops returned en masse – and they didn't bring a bottle. Having forced their way in uninvited and illegally, they were instructed by their leader Sgt Leroy Logan to clear the place. At around the same time it was pointed out to them that they had no right to be there – the law was quoted. The (obviously highly trained) officers responded by arresting people, smacking their heads against anything convenient, handcuffing them and dragging them off to the meat wagon.<sup>145</sup>

A court case followed from this eviction, which was ruled in favour of the squatters, highlighting the irregular and heavy-handed<sup>146</sup> behaviours of the agents. This case had attracted favourable coverage for the squatters, but that was rarely the case. Reporting on another eviction in Brixton in May 1993, tones were different:

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<sup>144</sup> Dee, 'Squatted social centres in London'

<sup>145</sup> Anonymous, *Squats and cops*, p. 1

<sup>146</sup> Anonymous, 'Hackney: arrested development', p. 6

Circus jugglers pelted police with crockery when their fireworks party went off with too much of a bang. Officers were called to break up the bash after neighbours complained of the noise. But when they arrived, the Big Top revellers bombarded them with a hail of plates and cups. Thirteen people were arrested and nine officers hurt.<sup>147</sup>

Court cases and hearings started by owners of squatted properties to request evictions were at times used by squatters as delaying tactics showing a deep comprehension of property laws and their mechanisms – an example of what Fichett-Maddock has called “admiration of the law”.<sup>148</sup> This practice was part of the centres’ repertoire of actions for the defence of occupations and for the practical campaigning for squats’ legitimacy. As noted for the earlier decade, and differently than in Italy, the discourse over legitimacy of English squatted centres rarely expanded beyond communiqués in case of eviction, sporadic call outs for support and the practical defence of existing occupations.

The resistance to the eviction of the ‘121 Centre’, which eventually took place on the 12<sup>th</sup> August 1999, proved that – given the right set of opportunities – a wider discourse over the legitimacy of centres could be and was carried out, despite failing to achieve tangible results. In January 1999, Lambeth council had obtained a court order for the eviction of the centre. Since then, the activists began a campaign that effectively managed to delay the eviction for months.

An attempt was carried out on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, but it was prevented by the support shown by those who had responded to the call for solidarity diffused the previous days and by the actions of the activists. The centre’s activists commented the positive result:

Monday morning, at 7am, we were out in the street. The 121 had been barricaded against the bailiffs.<sup>149</sup>

[...] we decided to [...] have a few people inside the building to [...] be locked-on to various secret defences should the bailiffs (and cops) enter the place.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Anonymous, ‘Crock that!’, p. 7

<sup>148</sup> Finchett-Maddock, *Protest, property and the commons*, pp. 62-67

<sup>149</sup> 121 Centre, *121 Centre. We’re still here* [Leaflet] (London, February 1999) : 56AI

<sup>150</sup> 121 Centre, *9<sup>th</sup> February 1999. Statement* [Communique] (London, 9 February 1999) : 56AI

When the police started sniffing around, we barricaded the street around 121, setting off our air-raid siren and starting up a sound system.

Around 70 of us held the street for about 2 hours.<sup>151</sup>

Barricades and physical resistance were accompanied by the search for a negotiation. On the same day, the activists negotiated the development of the immediate situation with police officers on the scene and a negotiation with local council leader Jim Dickson was sought throughout the seven months preceding the eviction with a variety of tactics: private meetings, presence at the council's sittings, pressure via mail and fax-bombing actions and more direct approaches:

[...] Leaving a group in the building 45 of us proceeded to storm Lambeth Town Hall, running through the building, looking for the Council Leader's office. We got there, but Jim Dickson was out. 2 security guards & an office worker assaulted a few of us, overdoing their job for no good reason since we didn't want to fight them. The cops arrived, broke through the office door and chucked us out, handcuffing 5 or 6 people [...].

We'd proved that their building is easier to get into than ours...<sup>152</sup>

After the brief occupation of the council's building, a formal meeting was held, but the councillors refused to offer any solution other than leaving the building and renting a different space.<sup>153</sup> The council leader confirmed that they "had to sell the building to raise vital funds for their program to improve Lambeth services".<sup>154</sup>

During the following months activists lived within the centre, never leaving it empty. Small events were organised to invite external participation and the attention on the risk of eviction was kept high via updates on the centre's website and radical mailing lists,<sup>155</sup> leaflets distributed locally and the production of the weekly news-sheet *South London Stress*. Different calls for support were sent out to seek help in the safeguarding of the centre and in the organisation of activities. Support was also given to other local squatters in the area and

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<sup>151</sup> 121 Centre, 121 Centre. We're still here

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> 121 Centre, *Resist the 121 eviction* [Leaflet] (London, February 1999) : 56AI

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Sarit M, *Urgent! 121 Centre in danger* [email printout] (London, 17 January 1999): 56AI

the resistance to the eviction was connected to the wider policies of gentrification which were “wrecking the neighbourhood” through the publication of detailed pamphlets.<sup>156</sup>

A statement from June 1999<sup>157</sup> revealed that the initial participation had faded:

[...] the council has adopted a "wait and see" policy in the hope of out lasting its opponents. This policy has seen a drop off in the amount of activity in the area, as the threats [...] no longer seem quite so immediate. However there is no doubt in anyone's mind that this is merely a delaying tactic and that the council still intends to gut Lambeth of it "undesirables". Whilst a certain degree of "battle fatigue" has set in at 121 there are tentative steps being taken towards reopening the centre with cafes and gigs already happening.

Two months later, the ‘121 Centre’ was evicted:

This morning at 6-30am 150 riot police backed by an armed squad and a helicopter sealed off Railton Rd and adjoining streets before bursting into 121 through the first floor window. Within minutes the 8 occupiers had been removed and the council went about trashing and barricading the building. A van of police continue to guard the building 16 hours later.

Protests and other actions against the eviction and planned auction of the building are currently being put together.

We are asking people to join the howls of protest against the council's evil actions and the continuing gentrification of Brixton. You can do so by emailing the people listed below on our hit list or by joining an international fax protest planned for this coming Monday 16th August.<sup>158</sup>

An interview with the Lambeth council leader Jim Dickson revealed that the eviction of the ‘121 Centre’ was a symbolic step in the authorities’ action to clean up the borough and deal “with the legacy of the past”.<sup>159</sup>

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This chapter opened with the description of the emergence of similar channels of politicisation for the urban youth of the early nineteen eighties in both Italy and England. The international diffusion of anarcho-punk message and ethics provided a shared vision and tools

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<sup>156</sup> Anonymous, *The Real Brixton Challenge* [Pamphlet] (London, February 1999): 56AI

<sup>157</sup> Anonymous, ‘Report 4<sup>th</sup> June 1999’, *Urban75*: <http://www.urban75.org/archive/news041.html>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>158</sup> Anonymous ‘121 Evicted’, *South London Stress*, 13 (1999): 56AI

<sup>159</sup> Cited in: ‘121 Evicted’

for interpreting the transformations within society, developing modalities of approach to politics that were very distant from those of the earlier decade.

It has been noted that – on a general level – radical politics in the nineteen eighties “did not aim at the revolution”.<sup>160</sup> Such general claims do not do justice to the ethos of several radical movements of the decade, but they help to enlighten a number of transformations within radical politics. Rather than refusing the revolution, radical politics and oppositional cultures of the decade changed the terms of the envisaged revolution. The emergence of social and political squatting – whether such places were labelled social centres or not – represented a shift from a mono-centric interpretation of the power structure of capitalist societies to a polycentric one. A shift that coincided with the transformations in the ‘structure of feeling’ of capitalist societies associated with postmodernism.

The campaigns promoted and supported by social centres were rarely concerned with the ‘take of the winter palace’ or the re-appropriation of the means of productions, signalling a distance from the traditional claims of both Marxism and anarchism. Nonetheless a wide-ranging transformative and oppositional rhetoric remained essential in the public discourse of the centres of the decade. Anarcho-punk – in continuity with much of the counterculture of the earlier decades – had moved the transformative focus onto the realm of the identity, the personal and the environment, in part as a consequence of a methodological refusal of violence as a means of transformation. Early social centres were representative of this transformation: for the *Virus* as much as for the first A-centres music and lifestyle formed the foundations of their political awareness – not a “capital P Political”.<sup>161</sup> New groups like Class War, despite attempting to re-situate the class divide within these new anarchist strands, were also affected by such general shifts, proposing actions against symbolic and ‘diffuse’ targets, in a similar way to what had been introduced by the more left-libertarian groups of the Italian

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<sup>160</sup> Harrison, *Finding a role?*, p. 525

<sup>161</sup> Donaghey, ‘Punk and anarchism’, p. 47

*Autonomia* since the late nineteen seventies. Social centres were enriched by these inputs and their role in popular direct-action episodes during the decade exemplified their growth in number and relevance. A similar tendency was observed in Italy in the second half of the nineteen eighties, when the occupation of a large number of centres was a consequence of the re-emergence of groups directly related to the *Autonomia* and the introduction of new approaches to territorial politics.

In the nineteen nineties differences outnumbered similarities. In England, the scene was deeply influenced by models of cultural activism brought into the social centres by innovative actors, and it had tightened a wide range of connections with a number of political campaigns by offering practical support to activists, often in the form of 'safe spaces'. In Italy, social centres had acquired a political predominance within the landscape of radical politics, being promoters of important campaigns and offering various contributions to radical struggles on several issues.

The response of state institutions constituted a further factor of diversity: in England centres were among the targets of the CJA; in Italy local and national experiments of collaboration with authorities and mainstream political parties were established. Despite the differences, similar debates were triggered by the modalities of relationship between radical movements and state institutions. Such debates pertained to the very nature and role of radical politics in neo-liberal societies. Two views emerged, termed differently in the two national contexts but very similar at their core: radical politics as systemic transformation or radical politics as direct-democratic participation. This dualism underlies the opposition between both 'fluffies' and 'spikies' in England and between negotiating and non-negotiating centres in Italy.

The particular attention posed by Italian centres on the issue of their legitimacy was also indicative of their central role in the radical panorama of the country. The legitimacy of social centres was raised as pivotal to preserve and expand experiments of re-appropriation of both

space and time: the space subtracted to the community by policies of gentrification, and the personal 'life-time' subtracted by the recent modification of labour organisation. This peculiar role allowed for a number of centres to posit the synergic cooperation with left-wing parliamentary forces and the radicalisation of mainstream politics as the only way out from the 'golden ghettos', which social centres had contributed to create.

## Chapter 6. INVADING ENEMIES' TERRITORIES.

### CULTURAL ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY<sup>1</sup>

During the decades examined in this work, English and Italian social centres could not be reduced exclusively to political actors. Political campaigning and direct action were pivotal aspects of their activities, but the most significant innovation was their ability in combining politics and other activities. The impressive reach of Italian social centres in the nineteen nineties – counting tens of thousands of visitors per month – was not achieved through their political activity, but thanks to the provision of alternative and affordable sociability, their capacity for intercepting – and transforming – trending cultural phenomena and the role they played within the elective communities which had formed around them. The success of squat parties in England, and of experiences like CoolTan Arts, Exodus Collective and Kebele could be described in the same way.

Such elective communities changed over time and according to the ethos and the activities proposed by each centre: they could be territorial or generational, they could have formed around a specific cultural and countercultural feature or due to a political affinity, they could be city-wide or more localised, but they all played an extremely important role in the maintenance of the centres. Without their communities, social centres would neither be able to act as “catalysts for the needs of the surrounding territory”, nor as “socio-political laboratories for the redefinition of social relationships”.<sup>2</sup> Whichever vision drove them, social centres would not be *social* without being rooted within some communities, nor would they be *centres* without such communities gravitating towards them.

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<sup>1</sup> “Invadere i territori nemici” was one of the mottos of the Rome based group *ACAB – Associazione Culturale Adesso Basta* and later of the *CS Forte Prenestino*

<sup>2</sup> These two interpretations of the role of social centres were – in a nutshell – the two major positions which emerged in the national debates of Italian social centres of the late nineteen eighties, described in the earlier chapter, see p.



Cultural activism and the provision of alternative sociability will be analysed here as the two main modalities of relationship between the centres the outside world. In the last chapter, the outward focus of the centres and their actions to innovate radical politics were investigated. In this chapter, the analysis will focus on their attempts to bring the outside world within their walls.

## **6.1 Otherness**

Musical events have characterised the existence of social centres since their inception. Tens of thousands of bands, crews, tribes, posses and DJs have played in concerts and musical events held in occupied spaces. Concerts were often the first events organised by social centres after their occupation and on a number of occasions musical events were pivotal to producing and spreading the practice of social squatting. In London, in 1981, the *Autonomy Centre* was rented thanks to the financial support of Crass and Poison Girls and once it was evicted, the organisation of punk gigs was one of the main rationales for the occupation of the *Centro Iberico* the following year. In Rome, in 1986, the occupation of the *CS Forte Prenestino* took place at the end of the *Festa del non-lavoro*, the alternative International Workers' Day celebratory event, in which music played a pivotal role. In both Milan and London, weekly concerts fostered the growth of the first social centres, providing organisational skills and a common ground for the formation of a community of activists and supporters. Concerts also signalled the potential for social centres to attract large crowds: important names in the international punk scene played in squatted centres throughout the nineteen eighties, and squat parties hosted thousands of people who had never previously ventured into squatted buildings.

