Prefiguring Anarchy:

An Exploration of Self-Managed Social Centres as Spaces of Radical Care

Master thesis

Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

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Preface

Engaging in the past for a better future

For as long as I can remember, inequalities and injustices have filled me with anger, frustration, and sadness. Experiencing something I consider to be unjust, or hearing about others experiencing injustices, often ends up with me angrily ranting to the people around me. At the same time, I have always been intrigued by all that is considered to be radically different. These two interests came together when I wrote my first ever university paper (in 2018) about Freetown Christiania, an anarchist enclave in Copenhagen, Denmark. In that paper, I explored the notions of utopia and dystopia, which instead lead to the conceptualisation of Christiania as a heterotopia due to the fact that the enclave works according to different logics than what is considered the norm outside of it. While the concepts of anarchism and utopia completely grasped me at the time, I never revisited these topics again in my studies. Nevertheless, during the past five years studying anthropology, my focus has stayed on exploring the kind of power relations that run the world, and the ways in which people engage with and contest unjust systems. The extent to which power relations influence everyday life, especially for those most marginalised, has led me to the conclusion that we need to completely abolish all systems of power before we can have a completely just and fair world. This realisation, in combination with a reflection upon that first paper I wrote, spurred me on to the topic of this research.

Going into the field felt like a rite of passage into anarchism for me. Connecting with people who have similar values and opinions has helped me articulate a part of my identity that has always been there, lying under the surface. Yet, it was not easy getting into the anarchist milieu. First of all, there are a lot of different orientations within anarchism to consider, making it more difficult to understand what exactly anarchism entails. There was furthermore a lot of history that I was not familiar with. Although history has always interested me, during this research I focused so much on the future that I had no room left to really look at the past. I ended up neglecting the importance of history until mid-April, when the fieldwork period was almost over:

> Looking through the miscellaneous shelves of the second-hand bookstore, I notice a familiar, bright-red cover to my right. I knew it! It is David Rosenberg's *Rebel Footprints: A Guide to Uncovering London's Radical History.* This book was

> recommended to me by Luke just weeks ago. This feels like a sign that I should take it home. Later that afternoon, I decide to check the book out. The table of contents points me towards the fifth chapter called "No Gods, No Masters: Radical Bloomsbury." A chapter about anarchism, perfect![1] Leafing through the pages I am mentally sent back to my third week in London, when Luke offered to give me a tour through the Bloomsbury and Soho area to point out some of its radical history. We had just gone for a coffee with a radical historian that Luke was acquainted with, and he seemed excited to share more information. Luke showed me the industrial alleys hidden behind the modern facades, as well as some old murals and a blue plaque which was dedicated to Percy Bysshe Shelley. Luke explained to me that Percy was the partner of Mary Shelley, and that she, in turn, was the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. At the time, I knew that Mary Shelley had written Frankenstein, but besides that, these names did not mean much to me. At that point of the tour, all I could think of was how they were long gone by now.[2]

The flashback caused by Rosenberg's book made me realise how Luke was quite right to put such an emphasis on history. Throughout the research period, I came cross the name Godwin quite often, which is not surprising as he is considered the founder of philosophical anarchism. He was clearly not forgotten. In fact, it became increasingly clear to me that history played an important role in the anarchist milieu. In the social centres, people kept referring to past revolutions and movements, which would often be connected to current struggles. People described how different the different neighbourhoods of London used to be, and how their communities had changed over time. Suddenly, everywhere I looked, I saw the past.

Rosenberg's *Rebel Footprints* and Luke's tour reminded me of the importance of remembering our past, not only learn from its mistakes, but also to illustrate the shortcomings of the present, and to draw inspiration from it for our future. Without a guide such as Luke, or books that present history such as *Rebel Footprints*, my knowledge of London's past walking around the streets would not have gone much beyond recognising the name of John Snow next to the Broad Street Pump. This experience furthermore illustrates how the past is hugely overshadowed by the visual transformation of London's streets as capitalism and accelerated development change how we use urban space. As Rosenberg (2015, 288) puts it: "Those who

[1] Fieldnotes, 11-04-2023.
[2] Fieldnotes, 21-02-2023.

seek to illuminate the city's rebellious past and put it into conversation with the present, so that the rebels of today and tomorrow can draw encouragement and inspiration from earlier struggles on these streets, are challenged by how quickly areas of London are being transformed, made more exclusive, and severed from their past." A disconnection between the present and the past limits our ability to perceive of the future as anything else than what our surrounds are pointing towards. We need to remember that things were not always this way, and they will keep on changing. And this change is not solely made by those in power, but also by those who resist. Thus, although this thesis focuses on the future, it is important to acknowledge that it is enabled and inspired by the past.

Introduction

> An anarchist society, a society which organises itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices, nationalism and its suicidal loyalties, religious differences and their superstitious separatism. (Ward 2008, 23)

Anarchism is a political philosophy that posits a radically different vision for what society should look function. Better yet, it is a broad concept that encompasses a wide variety of visions for a better world. This research builds upon a social conceptualisation of anarchism, considering it as the demand for complete freedom and equality (Walter [1969] 2019, 5). As Ward (2008, 23) posits in the quote above, the visions put forth by anarchism does not have to be confined to the realm of the imagination. Instead, radical alternatives can be considered a part of everyday life. They are just hidden or obscured by systems of power.

In order to move anarchism out of our imagination and into reality, we need to first *expand* our imagination. Thus, we need to break free from what Fisher calls "capitalist realism," which entails a widely shared sense that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Fisher 2009, 2). We need to acknowledge that capitalism's rhetoric of climbing the social ladder leads to the reproduction of the inequalities and structures of domination that enables the rich to keep getting richer at the expense of the poor (Branson 2022, 94). This is a call for the radical imagination: "the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be" (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 3). The radical imagination is not something possessed by the individual (Ibid., 4). Instead, it can be considered the collective mapping of "what is," how this is the result of "what was," and how this leads to "what might be" (Haiven and Khasnabish 2010, iii). It is a social process through which people share collective visions for the future and expand their horizons of possibilities. Bryant and Knight (2019, 16) argue that the future shapes our everyday lives. The different ways in which we orient ourselves towards the future influence our actions in the present. With this in mind, nurturing the radical imagination will expand our horizon of possibilities, which in turn has consequences in our everyday lives now.

One type of space in which this the anarchism and the future come together is the self-managed social centre. These social centres are autonomous spaces that provide both social

movements and local communities with resources as well as a variety of activities (Yates 2015b, 5). Self-managed social centres come in many different forms and often intertwine with a variety of other social movements. It is especially common for them to intersect with antifascism, global justice movements, and squatter movement (Williams 2018, 7). What the social centres often have in common with each other, as well as the intersecting movements, is that they are built upon anarchist principles (Lacey 2005, 292-293), such as self-management, direct action, cooperation, voluntary association, and mutual aid. In this sense, self-managed social centres can be considered manifestations of an anarchist radical imagination. They are spaces where radical visions are put into practice.

This research aims to explore the different ways in which the future is approached in three different self-managed social centres in London, the United Kingdom. This will be done through the lens of prefiguration: enacting ideals for the future in the present, through aligning means with ends (Franks 2006, 114). Prefiguration has become a popular framework for understanding the organisational structures and other practices of radical social movements (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 62). Within the discipline of anthropology, the focus has been largely limited to the alter-globalisation movement of the late 2000s and early 2010s (Krøijer 2015, 26). This research aims to move prefiguration away from the explicit moments of resistance, and instead use it to reconsider how the everyday is connected to the future. In this way, prefiguration helps to bridge the gap between theory in practice in approaching the future. This brings us to the following research question:

How is the future approached and embodied through prefigurative politics in self-managed social centres in London?

This thesis will contribute to the ever-growing body of anthropological literature on the future. Anthropology is particularly well-suited for exploring the politics of the future because, in its attempt to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, it opens us up to unconventional ways of looking at the world. Anthropology encourages us to take the imagination seriously as a tool for broadening the horizon of possibility and a way of creating change in the world. This thesis will also be adding to the body of work on prefiguration, which is still quite limited within our discipline and mostly focuses on the more explicit and visible forms of protest such as found in the 1990s and 2000s alter-globalisation movement (e.g., Graeber 2009a; Juris 2008; Maeckelbergh 2009). By applying the concept of prefiguration to the domain of the everyday, prefiguration will highlight the relationship

between the political and the everyday, even when this relationship is not enacted with (full) intention.

Research location and population

This thesis is based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork in three different self-managed social centres in London, the United Kingdom. Self-managed social centres are autonomous spaces where activists and local communities can meet up, use the space for activities, and make use of different resources and services (Lacey 2005, 292). It is difficult to give a more concrete or specific definition, because every social centre works according to their own logics, priorities, and abilities, leading to individual spaces having their own "peculiar characteristics as moulded by their participants, the community surrounding them, and the philosophy and politics to which they prescribe" (Finchett-Maddock 2010, 33). At the same time, the three social centres that are the topic of this research have certain tendencies, values, and organisational practices in common. They do not stand alone, but instead, are connected to each other and to a variety of movements and networks that span London, the UK, or even the world. The social centres make up nodes in a larger network of radical social movements, characterized by blurry boundaries and overlapping groups (Gordon 2008, 14). Some people were deeply involved in one specific social centre, while others preferred to spread themselves thinner and help out wherever they were needed, frequenting many different radical spaces in London. The communities that made use of the three social centres were furthermore very diverse, representing a variety of struggles and aspirations.

It needs to be noted that the three self-managed social centres in which research took place are not representative of all other social centres in London, the United Kingdom, or let alone in other places in the world. The three social centres are not even close to being representative of each other. Nevertheless, the focus of the research is on the processes that bring these spaces together. The aim is to look at the commonalities between the spaces in order to explore the wider tendencies and values that are shared, instead of focusing on what sets them apart. The three spaces share that they were born out of the desire for more autonomy and the necessity for spaces of radical support. They are built upon the anarchist principles of self-management, cooperation, mutual aid, voluntary association, and direct action. All these principles are part of an overarching concern with the desire for freedom and equality.

I chose to do this research in London because the city knows a long history of radical

politics (e.g., Rosenberg 2015). London also used to have a thriving anarchist milieu with countless squats. In the 1980s, autonomous spaces, mostly squatted, played an important role in the city's "anarcho-punk counter-culture" (Pusey 2010, 179). Towards the 1990s, there was another wave of new autonomous spaces, flowing forth out of a larger trend of social movements protesting injustices such as the Poll Tax (Ibid.). The late 1990s and early 2000s marked a turn towards activism focused on the injustices of global neoliberal policy (Chatterton 2010, 1207). However, after a last popular wave of anarchistic organising by the Occupy movement and the 2010 student strikes, anarchism as a movement has struggled in the United Kingdom. This is something that participants have referred to as a "depletion of anarchism."[3] This context makes the study of the future an even more pressing matter. The continuation of these social centres under what seems to be increasingly unfavourable circumstances raises the question of how people retain the ability to mobilise and fight for radical change.

A current point of departure for anarchist communities such as the social centres remains the social injustices of capitalism as reinforced through neoliberal policy. As a metropolis, London is fuelled by neoliberal policy and is dedicated to "the reproduction and circulation of capital through endless consumption" (Pusey 2010, 177). By attempting to become autonomous from this system, self-managed social centres can be considered spaces of resistance (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006, 310).

Methodology

This research is built upon a triangulation of ethnographic methods. Such methods often mirror the informality and banality of everyday life (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 3). The core method of this research was participant observation, which entails participating in everyday activities in order to learn about both the explicit and implicit aspects of a community's routines and culture (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 1). This entailed taking part in a variety of activities in the social centres, as well as contributing to the spaces by volunteering and just generally hanging out and talking with people. This method allowed me to gain an understanding of the everyday dynamics that make up the space. It also helped me to become more more familiar with participants and gain people's trust. Another core method was semi-structured interviews. Ten interviews with ten different people helped to create a deeper understanding of the ways that people experience participation in the social centres, as well as

[3] Fieldnotes, 08-02-2023.

how they situate themselves in a wider political context. These interviews supplemented all the casual conversations that happened during participant observation.

In addition, literary and visual materials in the archives and libraries of the social centres were analysed. Materials such as books, (maga)zines, posters, and stickers helped to create an understanding of what kinds of information and ideas circulate in the self-managed social centres, and how they become part of people's perceptions of the world. Zines played a particularly interesting role in illustrating the sort of radical imagination that drives the social centres. As Duncombe (1997, 7) explains, zines are small publications that are concerned with "a radically democratic and participatory ideal of what culture and society might be…*ought* to be." Zines open create space for anybody to voice their opinions and share their ideas or struggles in whatever way they see fit. They also make information as well as art more accessible, as they are often sold on a donation basis or sometimes even traded. The zines I came across included all kinds of topics, from talking about one's hobby's to critically assessing radical theory. In order to engage with my research findings in a more creative and affective way, I decided to make my own zine to complement this thesis. A downloadable version of this zine (as opposed to a printable version) was added in Appendix 1. This zine furthermore allows me to give something tangible back to the social centres that is more digestible than the complete thesis.

Lastly, I applied the method of auto-ethnography, which entails including one's personal experience doing research as an important part of what informs ethnographic research (Adams, Ellis, and Jones 2017, 1-2). Auto-ethnography requires one to reflect upon the experience of doing research and helps create a sense of what it is like to be in the field (Ibid., 2-3). Learning about my own identification with anarchism was a part of this research project, which made auto-ethnography an essential method to help understand this process. The method enabled me to reflect better upon the affective dimension of participating in the social centres. Auto-ethnography further required me to explore more in depth my role as a researcher in these spaces and the contradictions between different parts of one's identity under anarchism. Therefore, it played an important role in the reflection upon ethics and my positionality.

Ethics and positionality

Self-managed social centres aim to subvert and resist all authority, including that of the state. Therefore, they are situated in a political context that is hostile to their existence. Revealing certain information might lead to social or political harm to the spaces and their members. That makes confidentiality extremely important. During the fieldwork period, data was anonymised immediately and stored on a password protected external hard dis, stored in a space that only I had access to. In order to keep confidentiality, identifying details in descriptions of the three social centres will be kept to a minimum. The individual social centres will furthermore not be distinguished with names, not even pseudonyms. This way I hope to avoid a cumulation of loose descriptions that together form an identifiable picture of any one of the spaces. In addition, a number of names, pseudonyms of course, will be returning frequently throughout the thesis. In order to keep confidentiality, descriptions of participants will be kept to a minimum. Instead, the references will be about their opinions and analyses.

The fact that anarchism is about liberation from all forms of oppression requires reflexivity and a continuous consideration of my own positionality. Self-managed social centres are run and frequented by a diverse group of people, bringing together many different backgrounds and struggles (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006, 310). This requires an awareness of the potential privileges that our identities bring with them, such as being white and well-educated in my case. The fact that I was able to travel to London and pay for my own expenses during my stay can furthermore be perceived as privileged. In addition, academia is often considered to be an elitist and privileged place (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 38). Within the anarchist milieu, it is commonly considered unethical for scholars, however empathetic they may be, to study issues of domination or inequality without getting themselves involved in activities that resist this domination (Williams 2012, 11). In this light, the least I could do was contribute to the activities of social centres whenever possible, such as by cooking, cleaning, and organising materials. Moreover, in order to follow the ethics and principles of these self-managed social centres, it was important to remain aware and reflexive in my role as a researcher. In order to avoid creating an “observer” status, I fully participated in activities without making many notes. I made it clear to people that I was there to learn and that I was open to their perspectives or critiques.

Another ethical consideration that needs to be made is the sharing of information with the communities that welcomed me during my fieldwork period. I consider information to be a common which should not be enclosed within the realm of academia (Haiven and

Khasnabish 2014, 13). One way in which I attempt to avoid this enclosure is by making my findings easily accessible to participants. In addition to providing them with my thesis, I will provide them with copies of the zine I made. This not only opens up the research findings to a wider audience, but it also creates the opportunity for dialogue.

Lastly, the issue of biases needs to be addressed. The choice of topic was influenced by my own interest in anarchism. Fieldwork amongst the self-managed social centres provided me with the opportunity to meet anarchists and see anarchism in practice. It helped solidify my own views and opinions, which fit within an anarchist framework. The result is that I see the work that self-managed social centres do in a generally positive and inspiring light. On the one hand, this research is not intended to be a value judgement on anarchism or the social centres. On the other hand, I do make use of anarchist theory, not only to understand the reasoning behind what people in the social centres say and do, but also as a way to frame this research. The way in which this was done will be discussed in the first chapter.

Outline

This thesis contains three main chapters that will set out the different ways in which the future plays a role in the three self-managed social centres in London. The first chapter will discuss the notion of anarchism. Anthropology and anarchism will be compared and set out as a framework that will shape the rest of this thesis. After, the chapter will dive into the concept of the radical imagination, which will be framed as a central process in how people in the self-managed social centres relate to each other. By analysing the organisational practices of the social centres, as well as their approaches to everyday activity and the notion of "good politics," the chapter will give an idea of what brings people together in the three spaces.

The second chapter will dive into the ways that people in the self-managed social centres engage with the future. By applying the anthropological framework of Bryant and Knight (2019), this chapter aims to make the future tangible in our everyday lives in the different ways that it orients our activities. A dichotomy will be made between the orientations of expectation and anticipation, which tend to be negative, and the orientations of potentiality and hope, which work to counter the first two.

The third chapter will illustrate how the future is embodied in the social centres by using the notion of prefiguration. It will be argued that prefiguration is both an intentional

strategy, and a natural tendency that emerges out of the application of anarchistic ethical frameworks in everyday life. By returning to the values that bring people together in the social centres, it will become clear that care plays a central role in the ways that people prefigure alternative visions for society in the present.

Lastly, the thesis will be closed off with a concluding chapter, which will give an overview of the arguments that were made. This will also include a consideration of how future research can add to and improve what has been done in this thesis.

Chapter 1

Anarchism in practice

> What is anarchism? What does it mean to be an anarchist? Why? Because it is not a definition that can be made once and for all, put in a safe and considered a heritage to be tapped little by little. Being an anarchist does not mean one has reached a certainty or said once and for all, 'There, from now on I hold the truth and as such, at least from the point of view of the idea, I am a privileged person'. Anyone who thinks like this is an anarchist in word alone. (Bonanno [1996] 1998)

As Bonanno points out, anarchism is a concept that evades a clear definition. Instead, it is an open-ended concept that is characterised by many different interpretations, and that manifests itself in many different ways (Rooum 2016, 17). Therefore, it is not possible to give a single definition of how anarchism is perceived of and practiced within a specific community. This chapter will start off with a discussion on the concept of anarchism within anthropological debate. This is important because just like anarchism, anthropology provides a certain way of looking at the world around us. In light of my own identification with anarchism, I feel it is important to set out what an anarchist anthropology entails and how this influences the approach taken on in this research. After this, the imagination will be set out as a key component of both anthropology and the self-managed social centres. It will then be illustrated that the organisational practices and everyday practices of the social centres are manifestations of a shared radical imagination. This shared imagination will lastly be explained through the notion of "having good politics."

Anarchism and anthropology

Anarchism plays a central role in this thesis because of two reasons: its importance in understanding the self-managed social centres, and its role in the theoretical framework from which the social centres are approached. This section will entail a careful consideration of anarchism, starting off by discussing the general approach that is taken on in this research. After that, anarchism will be brought into an anthropological framework to explain how the two intersect and can be mutually beneficial.

The concept of anarchism

As noted above, anarchism is a political philosophy that contains many different orientations and definitions. In a traditional sense, anarchism entails the desire for an absence of government (Walter [1969] 2019, 3). However, this research takes on a broader approach to include other systems of authority, defining anarchism as the demand for freedom and equality (Ibid., 5). Freedom and equality can be considered two sides of the same coin: equality without freedom means that everybody is equally oppressed, and freedom without equality means that marginalised groups are less free than privileged groups (Ibid.). This approach can be considered social anarchism, which became the prominent form of anarchism in the UK since the mid-80s (Franks 2006, 16). In contrast to liberal anarchism, which considers the freedom of the individual within an underlying assumption that people act according to their own interests, social anarchism situate struggles for freedom in a socio-historical context focused on class struggle (Ibid.). According to Franks (Ibid., 12-13), this class struggle anarchism is based upon four principles: a rejection of capitalism, a rejection of state power and other authorities, a concern for other people's freedom as an integral part of creating non-hierarchical social relationships, and lastly, prefiguration. All four principles that will be recurring themes throughout this thesis.

Out of the aforementioned ethical considerations flow forth a number of principles that are central to anarchist praxis, such as autonomy, direct action, horizontal organisation, mutual aid, and voluntary association. These principles have also become central to the organisation of many contemporary radical social movements (Gordon 2007, 29; Kinna 2005, 4; Walker 2012, 1). Yet many of these social movements are more likely to use different labels instead, that is, if they use any labels to begin with (Graeber 2009b, 105). The reason for this is that however broad and open-ended the label of anarchism might be, it still implies a certain line of thought that has had negative connotations in media, or that can feel restricting (Gordon 2008, 13). Likewise, as of May 22, 2023, the Twitter biography of the late David Graeber, who was a prominent anthropologist, as well as an anarchist and activist, states: "I'm an anthropologist, sometimes I occupy things & such. I see anarchism as something you do not an identity so don't call me the anarchist anthropologist."[4]

Even those who reject the label of anarchism can still "embody the anarchist temperament" (Walter [2002] 2019, xxii). This is the approach towards anarchism taken on in this research. While the three self-managed social centres that are the topic of this thesis are

[4] @davidgraeber, accessed May 22, 2023, https://twitter.com/davidgraeber.

not fully anarchist, they all embody an anarchist temperament in their praxis. Following Branson (2022, 1), I consider anarchism as a label to describe something that many people already do. It is found both explicitly in clear acts of resistance, and implicitly in people's everyday lives. Thus, the focus of this thesis lies upon the everyday, practical applications of anarchism in the self-managed social centres and in the lives of those who participate in the spaces. But before diving into this, the next section will first set out the relationship between anarchism and anthropology in order to lie the groundwork for the rest of this thesis.

The case for an anarchist anthropology

It can be argued that there is a sort of natural affinity between anthropology and anarchism. For example, Brian Morris (2014, 57) argues for an "elective affinity," which he ascribes to anthropology's historical tendency to focus on stateless and pre-state societies. David Graeber (2004, 12-13) also sees an affinity, but he finds it in the fact that anthropological thought is characterized by a "keen awareness of the very range of human possibilities." A contrasting viewpoint is given by Stephen Nugent (2012, 207-209), who argues that the anarchism and anthropology are not mutually complementary. According to Nugent (Ibid., 207), anarchism is "incorporable" into an anthropological framework because anarchism is hostile towards the notion of systems, while anthropological thought is dependent on systems because of its focus on the notion of culture. He frames anthropology as "an ideological science" that "is its own culture industry" through creating anthropological products such as concepts, frameworks, diplomas, and papers (Ibid., 212). In contrast, he considers anarchism to be a political and moral stance that does not depend on, and at times is quite hostile towards, such socio-cultural accreditations (Ibid.).

Nugent's critique brings to the foreground the complexity of identity within anarchism. As Portwood-Stacer (2013, 77) points out, it is impossible to fully be an anarchist, because present conditions simply do not allow us to be completely separate from hierarchical structures. Everybody plays a role in some system of another, which only takes as little as simply trying to survive in a capitalist economy by making a living through wage labour or buying groceries in a supermarket. It is therefore unlikely for anarchism to be practiced in ideal circumstances, void of contradictions. This is not to say that there is no value in scrutinising such contradictions; in fact, this can help us rethink the ways in which we may improve our lives and live more according to our own values. The point I want to make is that contradictions are found everywhere, as anthropologists have been good at pointing out, thus

the contradictions between anarchism and anthropology should not be considered grounds for the dismissal of their potential to be mutually beneficial.

In order to conceptualise an anarchist anthropology, it would be fruitful to return to David Graeber, specifically his essay *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Graeber (2004, 7) conceptualises anarchism as a project that aims to undermine structures of domination, while creating the institutions necessary for a new society in a democratic way. This implies that the means have to be in accordance with the desired ends, which makes anarchism "an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice" (Ibid., 6-7). What anthropology can add to further this goal is applying its tools to work towards "human freedom" (Ibid., 105). Anthropology is well suited to learn about how power in our contemporary world shapes the way we see ourselves and each other, as well as in what ways we might have a dependency on hierarchies (Walker 2012, 2). Anthropology could help highlight "power and how best to deal with it," as well as how to better organise a non-hierarchical, thus an anarchist, society (Walker 2012, 2-3).

Another way in which anthropology might be especially well suited to study anarchism is by focusing on the role of the imagination. Graeber (2004, 102) emphasises that an anarchist anthropology requires social theory that is born out of a liberated imagination. Or, as he puts it: "To think about what it would take to live in a world in which everyone really did have the power to decide for themselves, individually and collectively, what sort of communities they wished to belong to and what sort of identities they wanted to take on – that's really difficult. To bring about such a world would be almost unimaginably difficult." (Ibid.). In the process of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange, as anthropology is often said to do, researchers are required to open up their imagination and reconsider what we think is "normal" and "strange." Anarchism requires a similar mindset, asking us to look beyond the normalisation of structures of domination, creating an awareness of the types of structures that keep domination in place, which enables resistance against these structures.

Holly High (2012) takes on an approach to anarchism and anthropology that incorporates the kind of liberated imagination that Graeber calls for. She considers anarchy a useful term for highlighting the limits and failings of the state, as well as whatever falls beyond the state (Ibid., 95). The other way around, anthropology can benefit anarchist theory in highlighting how, just like the state, it is "banal, mundane, ordinary and everyday" (Ibid.). In this sense, High's framework focuses on how anarchism "is already at work in the world, both in anthropologists' analytical frames and/or in those of their informants" (Ibid., 94). This thesis makes use of both anthropological and anarchist frameworks in order to understand the

ways in which the self-managed social centres operate. Anarchist theory is not solely considered as a way to understand why anarchists think what they think and do what they do. I also apply anarchist theory as a way to frame how the world operates. Anarchist theory and anthropological works are not mutually exclusive, but instead they intertwine and can support one another, as pointed out above. High's framework furthermore fits within the approach taken towards anarchism in this thesis; it is considered something both radical and mundane. This perspective highlights the types of power relationships that people in self-managed social centres experience in their everyday lives, and how this framed participation in these spaces. The following section will further set out the approaches taken to everyday life by those in the social centres by discussing the role of the imagination.

The radical imagination in the social centres

> Through a narrow hallway, I enter the social centre for the first time. As I push open a creaky wooden door, I see two people sitting in the room, one on a couch and one on a chair next to it. The walls are covered in shelves, from the floor to the ceiling, filled with colourful folders and various books. One of the men greets me and introduces himself as Patrick. Noticing my hesitation, he asks whether this is my first time visiting the space. I tell him it is, explaining that I have had email correspondence with someone in the space, and that I am now in London to do fieldwork there if they will still have me. Patrick responds that the space is open to everybody, implying that I too am welcome to be there. He starts to tell me a brief history of the collective while giving a tour through the space. As I look around, I start to feel overwhelmed by the amount of material around me, as well as all the colourful details of posters, stickers, and labels. After finishing the tour, Patrick sits back down next to his acquaintance and offers me a piece of cake from the plate on the desk next to them. I thank Patrick for his help and explain that I would see him next week, when my fieldwork officially starts. Excited and nervous, I walk out with a big smile on my face. I have found a goldmine of information and inspiration and I cannot wait to dig in.[5]

[5] Fieldnotes, 02-02-2023.

This vignette of my first visit to one of the social centres illustrates two important aspects of the space. First of all, it shows the nature of the space: it is an open space which has a welcoming atmosphere because of the way people run it. Second, the space works to inspire and spark the imagination. The layout and materials in the space display a certain radicality which works on an affective level. The countless books, folders, posters, and stickers, point towards the role of the radical imagination in the space.

The concept of the radical imagination, often used to analyse social movements, refers to "the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be" (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 3). It is a broad concept that does not entail a specific belief or strategy, but instead concerns a general understanding that changing "the system" requires transforming the fundamental structure of the system itself (Ibid., 5). The ability to imagine radical alternatives is a prerequisite for the existence of self-managed social centres, because these spaces are organised in a way that is radically different from the status quo. Social centres are spaces that are organised through the praxis of "autonomous politics" (Chatterton, Hodkinson and Pickerill 2010, 253). This entails the goal to create spaces where people are able to "act freely from structures of oppression and hierarchy, engage with these systems and structures in a way that challenges or transgresses dominant norms and forms, and attempt to provide alternative models of social, economic, political, cultural and communicative organization and practice" (Fominaya 2020). This became clear to me during participant observation in the social centres. The following section will set out the alternative practices born out of the radical imagination by discussing three essential aspects of their radicality: organising horizontally, reframing everyday life, and a shared belief in "good politics."