Countercultural phenomena have influenced the ethos of social centres in many ways, informing modalities of political and cultural activism. Among others, anarcho-punk, free parties and hip-hop ‘posses’ became the trademark of different generations of social centres. Their impact was visible in the modes of communication, in the relationships with the communities of supporters and in the debates that they generated.

Between the end of the nineteen seventies and the beginning of the nineteen eighties, punk had signalled the need for social and cultural transformations, embodying the crisis of earlier models of cultural resistance. Punk was – in the words of one of the first Italian television commentators – “a mix of paranoid and unpleasant music, maybe the music of our times”.<sup>3</sup> Firstly in England and later in Italy, the spell of existential revolt sparked by punk music was soon commoditised, commercialised and reabsorbed. By 1978, the inconsistency of punk’s anarchist sloganeering shouted from the stages and the pages of the magazines became evident. Its individual and stylistic rebellion had nonetheless provided the youth population with a cultural map to make sense of society, and had offered a new starting point for the modernisation of anarchist activism.

The formation of an anarcho-punk subgroup within the punk scene was a direct response to the shortcomings of bands like Sex Pistols and The Clash:

We sort of tail-ended that first wave, [...] We didn’t see any great disconnection really, but we actually wanted to put into action what had never been the intention of those earliest punk bands. We picked up their pretensions and tried to make them real. We came in with their energy, but also a great deal of political sincerity, and it was the political sincerity that attracted and created a movement.<sup>4</sup>

In Italy, the first wave of punk was almost exclusively experienced as an imported phenomenon. A number of bands formed, often supported by important record labels, but the

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<sup>3</sup>‘Odeon. Tutto quanto fa spettacolo’ [TV show clip], *Youtube*: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7Zd\\_GrLhxI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7Zd_GrLhxI), Accessed 1 April 2019. The clip was originally broadcast by the Rai 2 TV channel, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 1977.

<sup>4</sup>Penny Rimbaud interviewed in: Glasper Ian, *The Day the country died. A history of Anarcho-punk. 1980-84* (London, 2012), p. 11

young punk kids were looking to London for inspiration. The youth at the end of the nineteen seventies, often too young to have lived through the peak of the mobilisation of earlier years, witnessed the crumbling of the revolutionary hopes of their older brothers and sisters. Radical politics were associated with empty sloganeering or armed violence. The 1977 movement had nonetheless been able to tune in to the discontent and disaffection of this generation. Political magazines published by the creative wing of this movement – especially from the *Indiani Metropolitani* groups – had a lot in common with the first punk zines which were published in Italy from October 1977. Some of the demands and the rhetoric of this movement were preserved in the new publications, but the very concept of militancy was refused, as expressed in one of the first zines edited in Milan, *Pogo*:

[...] we are the rage – we want to rebel now! We refuse factory work – and more than everything else we are launching a head-on attack against the logic of *militancy*. The personal is political!!

[...] we don't give a shit – neither of punk music or punks – we are interested only in the abolition of future and of memory.

[...] The big expectations of the [Young Proletarian Clubs] have been irremediably frustrated – [we] show total disillusion [...] – it's our only weapon against the avalanche of restoration.<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned, relationships with left-wing militants were also difficult. Marco Philopat recalled how behaviours and fashion choices of punks were initially interpreted as fascist:

With the comrades any relationship is almost impossible – on Saturdays if there are no clashes with the coppers they take it out on us – in the best case they take the piss: 'Dressed like that you are too visible and you'll get locked up in a minute.' – in the worst case they treat us like fascists and then the only thing to do is to run away [...].<sup>6</sup>

In both countries, anarcho-punk drew as much from punk's innovative ethos as from past experiences. In England, several Crass members had been involved in the free festival scene during the nineteen seventies. In Italy, groups of young punks started to bond with anarchist groups, and use their 'offices' as gathering places. Crass' influence on the new-born anarcho-

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<sup>5</sup> *Pogo* [zine], 1 (1978), pp. 1-2 : CDA

<sup>6</sup> Philopat, *Costretti a Sanguinare*, p. 20

punk scene has been widely analysed.<sup>7</sup> Their capacity to combine and overwrite punk ethics and traditional anarchism informed the first social centres in both England and Italy. Thanks to them, political stances and features of the countercultural movements of the nineteen seventies were re-conceptualised, adapted and translated into new messages and forms.

The high visibility of Crass, and the amount of attention they received, produced a ‘mythologisation’ of their actions and vision. Crass were often presented as new anarchist apostles, essential to the definition of what anarcho-punk meant. This approach hinders the understanding of the formation of an anarcho-punk scene as a multidirectional process, which saw the gradual affirmation of set of themes, styles, political stances and action repertoires and in which Crass, non-punk anarchist activists, hippy ‘veterans’, and most importantly the youth of those years played an important role.

Squatted centres were part of this process, fostering the growth of cross-cultural and multimodal channels of politicisation. Music was at the core, and every step was informed by the ‘everybody can do it’ attitude brought forward by punk: forming bands, composing songs and writing lyrics, but also rehearsals, live performances, production and distribution. A whole set of cultural forms were experimented with: visual art, design, typography, graffiti, video making, and ‘subvertising’. New channels of communication were developed, attempting to create an alternative and separate circuit in opposition to the commodification of music. A number of punk-zines fostered this shift in punk culture. In both Italy and England hundreds of zines had been published since the late nineteen seventies, providing “a literary and graphic complement”<sup>8</sup> to punk music, offering a creative medium “through which those closest to the culture could define, contest and shape it from within”<sup>9</sup> and reinforcing contacts

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<sup>7</sup> Berger, *The story of Crass*; DIY, *Crass bomb. L'azione diretta nel punk* (Milan, 2010); McKay, *Senseless acts of beauty*; McKay, *DiY cultures*; Dines, Worley (eds.), *The aesthetics of our anger*

<sup>8</sup> Worley Matthew, ‘Punk, Politics and British (fan)zines, 1974-84: “While the world was dying, did you wonder why?”’, *History Workshop Journal*, 79.1 (2015) p. 81

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83

between different local scenes. While most of them remained focused on music coverage and on the war for authenticity between youth cultures, some incorporated the political stances of anarcho-punk.

*Attack*, published in Bologna since 1980, was the first explicitly anarcho-punk zine to be published in Italy. Members of the local band, Raf Punk, edited the fanzine. It was initially conceived after they held a protest during a concert of The Clash, held in town and organised by the local council. The event had attracted punks from the far reaches of the country, and the protest enabled more politicised punks to get to know each other. Raf Punk were protesting against the local council – for participating in the commodification of punk music – but also against The Clash themselves, who, they believed, had exploited punk ethics for their own personal profit.<sup>10</sup> *Attack* chose to open its first issue with an article expressing solidarity with the British anarchists of the ‘Persons Unknown’ case, and with the translation of the lyrics of *Bloody revolutions* from Crass, the band’s *j’accuse* against revolutionary violence.

This punk-zine is needed to inform people about what the mainstream press tries to hide by proposing a smattering of ONLY MUSIC, and what the left-wing press, after accusing us for years of fascism or Nazi behaviours, and having now understood their huge mistake, tries to feed us in a biased, external and uninformed manner ON PUNK. [...] After the big lies, now we cannot allow THE BIG TRUTHS to circulate. Thus, this punk-zine acts firstly as information, and as a fight against punk misunderstanding, because no-one better than us can tell people what WE are. [...] We have already been blamed for posing as preachers and prophets of ideologies and we have already answered that we actively accept this role rather than that of dominated victims of the market of goods and ideas managed by the music industry, mainstream media, and institutions [...]. *C’est ne que un debut. This is just the beginning.*<sup>11</sup>

This attitude was soon followed by several publications: more than a hundred by the mid-nineteen eighties.<sup>12</sup> The majority of these had a very brief editorial life, one-offs or a handful of issues; others managed to carry on with their activity for years. On the zines’ pages, new topics and new approaches to music and politics were introduced to Italian punks: pacifism,

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<sup>10</sup> Restelli Angelo, ‘Mamma dammi la benza, Episodio 3: A come anarchia’ [Documentary], *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImcL5gwhV2U>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>11</sup> *Attack* punkzine [zine], 1, (1980), p. 3 : CDA. The last two sentences are written in French and English in the original.

<sup>12</sup> Curcio Diego, *Rumore di carta: Storia delle fanzine punk e hardcore italiane 1977-2007* (Genova, 2007), pp. 55-76

radical ecology, eco-activism, animal liberation movements, vegetarianism, veganism, straight-edge philosophy, anti-vivisection movements, different approaches to anarchism and feminism, queer instances and obviously music and the occupation of social spaces. Through their zines the different local scenes could converse with each other. Following this direction, *Punkaminazione* was created in 1982 to act as a news board for the whole national scene, fostering debates and cooperation. The activists of the Virus in Milan created *Antiutopia Produzioni e Creazioni* and *Virus Distribuzioni* to facilitate the production of tapes, zines, books and videos in the centre and to foster the distribution of this material within the growing scene.

In England the A-Centres of the early nineteen eighties fostered the diffusion of a number of politically charged zines: *Kill your pet puppy* and *Pigs for slaughter* have been already mentioned, as a number of their editors were deeply involved in the centres, but also *Scum*, which was edited by Andy Martin, and zines such as *Book of Revelations*, *Precautions Essentielles Pour La Bonne*, *Enigma* and *Paroxysm Fear* were produced by the communities brought together by these spaces.<sup>13</sup>

Communities in this instance related to the visiting audiences and the elective group of supporters that allowed the space to survive. The cultural codification of anarcho-punk was intrinsically provocative. It was extremely visible. It was intended to attract attention with clothing, styles, sounds and modalities of communication, and at the same time to refuse this attention as prevarication and violence.<sup>14</sup> It entailed a “[...] ‘moral’ refusal of any option of integration within the existing order”,<sup>15</sup> constructed on a sense of otherness from the rest of society. This codification explained the absence of a relationship between these centres and the surrounding territories. The formation of territorial communities was in many cases not

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<sup>13</sup> Worley, ‘Punk, Politics and British (fan)zines, 1974-84’, p. 96

<sup>14</sup> Scarinzi, Traù, ‘Correggio’s graffiti’, p. 29

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

taken into consideration. In the vast majority of documents produced by this typology of centres, the inhabitants of the neighbourhood were not mentioned. When they were, mentions were negatively charged, showing a relationship built only on reciprocal refusal and incomprehension. The neighbourhood witnessed the activities of these centres with revulsion and worry: the presence of the centre in the territory was felt to be alien and a cause of disturbance and problems. This was particularly true of the *Virus* in Milan. The activities of the centre had hindered the – mostly unsuccessful – attempts of the squatters' community that had inhabited the area since the late nineteen seventies to establish a positive relationship with the locals. For the punx, the centre was directed at young punks and was not intended as a resource to connect and empower territorial instances. Among the reasons for this failure was the particularly residential nature of the area, which had undergone processes of renovation and gentrification throughout the nineteen seventies. In the case of the *Virus* – as was described in Chapter 3 – surrounding inhabitants played an important role in the events leading up to its eviction.

Through music and zines, the anarcho-punk community kept growing, and the role of the centres as gathering places, venues and the backbone of a national network was established in both countries. Centres fostered the growth of particular musical styles and sub-genres, and allowed for now notorious bands to take their first steps. London's A-Centres mostly attracted bands which drew inspiration from the musical style of Crass: Hagar the Womb, Rudimentary Peni, Zounds, The Mob, The Apostles, Blood and Roses, Rubella Ballet, etc. The Demolition Ballroom in Bristol supported the creation of a particular 'crust-punk' subgenre, which became typical of the city, with bands like Disorder, Lunatic Fringe, Subhumans, Chaos UK and Amebix. In Italy, each local scene had its own bands and musical preferences. The network of social occupations and semi-legal clubs that had formed in the country was essential to the development of a more original approach to punk music. In

contrast to England, the interest of major record labels for Italian punk had vanished soon after 1977-78 and very little space was offered in terms of venues or production opportunities. The alternative network became pivotal in allowing punk music to grow in the country. 5° Braccio, Contrazione, Negazione, Declino (Turin), Crash Box, Wretched (Milan), Bloody Riot (Rome), C.C.M., Cheetah Chrome Motherfuckers (Pisa), Chain Reaction (Bari), Raf Punk (Bologna), Raw power (Reggio Emilia), Kina (Aosta), Indigesti (Vercelli) and a number of other bands were born within this network, with many of them were directly involved in local centres. As a consequence, a particular genre – ‘Italian Hardcore’, as it was dubbed in the pages of *Maximum Rocknroll*<sup>16</sup> for its specific sonorities and styles – acquired remarkable notoriety and fostered the international success of a number of bands.