Organising horizontally

> The night sky and the blocked windows prevent me to be able to see what is going on inside. Hesitantly I push against the wooden front door. With some effort and a loud creak, it opens. Once inside, I am met by warm light and chatter. The main room is filled with chairs in the form of a circle. Approximately eight people are seated in a circle around the coffee table, chatting and waiting. A couple of people are walking around, grabbing coffee, tea, or some leftover food. I decide to grab a chair and join the circle. Nervously I wait for the meeting to start, not knowing how it works or how

> many people will show up. After everyone has taken a seat, it becomes a bit quieter. Owen looks up from his laptop and suggests to take the role of the facilitator. The others agree. Then somebody asks who is up for writing the minutes. Owen noted that he might as well do it because he already had his laptop open. He then notes that he would only do it if the others were okay with it, joking that he does not want to create too much of a concentration of power. He gets some chuckles, which indicates that everybody seems fine with it. Vanessa then speaks up to say that we have a special guest, me, who is there to observe the meeting. She suggests I introduce myself and my research project. I explain that I was doing fieldwork for my degree and that I want to observe the meeting to learn about how the space is organised. I then ask if anybody had any questions or objections to my presence. Nobody says anything. After about five seconds, Owen notes that they can now start the meeting.

The above is an excerpt from the fieldnotes taken at a general meeting of one of the social centres. These meetings are held on a monthly basis and their function is to keep participants in the space informed of the happenings around the space, as well as to provide the opportunity to make decisions, plan activities, raise new ideas, and discuss any problems. The particular meeting described above took place in three different phases. The first phase was an introduction round, during which everybody was asked to state their names, pronouns, and how they are feeling. During the second phase the group went over the different sub-groups in the space, asking whether there were any updates. This included the financials of the building. After a short break, it was time for the third phase of the meeting: the agenda. Various topics were discussed. For example, somebody came up with the idea to plan a maintenance day in which they could work the upkeep of the building. Another topic was the use of one of the rooms of the building; did they want to keep the space available for working groups, or would they let someone external use the space which would provide them with new resources brought by that person? The latter turned out to be too big of a decision to make on such a short notice. Therefore, they agreed to come back to it during the meeting next month.

What this meeting shows is the process of horizontal organisation and decision-making, in the form of small-scale direct democracy. Owen described this process as “boring, mundane, hyper-local democracy,” after which he emphasised that this type of organisation is

necessary for autonomous communities to exist.[6] There are no "leaders" in the social centres. Instead, people are temporarily and democratically appointed as facilitators for meetings or events. The ideal outcome of decision-making during meetings is to reach consensus, but that is not always realistic. On this issue, Dylan argued that "consensus decision-making is not only about everybody agreeing on everything – it's also about trusting others to make the right decisions, even if you don't always agree."[7] Thus, trust and mutual respect play an essential role in smooth decision-making processes.

Organising hierarchically requires careful consideration of one's position and an awareness of the potential power relations at play. High (2012, 105) notes that the anarchic relationships that we find in our field sites are unlikely to be pure relationships. Instead, they are "uneven and patchy" (Ibid.). Anarchism's open-endedness and "commitment to 'structurelessness'" can lead to the emergence of informal hierarchies (Gordon 2008, 62). A common hierarchical structure within anarchist circles is ageism, as was pointed out by Dylan. He felt that this bias is ignored often because it is so normalised. He explained that older anarchists often talk about the past, after which he mockingly said: "when I was younger, blah blah blah, and we did that… blah blah." He clearly felt annoyed with this behaviour he perceived. According to Dylan, anarchists who are more experienced hold a certain position of power, and he feels that "it's their responsibility to shut up at some point."[8] At a different social centre, during an evening of organising materials, Luke showed an awareness of the dynamic that Dylan criticised. He was attempting to create a new group of people involved in the organisation of the space, particularly the archive part of it. Of the group, he was one of the members who had been involved in the space for the longest. He explained that he was trying to avoid taking the lead because he did not want to be in a position of authority. His efforts were noticeable in the way he made sure to ask others for their opinions before giving his own. He also encouraged the rest of the group to make decisions together.

There are several other factors besides age or experience that can give a person a certain position of power in the self-managed social centres. For example, some people have more time to invest in the space. Not all people have keys to access the building. Some people are not native English speakers and find it harder to articulate their point. Some people feel

[6] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.
[7] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.
[8] Ibid.

more confident to take on projects or stand up for themselves.[9] Avoiding hierarchies requires a constant vigilance, as well as a lot of self-reflection, and some trial and error. But there is a fine line between vigilance and policing. This was illustrated during one of the meetings I was able to attend. The collective had an issue with one group that was making use of the building. They spend a relatively large amount of the meeting talking about how to handle this issue. On the one hand, they felt that they had to be clear and not tolerate misconduct by the group. On the other hand, they agreed that they could not start policing. Within anarchism, policing is generally considered as unacceptable because it is a way to exert control and power. Therefore, the group decided it was important for them to take on a nuanced approach and listen to all parties involved before taking drastic action. Key is that people try to be aware of all dynamics that can lead to power relations and show a willingness to experiment with the best ways to go handle them.

The horizontal relationships in the social centres are certainly not perfect, but they still stand in stark contrast to the organisation of society at large. Putting the principle of horizontality into practice, even with the imperfections that may be, is important because it helps to expand people's imagination. As Gordon (2008, 38-39) points out, "It is much easier for people to engage with the idea that life without bosses or leaders is possible when such a life is displayed, if on a limited scale, in actual practice rather than being argued for on paper." The social centres are locations where people can take seriously and apply their values in organising alternative communities and movements.

Reconsidering the everyday

The state sets boundaries for how politics are to be conducted: voting, sanctioned protests, and petitions, for example (Branson 2022, 21). Hereby the state "encloses us in the very narrow definitions of action while also removing our connection from the people, living creatures, and the world around us by imagining policy and state infrastructure as the only means for managing life" (Ibid.). To go beyond these actions requires the ability to see the boundaries created by the state, or at least have an awareness of the existence of these boundaries. An important part of anarchist theory, as well as of the radical imagination, is a certain awareness of the structures of power that create inequalities, and how they are embedded in our everyday lives.

[9] Ibid.

With this awareness, participation in the self-managed social centres becomes political. Everyday activities are put in contrast to normative ideas about how these activities are supposed to be practiced. To illustrate this, Dylan used the example of cooking and sharing a meal. At the social centre, people cook without a recipe. They chop whatever they have available and turn it into a meal, which often ends up as a stew. Dylan argued that normative ways of eating food take place at a restaurant, where somebody cooks behind the scenes and you pay for it, or at home, either individually or communally with family or friends. According to Dylan, many people lack a kinship way of sharing food. This is one of the things that the social centre offers: the communal preparation and consumption of food, outside of capitalist relations. Instead of paying a standard price for the meal, the social centre works through donations, on a pay-what-you-can basis. Therefore, the social centre is a space that offers the opportunity to not just be a customer, but instead use the space, as Dylan put it.[10] In this light, the social centre can be considered a space of resistance against the privatisation of capitalism by opening up space for cooperation, politics, support, as well as social life and entertainment (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006, 310).

Just like horizontal organisation, engaging in everyday activities in an alternative way fuels the radical imagination. As Luca put it: the social centres show that other ways of doing things are possible.[11] This way, the radical imagination plays a more implicit and everyday role. It is found in how people contest the normative practices that structure our everyday life through reshaping practices to fit different ethical frameworks. This implicit embodiment of the radical imagination is accompanied by a more explicit way of sharing the radical imagination: through social processes. One moment that clearly illustrated this process happened during an afternoon of gardening. Dylan told a story about how he was walking with a girl recently when they noticed a peach tree. The girl noted that she had never eaten a peach before, at least not one that did not come out of a can. Dylan helped her reach her first peach. He explained that he found this such a nice moment. Owen then half-jokingly commented that Dylan is "combatting alienation," which got a laugh out of the group.[12] Here, Owen shared with the group a radical interpretation of a moment that in first instance I just interpreted to be sweet. Alienation, as a sense of meaninglessness under capitalism (Wood 2004, 8), can be considered an everyday phenomenon. During an interview a couple of weeks earlier, Owen had given thorough answers to all of my questions, explaining his perceptions

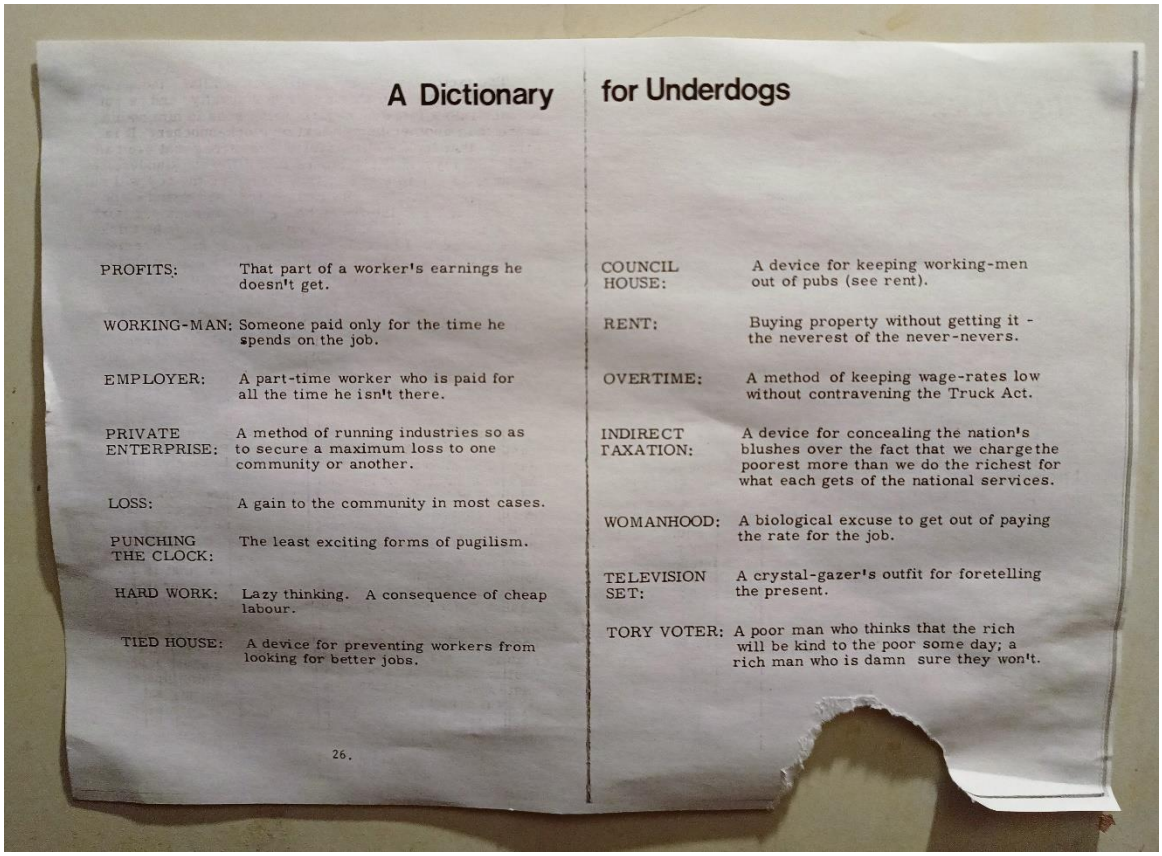
[10] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.
[11] Fieldnotes, 12-04-2023.
[12] Fieldnotes, 09-04-2023.

about the failings of society.[13] It became clear that such analyses are something that he engages in regularly, and through moments such as the one described above, he shares them with others in the social centre. The fact that the others in the garden laughed with Owen furthermore indicates that they understand Owen's viewpoint. Through such moments, it becomes clear that self-managed social centres provide like-minded people with the opportunity to come together and nurture the radical imagination by sharing time together and exchanging opinion and ideas. This moment thus illustrates how the radical imagination is a social process: it is created and strengthened through collective processes of sharing stories, ideas, experiences, artwork, theories, and language (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 4).

The comment on alienation furthermore points towards the kinds of critiques that are shaped through the radical imagination. During interviews as well as participant observation, critique on power systems was a common topic of conversation, and especially the power of the government and of capitalism were a recurring theme. General feelings about the state of world were often expressed through phrases such as "the world is fucked"[14] or "the system is completely broken."[15] For example, Dylan has no faith in the state and sees it crumbling. He describes the UK as experiencing "utter state failure."[16] Luke argued that "it feels very dystopic for many people right now."[17] Adam argued that "we live in a fascist country,"[18] and Patrick has never felt less optimistic about the state of the world.[19] What these assessments point towards is a "shared political language" within the social centres, which focuses on structures of domination such as capitalism, the state, and the patriarchy, as well as ways of enacting resistance (Gordon 2008, 4). This shared language places emphasises how systems of power are located in our everyday lives and are all-encompassing. This political language is found not only in the conversations people have in the social centres, but also in written material which circulates within the social centres. Take for example figure 1. The printout hangs on a wall in one of the social centres. It contains a radical interpretation of aspects of many people's everyday lives, which seems to be specifically concerned with the experience of the working class as the word "underdogs" in the title points towards. The list describes different systems that are perceived to negatively shape people's lives, such as the labour system, the housing system, the media and the patriarchy. Profits are framed as something

[13] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.
[14] Interview with Vincent, 01-04-2023.
[15] Interview with Vanessa, 06-04-2023.
[16] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.
[17] Interview with Luke, 15-03-2023.
[18] Interview with Adam, 13-04-2023.
[19] Interview with Patrick, 09-03-2023.

taken away from the worker, instead of earned by the employer. Privatisation is considered to create "a maximum loss to one community or another," instead of improving efficiency and healthy competition.



A Dictionary for Underdogs

PROFITS: That part of a worker's earnings he doesn't get.

WORKING-MAN: Someone paid only for the time he spends on the job.

EMPLOYER: A part-time worker who is paid for all the time he isn't there.

PRIVATE ENTERPRISE: A method of running industries so as to secure a maximum loss to one community or another.

LOSS: A gain to the community in most cases.

PUNCHING THE CLOCK: The least exciting forms of pugilism.

HARD WORK: Lazy thinking. A consequence of cheap labour.

TIED HOUSE: A device for preventing workers from looking for better jobs.

26.

COUNCIL HOUSE: A device for keeping working-men out of pubs (see rent).

RENT: Buying property without getting it - the neverest of the never-nevers.

OVERTIME: A method of keeping wage-rates low without contravening the Truck Act.

INDIRECT TAXATION: A device for concealing the nation's blushes over the fact that we charge the poorest more than we do the richest for what each gets of the national services.

WOMANHOOD: A biological excuse to get out of paying the rate for the job.

TELEVISION SET: A crystal-gazer's outfit for foretelling the present.

TORY VOTER: A poor man who thinks that the rich will be kind to the poor some day; a rich man who is damn sure they won't.

Figure 1: "A Dictionary for Underdogs." Photograph taken by me.

Zines are an especially interesting medium to look at the written form of the shared radical imagination of the social centres and the broader milieus they are embedded in. Zines are small publications, often independent and localised, that function as a way for anybody to voice their opinions or share their interests (Duncombe 1997, 7). Thus, they provide "a radically democratic and participatory ideal of what culture and society might be…*ought* to be" (Ibid.). The zines in the social centres vary greatly in content and appearance. See appendix 1 for a zine that I created as a supplement to this thesis. It contains a summary of the research findings and integrates some pictures taken during the fieldwork period in London.

Alternative visions on everyday practices are embodied in the way that everyday tasks are practiced, and in how people frame this in conversations and written material. An important part of these visions is that they critique the status quo and demand for change in

various ways. They ask people to rethink what our everyday activities mean and provide calls for resistance against the normalisation of oppressive structures. But the radical imagination is not only about what people are *against*; it also involves a positive aspect, of what people are *for*. The next section will deal with the shared values that shape what people both fight against and for in the social centres.

"Don't worry, he has good politics."

To reiterate, the collective processes of organising, socialising, and sharing written materials, the self-managed social centres nurture the radical imagination. Yet there is no single imagination to be found in these spaces. Instead, the imagination is shaped by one's position in society (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002, 321). Aspects of our identities, such as class, race, gender, and sexuality, intersect and shape how we experience the world around us, including the extent to which structures of domination are felt in our everyday lives. Therefore, it is important to remember that the radical imagination entails a part of our imagination, which we share with others (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 4). In the three social centres, there is a set of overlapping values, which on multiple occasions during participant observation was referred to as "having good politics."[20] The notion of good politics delineates a common ground; it is an indication of the basic values that allow people to come together and work towards common goals.

During interviews, people were asked about their values and their wishes on a political level. This led to a list of topics that people were concerned with, spanning clear objectives and abstract wishes. For example, Adam said that would like to see the social centre he participates in to grow in terms of people involved. He emphasised that he did not mean just any people; he wants people who have similar hopes, dreams, and values as those that use the space now. When asked what exactly these values are, he listed the following: HIV positivity, Pro Palestine, ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards), anti-eviction, and animal liberation. He considers these values to be "pro people," based upon support, understanding, and solidarity.[21] These are some very specific ideals and goals, but they do point towards an overarching ideal: freedom. Owen summarised the values of the social centre a bit more concisely: the people in the space "share a belief in action" through providing mutual aid and sharing knowledge with

[20] Fieldnotes, 01-03-2023.
[21] Interview with Adam, 13-04-2023.

each other.[22] He posits the anarchist principles of direct action and mutual aid as the cornerstones of the social centre. According to Dylan, people in the social centre want to collectively become more autonomous, with an emphasis put on breaking away from capitalist relations. This is what was illustrated earlier with his example of collectively cooking and sharing a meal. Dylan feels that "there's an everyone here wears the same shoes everyday kind of vibe" in the social centre. He views the general politics of the social centre as "liberation politics," including the desire for open borders to that people have freedom of movement. He concluded by arguing that that people would disagree on the way in which autonomy could be achieved. Similarly, Vincent argued that people have different visions for how we can achieve change. For example, some people have faith in the idea of a parliament, and some do not. But what matters to him is that people in the social centre understand that radical improvement requires system change, and that in order to achieve this, people need to organise collectively.[23]

Vincent's note on the role of the government illustrates that the radical imagination that circulates these self-managed social centres is broader than just anarchism, because anarchists do not share this faith in the government. But one thing that everyone seemed to agree on was the belief that we need radical change, and that this is something communities can work towards together, at least on a small scale. Autonomy is at the heart of this desire for change. People are committed to resisting inequality and creating better conditions for communities to not just survive, but also to thrive. This results not only in a horizontal organisational structure, but also in a variety of practices and activities aimed at creating autonomy or resisting power structures. Thus, what brings people together is a shared desire for more autonomy through horizontal relationships and resistance of oppression. Such a unifying mentality enables people with different political orientations to come together and work towards shared goals that fall under the realms of freedom, including equality and justice.

The desire for radical change furthermore brings to light the temporal aspect of the radical imagination. It is a process of collectively mapping "what is," how this comes from "what was," and how this leads to what "might be" (Haiven and Khasnabish 2010, iii). The radical imagination is not solely about the way we interpret the past and the present, but also

[22] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.
[23] Interview with Vincent, 01-04-2023.

what we imagine is possible for the future. How this depiction of an imagined future plays out in London's self-managed social centres will be the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 2

A radical future

It's almost the end of the fieldwork period and I am once again visiting Patrick in the social centre. Making use of one of my last opportunities to visit the space before leaving London, I am frantically looking through the different maps of the archive to make sure I am not missing out on any useful material. Meanwhile, Patrick is, also slightly frantically, organising some maps with magazines on a table he put up in the middle of the room. Suddenly something falls with a thud on the floor in the other room. Patrick chuckles, to which I join in and note that it seems almost impossible to look through the boxes without dropping stuff. I then decide to put my map back and pick a different one, labelled "anarchist theory." The shelf is too cramped, resulting in a struggle to get the map out without causing the adjoining maps to fall out. By the time the map is almost out, a small book falls out of it and gently lands on my face. Clumsily I grab it and read the title: *total liberation*.

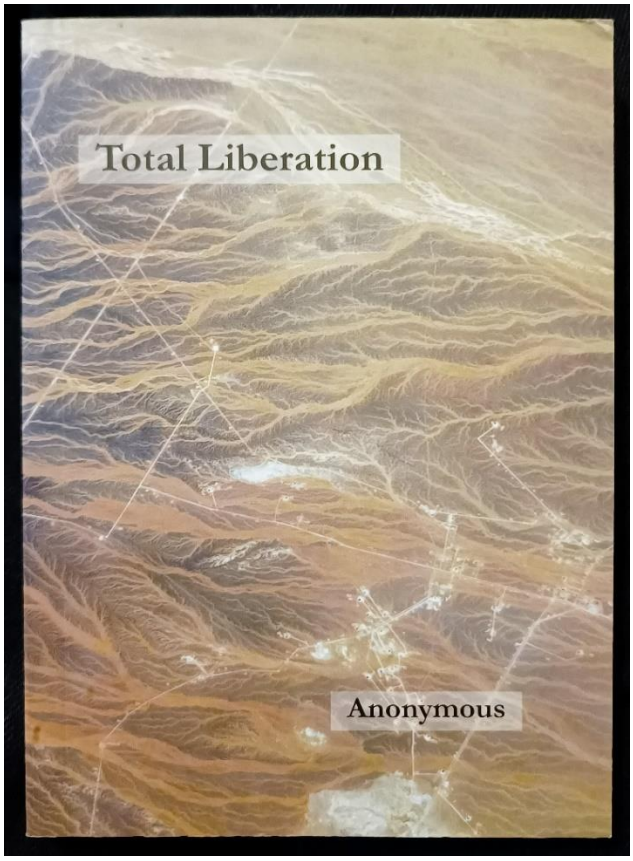
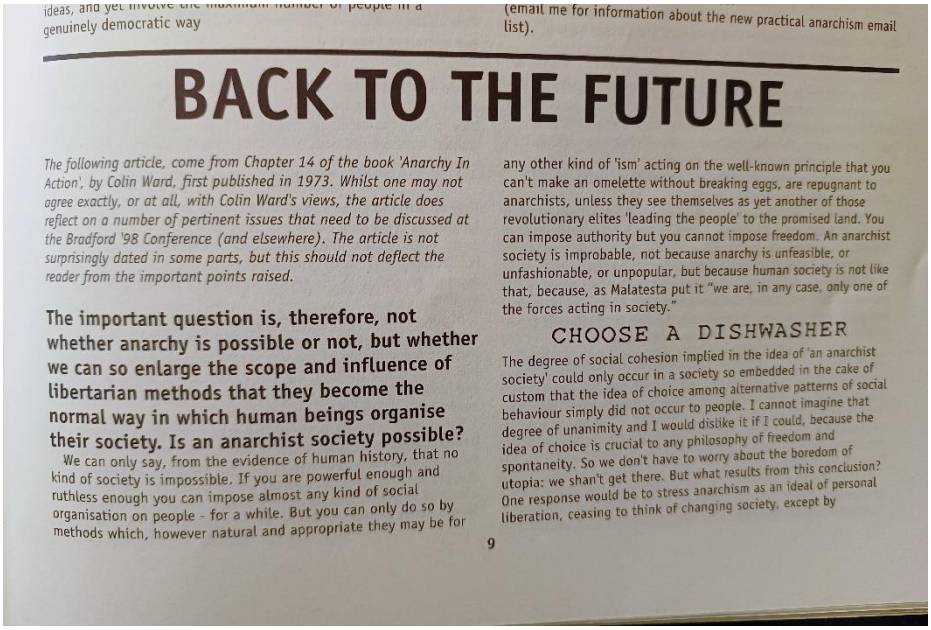


Figure 2: *Total Liberation* by Anonymous, Active Distribution. Photograph taken by me.

I put down the book and finally free the map from the shelf. It is filled with anarchist magazines. The first magazine I pull out is the second issue of *Smash Hits: A Discussion Bulletin for Revolutionary Ideas*. Opening it up to a random page leads me to an article called "Back to the Future." [24]



ideas, and yet involve the maximum number of people in a genuinely democratic way

(email me for information about the new practical anarchism email list).

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The following article, come from Chapter 14 of the book 'Anarchy In Action', by Colin Ward, first published in 1973. Whilst one may not agree exactly, or at all, with Colin Ward's views, the article does reflect on a number of pertinent issues that need to be discussed at the Bradford '98 Conference (and elsewhere). The article is not surprisingly dated in some parts, but this should not deflect the reader from the important points raised.

The important question is, therefore, not whether anarchy is possible or not, but whether we can so enlarge the scope and influence of libertarian methods that they become the normal way in which human beings organise their society. Is an anarchist society possible?

We can only say, from the evidence of human history, that no kind of society is impossible. If you are powerful enough and ruthless enough you can impose almost any kind of social organisation on people - for a while. But you can only do so by methods which, however natural and appropriate they may be for any other kind of 'ism' acting on the well-known principle that you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, are repugnant to anarchists, unless they see themselves as yet another of those revolutionary elites 'leading the people' to the promised land. You can impose authority but you cannot impose freedom. An anarchist society is improbable, not because anarchy is unfeasible, or unfashionable, or unpopular, but because human society is not like that, because, as Malatesta put it "we are, in any case, only one of the forces acting in society."

CHOOSE A DISHWASHER

The degree of social cohesion implied in the idea of 'an anarchist society' could only occur in a society so embedded in the cake of custom that the idea of choice among alternative patterns of social behaviour simply did not occur to people. I cannot imagine that degree of unanimity and I would dislike it if I could, because the idea of choice is crucial to any philosophy of freedom and spontaneity. So we don't have to worry about the boredom of utopia: we shan't get there. But what results from this conclusion? One response would be to stress anarchism as an ideal of personal liberation, ceasing to think of changing society, except by

9

Figure 3: "Back to the Future" In *Smash Hits: A Discussion Bulletin for Revolutionary Ideas, 2.* Photograph taken by me.

This vignette illustrates how digging through the radical libraries and archives of the social centres feels like going on a journey. Often, this journey brings us back to the past. Books, pamphlets, magazines and flyers tell us the stories of the many struggles that radicals have engaged in throughout history. They help to link up struggles over time, showing how they influence one another and transform over time. But as the vignette shows, these materials can also take us to the future. They can show us visions for a different world that has not happened yet.

This chapter will discuss how the radical imagination leads to different approaches to the future in London's self-managed social centres. First, it will explain Bryant and Knight's (2019) anthropological framework for understanding the future, which will then be applied to the approaches found in the three self-managed social centres. It will be explained that there is a dichotomy between the orientations of anticipation and expectation, which tended to be more negative, and the orientations of potentiality and hope, which work to counter the

[24] Fieldnotes, 13-04-2023.

negativity. The chapter will then conclude with a discussion on the relationship between anarchism and the future in the context of the social centres through the notions of open-endedness, utopia, and a perceived "depletion of anarchism."

Orienting ourselves towards the future

Over the last decade, an anthropology of the future has emerged within the discipline, has framed the future as playing a critical role in many contemporary issues (e.g., Bryant and Knight 2019; Appadurai 2013; Collins 2008; Pels 2015; Salazar et al. 2017). This thesis draws upon the framework set out by Bryant and Knight (2019). They argue for a teleological approach, which entails a focus on the "ends" that orient us in our everyday lives. Thereby they move away from a linear understanding of time; instead of considering the future to derive from the present, they focus on the present as derived from the future (Ibid., 16). By applying the notion of orientations, something that does not exist (yet) becomes more tangible, as it exists in our imagination in the present, and is embodied in our everyday orientations towards the future. The framework is built upon six different orientations towards the future: expectation, anticipation, speculation, potentiality, hope, and destiny (Ibid., 2). These orientations represent different depths of time, and therefore shape our everyday perceptions of the future in different ways (Ibid., 2). This chapter will focus on the orientations of expectation, anticipation, potentiality, and hope. During participant observation and interviews, people addressed these four orientations the most. The first section will focus on the orientations of expectation and anticipation, which is largely dominated by negative feelings. After, potentiality and hope will be framed as a positive counterpart, situated in the spatiotemporality of the social centres.

A future filled with struggles

As set out in the first chapter, the social centres are spaces in which people are brought together by both their shared values, and shared critiques of the status quo. The latter contained perceptions of the world that were quite negative, expressed through phrases such as "the world is fucked."[25] In fact, these expressions were most common when people in the social centres were asked about where they felt the future was going. Instead of considered

[25] Interview with Vincent, 01-04-2023.

how the future might derive from the present, there was a certain contraction of the present and the future, implying a perception of the future as a continuation of the present. This sentiment was explicitly addressed by a couple interviewees, who noted that they did not expect the future to become easier.

The orientation of expectation is one which relies upon knowledge derived from the past (Ibid., 28). In the social centres, people regularly talked about a long history of struggles in radical movements, which were then connected to struggles in the present. Such an approach to struggles not as separate events but instead continuous throughout history led to expectations about their continuation, as well as their exacerbation, in the future. For example, Conner expected the material conditions to get worse for most people, as fascism is increasing and capitalism will keep producing new crises.[26] Alan kept their assessment of the future even more general, arguing that the future will not become easier.[27] Furthermore, during casual conversations, people touched upon the practical everyday struggles that they did not see being solved in the foreseeable future, such as paying the rent or gaining access to resources. All these visions are expectations, because they rely upon information from the past to assess where the future is going.