Italian and English centres also hosted concerts of already well known groups. All the most famous anarcho-punk bands – Crass, Poison Girls, Conflict, Chumbawamba, etc. – toured England, playing in occupied centres and venues. The Milanese *Virus* hosted the San Francisco based hardcore band MDC and the Bristolian crust-punk group Disorder in 1984. Chumbawamba, from Leeds, and The Ex, from The Netherlands, played in the *CS Forte Prenestino* in Rome, in 1987. In the second half of the decade both the *CS Forte Prenestino* and the *CS Leoncavallo* in Milan attracted a great number of internationally famous punk bands, establishing a particularly strong connection with the American punk-hardcore scene.

The second half of the nineteen eighties was characterised by a widening of acceptance of different forms of expression. The rigidity of the anarcho-punk approach was relaxed thanks to the diversification of oppositional cultures. In both countries, centres were a site for the encounter between the multifaceted post-punk underworlds.

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<sup>16</sup> *Maximum Rocknroll* covered Italian bands since its first issues. Already in 1984 the term “Italian hardcore” was used as a genre label: Anonymous, ‘Italy’, *Maximum Rocknroll*, 12 (March 1984) p. 58



The ‘Ambulance Station’ in London was opened in 1984 by anarcho-punk activists and members of the Bourbonese Qualk, an experimental industrial band. During the three years of activities of the centre, punk still played a major role, as remembered by Crab, a Bourbonese Qualk member:

That kind of aggressive style was all around us at the time – hard-core punk was the unavoidable soundtrack to our lives at the Ambulance Station, and osmotically became a part of our music.<sup>17</sup>

It had nonetheless been opened as a “radical cultural-political centre”,<sup>18</sup> the scope of which included a highly differentiated approach to arts and politics, drawing inspiration from the collectivist experiment of the ‘Dial House’.<sup>19</sup>

Yes, it was a very creative period, more active than the Dial House (which was outside London in the country) – we rebuilt the building (with zero budget) to accommodate artist studios, filmmakers, darkrooms, recording studios, rehearsal space, print workshops, free cafe, sculpture studios – we even had metal casting equipment for making sculpture – and a big performance space and bar. There was always a lot going on and we lived in the middle of all of that madness.<sup>20</sup>

Around the same years in Milan, the ‘Helter Skelter’ events in the *CS Leoncavallo* were underpinned by a similar ethos. ‘Helter Skelter’ had been ideated and promoted by a heterogeneous group of people uniting punx, kindred creatures, skins, and other activists particularly attentive to contemporaneous forms of experimental art. Between 1985 and 1987 they organised concerts, film screenings, happenings and performances, linked by the idea of multi-media experimentation as a radical practice.<sup>21</sup> The number of ‘first times’ was high: new musical genres, new video and performative experiments, the invitation of Eastern European artists and bands who had never, or rarely, performed in Western Europe, different approaches to technology and the first glimpses of computer-mediated communication. These

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<sup>17</sup> Uggeri Matteo, ‘Interview with Simon Crab of Bourbonese Qualk’, *Bourbonese Qualk Archive*. 2016: <http://bourbonesequalk.net/155-2/>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>18</sup> Anonymous, “‘Live Series 2’ & The Ambulance Station’

<sup>19</sup> The Dial House was the home and headquarters of both Crass and Poison Girls. Situated in Essex, it has been an open house and a commune since the late sixties.

<sup>20</sup> Uggeri, ‘Interview with Simon Crab of Bourbonese Qualk’

<sup>21</sup> Nacci Ilaria, ‘Tra ribellione e tecnologia: la storia editoriale di «decoder» e del cyberpunk a Milano (1986-1998)’, *Storia in Lombardia*, 2 (2016) pp. 58-92; Valcavi Andrea, ‘Helter Skelter (1985-1987)’, *Gomma TV*: <http://www.gomma.tv/testi-e-materiali-vari/helter-skelter/index.html>, Accessed 1 April 2019

‘first times’ were not only representative of a transformed approach to music and culture, but they also promoted the innovation of the cultural landscape taking place in the whole country, situating social centres at the forefront of cultural experimentation.

By the end of the nineteen eighties – and increasingly in the following years – Italian social centres had acquired the capacity to ‘steal’ important bands from the mainstream circuit. The foreign bands that were hosted by squatted centres were united by a vague affinity in terms of opposition to the ‘mainstream’ but often had to make compromises in terms of the circuit of venues offered by the music business in order to undertake international tours. This was most often the case for the ‘big names’ of the North-American punk-hardcore scene, such as Black Flag, Henry Rollins, Fugazi, Sonic Youth, Scream, Toxic Reasons, Bad Brains, No Means No, Bad Religion, etc., which found in Italy some of the only opportunities to play in self-managed and occupied venues.

A debate around the practices connected to the construction of a musical circuit, which was alternative to the mainstream one, had started with the publication of the first Italian anarcho-punk zines.<sup>22</sup> The capacity of centres to impose themselves as a viable competitor fostered its growth.<sup>23</sup> The debate developed around the concept of *autoproduzione*, self-production. The use of *self/auto* prefixes – *autonomia* (autonomy), *autogestione* (self-management), *autorganizzazione* (self-organisation), *autocostruzione* (self-building), *autoproduzione*, etc. – has been a permanent characteristic of Italian social centres. Anarcho-punk centres put a particular emphasis on such prefixes, which in this case “favoured a (self-)representation of the social centre as a ‘liberated space’, a ‘self-governed island’ [...]”,<sup>24</sup> reinforcing the separation from local territory and society. *Autoproduzione* was indeed intended as a

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<sup>22</sup> Traces of this debate can be found in the first issues of *Attack* and in all the issues of *Punkaminazione*.

<sup>23</sup> *Bollettino Nazionale punx Anarchici* [zine], 1-3 (1988-1989)

<sup>24</sup> Membretti, ‘Autorappresentanza e partecipazione locale nei centri sociali autogestiti.’, p. 130

complete separation from the whole of the music business, which for the anarcho-punks included the left-wing independent labels born in the nineteen seventies.

The zine *Punkaminazione* had been the first attempt to table a discussion on such themes. Each issue was edited and produced by a different local group – be that a centre, a fanzine, a band, etc. In the summer of 1982, the first national gathering of Italian punx was organised in Bologna and the production of a national bulletin with information on “punx activities and ideas”<sup>25</sup> was tabled. It lasted until 1985. In those years, the discussion on *autoproduzione* was defined by negations and positions which were uncompromising: “public stoning for those who play for the [institutions], no interviews to be given to Rokerilla,<sup>26</sup> no record to be sold in shops, selling price very close to production cost, no space for distributors, and so on...”<sup>27</sup>

The debate continued, producing other attempts at networking. In 1988-89, at least three national meetings were held in Rome and Florence, leading to three issues of a zine/bulletin titled *Bollettino nazionale punx anarchici*, Anarchist punx national bulletin, published between October 1988 and February 1989. The title explicitly delineated the boundaries and scope of the zine and the meetings. These gatherings were taking place at the same time of the first national meetings of the Italian social centres, described in the earlier chapters. Both the punk scene and the social centre scene had changed. They had become a diversified ecosystem of political cultures and radical lifestyles. While the national coordination of the social centres interested all of their members and subgroups, the meetings which produced the bulletin were limited to anarchist punk collectives. For them, *Autoproduzione* entailed a set of rationales which refused any form of assimilation into the cultural industry, along with an

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<sup>25</sup> Punkrazio, Kina, ‘Punkaminazione’, *Gomma TV*: <http://www.gomma.tv/testi-e-materiali-vari/fanze/punkaminazione/index.html>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>26</sup> Italian commercial music magazine founded in 1978 and particularly attentive towards punk and post-punk music and cultures.

<sup>27</sup> Punkrazio, Kina, ‘Punkaminazione’

understanding of the potential of this position, its limitations and inconsistencies.<sup>28</sup> The different needs of the nineteen local scenes involved in this discussion created difficulties and tensions which meant that collective projects were unfeasible.<sup>29</sup> The role of social centres was interpreted as ambiguous: they were considered to be central nodes of the alternative punx network, pivotal to its existence, but they were also perceived as ‘entities’ partially alien to the punx community.<sup>30</sup> Activists from the centres who participated in such meetings revealed this duality between their allegiance to the rigidly tight-knit punx scene while also being involved with the centres.<sup>31</sup> The duality was particularly divisive, as many centres were discarding rigid ideological allegiances in favour of internal heterogeneity.

While such debates and networking projects were a specifically Italian interest, in both countries, the *moral otherness* represented by anarcho-punk counterculture had provided, for a part of the nineteen eighties, sustenance for a micro-system that fed on its separation from both the mainstream cultural market and traditional politics. Doubts, fears and recriminations expressed in the Italian bulletins signalled the exhaustion of this position.<sup>32</sup> Music politics was the last bastion of this *otherness*. The new decade introduced actors that approached topics such as *autoproduzione* and the relationship between oppositional cultures and the mainstream market, in different ways.<sup>33</sup> The DiY ethos developed within the punk scene inspired both the English free party scene and Italian hip-hop and reggae posses. However, it was reinterpreted in different ways, resulting ultimately in the abandon of the anarcho-punk

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<sup>28</sup> VA, ‘Com’è andata al primo incontro’, *Bollettino Nazionale Punx Anarchici*, 1 (1988) pp. 7-31

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous, ‘Roma, 3 Dicembre 1988’, *Bollettino Nazionale Punx Anarchici*, 3 (1989) pp. 4-14; Virus, ‘Da Milano’, *Bollettino Nazionale Punx Anarchici*, 3 (1989), pp. 21-22

<sup>30</sup> VA, ‘Com’è andata al primo incontro’; Mikrocellul-Azione Napoli, ‘Autoproduzione!?’’, *Bollettino Nazionale Punx Anarchici*, 2 (1988), pp. 51-53

<sup>31</sup> Virus Occupato, ‘Milano 18-10-88’, *Bollettino Nazionale Punx Anarchici*, 2 (1988), pp. 37-38; Robb., ‘Parlando di distribuzione’, *Bollettino Nazionale Punx Anarchici*, 2 (1988), pp. 41-42

<sup>32</sup> Anonymous, ‘Roma, 3 Dicembre 1988’

<sup>33</sup> Different approaches to the topic were attempted since the very early nineteen nineties, with the creation of new local and national networks: *La Lega Dei Furiosi* [zine/catalogue], (1990-1993) : BACZ; *La Cordata per l'autogestione*, active in the first half of the nineteen nineties; *GRA, Grande Raccordo Autoproduzioni*, active in Rome throughout the second half of the decade: *GRA, Nuove frontiere per l'autoproduzione* [Minutes], undated (1996) : BACZ

rigidity, which had “created unbridgeable chasms between political proposal and social comprehension”.<sup>34</sup>

## 6.2 Hybridisation

Between the end of the nineteen eighties and the beginning of the nineteen nineties, squat parties and large music events were introducing social occupations to a wider public, composed especially of young urban people. This popularity posed new questions regarding the relationships between activists and users and between the centres and their surroundings. On one side, the affinity shared by activists and users in the nineteen eighties had been replaced by an increasing diversity, encompassing a relatively small core group of activists and vast numbers of users, attracted by popular cultural events. Large centres especially, decided to equip themselves with a more structured organisation, which hindered the sharing of responsibility that had characterised earlier experiences. On the other side, this new mass of users signalled the city-wide appeal of their activities. In practical terms, this interfered with the neighbourhood-wide focus that many centres had started out with. Experiences such as *CS Forte Prenestino*, *CS Leoncavallo*, CoolTan Arts and the 121 Centre were representative of a new approach to centres’ activities: the idea of a centre which opened exclusively for hosting events started to be perceived as a limitation; they instead began to consider themselves as *public spaces*. Occupation and self-management were the ‘tools’ for eliminating access barriers and for safeguarding the public – common – nature of these spaces. Centres were crossroads of renovated sociality, culture and politics; ‘interzones’ at

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<sup>34</sup> Hai visto Quinto?, *Doc. Sisto V Autoproduzione*

the borders of legality and illegality,<sup>35</sup> and thus they were inhabited and accessible throughout most of the day, within the means of squatters and activists.