The orientation of anticipation is quite similar to that of expectation. Bryant and Knight (Ibid., 28) explain that anticipation goes beyond expectation because it entails certain feelings and sensations that make people "press forward into the future, enacting it and thereby pulling the future towards the present." Through these sensations and feelings, anticipation calls upon an "affective dimension of time" that is not only experienced individually, but also collectively (Ibid., 32). One anticipation-filled topic that regularly came up in conversations was that of climate change. Climate anxiety has become a well-known phenomenon in our contemporary world and plays a role in people's participation in the social centres. For example, Owen and Vincent framed their participation in the social centre as at least partly motivated by a climate disaster they anticipated. As Owen put it: if the catastrophe around the corner happens, he will have done everything in his strength against it.[28] His phrasing of disaster being around the corner points towards the emotions that anticipation brings with it. Owen's concern with climate change furthermore highlights how anticipation encourages non-linear perceptions of time. In explaining his present participation in the social centre as something positive to look back upon when disaster strikes, he is what Miyazaki

[26] Interview with Conner, 03-03-2023.
[27] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.
[28] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.

(2006, 157) calls reimagining present action from future perspective. This illustrates how through anticipation, the future is drawn into the present, giving meaning to the actions taken today (Bryant and Knight 2019, 28).

The future was generally approached as the anticipation of something bad coming towards us. This was on course with people's expectations for the future, but at the same time it was filled with uncertainties. Depending on whether a vision for the future is negative or positive, orientations translate into action which can aim to either interfere or actively make it happen. Of course, it can also lead to nonaction, letting it happen passively. If the expected or anticipated future is positive, people can try to increase its chances of happening. But, in the case of negative orientations such as the two examples of precarious existence and climate crisis as mentioned above, people took action that is aimed at undermining or countering these outcomes. In the expected future struggles in keeping the social centres going, people try to improve money-making strategies such as getting different items to sell or throwing fundraising socials. However, these strategies are short-term, and it is difficult for the social centres to get out of a position of precarity. In the case of an anticipate climate disaster, Owen explained that he aimed at building resilience in the social centre. This orientation is more long-term. Climate resilience is built through sharing knowledge and skills, such as gardening or building with repurposed materials. This way, the community collectively attempts to become more resilient against anticipated problems caused by the anticipated climate disaster, such as food shortage or lack of material resources.[29]

The pessimistic expectations and anticipation that prevail in the social centres are the result of the shared radical imagination which was discussed in the previous chapter. Their radical imagination allows people in the social centres to reinterpret what it means to live in the current moment, which leads to what Bryant and Knight (Ibid., 33) call "vernacular timespaces." Vernacular timespaces are social sites which include physical space but also transcends it, encompassing all other social order that are connected to "all the other orders of people and things that are associated with human activities" (Ibid.). In discourse timespaces are often expressed in an epochal way, as expressions about the times that we are living in (Ibid., 34). In the social centres, vernacular timespaces mostly manifested in talk of living in a time of crisis. People experience processes such as increasing gaps between rich and poor, austerity measures, global warming, the increasing power of the Right, and increasing intolerances of different identities and backgrounds, giving the sense that even if the world

[29] Ibid.

seems quiet at times, crisis is already happening in the background. A time of crisis can be considered a time characterized by uncertainty, in which we are unable to anticipate the future which leaves us with anxiety (Ibid., 43). Thus, in the social centres, people's perceptions of both the present and the future are marked by crisis. This reduces the distance between the present and the future; the crisis of the future is, as Owen phrased it, "around the corner."[30] These orientations towards the future are quite depressing, which raises the question of what motivates people to partake in acts of resistance and (re)building in the social centres. The next section will explain this through the orientations of potentiality and hope.

Social centres as spatiotemporalities of hope

As aforementioned, the expectations and anticipations explained by people in the social centres were generally negative. The radical imagination creates a hyper-awareness of the structures of domination that shape our everyday lives, which can be quite discouraging. What the self-managed social centres offer against this, is that they are spaces full of potentiality, and hope.

Bryant and Knight (Ibid., 107) define potentiality as "the future's capacity to become future." They see potentiality as a weaker form of expectation: the potential is something that can happen, but it also may not (Ibid., 108). The potential is present but also absent, as it requires action to be realised (Ibid.). Bryant and Knight (Ibid., 111) point out that potentiality manifests materially in the present: "potentiality is an entirely real dimension of objects, whereas possibilities are not." In the self-managed social centres, potentiality can be found in the physical space itself. The social centres are often adapted, albeit temporarily, to the activities that are being held in the spaces. Chairs are put up in a circle for meetings. Spaces are filled up with tables for eating a meal together,[31] or for organising materials.[32] Boxes are moved into the main room, and then two hours later put back in storage.[33] Shelves that are dedicated to specific groups might be reallocated to a different use after a monthly meeting.[34] Potentiality plays a role in how the social centres claim space and remove it from a capitalist context, making the occupation of this space in itself political, both squatted or legalised. Space is seen as having the potential to provide people with different forms of activities.

[30] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.
[31] Fieldnotes, 20-02-2023.
[32] Fieldnotes, 13-04-2023.
[33] Fieldnotes, 08-03-2023.
[34] Fieldnotes, 02-03-2023.

This is also where social relations come into play. Potentiality is a key factor in holding timespaces together as social spaces of futural orientations (Ibid., 117). People speak of the potentiality for the social centres to increase in terms of community. The social centres have the potential to become "lovely and nurturing" spaces.[35] The potential for social relations in the spaces is inherent in the name: social centre. Interlocutors expressed the social potential of the social centres in their wishes for the future of the spaces: improved horizontal relationships where everybody puts in adequate effort,[36] a wider outreach to other spaces and networks,[37] or a bigger community of regular participants who have similar values and dreams.[38] Vincent specifically argued that there is potential for radical change in the United Kingdom, but people live their lives too privately and individually to achieve change collectively.[39] The social centres thus offer people the opportunity to come together and create social relations that would not exist on the outside.

In the realisation of potentialities, hope comes into play. As Bryant and Knight (Ibid., 134) explain, "hope emerges in the gap between the potential and the actual." Hope is always aimed towards something, thereby propelling us into the future (Ibid.). But hope oftentimes manifests in a limited timespace, a spatiotemporal bubble (Ibid., 151-153). The self-managed social centres can be considered such spatiotemporal locations of hope. For example, Vincent expressed that hope can be found in pockets: in situations of radical opposition. Vincent got involved in the social centre during a moment in his life when he was not doing much political organising, which had made him feel quite cynical and hopeless. Joining the social centre made him feel more positive and gave him hope that creating change is possible.[40] In a similar vein, Owen identified the social centre as playing an important role in creating "moments of joy and resistance" which gave him hope. Alan also identified the social centres as spaces of hope, but he argued that this happens in conjunction with moments of hope outside of the spaces. Alan explained that while they see media painting a bleak picture of the state of the world, their personal experience tells a different story. In local radical spaces, among which the self-managed social centre they are involved in, Alan sees that many people do show up. Alan finds local moments of hope that contrast with "the bigger feelings and

[35] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.
[36] Interview with Vincent, 01-04-2023.
[37] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.
[38] Interview with Adam, 13-04-2023.
[39] Interview with Vincent, 01-04-2023.
[40] Ibid.

portrayals of doom."[41] Thus, for these people, the social centres are spaces of hope.

To summarise, the orientations of anticipation and expectation tend to be more negative, flowing forth out of a history of struggles and manifesting in contemporary anxieties. The orientations of destiny and hope work to counter these negative perceptions. The orientations exist at the same time and intertwine, but depending on the moment, one might prevail over the other. Therefore, we can consider hope to be "the political counterpart to the work of the imagination." Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that both the negative orientations of expectation and anticipation and the positive orientations of potentiality and hope were expressed in very general terms. This can partly be ascribed to the limits put on our ability to anticipate due to the sense of living in crisis. But a lack of specificity about the future also fits within anarchism's commitment to open-endedness, which requires people to be open to the different ends that can emerge out of anarchist praxis. The next section will dive into this commitment to open-endedness by discussing the relationship between anarchism and the future.

An anarchist future?

The previous section posited hope as a positive orientation that counters those of expectation and anticipation. However, sometimes the orientation of hope leads to other less positive orientations, such as "the collapse or exhaustion of those efforts: moments in which hope may turn to apathy, frustrated planning to disillusion, and imagination to fatigue" (Bryant and Knight 2019, 19). This seems to have become a common experience in autonomous spaces over the last decade. This dynamic of hope and disenchantment will be discussed in the remaining part of this chapter. The following section will dive into the relationship between anarchism and utopia through the notions of open-endedness and utopia as a process. The chapter will then close off with a consideration of what some people in the social centres have referred to as a "depletion of anarchism."

Utopia as a process

The relationship between anarchism and the future is complicated. Anarchism is often critiqued on being too idealistic because it requires the assumption that there is a goodness in

[41] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.

human nature which is not backed up by historical narratives (Amster 2009, 290). An anarchist future is therefore considered to be utopian and unrealistic. Yet this critique relies on a certain conception of what utopia entails.

According to Newman (2009, 208), the notion of utopia has an ideological function as it stigmatises alternative visions for society as unrealistic, naïve, or even dangerous. Through such stigmatisation, the notion of utopia puts limits on our imagination, narrowing people's horizons of possibilities. But what is often stigmatised is a conception of utopia as a static ideal, a perfect world based upon a single notion of truth. When we conceptualise utopia as an ideal future goal, it makes it not only unrealistic, but also incompatible with anarchism. The nature of anarchism does not allow for a fixed plan. Blueprints would not only defeat the whole notion of freedom and autonomy, but they would also be counterproductive because this set plan for the future "would already be poisoned by our own time and place," solely leading to a dystopian future according to Haiven and Khasnabish (2010, ix). As Dylan put it: "an important part of anarchism is that you can never be sure. Within anarchism, the focus is on the process rather than the product.[42] Therefore, it would be more productive to think of the notion of utopia not as a fixed state, but as a way of conducting action. As Marshall (2009, xvi) puts it: "The anarchist utopia is not the closed space of a perfect society but engages in constant struggle against protean forms of domination, hierarchy and exploitation. It is the active creation of a more generous, loving and free society. It operates in the present tense."

Maybe the relationship between anarchism and the future does not have to be so complicated after all. Utopian thinking can essentially be considered a way to achieve process. It requires us to be creative and break away from restraints put on our imagination by capitalist ideology (Davis 2009b, 74). This allows us to better distinguish what is truly impossible, and what is only considered impossible because they are framed that way by institutions (Davis 2009a, 2). During an interview, Alan noted that while utopia seems unreachable, the struggle we engage in towards achieving it is productive.[43] Conner noted that in his vision of the future, he likes to focus on "a communal horizon of a utopian future," because he felt that this is the most productive way to approach the future for him.[44] By applying utopianism in the present, it becomes "a form of politics that affirms a kind of radical disruption of the current order through the invoking of the idea of an alternative, without at the same time setting out what this alternative actually is." (Newman 2009, 216). It

[42] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.
[43] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.
[44] Interview with Conner, 03-03-2023.

can therefore be argued that the self-managed social centres create "utopian modes of interaction" through the principles such as horizontality, cooperation, and solidarity (Gordon 2008, 41). But for some people in the social centres, utopian thinking has become more difficult as we have progressed into the 2010s and the 2020s. Contemporary challenges to utopian thinking in the social centres will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

The depletion of anarchism

A number of people in the three social centres felt like anarchism as a movement is dying out, something that Luke and Nigel referred to as the "depletion of anarchism."[45] This depletion was placed within a larger trend of resistance against the state dying down.[46] Conner noted that in comparison to similar spaces in other countries, the different social centres in London are inadequate in what they have to offer.[47] According to Patrick, there is no real anarchist or squatting movement in London anymore, compared to twenty years ago. He also argued that contemporary movements have forgotten the "politics of the streets." In London, people do not come together locally. Patrick argued that the street should be an emotional site, where people get together and display joy and playfulness in political action. He identified the neoliberal city to be the cause of the lack of ownership over the streets.[48] Multiple people furthermore identified the 2010 student protests to be the last proper display of anarchistic resistance in the United Kingdom. The depletion of anarchism after this moment was ascribed to a variety of different factors.

First of all, squatting and protesting laws have become stricter over the past decades. An important law change was the criminalisation of squatting in 2012, whereby squatting residential buildings became illegal. According to Patrick, this had a huge impact on the squatting milieu in the city, which has started to die down to a certain extent.[49] Multiple people in the social centres furthermore argued that government response through police mobilisation against protests, or just radical politics of any sort, has increased. Throughout the years, laws have been passed that have made protests more difficult, such as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which allows police to crack down on protests that are considered disruptive (UK government 2021). Furthermore, at the end of my fieldwork

[45] Fieldnotes, 08-02-2023.
[46] Interview with Patrick, 09-03-2023.
[47] Interview with Conner, 03-03-2023.
[48] Interview with Patrick, 09-04-2023.
[49] Fieldnotes, 02-01-2023.

period, Extinction Rebellion was conducting big protests in Westminster from April 21st to April 24th, the Public Order Act 2023 was passed, which limited protest rights even further (UK government 2023). Vanessa explained that she spent her twenties marching and protesting, but now groups lack the ability or initiative to create radical change, which she partly attributed to the passing of laws that restrict people's rights. But she also feels that people have given up.[50]

Multiple interlocutors argued there has been some disillusionment among the anarchist milieu, as well as within the wider scope of Left movements. A consequence was the deterioration of the radical imagination. While some people did not know what to blame for the recent lack in morale, during conversations, two different processes came to the fore. The first was the Spy Cops scandal, which entailed undercover police infiltration in mainly progressive and leftwing groups in the UK between 1968 and 2010, amongst which in the anarchist milieu (Evans 2023). This created a lot of distrust in anarchist spaces, and lead to people getting disheartened.[51] The second factor that was considered a cause of disillusionment was Corbyn's campaign as the leader of the Labour Party in 2015. He managed to win over many people on the political Left, including some anarchists (Kinna 2019, 8). Among these people was Dylan, who was convinced by Corbyn's campaign after he found a video of David Graeber, who said that he felt that Corbyn was the first politician with an idea of the world that Graeber would be okay living in. Dylan decided to get involved, but this ended up setting his faith in politics back. Dylan saw bureaucracy, unfair compromise, and the dampening down of ideas just to get them to parliament. Unlike some others who were disillusioned, Dylan ended up coming back to anarchism through his preference for getting things done through a Do-It-Yourself perspective.[52]

In addition, London's anarchist movement has declined in numbers due to gentrification, which is a huge problem for London's marginalised communities, including the communities that make up the three social centres.[53] Some people who used to participate in the spaces have furthermore moved out of London due to just wanting a better life.[54] Furthermore, part of the older generation of anarchist who got involved in the 50s and 60s have passed away in recent years. Luke noted that the research project should have happened

[50] Interview with Vanessa, 06-04-2023.
[51] Fieldnotes, 08-03-2023.
[52] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.
[53] Fieldnotes, 02-03-2023.
[54] Interview with Patrick, 09-03-2023.

about five to ten years earlier.[55] Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic had a big impact on the social centres. Because the spaces could not be opened much throughout the pandemic, it became more difficult to pay the bills. Two of the social centres furthermore expressed that getting the number of visitors back from before the pandemic is a slow process. Luke estimated that it would take another year at the very least.

A last factor said to have had a negative influence on anarchism is social media. When the internet first became more widespread, anarchists were able to use its tools to organise better and communicate more efficiently.[56] The present focus on the internet however is seen as taking away opportunities for meeting face-to-face. Meeting up in a physical space enables people to feel grounded.[57] This furthermore allows for people to meet people they normally would not reach out to, thus leaving space open for spontaneous encounters and organisation.[58]

The depletion of anarchism has created the sense of being in a crisis within a crisis. Anarchism is already involved in a historical struggle against different systems of oppression, and now the movement is also struggling internally. Burnout is not uncommon among activists (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 127), a topic which came to light on numerous occasions during participant observation. On multiple occasions, Luke noted that activist burnout was a serious problem among the anarchist milieu, caused by people taking on too much at the same time, which then jeopardizes long-term progress.[59] All these factors burden the radical imagination. An important part of the ability to imagine a different world is the ability to be engaged in the never-ending fight for this different world, or "the ability to live between those worlds and this one" (Ibid., 130). This is a constant process of working towards a different future, even if progress is very slow. This will be the topic of the next chapter.

[55] Fieldnotes, 21-02-2023.
[56] Fieldnotes, 22-02-2023.
[57] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.
[58] Fieldnotes, 17-02-2023.
[59] Fieldnotes, 29-03-2023.

Chapter 3

Prefiguring a society based upon care

"It doesn't matter when we build this new society. Whether we do it now or during an apocalypse. It's still going to be a better future than a capitalist world," Alan argued during an interview. Alan wishes for a world with a lot of rest, a focus on nature, and in which people are protected and their disabilities are honoured. Alan tries to integrate these ideals for a better future in their everyday life: by "demonstrating how change can happen." They have been involved in projects to protect workers, as well as mutual aid projects. Here and there, Alan gives a little time to different radical spaces and projects. This is their way of making a change.[60] Alan describes their approach to the future to be demonstrating how change is made. What they do is enacting their vision for the future in the present. More specifically, in their everyday life, Alan is prefiguring a world of care.

This chapter will discuss the future in the three self-managed social centres as something embodied in the self-managed social centres through prefiguration. The first part of the chapter will set out what prefiguration entails, and how it relates to the different motivation behind the practices and activities conducted in the social centres. The second part of the chapter will make a case for considering the three social centres as spaces of care, where different visions for the future are prefigured through practices and relationships built on the notion of care.

Prefiguration and anarchism

> People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints – such people have a corpse in their mouth. (Vaneigem [1983] 2001, 26)

In the quote above, Vaneigem places the everyday at the heart of revolution. Social change does not always happen in big and violent revolution. We should not underestimate the role of

[60] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.

the everyday in transforming society, at least on a small scale. The following section will set out the concept of prefiguration, and why it fits well within anarchism.

Prefiguration without a plan

The notion of prefiguration has become a popular term amongst social movement research (e.g., Yates 2015b). The term was first coined by Boggs (1977, 7), who defines it as "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal." Prefiguration entails enacting an imagined alternative or future world in the present, "as though it has already been achieved" (Yates 2015b, 4). Thereby it removes the temporal distinction between present-day struggle and future goals (Maeckelbergh 2011, 4).

Krøijer (2015, 26) points out that within anthropology, prefiguration has most importantly been considered in the context of the alter-globalisation movement (e.g., Graeber 2009a; Juris 2008; Maeckelbergh 2009). For example, Graeber (2009a, 512) describes how people in the global justice movement work with "a different set of assumptions about what's really real," or what he calls a "political ontology of the imagination" (ibid.). The direct action of protest, demonstrations and occupations that flow forth out of the radical imagination have a prefigurative element: "those who carry out a direct action are insisting on their right to act as if they are already free" (Ibid., 433). This approach to direct action as prefiguration is very useful in understanding how activists relate to the future. However, since it is focused on the more explicit and visible types of activism, such as protests, strikes, and occupations, it leaves the question of how prefiguration takes shape in the self-managed social centres, which are situated more in the implicit and the everyday. Therefore, this research takes on a broad approach to prefiguration. In this, I follow Franks (2006, 115) who considers direct action to be "practical prefigurative activity carried out by subjugated groups in order to lessen or vanquish their oppression." Prefiguration then becomes direct action aimed at resisting oppression. This conceptualisation of prefiguration goes beyond explicit acts of activism by including alternative lifestyles and methods of community-building (Fians 2022, 11). As Vincent aptly put it: "You can't expect one day for somebody to do the revolution for us. People need to know how to do things – care, cook, fix pipes, fix lights."[61] This way, he frames (everyday) skills as part of "the revolution."

[61] Interview with Vincent, 01-04-2023.

This understanding of prefiguration is useful for understanding the activities of self-managed social centres because it allows for open-endedness in shaping the future by focusing on the everyday practices and strategies used to contest the power relations we live under (Ibid., 1). Prefiguration calls for a different world that is not predetermined, but instead developed through experimentation, making prefiguration a theory "that theorizes through action, through *doing*" (Maeckelbergh 2011, 3). In this context, the social centres can be regarded as "petri dishes," as Luke phrased it.[62] Essential for prefiguration then is cooperation, as "social change is a continuous process for which everyone is responsible" (Ibid., 15).

Prefiguration comes in many different forms. Prefigurative practices "are pragmatic and local, as no ultimate or universal ground for 'the good' exists" (Franks 2006, 114). Similarly, Maeckelbergh (2016, 122) conceptualises prefiguration as "an embodied process of reimagining all of society – and as such the specific practice of prefiguration is different every time and in each place that it is enacted." The result is that every social centre provides in their own way a "sense of the alternative in a material and practiced way."[63] Therefore, it would be useful to consider utopian prefigurative practices as a spectrum, leading to a plethora of prefigurative practices among activism (Kinna 2016, 209-210). On this spectrum of utopian prefiguration, self-managed social centres fall under the types of "utopias that prioritize psychologies of action" which "revolve around the creation of autonomous spaces and the transformation of everyday social relationships" (Ibid., 210). What this transformation looks like will be discussed next.

Prefiguration and intentionality

Ethics are a central part of anarchism. According to Franks (2006, 97) anarchist activists often assess the actions of both themselves and of their opponents through in ethical terms, both consciously and unconsciously. The result is that the means tend to reflect the ends (Ibid., 114). Central to the prefigurative ethic of anarchism is autonomy (Ibid., 107). As Fians (2022, 7) points out, "giving voice to the 99% starts with empowering activists individually, by placing autonomy at the core ideal-typical prefigurative politics." The organisational practices of the social centres, such as self-management, direct action, horizontal decision-making, and voluntary association, make room for this individual autonomy. But prefiguration goes

[62] Interview with Luke, 15-03-2023.
[63] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.

beyond the organisational structures of the spaces. The social centres are locations where individual and collective goals come together, therefore prefiguring a myriad of different futures on both the individual and the collective level.

This raises the question of the role of prefiguration in individuals' participation in the space. It is easy to state that the collectives of the social centres are prefiguring an alternative way of organisation or community-building in their collective efforts, but do all individuals in the spaces approach their participation this way? During both interviews and participant observation, it became apparent that not everybody actively takes the future into account in their everyday lives, let alone in their participation in the social centres. For example, when Vanessa was asked the question whether she takes the future into consideration in her everyday life, she chuckled and responded, "that's a weird question!" After a moment of silence, she said that she does not actively shape the future.[64] Others were concerned with the future, but explained that they were not good at taking it into consideration in their everyday lives.[65] Patrick as such explained that his working-class status and lack of funds prevent him from making plans for the future.[66] But there were also people who do actively connect their participation in the social centres or other activities in their everyday lives to their visions for the future. One example of this can be found in the following excerpt from an interview with Vincent:

> Vincent said that many of his actions are aligned with his idea about what the future should look like. For example, he believes that his current job would still be a useful job if we lived in a different system. He wants to train for things that can improve the world we live in. He likes to pick up stuff from the streets, so that he can build with it. He doesn't really buy much besides food. And even that he sometimes gets from the streets. He likes to garden and grow vegetables. This makes him less reliant on the supermarkets' monopoly on food. He also bikes. But this is not only because of his values. It is also because he doesn't have money for the tube. Biking is cheap, fast, and gives him the freedom to go wherever he wants to go. He gardens because he loves caring for plants. These are small radical acts, but he doesn't want to sell it like that. He also does bad things, such as eating meat and smoking weed. He moved to a

[64] Interview with Vanessa, 06-04-2023.
[65] Interview with Conner, 03-03-2023; Interview with Patrick, 09-03-2023.
[66] Interview with Patrick, 09-03-2023.

> neighbourhood he originally wasn't from. And he could do more organising in his spare time.[67]

In this interview, Vincent explained that his everyday activities, such as biking, gardening, and cooking with saved food, align with his idea of how everyday life should look like in a better future society. Thus, he is prefiguring ideals for the future in the present. This furthermore highlights the relationship between political participation and everyday life, as Vincent illustrates how his everyday activities are infused with political meaning (Yates 2015a, 238). However, Vincent also raises the question of whether we can his everyday actions to be prefiguration if the future is not the sole determinant of his decision to live his life this way. For example, he explained that his choice to bike or to reuse items also fits better with his budget, and his decision to garden is motivated the enjoyment he takes from it. He also adds that not all aspects of his everyday life decisions fit within what he considers to be ethical praxis, such as eating meat or relaxing a bit more instead of politically organising.

In this light, it is important that we consider prefiguration to be more than just a strategy or a method. Instead, I approach prefiguration as a tendency, that emerges when an ethical framework based upon anarchist principles is implemented either as a strategy, or as an approach to everyday life. Taking ethics seriously in how we live our lives and build our communities results in a natural alignment of means and ends. The main intention behind prefigurative practices therefore does not have to be prefiguration in itself. As Yates (Ibid., 247) found in his research on prefiguration amongst social centres in Barcelona, the first reason given for undertaking an activity is likely to be the practical benefits. But activities can at the same time still be embedded in a political discourse (Ibid.). Prefiguration therefore allows us to consider how the everyday obtains a political meaning, especially for those who integrate an anarchistic ethical framework into their everyday lives. Ethics are central to the existence and practices of the social centres, as well as to the communities that make use of the spaces. This results in both active attempts to prefigure an alternative society on a small scale, and a more passive or unconscious tendency to align means with ends. The ensuing prefigurative practices of the social centres embody a variety of different futures that are centred around anarchist principles and, what I will argue in the remaining part of this chapter, around relationships of care.

[67] Interview with Vincent, 01-04-2023.

Spaces of care

> Anarchy: the word itself seems to stir a visceral reaction. Perhaps terrifying images of rudderless chaos or a world of brute force and pointless destruction spring to mind. Or perhaps one might think of quite the opposite: harmony between free agents, and human needs met through a multiplicity of voluntary associations. Horror or romance, either way, the word provokes a kind of explicitness about what one imagines humans to be at core: what they are capable of, prone to, and require. (High 2012, 93)

As High points out, anarchism is a loaded label. In media, it has often been likened to chaos and violence, built upon the assumption that authority is necessary to keep people safe. However, this research perceived of anarchism in a social sense, which is based upon a very different view of the nature of people. In the remaining part of this chapter, I will argue that the underlying belief that propels people to find solidarity in London's self-managed social centres is that at the end of the day, we all need care, and we are capable of caring for each other. Care will be considered as central to the restructuring of the social relationships upon which society is built, and it is enacted through a variety of practices. The following section will frame care as a central notion upon which the social centres are built. After, the chapter will end with a discussion of why care as practiced in the social centres can be considered something radical, by contrasting relationships of care with relationships under capitalism.

Building caring communities

The previous chapter discussed how, in the three social centres, the orientations of expectation and anticipation mostly entailed a negative and fearful approach to the future. People envisioned an undesired and dangerous future, whereby the social centres were considered spaces of potentiality and hope, enacted through resistance. Whereas people anticipated a society of exacerbating crises, they also had hope that things would change and that they could build up something new. Prefiguration combines these two aspects: resistance against domination and the working towards something more positive. Nevertheless, the main focus of prefiguration is the positive side, of building up a new society according to "utopian social relations" (Yates 2015a, 236).

The focus on rebuilding social relations requires us to rethink what falls under the realm of politics. A useful approach for this is provided by Heckert (2019, 132) who wants to turn away from a focus on "politics *as tactic*," instead focusing on "politics *as*

relationship." According to Heckert (Ibid., 135), anarchism "offers something *other* than a politics of representation, normativity, and policing;" instead on speaking for other people, anarchists aim to speak for themselves. This requires sensitivity, calmness, and the ability to listen both to ourselves and to others (Ibid., 136). Practicing freedom requires us to move away from egocentrism (Ibid.). This means taking each other seriously in our concerns. For example, during an afternoon of digging through one of the social centres' archives, I asked Patrick what his favourite part of it is. He chuckled and after a moment of silence responded that he likes everything. I then asked whether that means that all topics are interesting to him. The archive contains tens of thousands of items relating to radical movements worldwide, and I was doubtful that Patrick would seriously be interested in all topics represented. Hesitantly he said "well, no, but it's all important."[68]

The self-managed social centres are hubs for communities to come together and put relationships of solidarity and care in practice. During an interview, Owen was especially vocal about this aspect of the social centre. He explained that the space is about "individuals helping each other, providing care in such a careless and individualistic world." Instead of dehumanising people who do not succeed in the society, the space is about providing support and treating others kindly.[69] Alan similarly vouched for the need to rehabilitate people, instead of shaming them for their circumstances.[70] This points towards certain assumptions about human nature. Within anarchism, domination is often expressed through the notion of *systems* or *regimes* of domination, which regulate relationships through sets of rules (Gordon 2008, 33). Thus, systems of domination are considered the overarching context that anarchists see as conditioning people's socialisation and background assumptions about social norms, explaining why people *fall into* certain patterns of behaviour and have expectations that contribute to the perpetuation of dominatory relations" (Ibid.). In this context, the social centres provide people with "nurturing spaces that facilitate the self-realisation of individuals and provide them with a self-created environment for overcoming alienation and entrenched oppressive behaviours." (Ibid., 56).

There are a number of ways in which care is embodied in the three social centres. First of all, sharing resources plays an essential role in supporting and caring for each other. Meals are shared on a pay-what-you-can basis, and if somebody does not have the means to pay for their meal, they can take it free of charge, no questions asked. Libraries and archives are open

[68] Fieldnotes, 13-04-2023.
[69] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.
[70] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.

for anybody that wants to use them, creating a free circulation of information. Money obtained by the social centres through the items they sell or the donations they receive are purely for keeping the spaces going, and not for profit. Therefore, the social relationships in the social centres are built upon providing the communities that use them with resources and support outside of capitalism.