In both countries, the new public was generally very young, between their late teens and their late twenties.<sup>36</sup> In 1992, 84 squatted centres were active in Italy, and they were central nodes of a network made up of 226 collectives, 69 documentation centres, 94 magazines and zines and 32 free radio stations distributed throughout the national territory.<sup>37</sup> The new visitors were principally students and student-workers, who often lived with their families or in shared student accommodation. Different events and centres attracted diverse sectors of the population: centres like *CS Leoncavallo* and *CS Cox18* in Milan attracted young self-employed workers and university students, thanks to the attention given by them to new technologies and cultural experimentation. Other centres targeted high-school students or the growing precariat, composed of occasional workers, agency workers, student-workers and the unemployed. The relative prevalence of self-employed people among centre users also represented changes in the labour market: a whole set of new skills were being developed, mainly outside of universities, for emerging fields such as IT, advertising and marketing, communication and media enterprises<sup>38</sup> and were being reused within the centres.

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<sup>35</sup> The concept of Interzone is borrowed from science fiction author William S. Burroughs, which in turn was inspired by the Tangiers International Zone, where he resided in the early nineteen fifties: Tangiers, as the Interzone, became the setting of his novel *Naked Lunch* and “was as much an imaginative construct as a geographical location, a metaphor for limbo, for a dead-end place, a place where everyone could act out his most extreme fantasies”. Sharing many similarities with Bey’s concepts of TAZ, the Interzone would become a very prominent icon in the Italian underground of the nineteen nineties: Burroughs William S., *Naked Lunch* (New York, 1959); Burroughs William S., Grauerholz James, ed., *Interzone* (New York, 1989); Morgan Ted, *Literary Outlaw. The life and times of William S. Burroughs*, (New York, 2012) pp. 253-4; Bazzichelli Tatiana, *Networking. La rete come arte* (Milano, 2006), p. 72

<sup>36</sup> A research carried out in the 1994 in 16 Roman social centres showed that the 70% of visitors were 25 years old or younger: *Senzamedia*, ‘Troppe persone non sanno neanche perchè si va in un centro sociale. Aggregazione, autogestione, punti di riferimento e libertà di espressione. Una ricerca sui frequentatori dei centri sociali romani’, undated (1994), republished in: *Tactical Media Crew*: <https://www.tmcrow.org/csa/ricerca/index.htm>, Accessed 1 April 2019; Also: Monroe, ‘Bread and (Rock) circuses

<sup>37</sup> ECN Milano, *Contro Italia*

<sup>38</sup> Data extrapolated from the mentioned Roman research by *Senzamedia* (1994) and from: Consorzio Aaster, ‘Questionario distribuito nei centri sociali Leoncavallo e Cox18’, in Consorzio Aaster et al., eds., *Geografie del desiderio*, pp. 13-19; Consorzio Aaster. ‘Polisemia di un luogo’

Italian activists actively carried out investigations into the composition of social centre users.<sup>39</sup> However, such concerns were not apparent in the English scene. The campaigns, activities, services and events which took place throughout the decade suggests the absence of high-school students and only the minor involvement of university students. The young unemployed and self-employed represented the vast majority of visitors. This was due to the stronger influence of marginal lifestyles upon the younger generation and by easier access to the benefit system, which allowed for such lifestyles to be sustainable.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, niche events – like the previously mentioned ‘Dead by Dawn’ at the 121 Centre – attracted a sophisticated crowd, which was particularly attentive to cultural proposals from the societal fringe, radical discourses over the potential of new technologies and extreme sounds.

Reflections on the racial composition of activists and users were rare at best, in both Italy and England. Italy has not traditionally been a multicultural country. Using Paul Ginsborg’s description, the Italian population had for decades been “extraordinarily homogeneous – in colour of skin, religion, even increasingly in language. It was, in racial terms, deeply conservative, and was quite unprepared for, and hostile to, the idea of a multi-ethnic Italy”.<sup>41</sup> The racial composition of the Italian population has rarely been analysed and, until the last few years, its true diversity has also been willingly downplayed,<sup>42</sup> as the very idea of black Italians has always triggered concerns in wide sectors of the population – and still does.<sup>43</sup>

Race and migration were unavoidably linked in both the mainstream and radical discourse and

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<sup>39</sup> The two aforementioned researches were carried out in Rome and Milan in 1994 and 1995. Samples and modalities were different, hindering a statistical comparison. Rationales and scopes of the surveys differed as well: Senzamedia’ work was an initiative of a group of statistics university students, users and activists of the Roman centres, while the research in Milan started from the collaboration between CS Leoncavallo, CS Cox18 and Consorzio Aaster, in the context of the debate on *Social enterprises*. Other Milanese centres decided not to participate.

<sup>40</sup> Binns Rebecca, ‘They may have beds but they don’t use sheets’ in Bull, Dines, eds., *Tales from the punkside*, pp. 119-135; Monroe, ‘Bread and (Rock) circuses’.

<sup>41</sup> Ginsborg Paul, *Italy and Its Discontents. 1980-2001* (New York, 2003) p. 64

<sup>42</sup> This is intertwined with the difficult heritage of Italian colonialism. Until 10 years ago, Italian scholarship rarely delved in such themes. Even more recently, especially thanks to the works of second-generation authors and of the Wu Ming Foundation, a number of publications have revealed the complexity of the relationships between race and nationality in the recent history of the country.

<sup>43</sup> Hawthorne Camilla, ‘In search of Black Italia’, *Transition*, 123 (2017) pp. 152-174

– as a consequence – the issue of racial composition within social centres was raised only in the context of campaigns in solidarity with migrants.<sup>44</sup> The situation was different in England, where a consistent section of the population was composed of non-white citizens. As Lapolla observed regarding *Kebele* in Bristol, English social centres were “a largely white movement in a multi-cultural society”.<sup>45</sup> This was a more general issue of the anarchist movement, radical groups and countercultures. The presence of active non-white groups of squatters in London between the nineteen seventies and the nineteen eighties was mentioned earlier, as well as the attempts of the activists of the 121 Centre to develop more continuous and positive relationships with the residents of Brixton, who are largely non-white. The party scene had partially reduced this divide, introducing squats to a considerable number of non-white party-goers, but the *Exodus Collective* represented an almost unique expression of multi-racial activism in the scene.

The exponential increase in the number of visitors to Italian centres went hand-in-hand with the growth of the phenomenon of hip-hop and reggae posses. Social centres became an essential environment for the proliferation of overtly political hip-hop music. Languages and codes of hip-hop music had been proposed during the nineteen eighties by a small number of zines and radical magazines: the Milan-based cyberpunk magazine *Decoder* – edited and produced by ex-squatters of the *Virus*, and organisers of the ‘Helter Skelter’ nights at the *CS Leoncavallo* – introduced hip-hop culture in its first issue (1987), as an ideal continuity between different modalities of ‘underground communication’.<sup>46</sup> Rephrasing cyberpunk guru Bruce Sterling, street culture, and hip-hop culture especially, was interpreted as “the site of the operative integration between technology and everyday practices of countercultural

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<sup>44</sup> Chapters on Italy in: Mudu, Chattopadhyay, eds., *Migration, Squatting and Radical Autonomy*, pp. 78-92, 93-98, 99-103, 143-161, 232-247

<sup>45</sup> Lapolla Luca, ‘Anarchist heterotopias. Post-1968 libertarian communities In Britain and Italy’ (Ph.D., Birkbeck, University of London, 2017) p. 140

<sup>46</sup> Anonymous, ‘untitled’, *Decoder*, 1 (1987), p. 66



resistance”.<sup>47</sup> Hip-hop acquired notoriety in both mainstream and grass-roots circles. Among the first rap experiments in Italy were the Multimedia Attack, renamed Da Black Attack, of Bologna, direct heirs of Attack Punk Records who had emerged in the early nineteen eighties, signalling a countercultural continuity. The music industry’s interest in hip-hop was immediate: between 1987 and 1988 several bands were quickly created and showcased around the country. This commercial promotion created diffidence towards the first rappers who tried to bring hip-hop music inside of the social centres. Isola Posse from Bologna was the first to try:

It wasn’t easy, nor immediate [...]. In Bologna it was hard, a process of education, of cultural exchange, obstructed by difficulties and reciprocal mistrusts. Our belief was that hip hop could grow, could work and become a form of culture in Italy, only if it abandoned the commercial dimension it had acquired at the beginning [...].<sup>48</sup>

Soon after, the first posses were formed in Rome and Milan. The Roman Onda Rossa Posse was explicitly linked to the free radical radio of the *Autonomia*: Radio Onda Rossa. The Milanese Lion Horse Posse was formed in the *CS Leoncavallo*. Posses were inspired by the ‘everyone can do it’ punk attitude, and by the ideas of anonymity and abolition of the distinction between the performers and the public, which were fuelling the free party culture in England. The first hip-hop nights in social centres were never-ending jams where everyone was invited to participate. Posses perceived themselves as families, collectives that brought together much more than music. Graffiti became a sign of tribal revolt against the inequalities of capitalist societies, in which art and the violation of private and public property empowered each other.<sup>49</sup>

The *Pantera* student movement determined its diffusion as a voice of dissent and resistance: in Rome in January 1990, at the end of a demonstration which had been highly participated in

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<sup>47</sup> Anonymous, ‘Letteratura Cyberpunk’, *Decoder.it*, retrieved via Wayback Machine, version 5 May 2009: <https://web.archive.org/web/20090305083736/http://www.decoder.it/archivio/cybcult/letterat/index.htm>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>48</sup> Campo Alberto, Chiesa Guido, ‘Rap & ragga’, in *Rockerilla* (July-August 1991) p. 25

<sup>49</sup> Mailer Norman, ‘The faith of graffiti’, *Esquire*, May 1974, pp. 77-88, 154-158

by students from the occupied faculties of the city, the Onda Rossa Posse “assaulted” the official stage, which was supposed to host speakers from unions and parties, and instead, sang what became the hymn of that movement: *Batti il tuo tempo*.<sup>50</sup> As recalled by *Il Duka*, a renowned figure of the Roman countercultural scene in those years, in a 1991 documentary on social centres and political hip hop:

That was the change. The people in the square suddenly stood up. It was a change from our whole experience of the eighties. That day marked it. From the following day we were no longer invisible, but we ended up in the newspapers, and for the first time they wrote about Italian Posses, and they wrote about it as an experience coming from within the social centres.<sup>51</sup>

Poldino, activist of the *CS Forte Prenestino*, instead remembers the difference in the perception of punk and hip-hop:

punk was a thing a bit imported from groups that came from abroad; Italian groups, even those more politicised were a copy, while Italian hip-hop, Italian rap, was born inside social centres, thus even if it evoked American hip hop and punk and that was its inspiration, it was something born inside here.<sup>52</sup>

Despite its distant origins, cultural practices of hip-hop succeeded in the process of *indigenisation*,<sup>53</sup> where punk had failed. This was due to a higher stylistic similarity to both Italian activist and pop culture traditions: the use of body language and strong corporeality; clear, recognisable rebel aesthetics; the prioritisation of words over music; the use of lyrics and rhymes based on cultural resistance and, thanks to the important Afro-Caribbean musical influence on the growing Italian scene, a more melodic approach to music.<sup>54</sup>

Punk – and anarcho-punk especially – had instead represented a neat discontinuity with musical and cultural traditions, a hostility that was expressed primarily through music: a powerful and shocking noise wall, shouted, growled or screamed. The nature of anarcho-punk was that of a niche and marginal phenomenon and it was in general addressed to small gatherings. Hip-hop could instead become the soundtrack of social centres as a mass

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<sup>50</sup> Onda Rossa Posse, ‘Batti il tuo tempo’, *Batti il tuo tempo* (Roma, 1990)

<sup>51</sup> Balestrini Nanni, Bianchi Sergio, Luppichini Manolo, *Batti il tuo tempo* [Documentary] (1991)

<sup>52</sup> De Sario, *Resistenze innaturali*, p. 65

<sup>53</sup> Iwabuchi Koichi, ‘Marketing Japan’, *Japanese studies*, 18, 2 (1998), pp. 165-180

<sup>54</sup> De Sario, *Resistenze Innaturali*, pp. 58-84

movement. Coinciding with the proliferation of a new wave of occupations and struggles, posses were identified with this innovation and with the transformations within the social centre scene.

Hip-hop – the posses version – quickly became the language of a new generation of activists, channelling the ethos of the Pantera student movement and of the newly occupied or regenerated social centres. Posses and crews were formed in many cities and centres; hip-hop nights in large cities like Rome, Milan, Napoli or Bologna became city-wide events, attracting thousands of people from the surrounding areas, while the walls of social centres became the canvases for new artists, who translated this new form of expression into graffiti.

The *CS I.N.K Isola nel Kantiere* – Island in the Building Site – in Bologna had been squatted in November 1988 in the basement of a bankrupt building site in a central area of the city. It was the archetype of new the countercultural social centres, as can be understood by this extract from an interview with a centre's activist published in 1992:

We have always based our existence on squatting. [...] For us, self-management acquires significance only at a communication level, artistic proposals and so on. While for other types of social centres the occupation was the symbol of disruption, for us it has always been the only means of survival as a group, allowing us to keep living together and carry on with our projects.<sup>55</sup>

Underlining the specificity of *I.N.K.*, the centre's activists were distancing themselves from more conflictual interpretations of the act of squatting, instead framing it as a necessity. The pivotal role that music and cultural activities played was described in a pamphlet that was distributed in 1991 to promote the cyberpunk virtual network 'Cybernet':

Cultural production in INK was intense and multifaceted; in three years of occupation – it was evicted in August 1991 – the space was the site of encounter of the most diverse experiences: the Isola Posse and the Ghetto Blaster nights, cyber-punk and post-industrial music and art exhibitions, graffiti, video, theatre, cinema... A cultural production that, publicised by media, became a symbol of the modernity of the city, used also by the administration, which for a while had been forced into a silent acceptance of the occupation and to open a negotiation, which was soon halted.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Solaro, 'Il cerchio e la saetta', p. 29

<sup>56</sup> Isola Nel kantiere, *Ink3d* [Pamphlet], 1991, p. 3 : BACZ

A duality had developed between musicians and activists, fuelling conflicts over the policies of the centres. In the words of Militant A, member of the Onda Rossa Posse:

I went to the Isola nel Kantiere in Bologna in April 1990. Some comrades told me: ‘Well no problem if you are going there to play, but that’s a place for posers and crazies’. Others told me: ‘It’s special, it’s the social centre which is more attentive to creative vanguards, an engine of underground culture’. They were two extreme souls of the movement talking, one saw in the social centres a modern political headquarters, the other a space for free culture and a home for living.<sup>57</sup>

The production of new countercultural codes and lexicons used by the posses, and the tight-knit relationship they had with the more ‘political’ antagonism of the centres reached extremely high levels of popularity, promoting an anti-hegemonic<sup>58</sup> discourse throughout the country.

The role of the free party culture in the renovation of the social squatting scene in England was examined in earlier chapters, especially regarding the transformations and political debates triggered by its emergence. This emergence and its encounter with the social squatting scene was a response to many of the questions that in Italy had been answered with codes and styles derived from hip-hop.

The music of the party scene was more easily accessible than punk; it owed a debt to past musical antecedents such as the ‘acid house’ and techno music scenes of Chicago, Detroit and New York in the early nineteen eighties, but also to the experiments of European bands like Kraftwerk, Cafe Voltaire and Borghesia. It was also influenced by the long-standing tradition of the sound systems of Caribbean communities.<sup>59</sup> As in the US, gay clubs were among the first places to host ‘acid house’ nights, before they found their distinctive settings in abandoned warehouses of post industrial London. Parallels were made with the Brass bands

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<sup>57</sup> Militant A, *Storie di Assalti Frontali: Conflitti che producono banditi* (Roma, 1997) pp. 57-58

<sup>58</sup> The term is taken from De Sario, *Resistenze Innaturali*, who uses it to define the typical form of cultural activism of the Milanese group that from the occupation of the *Virus* went to disseminate countercultural seeds in several projects, defying boundaries between alternative and mainstream.

<sup>59</sup> Transpontine Neil, ‘A Loop Da Loop Era: towards an (anti)history of rave’, *Datacide* 10 (2008); Fringeli, ‘Radical intersections’

of miners' villages,<sup>60</sup> and the self-defined ravers of the nineteen sixties,<sup>61</sup> or the various "eruptions of noise into music"<sup>62</sup> of the twentieth century.

As for the Italian posses, free party tribes and crews had taken the 'everybody can do it' punk attitude to its extreme. The role of the musician had disappeared, replaced by these collective identities, whose potential revolved around the individual anonymity of their members. Disk jockeys were unrecognisable from the audience; records were produced with white unmarked labels and parties were illegal and held in secret locations, which were revealed at the last minute, and only by phone or by word of mouth. Quoting Michel Foucault's words on Panopticism,<sup>63</sup> Praxis newsletter, the zine of the free party scene, claimed in 1996 that 'Visibility was a trap':

There are no clear solutions: autistic and artistic, armed with a loudspeaker or with a gun, there are innumerable strategies against control... but organisation, propaganda, spokespersons etc. are not what interests us here: this becomes too easily part of the game of the old world. Visibility is a trap. We are talking about the invisible insurrection of a million minds. PS – If you can't figure out what all this is supposed to have to do with underground parties, nameless white labels, mysterious frequencies, connecting levels of sounds and ideas, games of identity, losing oneself in dingy basements, realising and forgetting the meaning of everything, conspiring to become one with noise, etc., then we can't help you<sup>64</sup>

Where musicians produced 'festival vibes' through refrains and choirs, free party tribes were re-conceptualising the idea of a festival as an uninterrupted party, through a continuous flux of music, that could last one night, a weekend, a week or more. The consequence of this transformation, and probably the real breakthrough, was that it briefly succeeded where punk failed, it eradicated the very idea of fan. The deejay, a central figure of club-culture, developed throughout Northern Europe in the late nineteen eighties, 'disappeared', hidden by the wall of sound composed of tens or hundreds of speakers, to "make some fucking noise".<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Deller Jeremy, *The history of the world* [Art project] (1997); Deller Jeremy, *Acid Brass* [Art project], (1997); <http://www.jeremydeller.org/EarlyWorks/EarlyWorks.php>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>61</sup> McKay, *Senseless acts of beauty*, p. 110

<sup>62</sup> Transpoutine, 'A Loop Da Loop Era: towards an (anti)history of rave', p.308

<sup>63</sup> Foucault Michel, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (New York City, 1977)

<sup>64</sup> Praxis Newsletter #11 (1996) quoted in: Nemeton, 'untitled', in Fringeli, Lynx, Nemeton, eds., *Everything else is even more ridiculous*, p. 13

<sup>65</sup> Motto of the Spiral Tribe, one of the principal free party crews, in McKay, *Senseless acts of beauty*, p.123

The democratisation of new technologies pushed the limits further than “this is a chord, this is another, this is a third, now form a band”<sup>66</sup> of punk memory; music could be produced without any know-how at all.<sup>67</sup> In the first few years, free parties moved as far as possible from the music business and its strategies, criticising both mainstream record companies and independent labels, as they “had started to reproduce [themselves] more and more through the same mechanisms as the ‘mainstream’”.<sup>68</sup> The reality soon proved to be different. Entrepreneurial projects grew up fast in the first half of the decade, creating rifts and tensions among crews and tribes.

Nonetheless, free party culture operated as an important renovator of English social centres. A move to more accessible music meant the centres also opened up. The centres squatted at the beginning of the decade were characterised by a less sectarian and open approach. ‘CoolTan Arts’ in Brixton, the Rainbow centres in Kentish Town and Cardiff, ‘The Alamo’ in Blackburn, the ‘Courthouse’ in Brighton and the centres occupied by the Exodus Collective in the Luton-Dunstable area, proposed a vast range of cultural activities and re-defined the idea of social occupations, establishing connections with a wider network of territorial realities and considering themes such as inclusion and accessibility, which were only fully developed by the following generation of social centres in the new century.

Since the first years of the nineteen nineties, but more consistently during the second half of the decade, electronic music and free party culture entered the Italian social centre scene. Magazines like *Decoder* had introduced the New Age Travellers, the British free party scene and the Spiral Tribe to their readership. At first, the relationship was contradictory. Activists

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<sup>66</sup> Savage Jon, *England's dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols and punk rock* (London, 1991), pp. 280-1; Savage attributes the phrase and the image with the three chords to the zine *Sideburns*, December 1976.

<sup>67</sup> Andrea, *Il movimento "Do it Yourself" (DiY): cultura di resistenza e azione diretta* [Dissertation]: published in *Drexkode*:<http://www.drexkode.net/PageContents/Articoli/Tesi%20DIY/Indice%20Tesi.htm>, accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>68</sup> Fringeli Cristoph, ‘Radical intersections’, *Datacide* 10 (2008), in *Everything else is even more ridiculous*, p. 311

of some centres were part of the scene, while many others saw in the ‘trip culture’ – as it became dubbed – a new degeneration. The synergies between social centres and ravers developed more intensely with the turn of the century, but this process began in the last year of the nineteen nineties, logistical support for free parties was often provided by self-managed structures and social centres had started hosting numerous parties.

Italian social centres were much more structured than English ones and the penetration of free parties fostered reciprocal transformations. Where free parties thrived on the temporary annihilation of external norms, social centres had partially overwritten social codes and norms by establishing new ones. Parties had to adapt to spaces that were enforcing alternative sets of conventions, which not always overlapped with theirs. In turn, social centres had to re-think and eventually modify such conventions in order to allow and promote the synergy with the party culture. The behaviours of the new population of visitors triggered intense discussions: the change in drug consumption habits was mentioned in the earlier chapter. Chemical drugs posed new ideological and practical issues to the activists of the centres. A survey proposed by the *CS Leoncavallo* and *CS Cox18* to their visitors was particularly telling regarding the different views on these substances. One of the questions referred to ecstasy consumption and the list of possible answers included:

- It's a thing for clubbing marathoners;
- It increases vital energies and allows one to reach very intense emotional states;
- It's functional to the [capitalist] system because it excites the same qualities required by productive organisation: speed, focus, repetitiveness.<sup>69</sup>

These three answers embodied the three most widespread approaches: refusal, acceptance and critical tolerance. On a practical level, discussions were instead focused on the management of the parties. Centres had to adopt new measures to ensure the safety of the party-goers and of the structures, to deal with the ‘altered states’ caused by substance use and abuse and to

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<sup>69</sup> Consorzio Aaster, ‘Questionario distribuito nei centri sociali Leoncavallo e Cox18’, p. 17

tackle drug-dealing.<sup>70</sup> The hedonism that characterised parties was often criticised as in opposition with the ethos of the centres. Many of these issues dragged on or only partly dealt with. In some cases, they lead to a refusal to host free parties, in others to a great deal of work in raising awareness and promoting shared policies with organisers and DJs.<sup>71</sup>

### 6.3 Experimentation

Free party culture was not exclusively a phenomenon through which centres opened up to a new public. It also allowed for the exploration of more experimental and extreme approaches to music and cultural activism.

Dead by Dawn – which has already been mentioned on a number of occasions – stood out as a particularly interesting site of this experiment. It retained the oppositional and proudly ‘minoritarian’ ethos of anarcho-punk – both its elitism and its anti-intellectualism – and combined it with artistic and political inputs from the nineteen sixties onwards. It contrasted the easy-listening nature of much of the contemporary free party scene, perceived as a compromising renouncement of its transformative potential in order to attract wider audiences.<sup>72</sup> Dead by Dawn ran monthly from February 1994 to April 1996, in the *121 Centre* in London, and was organised by a collective formed by zine editors, music producers, tribes and activists such as Praxis DJ team, TechNet and Adverse, all internal to the free party scene but connected by a vision of a scene that was at the same time oppositional and sophisticated. It was described on the pages of *Alien Underground*, a zine offering “techno

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<sup>70</sup> Bolena Anna, ‘Rave illegali a Roma. 1993-1996’, *Not*, 27 November 2018: <https://not.neroeditions.com/rave-illegali-a-roma-1993-1996/>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>71</sup> Among many experiences, the *Laboratorio Antiproibizionista* of the social centre Livello 57 in Bologna stood out for their wide-range approaches to drug consumption within social centres. They provided accurate information on different substances, set up safe spaces with people trained in first-aid care, campaigned for the decriminalisation of drug consumption, etc.: Anonymous, ‘Histoire D’.O.C.’, *L57*: <http://www.ecn.org/livello57/html/storial57.html>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>72</sup> *Praxis Newsletter*, 11 (1996)



theory for juvenile delinquents”,<sup>73</sup> as a “a baptism by fire [...], an open secret, an anonymous pool of power accessible to guileless travellers of multitudinous potentiality”:<sup>74</sup>

[...] Nothing is sacred. Dead By Dawn is the realisation and suppression of popular music and attendant social conditions; techno reveals how we find our own uses for magical systems, alchemically transforming machines into play-things, and constantly re-mixing, re-connecting, and re-inventing ourselves.<sup>75</sup>

As mentioned, the Dead by Dawn nights were a unique mix of talks and DJ-sets: “a combination of Deleuze & Guattari and very fast and loud beats seeming to offer a new radical line of flight from capitalism”.<sup>76</sup> More than any other experience produced by the English social centres, these talks directly tackled the shift in meaning of political and cultural action associated with post-modernism, encompassing a wide variety of typologies of social movements, as it was well described in the *Praxis Newsletter* in 1994:

So, what have the talks been about? Well, so far we've had - Advance Party and Squash giving detailed information about the Government's plans for universal conformity with their Criminal Justice Bill and its attacks on ravers and squatters; the London Psychogeographical Association explaining how chaos theory is a ruling class conspiracy; the Lesbian and Gay Freedom Movement discussing what sex would be like in an anarchist society; the editors of Underground, the London-based filthy free newspaper for the demolition of serious culture, demonstrating the possibilities of electronic art, encouraging us to make love to computers and conceive an army of bastard cyborgs, as well as revealing plans for the transmission of strange signals on the Fast Breeder computer bulletin board; and an evening with Stewart Home, chatting about his life, work, techniques for psychological warfare on the ruling class and why he wants to smash the literary establishment.<sup>77</sup>

Topics and discussions continued on a series of zines that were being produced by groups and individuals within the scene, widening the reach of the discourses.<sup>78</sup> Such intellectual complexity was reflected in the music choice: all the variants of techno played (known as gabber, techno-hardcore, stormcore, nordcore, hartcore, speedcore, or again techstep, dark jungle, etc.) were not proposed in order to attract a mass following, instead, they “represented

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<sup>73</sup> From the cover of *Alien Underground*, 0.0 (1994)

<sup>74</sup> The institute of Fatuous Research, ‘Dead by Dawn on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1994. Club review’, *Alien Underground*, 0.1 (1995), republished on the website *Datacide, Magazine for noise and politics*: <http://datacide-magazine.com/dead-by-dawn-we-are-invincible-1995/>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Transpontine, ‘Alien Underground’, *History is made at night*, 2 October 2010: <http://history-is-made-at-night.blogspot.com/2010/10/alien-underground.html>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>77</sup> *Praxis Newsletter*, unnumbered (August 1994)

<sup>78</sup> Among them: *Praxis newsletter*, *Datacide* and *Alien Underground*

not just aesthetic extremism but a frantic search for un-colonized sonic space”<sup>79</sup> which was conceived as “resistant to commodification and appropriation”.<sup>80</sup> This reaction “against ideological, economic, and stylistic taboos”<sup>81</sup> was again explained in the *Praxis Newsletter*, where the idea of producing ‘listening’ techno was defined as an oxymoron and an insult:

Music for consumers so passive that they don't even leave the sofa and move about. Voyeurs of a subculture that demands physical activity and secretions. The spectre of "Intelligent" jungle or techno. The removal from the party with all its smells, interactions, exhaustions and into a tidy category for the post-modern tourist.<sup>82</sup>

Indeed, most of these genres were refused by large parts of the party scene and its specialised press, making the combination of the 121 Centre/Dead by Dawn a safe haven and a “networking centre for extremely specialized and confrontational subgenres”.<sup>83</sup>

Dead by Dawn nights never attracted a mass following but did develop a circuit of loyal acolytes that soon had international reach due to the particularly European character of the 121 Centre and of the squatter community in Brixton and the international network of free parties of which the organisers were a node. Monroe summarised the interesting relationships between space and music and between the ideas of ghettoization and exclusivity which were created in these nights:

[These parties] symbolize a twin process of stylistic and musical ghettoization: some of the most extreme sounds to have been heard in London playing to an audience of one or two hundred in an almost stereotypically bleak basement space. Though at one level, it was indeed a ghetto space, anyone who attended an event at 121 will remember its unique atmosphere. In the small hours, for listeners slumped in armchairs on the ground floor surrounded by the blast of dystopic noise emerging from the basement space, the 121 could seem as hyperreal as anywhere, even without chemical enhancement. The incongruity of the location could actually fuel the intensity, the awareness of being in a parallel space that was at least symbolically beyond the reach of daily commodification and oppression. The space served as a nexus of extreme sensory experience and had a unique atmosphere.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Monroe, ‘Bread and (Rock) circuses’, p. 155

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Anonymous, ‘Down with intelligence!’, *Praxis newsletter*, 8 (1996); quoted in: Transpontine, ‘Dead By Dawn. Brixton 1994-1996’

<sup>83</sup> Monroe, ‘Bread and (Rock) circuses’, p.154

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 155-6

At the core of this experience was the cyberpunk approach to technology, which since the nineteen eighties had played on the hyperrealism of technological enhancement to empower (post-)modern countercultural oppositions. In Italy, this approach was proposed by the editors of the magazine *Decoder*. The magazine was one of the brainchildren of the collaboration between punx from the *Virus*, the varied underworld of post-punk cultures that had met on a number of occasions, from the opening of the *Vidicon* in 1981, to the inception of the Helter Skelter nights at the *CS Leoncavallo*, and the collective running of the political bookshop Calusca, opened by Primo Moroni. The Milanese location was not an accident: more than any other Italian city, Milan had been at the forefront of technological advancement since the end of the nineteen seventies. Here, the first IT companies were created and the first access to virtual communication tools was made possible. During its 13 year lifespan – 12 issues were published between 1987 and 1998 – *Decoder* played a seminal role in anticipating transformations and introducing topics and themes that were then absorbed by social centres. It also allowed for cyberpunk philosophy to act as a bridge between anarcho-punk, posses, hip-hop and the free party scene, encompassing more than 20 years worth of countercultures within its comprehensive vision, based on the integration of underground practices and technology.<sup>85</sup> What has often been labelled as the Cyberpunk Manifesto<sup>86</sup> stated:

[...] "cyberpunk" [...]. The term captures something crucial to the work of these writers, something crucial to the decade as a whole: a new kind of integration. The overlapping of worlds that were formerly separate: the realm of high tech, and the modern pop underground.

[...] Technical culture has gotten out of hand. The advances of the sciences are so deeply radical, so disturbing, upsetting, and revolutionary, that they can no longer be contained. They are surging into culture at large; they are invasive; they are everywhere. The traditional power structures, the traditional institutions, have lost control of the pace of change.

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<sup>85</sup> Inspiration sources for cyberpunk can be traced much further back, encompassing early twentieth century science-fiction, nineteen fifties' North-American beatniks, hippy culture and rock music.

<sup>86</sup> Sterling Bruce, 'Preface', in Sterling Bruce, *Mirrorshades. The cyberpunk anthology* (New York, 1986) IX-XVI

And suddenly a new alliance is becoming evident: an integration of technology and the eighties counterculture. An un-holy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent - the underground world of pop culture, visionary fluidity, and street-level anarchy.<sup>87</sup>

Cyberpunk did not share its literary predecessors' technophilia; technology had changed, and with it the approach taken to it:

For the cyberpunks, by stark contrast, technology is visceral. It is not the bottled genie of remote Big Science boffins; it is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds.

Certain central themes spring up repeatedly in cyberpunk. The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry—techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self.<sup>88</sup>

The popular culture of the nineteen eighties was at the core of the cyberpunk vision, made as it was of “Walkman, portable hi-fis, VCRs, electronic batteries, camcorders, high-definition television, telexes, faxes, laser-discs, satellite dishes, optic fibre cables, personal computers, plastic surgery, the omni-comprehensive semiotic web, the overcoming of the world-system within a global nervous system thinking for itself”.<sup>89</sup> Italian editors of *Decoder* pushed cyberpunk towards a more political direction, which was almost absent abroad.<sup>90</sup> They charged it with an anarchist and libertarian ethos and used it as a centrepiece for the construction of new social imaginaries, “able to break the stifling yoke on imagination which characterises modern societies”.<sup>91</sup> Cyberpunk was a possible answer to the “communicative

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. XI-XII

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p. xiii

<sup>89</sup> Anonymous, ‘Cyberpunk culture’, *Decoder.it*, retrieved via Wayback Machine, version 14 April 2009: <https://web.archive.org/web/20090414011233/http://www.decoder.it/archivio/cybcult/index.htm>, Accessed 1 April 2019. The quote is a reinterpretation of a passage of: Downham Mark, ‘Cyberpunk: The Final Solution’, *Vague*, 21 (1988) 37-48

<sup>90</sup> Bruce Sterling and William Gibson “acknowledged that the Italian political reading of cyberpunk was an unforeseen and original twist on their literary output”: Deseriis Marco, ‘Italienischer Cyberpunk. Die Entstehung einer radikalen Subkultur’, in Apprich Clemens, Stalder Felix, eds., *Vergessene Zukunft: Radikale Netzkulturen in Europa* (Bielefeld, 2012) p. 139

<sup>91</sup> Anonymous, ‘Cyberpunk politico’, *Decoder.it*, retrieved via Wayback Machine, version 24 February 2009: <https://web.archive.org/web/20090224202726/http://www.decoder.it/archivio/cybcult/politico/index.htm>, Accessed 1 April 2019

paradox that marks the current phase of our society: a world that has never been so *media*, but also so poor of actual communication”.<sup>92</sup>

Milan saw the growth of a particular modality of cultural activism based on a multimedia approach to both culture and activism, in which the *forms* of activism were flexible and fluid, changing from the punk activism of the *Virus*, to the combination of countercultures in *Helter Skelter*, and to the anarcho-cyberpunk vision of *Decoder*, which was explicitly aimed at a “recomposition of the tendencies of the international underground (political, cultural, social, etc.)”.<sup>93</sup> Both *Decoder* and *Helter Skelter* signalled important transformations in the social centre scene at the end of the nineteen eighties. They were able to foresee that a wider public could be receptive to radical political and cultural messages, and their attention to communication, and to the potential of virtual communication especially, was timely and poignant. At the turn of the decade, social centres could make use of a wide innovative skill-set provided by students and self-taught young professionals, allowing for the ideas proposed by the cultural agitators of *Decoder* to be put into practice, despite a general backwardness in the Italian technological panorama.

In early 1988, the Danish group TV Stop had proposed the development of a European antagonistic telecommunication network “with the aim to connect and distribute antagonist material through *telematic* media”.<sup>94</sup> Groups from France, England, Germany and Italy participated in a number of meetings, which prompted the creation of the *European Counter Network* (ECN). However, in this form it lasted less than a year. By 1989, when the first debates and experimental connections to computer-based communication systems started in Italy, its international scope had faded.<sup>95</sup> Nonetheless, ECN took root in Italy, when some

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Untitled’, *Decoder*, 2 (1988) p. 146

<sup>94</sup> Di Corinto Arturo, Tozzi Tommaso, ‘Hacktivism. La libertà nelle maglie della rete’, *hackerArt*:[http://www.hackerart.org/storia/hacktivism/3\\_4\\_2.htm](http://www.hackerart.org/storia/hacktivism/3_4_2.htm), accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

“groups linked with the *movimento* realised the communicative potential of BBS and home computing and the relative independence of the medium. First overtly politicised BBS were soon created”.<sup>96</sup>

The BBS, Bulletin Board System, connected – years before the Internet – small local networks of computers and, with these acting as nodes, could be linked to a global network of BBS nodes. Political groups and social centres in Turin, Florence, Bologna, Padua and Milan opened their nodes relatively early on and by 1990 the aborted project of ECN had become active in connecting the Italian scenes. In parallel to the Pantera movement, which – following a similar ethos – was connected with students protesting in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, meetings about the new medium were held in several social centres in Italy. Two approaches to telecommunication were developed: ECN was being developed precisely as a medium for the diffusion of radical politics, CyberNet was instead founded by *Decoder* editors for those who sought a radical interpretation of telecommunication itself – “as a new rhizomatic modality of communication and a new frontier of human experience”.<sup>97</sup> Within and around the social centres, both radical networks developed. A manual for activists was prepared and distributed titled *Digital Guerrilla*, which explained the importance that communication had acquired within activism:

One of the scopes of the movement (and for many of us, one of the main scopes of our existence) is communication. Communication of ideas to search for political transformation, communication between groups to share projects and organisational support, communication between individuals to group together (or to remain individuals, despite groups) and communication to get to know other people in the world with our same interests and targets.

[...] Thanks to telematic networks we can automatize the diffusion of news and information in all of the city, the nation, the world: networks don't give a damn about borders.<sup>98</sup>

By 1991, several nodes were active on both networks, and an intense debate made of virtual exchanges and the sharing of material was in full flow on several topics. A number of local

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<sup>96</sup> Autistici & Inventati, Beritelli Laura ed., +*Kaos. 10 Anni di Hacking e Mediattivismo* (Milano, 2012), p. 31

<sup>97</sup> Di Corinto, Tozzi, '*Hactivism*'

<sup>98</sup> Zero!, BITs Against the Empire, '*Digital Guerrilla. Guida all'uso alternativo di computer, modem e reti telematiche*', *Zero!*: <http://www.ecn.org/zero/digguer.htm#cap7>, accessed 1 April 2019

groups started to publish periodical bulletins, gather information, updates and news from various local actors, and also thematic dossiers on various themes.<sup>99</sup>

Between 1991 and 1994, the phenomenon of BBS reached its peaks and then disappeared, attacked by Italian courts in what was defined as the Italian Crackdown<sup>100</sup> and above all by the mainstream availability of the Internet and the World Wide Web. The ECN project migrated to the *web*, and *Isole nella rete*<sup>101</sup> was created: it was a server for hosting the first websites of antagonist realities.