Second, care is found the ways that people interact with the physical environment of the spaces. For example, people take care of libraries, archives, and other materials that represent different struggles throughout history. These materials function as ways to connect with and inspire each other. Furthermore, gardening can be considered care, because it literally requires people to talk care of plants which in turn can be used to care for the community as nourishment, as well as a meal to bond over. Taking care of the resources and materials used in the spaces furthermore illustrate how the social centres move away from capitalism:

> While drying off the washed mugs, I notice that many of them are chipped. I grab a new mug to dry off and notice that the handle has a crack. Carefully I wiggle the handle to assess whether it is still sturdy or not. The movement emits a scrapy noise. Unsure of what to do, I turn to Susan and show the break. "It's broken, do you think it's still sturdy enough to keep?" Susan grabs the mug and also wiggles it before rotating and inspecting it further. She takes one last look at the crack and then smilingly says "yeah, I think so. I rather like this mug!" before carefully putting it in the appropriate storage box.[71]

The vignette describes how Susan displayed care in the way she interacted with the damaged mug. To her, it was not just a broken mug that should be thrown away; instead, it was a mug that was still functioning, and one she found nice even. A similar story was told in another social centre. While sitting on the couch, as Conner did every time I visited the space, he explained how a couple of years ago the other members of the collective wanted to replace the couch. But he liked the couch so much he vouched for it to stay. Years later, he still enjoys the old and slightly worn-out couch. People in the social centres showed a concern with making the most out of the resources accessible to them. The objects and materials that are used in the social centres are sourced in a variety of ways, ranging from buying or thrifting to receiving them as gifts or picking up discarded items from the streets. When items were no longer

[71] Fieldnotes, 16-03-2023.

needed, people asked around and sent out messages in group chats to find a new home for them. As mentioned in the last section, prefiguration does not have to be the sole or even the main intention behind undertaking a prefigurative action. Taking care of the resources that are available to the social centres is also just plainly necessary because the spaces often lack the funds to invest in new resources. But there is certainly an important anti-capitalist aspect to it. Breaking free from the idea that everything needs to be new and in perfect condition allows people to use what they have at their disposal, making them a little less dependent on the market economy. In this sense, everyday practices of care can lead to greater autonomy for the social centres.

"Is being nice to people really prefiguration?"

One time I was discussing the topic of prefiguration with Patrick. He noted that yes, we might be trying to prefigure something here. But he also had his doubts: can being nice to other people really be considered prefiguration?[72]

In order to answer this question, I want to turn to Milstein (2014, 4-5), who argues for embracing our imperfections, and focusing on how to make "better mistakes" through "the commitment to always grow." What we need for this are social relations based upon empathy and dialogue (Ibid., 5). This would make spaces that are *truly social* (Ibid., 7). With this, Milstein (Ibid.) recalls her experiences entering spaces that have the tag of being a social space but meet visitors with blank or even hostile glances. This dynamic leads to "missed connections" and lacks solidarity and care (Ibid., 8). By referring to the missed connections of radical social spaces, Milstein (Ibid., 7-8) argues that the potentiality of many of these spaces to create social relations that can actually lead to social transformation is not realised.

During participant observation, I often felt this real sociality that Milstein calls for. While some people were apprehensive to my research, understandably so, most people were very open and welcoming. When meeting new people, they would often ask me how I found the space, which gave me the perfect opportunity to explain my research project to them. Quite some people were open and vulnerable in their conversations with me as well as with each other. People made the effort to ask each other questions and listen to each other. It became clear that the three self-managed social centres were spaces where people can make deep connections.[73] These feelings were shared by Adam. When asked what the social centre

[72] Fieldnotes, 13-04-2023.
[73] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.

means to him, he summarised the following: love, solidarity, community, hope, home, family, and a place to be safe. Adam noted that he has a long commute to get to the space, and then jokingly said that I should write that down, because it shows that he is committed. [74] But his love for, and commitment to, the social centre showed itself in the way he acted around the space: joyful, excited, caring, and understanding. For Adam, the social centre was a home, but I felt that he played an important part in this by bringing the feeling of home with him. It was clear that Adam deeply cared for the community, and that he also felt cared for by the others.

Thus, I answer Patrick's question with yes: being friendly can be considered prefiguration in the social centres. The people in the social centres provide friendliness in a non-commercialised manner (Ibid., 8), which enables people to make connections that would otherwise be missed. This way, people build up communities which are not dependent on capitalist exchange, but instead on care and reciprocity. The social centres are spaces where people learn how to "build networks of care."[75] And through creating alternative models for care, people are able to become more autonomous within the community.[76] How this autonomy-building takes place became clear to me after I was added to the group chat of one of the social centres. People would send call-outs when someone in the community was in need of help, or announce when they became aware of resources that someone in the community might get use out of such as free items to pick up. If there is an immigration raid somewhere in London, chances are that the group receives an urgent callout asking people to come support. The group chat also illustrated how connected this particular social centre was to other groups and spaces in London; regularly, someone would relay an event from another group, inviting people from the social centre to come join. Thus, the networks of care that are created in the social centres extend beyond the physical spaces.

In their research on women of colour activists against austerity in the UK, Emejulu and Bassel (2018, 114) posit care as a radical act: "*To care about Others* requires the development of a political imagination that takes seriously the lived experiences of the most marginalized." Similarly, in the social centres, building up networks of care requires of people to step away from the commercialisation and individualisation of care, and reframe practices of care as communities taking care of each other autonomously. Through relationships of care, people in the social centres challenge normative ideas about living under neoliberalism while simultaneously building up new political subjectivities (Ibid., 115). Therefore, in the context

[74] Interview with Adam, 13-04-2023.
[75] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.
[76] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.

of these social centres, care can be considered prefiguration (Ibid.). And while the social centres are prefigurating a variety of alternative visions for the future, they have in common that these prefigurations come down to the desire for "a world of joy, art, love, beauty, friends," as Dylan explained.[77] The social centre that he participates in, emits this feeling especially well:

> It is my last night in London, and I decided to treat myself to a pizza to cope with the weird feeling of leaving the field. Tired but content, I walk to the bus stop holding the pizza in front of me. I pass by one of the social centres that I have been spending the last three months in, and I observe it one last time before leaving the area. People are sitting on the roof, chatting and laughing. More people come up the roof to join them, bringing with them what looks to be bottles of beer. The group seems especially joyful today, and I wish I was a part of it. I am filled with both joy and sadness, as I realise that I will be leaving it all behind tomorrow.

The vignette illustrates my mixed feelings about going home after finishing my fieldwork. Although I had not been able to build strong relationships with people in the social centres, I had enjoyed spending my time in the spaces a lot. It felt nice knowing that I could partake in spaces where people put in the effort to care for each other and to show solidarity. In the social centres, people shared with each other, learned from each other, and enjoyed each other's company. The vignette also illustrates what Milstein (2014, 11) refers to as "slowness" in creating social relationships that stand "in contrast to the high-speed, high-tech sensibility that feels like it increasingly produced isolation." For example, at the social centre described above, dinners would often be an hour later than intended because people took their time making a nice meal while at the same time enjoying each other's company and making conversation. In all three social centres, there were plenty of moments of just sitting down and talking with each other, without being in a hurry to get something done. In this way, the social centres can be considered slow and steady spaces of pedagogy, that contrast with the fast-paced activism that happens on the outside.

An anarchist approach to everyday life helps us refocus on the "off-moments" that capitalism does not account for. These are the moments not governed by capital, but instead by our needs and our desires (Branson 2022, 64). An anarchist approach to everyday life allows for the mindfulness to put care back into our daily activities. It is about taking care of

[77] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.

each other, our needs, our desires, in a do-it-yourself manner. Although the social centres definitely were ready to work hard and take action where needed, many of the moments I spent in the spaces were moments of slowness and care. These moments should not be underestimated in their ability to create strong community bonds and autonomous networks of care. It is through these moments that the social centres prefigure an autonomous future.

Conclusion

Care as the embodiment of an autonomous future

This thesis explored the ways in which the future is approached in three self-managed social centres in London, the United Kingdom. A social conceptualisation of anarchism was taken as a starting point for understanding the practices and ethics of the three self-managed social centres in London. Although the radical imagination of the social centres goes beyond anarchism, and the social centres themselves do not always necessarily use the label of anarchism, they embody what Walter ([2002] 2019, xxii) calls the "anarchist temperament" through their organisational principles. The three social centres are very different but at the same time represent similar ethics and values, embodied in their practices.

This research happened during an inconvenient time, according to my interlocutors. People sensed that London's anarchist milieu, including the self-managed social centres that are part of it, are in a crisis within a crisis. This context makes the future an especially interesting notion to explore at the moment. As people become discouraged and protest against systems of oppression declines, it is important to consider how this affects future-making practices among radical movements. Figuring out how people are able to retain hope in this context can help rebuild these movements in their fight for a more just world.

Following Bryant and Knight's (2019) framework, I applied the orientations of expectation, anticipation, potentiality and hope to explore the ways in which the future is approached by people in the three social centres. The overarching sense of being in a constant (exacerbating) crisis means that the future becomes characterized by uncertainty (Ibid., 43). This was visible in the different expectations and anticipations that people had for the future. In the case of expectation, which is reliant upon knowledge and experience from the past (Bryant and Knight 2019, 28), people would call upon past struggles and connect them to the present, as well as their expectations for the future. The orientation of anticipation, which pulls the future into the present through the feelings and sensations it calls upon, cannot rely upon the past, thus it functions through uncertainty. Participation in the social centres was framed as something positive to look back upon when anticipated disaster has struck.

Even though expectations and anticipations were generally negative, these feelings were countered by the potentiality of the social centres, and the moments of hope that they provided. The self-managed social centres functioned as spatiotemporalities of hope (Ibid.,

153), which stood in connection to other bubbles of hope on the outside, such as protests and occupations. However, the uncertainty that the sense of crisis creates resulted in generalised statements about the hope that change is possible. But this lack of detail can also be ascribed to anarchism's commitment to open-endedness.

By applying the notion of prefiguration, it comes clearer how hope for the future functions in the social centres. Prefiguration entails the embodiment of a desired future in the present (Boggs 1977, 7). What this comes down to is putting the radical imagination to work by considering ideals for future society to be possible in the present. The radical imagination is social process built upon shared values and ideas about realities (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 4). Therefore, in the social centres, prefiguration entails the collective efforts to put a shared ethical framework into practice, leading to ideals being realised on a small-scale in the present. While resisting the status quo is a part of prefiguration, the importance lies in the fact that this is done through the attempt to build up something alternative to replace what is deemed unsatisfactory. So, what exactly is it that the social centres are prefiguring? This brings us to the main research question of this thesis:

How is the future approached and embodied through prefigurative politics in self-managed social centres in London?

In order to answer this, we must return to the basic values and principles upon which the social centres are built. Social anarchism as the demand for freedom and equality requires us to not only speak up for ourselves, but also listen to others (Heckert 2019, 136). True equality cannot be achieved without letting go of egocentrism and without taking seriously the struggles of others (Ibid.). This conceptualisation of anarchism puts care at the heart of the sort of society that is being prefigured in the social centres. The self-managed social centres are community hubs that enable people to come together and put relationships of care and solidarity into practice. In the spaces, relationships are built not because of their exchange value, but because they provide people with the ability to become more autonomous from structures of oppression through creating networks of care. This care is practiced in a myriad of ways, but the key to social transformation lies with the care in our everyday social relations (Milstein 2014, 7). This argument is not meant to undermine the calls for protests or revolutions in their ability to create transformation. But on the level of the social centres, community-building is central to social transformation.

The type of care that is provided in the social centres stand in contrast to care under capitalism. Instead of care being commercialised, as well as individualised, it is practiced in

the form of communities becoming more autonomous from this together by taking care of each other. The moments of care I witnessed in the three social centres were moments of "slowness" (Ibid., 11). These moments are not governed by the demands of capital, but instead by our own needs and desires (Branson 2022, 64). It is through these moments of care that the collectives of the social centres practice autonomy. Thus, to answer the research question, through prefigurative practices that take place on the level of the everyday, the three self-managed social centres in London are prefiguring an autonomous future, in which people are not dependent on, or at the mercy of, authority, but instead supported through collective practices of care.

Recommendations for further research

The future is such a complex topic and can be approached in many different ways. The scope of this research was not broad enough to take into account all different ways in which the future is approached and embodied. For future research, it would be useful to better take into consideration the role of the past in the ways that people approach the future, as I called for in the preface.

Additionally, it needs to be noted that out of the ten interviews conducted, only one was with a woman, and another with a nonbinary person. This will most definitely have had impact on the data obtained. The same goes for the fact that only one interviewee was not white. It would be good for future research to seek out a more diverse sample of voices as to not overlook certain struggles or experiences.

There was furthermore little room left for a consideration of the different struggles that influence how individuals approach the future. The focus lied on how the collective worked towards something positive. I think this would be a useful lens that could supplement the findings of this research project.

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Appendix 1: My own zine

This appendix contains a zine that I made to complement the thesis. It offered me a more creative and affective way of engaging with the research findings. The zine attached below is only suited for electronic viewing. A printable version of the zine will be provided to the three self-managed social centres in addition to the thesis and the digital zine.

Prefiguring anarchy:
self-managed social centres as spaces of care

Summary of MSc research project, based upon three months of ethnographic fieldwork in three social centres in London

2023

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MSc Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

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About

This zine was made as part of the MSc degree program *Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship* at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. It contains a summary of the research findings of the thesis, which is the final product of the research project.

The aim of this research is to explore how the future is approached and embodied in self-managed social centres in London. During three months of ethnographic fieldwork, I participated in three undisclosed self-managed social centres. Methods include participant observation, semi-structured interviews, analysis of diverse materials present in the social centres, and auto-ethnography.

The research question is as follows:

How is the future approached and embodied through prefigurative politics in self-managed social centres in London?

I chose to make a zine to compliment my thesis in order to engage with my research findings in a more creative and affective way. This zine also provides an accessible way to share a summary of the research findings to those who participated in the study.

I am incredibly grateful for all the kind people who made me feel welcome in the social centres and guided me in both my research and my personal journey into anarchism. The fieldwork period felt like a rite of passage into anarchism. Connecting with people who have similar values and opinions has helped me articulate a part of my identity that has always been there, hidden beneath the surface.

NB: All names used in this zine are pseudonyms.