In some social centres, groups of ‘hacktivists’ – a terms coined from the combination of hacking and activists, which came into use only at the end of the decade – created workshops and publications, worked on the connectivity of the centres and raised awareness around the possibilities, limits, and wide-spectrum issues like privacy, copyright and the alternative uses of common technology, but their activity was still limited and not always understood.<sup>102</sup> In a continuation of the cyberpunk approach, the idea underlying these activities was that the advent of information technology was bringing forward an anthropological mutation, which was susceptible to being oriented ‘from below’.<sup>103</sup>

*Decoder* opened the way for a social approach to technology, creating the *Piazza virtuale* event, in the *CS Cox18* in 1992. Working with the German group Van Gogh TV on the idea that communication could never be unidirectional, the event was based around a multidirectional television connection between the squat and hundreds of other *piazze* around

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<sup>99</sup> These are now, almost 30 years later, some of the only accessible documents regarding the debates among social centres in the early 1990s. A number of ECN bulletins have made publicly available through a process of re-digitalisation of printed copies by Archivio Grafton9: <https://www.grafton9.net/>, Accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>100</sup> A police operation against hackers that involved searches and requisitions of hundreds of BBS nodes, in: Gubitosa Carlo, Associazione Peacelink, *Italian Crackdown: BBS amatoriali, volontari telematici, censure e sequestri nell'Italia degli anni '90* (Milano, 1999)

<sup>101</sup> *Isole nella rete* means islands in the net. It is also the title of a novel by Bruce Sterling, originally published in 1988, but only translated into Italian in 1994.

<sup>102</sup> CS Forte Prenestino, AvANa, *Processo Hacklab* [Project proposal], 23 November 1998 : BACZ; CS Forte Prenestino, AvANa, *Progetto Rete Forte di AvANa* [Project proposal], 10 December 1998 : BACZ

<sup>103</sup> ‘Cyberpunk politico’, *decoder.it*

the world, during the contemporary arts festival *Documenta*.<sup>104</sup> This was the first of many events that the Decoder group and many others organised through alternative approaches to IT.

Information technologies changed the internal structure of the centres, proposing different channels of internal and external communication, transforming the modalities of the promotion of the activities and re-conceptualising the very idea of access to knowledge. The CyberSyn II project presented by the hacktivist group of the *CS Forte Prenestino*, Avana.Bbs, in 1999, represented a synergic vision of telecommunication, new social services, and was among the more holistic projects proposed during this time by social centres. It was composed of: a “freenet”, which would situate the *CS Forte Prenestino* within the city’s virtual network and provided visitors with free access to internal (intranet) and external (internet) networks; a series of resources for “brain workers” within an interface for work cooperation outside corporations and work-places; a “watchdog”, offering information and advice regarding legislation on computer-based communication in Italy; and ‘Osmak’, a digital magazine. The project was never fully realised due to internal resistance, changes in priorities, fast paced technological advance, and due to the chronic difficulties of social centres in maintaining long-term projects.<sup>105</sup>

The seeds sewn by *Decoder* and by the encounter between IT and social centres’ political activism emerged fully grown in 1998, with the organisation of the first Italian Hackmeeting in Florence<sup>106</sup>, which gathered collectives and individuals fascinated by radical approaches to IT innovation. From these experiences many centres equipped themselves with ‘hacklabs’, grass-roots technological workshops in which to experiment with computers, servers,

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<sup>104</sup> Anonymous, ‘Retrospective. Documenta IX, 1992’, *Documenta*: [https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta\\_ix](https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_ix), accessed 1 April 2019

<sup>105</sup> CS Forte Prenestino, AvANa, *AvANa, CyberSyn II* [pamphlet/project description], undated (1999) : BACZ

<sup>106</sup> Autistici & Inventati, Beritelli ed., +*Kaos*, pp. 34-35



communication protocols, etc.<sup>107</sup> On this basis the virtual communicative structure for the entire radical movement was created. By 1996, anonymous servers had been set up by local hackers to assure the privacy and safety of internal communication. By 1998, over sixty social centres had an online presence, and around fifty had a website hosting documents, photos, events and contacts. Computer literacy among centres' activists was uneven, but in general, it was higher than that of the rest of the population:<sup>108</sup> only a few centres lacked activists with a particular passion and propensity for IT languages and codes. In general, the passage towards the Web was met with both enthusiasm and scepticism. Before 2000, only a small number of radical realities had a significant online presence, and many were social centres. Slowly the entire panorama of Italian radicalism moved a good part of their internal debate (via emails, mailing lists, chats) and external communication (via newsletters, websites) online.

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In this last chapter the modalities of relationships with supporting and surrounding communities operated by English and Italian social centres were analysed. Such relationships were built on the tensions, innate to social centres, between exclusion and inclusion. Their development followed a similar path to that of political campaigns. Earlier anarcho-punk social occupations were characterised by a separatist ethos, expressing an otherness from the rest of society. Communities of supporters were generally small and marked by a high degree of affinity and reciprocity with the activists.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid. pp. 49-56

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

In Italy – and especially in Milan – the end of the nineteen eighties witnessed the politicisation of cyberpunk philosophy, which provided a bridge between punk activism, to new forms of expression of countercultural resistance: the hip-hop of the posses born within the social centres of the early nineteen nineties and the encounter between the centres and the free party scene towards the end of the century. Technology was at the core of this connection. In England, technology had supported the growth of free party culture since the late nineteen eighties, and social occupations became the urban settings of free parties and which lead to the possibility of offering new activities. New countercultural forms of expression were marked by a more inclusive and hybrid approach, refusing the separatism of anarcho-punk. This opened the centres up to a much wider public and transformed their relationships to the communities with which they were interacting in many ways. Tight-knit communities based on political affinity were being replaced by a loose citywide community of visitors and by territorial forms of aggregation. In both Italy and England, more sophisticated niches within these oppositional cultures proposed innovative forms of cultural activism. While in England the experience of Dead by Dawn fostered a series of debates that started within the centres scene and carried on elsewhere. In Italy the magazine *Decoder* was situated on the border of the scene and was able to prefigure, trigger and feed important transformations within the centres.

## Conclusions

In this dissertation I examined the evolution of squatted social centres in England and Italy during the last two decades of the twentieth century. To do so, I situated these developments against two backdrops: on one side, the framework of countercultures and radical politics within which they moved; on the other, the shift in the ‘structure of feelings’ of capitalist society represented by post-modernism and the rise of neo-liberal politics. It is important to stress, as pointed out in the introduction, the complex and multi-faceted relation between post-modernism and neo-liberalism, which have independently concurred in shaping actions and responses of the social centre scenes in both countries. The comparison between the two national scenes – and between two local scenes within each – allowed for the exploration of specific context-dependent responses to global stimuli. Notably, these contextual developments had different impacts upon each scene, in different ways and at different times. The scope of the research lays in three main areas: stressing the important contribution of a historical approach to the study of social centres, enlightening the similarities between two highly uneven terms of comparison and reconceptualising social centres beyond divisions between cultural and political approaches, highlighting the pivotal role that the tension between politics and culture played throughout the centres’ history.

De Sario argued that there was a need for an analysis of new social movements that focused on local differences in Italy.<sup>1</sup> He posited that modalities of activism developed in different cities in the nineteen eighties were directly connected to the specific “forest of symbols, practices [and] different local idioms”<sup>2</sup> offered by the surrounding context. Within such specificities, my research has shown both similarities and differences in the formation of the mind sets and action repertoires of Italian punx and non-punk activists in the early nineteen

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<sup>1</sup> De Sario, *Resistenze innaturali*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205

eighties. The watershed at the end of the nineteen seventies played an essential role in forcing an empowerment of such local specificities, having destroyed the national breadth of radical politics. In Milan, the *Virus* was occupied in 1982. This early achievement and the particular attention given by Milanese punx to countercultural agitation were not possible for Roman punx and activists. In Rome, the first significant occupations took place between 1985 and 1986 and were the culmination of both dialogue and cooperation between different political and cultural ethos.

In England, the centripetal force of London has been reflected in the structure of many studies concerning the English and British squatting and social centres scene. The numbers and the variety of London's social centres hindered the exploration of local specificities.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the other areas in which a high level of squatting occurred were not the largest English cities, but those characterised by a "longstanding reputation (deserved or undeserved), for being a 'radical' place",<sup>4</sup> such as Bristol and Brighton. At the very least, these were the cities in which the memory of squatting in the last decades has been better preserved and transmitted. Nonetheless, the difference in the dimension of the phenomenon between the capital and other centres was striking: by the mid- nineteen eighties London had witnessed the occupation of several A-centres, the 121 Centre and a number of squatted venues, Bristol had experienced two occupations; by the end of the nineteen nineties over 60 centres had been squatted in the capital, while only a handful of centres had been recorded in Bristol.

Under the surface of these extremely different national scenes, a number of cultural and political trends were identified. Countercultural waves framed the activities of centres in both countries and similar internal conflicts reverberated throughout the scene in both Italy and England. Furthermore, despite the different levels of success for the 'social centre' model,

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<sup>3</sup> Vasudevan, *The autonomous city*, pp. 40-66; Needle Collective, 'Squatting in England and Wales. Heritage and perspectives'

<sup>4</sup> Needle Collective, *Bash Street Kids*, 'Ebb and Flow', p.153

mechanisms of mobilisation and the modalities of relationships built with the surrounding communities followed a comparable development, especially considering the tensions between otherness and hybridisation and between different visions of radical action.

## **A Journey Through Time**

The first aim of this dissertation was the restitution of a diachronic – historical – dimension to phenomena which have too often been studied only in the present tense. Tempering the static picture of English and Italian social centres offered by many researchers<sup>5</sup> is key to stressing their close relationship to the evolution of contemporary European societies and to enlighten common trends and their context-specific adaptations. This work has moved towards new territories, largely unexplored by scholars of history. The debt towards the social sciences needs to be underlined, as it is here that I found the theoretical foundations upon which this research is built. Nonetheless, the static nature of categories produced by synchronic approaches has also been tested throughout my work. This allowed for the ‘journey through time’ of these political and cultural phenomena to be situated at the very centre of the analysis. While a useful tool with which to navigate the wider seas of political and social mobilisation, labels such as ‘new social movements’ and ‘urban movements’ lose much of their epistemological usefulness when confronted with the great variety of forms of activism experimented with by social occupations during the last twenty years of the twentieth century. As I have shown, these were characterised by a continuous dialogue between past and future, and by a tension between continuity and discontinuity. Rich Cross, referring to anarcho-punks

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<sup>5</sup> On Italy: Ruggero, ‘New social movements and the ‘centri sociali’ in Milan’; Dines ‘Centri Sociali: occupazioni autogestite a Napoli negli anni Novanta’; Membretti, ‘Autorappresentanza e partecipazione locale negoziata nei centri sociali autogestiti’. On England: Hodkinson, Chatterton, ‘Autonomy in the city’; Chatterton, ‘So what does it mean to be Anti-capitalist’ Lacey, ‘Networked communities’

in the early nineteen eighties, stated that “the hippies now wear black”,<sup>6</sup> underlining the continuity between apparently distant forms of countercultural activism. Models and frameworks of political action were also continuously discussed, rejected, reclaimed and renovated. Furthermore, intergenerational exchanges underpinned a large part of the internal debates examined.

I argue that the ‘social centre’ label – here widely used to indicate both Italian and English social centres – encapsulates a diversified assortment of typologies of occupations within each scene. In some cases, differences between centres in each country outnumber the differences between the two scenes at a national level. Activists of the English centres have frequently discarded any comparison with the Italian scene. This seemed to respond to an idealisation of the southern European centres, which were viewed and interpreted as extremely radical actors, devoid of those contradictions that activists perceived to be present within the English scene.<sup>7</sup> The use of the *social centres* label within both radical scenes was itself charged with divisive and discriminatory significance. The branding process within the Italian scene was a process of selective exclusion, focused on the definition of those aspects that concurred with the consolidation of a particular brand. The refusal of this label by part of the anarchist scene in the nineteen nineties was a response to – but also, eventually, a part of – this conflict over the ‘social centre’ status. In England, in the first years of the twenty first century, the *Wombles* collective used the term social centres to describe the innovative nature of their new occupations. Indeed, the very name *Wombles* was an explicit reference to the Italian *Tute Bianche* movement. Symbolically however, this occurred in the same years that the *Tute Bianche* were criticising the social centre model as inadequate to the challenges posed by the new millennium. In the words of the 56a Infoshop’s activists, it seems more accurate and important that “instead of dismissing earlier U.K. centres for faults, it would be better to

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<sup>6</sup> Cross, ‘The Hippies Now Wear Black’

<sup>7</sup> 56a Infoshop, ‘Local traditions, local trajectories and us’

recognise commonalities between them and the European social centre model and work with that.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Uneven Comparison**

The success of the social centre model is arguably the major variable between the two scenes. In Italy, the model reached the role of centrepiece of the whole radical movement in the nineteen nineties. In England however, social centres were just one of many actors within the radical and countercultural landscape of the country. This difference has affected my evaluation on the feasibility and the modalities of a comparison between the two national scenes. The first issue was the different dimensions of the scenes. The sheer number of Italian social centres and their diffusion throughout the country was difficult to compare with the London-centric English scene. Secondly, Italian social centres were an object of interest for both alternative and mainstream media for several years. This interest was multi-sectorial, encompassing news, politics, culture, lifestyle, music, arts, etc. Conversely, English social centres scarcely ever appeared in mainstream media and the interest of the alternative and radical press was limited to specific moments or to the precise rationales of each publication. Thirdly, given the role Italian social centres played within the radical movements of the country, they produced a vast quantity of documents on many topics, expressing collective positions and triggering important debates. However, in England, centres approached politics on more practical terms, relegating the production of analytical documents and statements to the background of their activity. Lastly, Italian radical archives and social centres’ archives and infoshops stored, archived and transmitted much of the production of the Italian social

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 57

centres, while in England this was done by a smaller number of entities which stored a much more limited range of material.

Though I have previously stated the limitations of my fieldwork, the quantitative difference in the results of my research trips is reflective of the issues just discussed. It transpired that the collected material from Italian radical archives and the personal collections of activists amounted to almost ten thousand documents, whereas in England it did not reach five hundred. My comparison is thus built upon these contrasting features – the verbosity of the Italian centres and the silence of the English ones, so that each stands out and enlightens the other. Common trends in the evolution of the two scenes have been identified, as well as similar debates which interested centres and activists from the two countries. Though at slightly different points in time, both English and Italian centres offered responses to the same global stimuli. The crisis of traditional classist revolutionary ideologies affected all centres from the early nineteen eighties to the late nineteen nineties. It fostered political and countercultural experiences, triggered debates, and provoked enthusiasm as well as scepticism. In both countries, anarcho-punk culture was a vehicle for both the re-conceptualisation of a systemic opposition after the watershed of the nineteen seventies and the development of a more experience-based and individualistic approach to politics. Again, in both countries, classist approaches were then re-situated within youth politics during the nineteen eighties. In England this was operated by the magazine and political organisation *Class War*, while in Italy by the adaptation and update of autonomist Marxism.

This crisis of ideologies was a consequence of the epochal transformations in the modes of production of capitalist economy. It was also driven by the political governance brought forward as a result of the advent of neo-liberalism: the dismantling of welfare systems, the decline of industrial labour, the rise of information technology and economy and the growth of new sectors of a flexible labour force with less rights and safeguards (the precariat). These



changes were reflected in the transformation of both national scenes in the nineteen nineties. The English debate between ‘fluffies’ and ‘spikies’, as well as the communitarian and non-conflictual interpretation of squatting and social centres as adopted by CoolTan Arts and the Exodus Collective were facets of the same issues confronted by Italian centres in their debates on ‘social enterprises’ and over the opportunity for cooperation with local councils and left-wing mainstream parties. Two competing visions on the role of radical politics within neo-liberal societies became clear: transformative politics, which posited the incompatibility between radical actors and the modern capitalist system, and participative politics, which suggested an expansion of the access to rights and services in order to effect radical changes. While recalling the long-standing contraposition between revolutionary and reformist politics, this new duality was rooted in the most recent transformations. Especially, the rise of precariat seemed to echo the claims of a classless society promoted by neo-liberal elites.

In Italy, since their inception in the late nineteen seventies, social centres had represented a grass-roots response to a severe lack in the public provision of services and social security, especially for the young urban population. Not only was squatting itself a direct-action response to a shortage of housing or social/political spaces, but activities proposed by social centres spoke of a ‘welfare from below’: policies over concert prices, the provision of tools for cultural production, people’s kitchens and cafes, inexpensive courses and workshops, etc. At the same time in England, squatting was born as a response to housing shortages, a fast-paced gentrification process and huge increases to the price of housing. However, the welfare system in place was more efficient and widespread. Despite the important contraction of such services during the nineteen eighties, references to “being on the dole” recurred frequently in primary sources and memories of activists.<sup>9</sup> This, I argue, was cause of the less pervasive

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.; Webb, ‘Dirty Squatters, anarchy, politics and smack’; Butler, ‘Disgustin’ Justin’; Binns, ‘They may have beds but they don’t use sheets’

diffusion of social centres in the English territory and in their reduced focus on the provision of services.

The different degrees of efficiency in the law and order systems, connected to the models of governance of the two countries, can also provide a partial explanation as to the apparent paradox of the diffusion and resilience of each site of study. These disparities are especially reflected in the duration of occupations in Italy, where squatting had been always considered a crime, and the much shorter life-span of squats and centres in England, where – despite several attempts – squatting was unlawful but not illegal.<sup>10</sup> The intricacy and slowness of the Italian judicial system contrasted with the straightforwardness of the steps to obtain an eviction order in England. Other factors to be taken into account were the differences in social relevance and in the capacity of mobilisation between the two scenes. Throughout the two decades, Italian centres' insistence on the issue of legitimacy of social occupations was an attempt to balance the *dogma of ownership* with the proposition of a different *right to the city*.

### **Politics vs. Culture?**

Both cultural and political activism – here analysed in two different chapters – were highly intertwined in the formation of the identity of centres. Moreover, they were interpreted and enacted in different ways in the two countries, in the local scenes, and by each centre. The two dimensions spoke of international political traditions and countercultural waves as much as of local influences and adaptations. In Italy, the 10-year-long season of widespread radicalisation – *the long 1968* – impressed precise characteristics upon the social centres. Despite being often contradictory, centres' relationship with this past resulted in their

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<sup>10</sup> Squatting in residential building was criminalised only in December 2012.

immersion within the wider radical scene, sharing languages, strategies and imaginaries. With the partial exception represented by the parenthesis of the early nineteen eighties, the political geography and a number of categories born out of the nineteen seventies were perpetuated and innovated, preserving the relevance of heretical Marxism over anarchism. The political traditions of the centres can also explain why so much of the experience of Italian centres was not reflected by their English counterparts. A number of campaigns, debates and stances promoted in Italy by social centres were, in England, situated as outside of the scope and reach of local centres. As noted, the strictly political role of English social centres was limited to a number of themes and to the offering of practical support to external campaigns. More importantly, centres rarely acted or spoke as political actors. This was the case for one of the more political occupations in London, the 121 Centre in Brixton. There, despite the presence of a high number of activists, their identity referred to the dozens of groups which had found a home in the centre. A collective identity as a centre was promoted exclusively in case of threats to the centre itself or to the local squatting communities. A higher level of fragmentation and the specific features of the nineteen seventies in England impacted upon the localisation of social centres within the political geography of national social movements. Despite the presence of a small but influential core of heretical Marxist theorists and activists, the influence of anarchism was much greater and was both the cause and effect of the incommensurable distance between radical and mainstream politics.

The tension between politics and counterculture was a unifying trait in the history of social centres. While they were often found to be in competition in the definition of the 'real' identity of social centres, both these aspects combined to bring about the success of the model, and responded to needs and desires that were difficult to separate. From this point of view – with authors such as The Free Association and the already mentioned Rich Cross<sup>11</sup> –

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<sup>11</sup> The Free Association, 'The kids was just crass'; Cross, 'The Hippies Now Wear Black'

continuity between the different forms of countercultural expression of the second half of the twentieth Century can be posited. By 1975-76 Italian Young Proletarian Clubs had already presented aspects of the nihilistic ‘no future’ attitude typical of the first wave of punk.<sup>12</sup> Since 1978, anarchist punks had proposed a re-appropriation of themes and ethos of hippy counterculture and a re-situation of punk within a wider oppositional discourse. The role of anarchist punk within both English and Italian centres in the first half of the nineteen eighties was extremely similar – a case of the successful adaptation of a non-indigenous culture. In the following years, the cultural paths of English and Italian social centres diversified. In England, free party culture played a central role in the transformation of the centres’ outward approaches, and in Italy the hip-hop and reggae scenes were key to the ‘massification’ of the scene. Free party culture landed in Italy a few years later, at the peak of the success of the social centre model, and accompanied social centres in further transformations at the turn of the century. Niche and sophisticated experiences often acted as a bridge between these different expressions of cultural activism, as in the case of the Milanese magazine *Decoder* and the London-based Dead by Dawn events. In this, they were inspired and influenced by the experiences of Crass, cyberpunk philosophy, situationism, Burroughs’ and Bey’s concepts of ‘interzone’ and ‘TAZ’. These ‘minoritarian’ cultural experiences were also the only moments in which social centres directly addressed the cultural change introduced with post-modernism. Dead by Dawn was described as a “combination of Deleuze & Guattari and very fast and loud beats”.<sup>13</sup> Post-structuralist analyses of the composition of modern societies, discourses on complex systems and multiple identities, and an interest in an eclectic array of

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<sup>12</sup> The reflections of Umberto Eco on the ‘communication of the Year 9, mentioned in chapter 2 can be also interpreted as situating the communicative innovation of the Italian 1977 within both a continuity of cultural expressions and the transnational diffusion of new cultural interpretative models. Eco, ‘Comunicazione sovversiva nove anni dopo il Sessantotto’; Eco, ‘C’è un’altra lingua: l’Italo-Indiano’; Eco Umberto, *Sette anni di desiderio. Cronache 1977-1983* (Milano, 1983)

<sup>13</sup> Transpontine, ‘Alien Underground’; The reference is in particular to: Deleuze Gilles, Guattari Felix, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (New York, 1977)

topics were all associated with the transformation of the labour market and with the search for renovated radical frameworks.

Recalling Harvey, social centres represented the opening postmodernism gave to “understanding difference and otherness, as well as the liberatory potential it offer[ed] for a whole host of new social movements”.<sup>14</sup> However, they also represented the resistance to the apparent shift in the focus of radical politics. The sophisticated experiences discussed here were indeed the only elements in the twenty-year-long activity of English and Italian centres that did not express diffidence or open hostility towards post-modern theories.

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Quoting Proudhon:

“I discovered that *antinomies* can’t be resolved or destroyed more than the opposite poles of an electric battery, they are not only indestructible, they are the origin of movement, of life, of progress; the problem is not their fusion, that is their death, but their balance, a balance ceaselessly unstable, variable according to the very development of societies”<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis, the very ‘ceaselessly unstable balance’ of these ‘antinomies’ was my compass for the comparison between Italian and English centres.

With ‘antinomies’ I not only indicate the structural disparity in the access to sources regarding the two scenes, but also the very tensions that ran between and within the local scenes. In both countries the contrasts and collaborations between radical politics and countercultures – re-proposed at times as *politicos* and *life-stylists*, *class-warriors* and *anarcho-punks*, *spikies* and

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<sup>14</sup> Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity*, p. 48

<sup>15</sup> Proudhon Pierre Joseph, *Théorie de la propriété* (Montréal, Paris, 1997), p. 32, [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/Proudhon/theorie\\_de\\_la\\_propriete/theorie\\_de\\_la\\_propriete.pdf](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/Proudhon/theorie_de_la_propriete/theorie_de_la_propriete.pdf), accessed 1 September 2017

*fluffies*, *rivoluzionari* and *alternativi*,<sup>16</sup> *fricchettoni* and *militanti*,<sup>17</sup> compatibles and incompatibles, etc. – became the foundation of centres’ success as hosts of different and multifaceted processes of politicisation. This relationship encompassed the tension between cultural separatism and hybridisation. Cultural separatism had marked the early experience of social centres, which were in need of new collective foundations, of a “progressive definition of cultural, ideological and life-style characters [which were] exclusive but not unproductive”.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, hybridism could be seen in the seminal encounter of anarchist punks and autonomous militants in the occupation of the *CS Forte Prenestino* in Rome, in the reactivation of the *CS Leoncavallo* in Milano at the end of the nineteen eighties, in the *Stop the City* demonstrations in London, in the variety of identities within the *121 Centre* in Brixton, or in the experiences of *Exodus Collective* and *CoolTan Arts* in the nineteen nineties. Ultimately, the encounters described within this thesis produced different forms of cultural and political activism within the social centres’ scenes, which assumed the characteristics of a counter-hegemonic discourse in Italy and of a dissemination of resistance at the margins of the radical movements in England.

This research touched upon many aspects of the activities of social centres that would require further study. The comparative approach can foster interesting contributions on the modalities of reciprocal influence between different squatting and social centres’ scenes and on the mechanisms of propagation of forms of cultural and political activism within the recent anti-capitalist movements. Radical archives also offer an almost uncharted territory for researchers. The difficult heritage they preserve is in itself potentially telling of the modalities used by social movements to build their own identities, of the relationship between present movements and past events, and of the historical narratives they transmit.

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<sup>16</sup> Revolutionaries and *alternatives*.

<sup>17</sup> Hippies and militants.

<sup>18</sup> De Sario, *Resistenze innaturali*, p. 204



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