Anarchism and self-managed social centres

This research is based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork in three self-managed social centres in London, the UK. The three social centres, which will remain confidential, are very different from each other in terms of how they are run, and what types of activities they are used for. Self-managed social centres are therefore defined as physical nodes in activist networks which provide people with diverse activities, resources, and services, depending on the specific space.[1] Although social centres do not always use the label of anarchism, they are generally organised according to anarchist principles,[2] such as self-management, horizontal decision-making, direct action, and voluntary association. Therefore, anarchism is here used as a framework through which to understand the existence and actions of the social centres.

Anarchism is a broad and contested concept. Even within the social centres we find dozens of different approaches. It feels most fitting to define anarchism by following Walter, who explains it to be the demand for freedom and equality, the two of which can be considered two sides of the same coin.[3] This best describes the social aspect of anarchism which I found to be very prevalent during participant observation in the social centres. The focus of this research therefore lies on the implicit and the everyday aspects and relationships of anarchism.

In this sense, we can consider anarchism to be a label for something that many people already do: everyday ways of reframing how we live our lives, and of working towards greater autonomy for ourselves and others.[4] People or groups that work according to anarchist principles might not use the label, but still "embody the anarchist temperament."[5]

"…an anarchist society, a society which organises itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices, nationalism and its suicidal loyalties, religious differences and their superstitious separatism."
– Colin Ward (2008, 23)

The radical imagination

The radical imagination can be defined as the ability to collectively imagine a radically different world.[6] It is a broad concept that does not entail a specific belief or strategy, but instead concerns a general understanding that changing "the system" requires transforming the fundamental structure of the system itself.[7] Self-managed social centres are born out of the radical imagination, and in turn work to reproduce and fuel it.

The communities that make up self-managed social centres are very diverse.[8] Therefore, the centres represent a wide variety of radical imaginations. This goes way beyond just anarchism, encompassing a wide range of political orientations on the Left. During participant observation, there were multiple people who referred to the notion of "having good politics" as a way to vouch for people they knew but were not part of the spaces. The notion of good politics can be considered a way to delineate a common ground. While the communities that make up social centres have a wide variety of opinions and ideas, there are some basic values that allow people to get together and work towards common goals. These are mostly centred on the fight for greater autonomy, and therefore the fight against oppression.

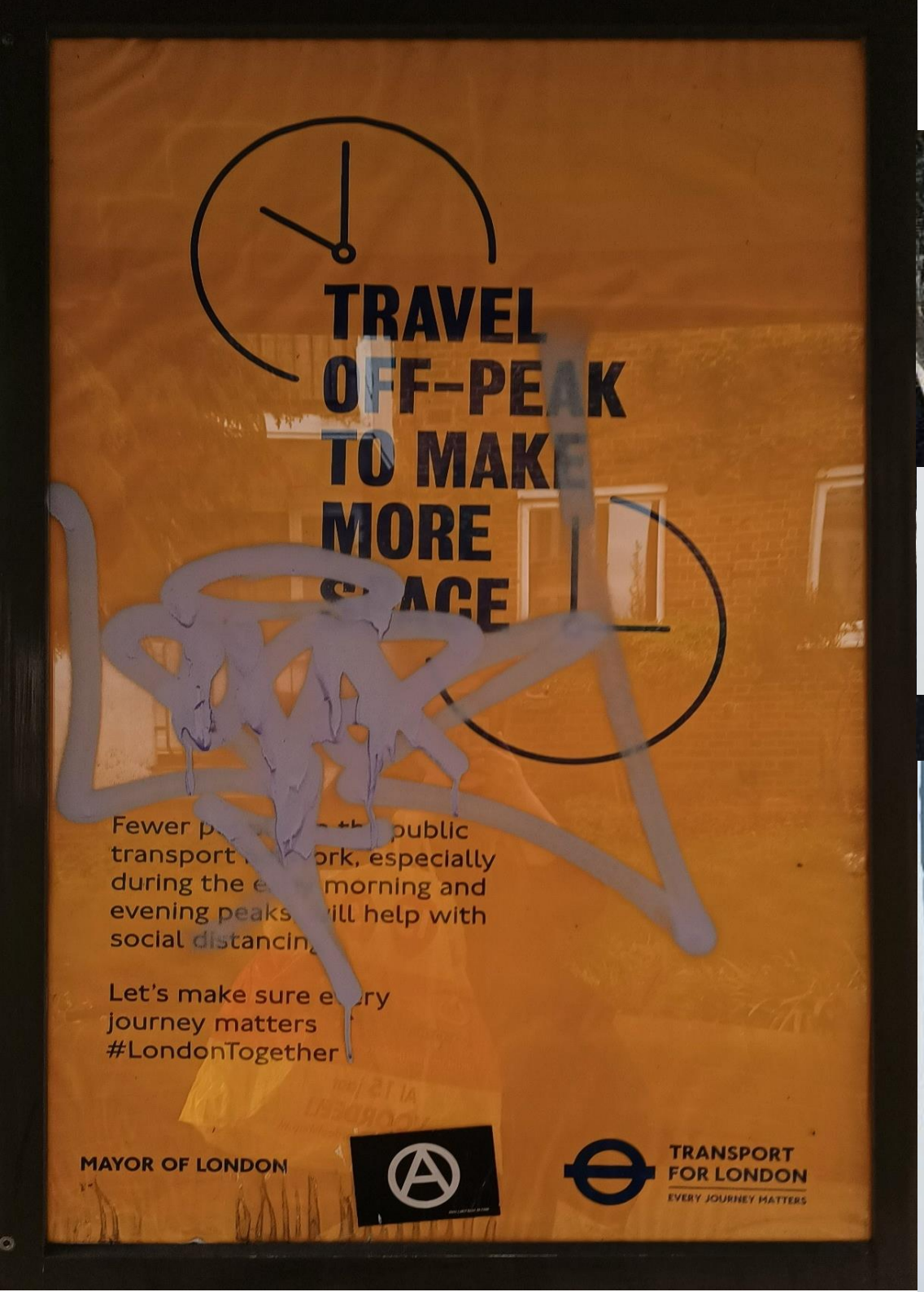
The radical imagination in not something the individual possesses; instead, it is something we share, formed through social processes such as sharing stories, ideas, experiences, theories, artwork, and a language.[9] The libraries and archives of the social centres are the clearest example of the radical imagination at work. These materials themselves represent many radical imaginations, and their presence in the spaces in turn fuel other people's radical imagination. Another way that the radical imagination is reproduced is through the conversations people have with each other.

Additionally, engaging in everyday activities in alternative ways is an important part of fuelling the radical imagination. As Luca pointed out to me during a conversation, the social centres show them that other ways of doing things are possible.[10] This way, the social centres work to broaden the horizon of possibilities.

An example of this re-imagining the everyday is given by Dylan's description of cooking in his particular social centre. He explains that food preparation happens communally, as well as improvised without a recipe, because they need to work with whatever ingredients they happen to have at hand. The meals are then eaten together with both members of the social centre and any other people who happen to come across it and want to join. The food is furthermore provided on a pay-what-you-can basis. Dylan explains that normally, food consumption happens in the private sphere of family or friends, or in a marketized and impersonal way such as in restaurants. The social centre offers a kinship way of sharing food outside of capitalism.[11]

People described the politics of the social centres in a variety of ways, such as "pro people,"[12] "sharing a belief in action,"[13] "anarchist,"[14] and "liberation politics."[15] What the full descriptions given by those participants have in common is that they are centred around the notion of autonomy, and they recognise that achieving this requires system change.

A walk from Brockley to New Cross



The future

It can be difficult to orient ourselves towards the future when it is filled with uncertainties, especially when the past and the present do not indicate positive things. This research focuses on the orientations of expectation, anticipation, potentiality, and hope. These orientations lead to different types of action taken in the present. One trend found among people in the social centres is that the orientations of anticipation and expectation form a counterweight to that of potentiality and hope.

First of all, expectation is an orientation that relies upon knowledge and experience from the past.[16] An example of a common expectation in the social centres was that the future would become more difficult than the present. For example, people expected past and present struggles for the survival of the social centres and related movements to continue and become worse in the future. These struggles include repression by authorities, internal conflicts, as well as more practical things such as paying rent or gaining access to resources.

Anticipation is similar to expectation, but instead of focusing on the past, it pulls the future into the present through the feelings and sensations it evokes.[17] A common anticipation was mentioned by participants was the sense of an impending climate crisis or disaster. The anxieties of climate change work to make the future be felt in the present. This furthermore led to a non-linear perception of present-day action, as Owen noted that when the climate disaster happens, he will have done everything in his power against it through his participation in the social centre. Thus, present-day action was perceived from the perspective of the anticipated worth of this action in the future.[18]

A third orientation is that of potentiality, which entails "the future's capacity to become future."[19] The potentiality found in the social centres takes place on two levels: materially and socially. On the one hand, the spaces have physical capacities; they can be reorganised to fit different purposes. They can be improved or broken down. But more importantly, the social centres are spaces where people can make connections and build social relationships. The social centres offer opportunities for building strong local ties, for participating in wider activist networks, or for random encounters to happen. Having a physical space for these connections is valuable, because it offers the opportunity for spontaneous organisation.[20] Some people furthermore talked about the potential of the different social centres: to be a lovely, nurturing space,[21] or to be the centre of more activist organising.[22]

In the gap between potential and the actual, hope emerges.[23] Many interviewees noted that even though they felt quite desperate at times, they still had hope left for a better future. The social centres were acknowledged to play an important role in fostering this hope. They are spaces that broaden the horizon of possibilities,[24] by showing that things can be done in a different way.

This was furthermore connected to moments of hope that have connections to the social centres but happen outside of them, such as protests and occupations.

In short, whereas expectation and anticipation tend to draw upon negative feelings, potentiality and hope form a counterweight, whereby social centres play a central role.

What does the future on your horizon look like?

Prefiguration through care

Blueprints do not fit within anarchism; instead, it is characterised by open-endedness, whereby the focus lies on the process rather than the product.[25] In order to investigate how orientations towards the future manifest in tangible practices, this research draws upon the notion of prefiguration. Boggs originally conceptualised prefiguration as "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal."[26] This requires that means and the ends align.[27]

Prefigurative practices "are pragmatic and local, as no ultimate or universal ground for 'the good' exists."[28] The result is that every social centre provides in their own way a "sense of the alternative in a material and practiced way."[29] In fact, the social centres are prefiguring a myriad of different futures on a small scale. Thus, we cannot speak of one single future being prefigured, even if we limit ourselves to one social centre in particular. Instead, it would be more useful to discuss what the different futures have in common.

Alternative visions for the future that permeate the social centres are focused on system change to create a society that is more ethical and just. This system change in turn requires rebuilding the social relations that form the foundation of society. Therefore, the types of social relations that make up the spaces are central to their prefigurative practices. The main argument that I want to make is that care is the driving force behind the prefigurative practices of the social centres.

The goal of freedom requires that the individual is able to practice their autonomy and speak for themselves. But when we remember that true freedom cannot be achieved without equality, it becomes clear that an important part of anarchism is the ability to listen to others.[30] Practicing freedom therefore requires sensitivity and calmness as well as moving away from egocentrism.[31]

Care is found in the organisational structures of the social centres, whereby horizontality and direct democracy are central. Furthermore, through creating networks of care,[32] people are able to support each other without state intervention, creating a small degree of autonomy for themselves. Care builds resilience, as people can turn to different spaces or communities when they need support. Care is also found in the way that people treat the physical space; in the way they clean, maintain, and decorate the social centres, for example. Care is visible when people use resources and materials for as long as they function, even if they are old or a bit cracked. Care is found in how people take care of plants and use them for the good of the community.

It needs to be noted that not all prefigurative actions come from a place of clear intention. For example, taking good care of the items in the social centres is also motivated by lack of funds to invest in new items. Therefore, prefiguration as aligning means and ends is something that can be an intended strategy, but also an unintended tendency.

The relationships of solidarity and care that are built in these spaces challenge normative ideas about living under neoliberalism.[33] As Owen put it: as the system fails, the space is about "individuals helping each other, providing care in such a careless and individualistic world."[34] This is what makes the types of care central in self-managed social centres radical.

Lastly, the social centres can be considered a counterpart to the more explicit and visible forms of activism outside of them, such as protests. They offer slow and steady spaces of pedagogy.[35] They are spaces that are not governed by capital, but instead by our needs and our desires.[36]

This is not to say that the social centres are not involved in the more explicit forms of anarchism. Although the focus of this research lies on the social and the everyday aspects of anarchism, this is just one part

of what the spaces are and do. Because the centres are nodes in broader activist networks, organising activism and building movements of resistance is an important part of the spaces. But when it comes to the direct prefigurative practices that happen within the social centres, I found relationships of care to play a central role. This way, care can be considered a radical practice through which a more autonomous and just future is enacted in the present on a small, local scale.

[1] Anita Lacey, "Social Centers and Activist Spaces in Contemporary Britain," *Space and Culture* 8, no. 3 (2005): 292.
[2] Ibid., 293.
[3] Nicolas Walter, *About Anarchism* (Oakland: PM Press, [1969] 2019), 5.
[4] Scott Branson, *Practical Anarchism: A Guide for Daily Life* (London: Pluto Press), 1.
[5] Natasha Walter, "Introduction to the 2002 Edition of *About Anarchism*, Nicolas Walter ([2002] 2019), xxii.
[6] Haiven, Max, and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 2-4.
[7] Ibid., 5.
[8] Interview with Vanessa, 06-04-2023; Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.
[9] Haiven and Khasnabish, *Radical Imagination*, 4.
[10] Fieldnotes, 12-04-2023.
[11] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.
[12] Interview with Adam, 13-04-2023.
[13] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.
[14] Interview with Luke, 15-03-2023.
[15] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.
[16] Bryant, Rebecca, and Daniel M. Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 28.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.
[19] Bryant and Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future,* 107.
[20] Fieldnotes, 17-02-2023.
[21] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.
[22] Interview with Luke, 15-03-2023.
[23] Bryant and Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future*, 134.
[24] Interview with Vincent, 01-04-2023.
[25] Interview with Dylan, 09-04-2023.

[26] Carl Boggs, "Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers' Control," *Radical America* 11, no. 6 (1977): 7.
[27] Benjamin Franks, *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2006), 97.
[28] Franks, *Rebel Alliances*, 114.
[29] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.
[30] Vishwam J. Heckert, "Loving Politics: On the Art of Living Together," In *The Anarchist Imagination: Anarchism Encounters the Humanities and the Social Sciences*, ed. Carl Levy and Saul Newman (New York: Routledge, 2019), 135.
[31] Heckert, "Loving Politics," 136.
[32] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.
[33] Emejulu, Akwugo, and Leah Bassel, "Austerity and the Politics of Becoming," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56 (2018): 114.
[34] Interview with Owen, 17-03-2023.
[35] Interview with Alan, 02-03-2023.
[36] Branson, *Practical Anarchism*, 64.