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a very bridgeable chasm?
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the mass of society despite the fact that we are not, after all, indentikit normative workers in boiler suits.

The second concluding point is that not being normal enough is probably not the main barrier most people have when they approach the left. Most of the left after all goes out of its way to present a not particularly honest impression of themselves as normal. The problem is that if you are happy with confirming to what is expected of you its quite likely that will extend beyond how you look, what you eat and the moral compass you use in relationships. It would be hard to isolate cause and effect but the decision not to be 'normal' is probably also a decision around how you will relate to private property, work discipline and 'knowing your place'. Outside of times of mass conflict the left has probably always been composed of the less 'normal' even if at times perhaps many acted normal for tactical reasons, just as some still do. It is not a desire to transgress the gender binary that is holding us back, is the weirdness of want to transgress the much more rigorously enforced economic rules & hierarchical power structures that form the bedrock of our society,

None of this is to deny that social centers are very capable of being deeply dysfunctional spaces but then that is true of any organisational method. Or that on their own what they can achieve is very limited but then we have discovered that to be true of even mass organisations like Trade Unions. Their value is really as part of an extensive toolbox of organisational methods. They have a role in organiser creation which produces organisers with different and in some respects more useful skills than some of the other methods the left more traditionally uses.

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bearded man in a skirt.' It would be interesting to test whether that assumption was actuality true (Lordstown and the 1984 British Miners strike suggest maybe not) but it is perhaps the strangest counter posing that could be offered in a context other than trying to parody 1950's Stalinism.

I drafted this shortly after he published his piece and have only returned to it some months later. This interval is significant because in the meantime Chelsea Manning completed her trial and released her statement saying she is a women and wanted to be referred to as such. This lead to a very significant debate about the subsequent misgendering of Chelsea by much of the mainstream media and even, if only briefly, by sections of the left media. A lot of 'normal' people were suddenly exposed to these debates about gender and the sky didn't fall in. Which possibly means the sight of a 'lavishly bearded man in a skirt' has taken a significant step towards mainstream acceptance in the same way that same sex couples holding hands in public has. That such transformations started to happen in obscure social centers demonstrates the value of such spaces, not a problem with them.

Some conclusions for now.

As I said as the start I think counter culture is a pretty important area for a modern oppositional movement to deal with. It's too big a subject to get into here but briefly I think Chekov's approach repeats the mistake of the left in not considering how the forms it chooses selects and reproduce its own composition. Mistakes that lead to a left that in its wish to appeal to all ends up appealing to almost no one outside of that group of mostly white men who like shouty argumentative debates between formal and informal intellectuals. Social centres and counter culture in general can be an important part of redressing that imbalance by providing space and voice to those who tend to be excluded by such default left methods. If they were the only methods used they would probably only reproduce a left that would appeal to a somewhat different almost nobody, both methods can be seen only as part of a toolbox for constructing a genuinely inclusive radical movement capable of uniting

What is it to be normal?

Chekov presents the tendency of social centres to concentrate people who are marginalised as a negative but is it really not a positive? In particular in comparison with the traditional left and its tendency to be dominated by the non-marginalised. His story about being made uncomfortable by a 'lavishly bearded man in a skirt' staring at him is a case in point. Unless you get that sort of concentration of the otherwise marginalised that persons life experience is probably otherwise to go through life with the constant uncomfortable experience (and worse) he momentarily felt and remembered. The creation of a space where the bearded person, and presumably others, are comfortable to be who they are is the creation of a space where they and allies can organise to being the process of transforming whatever it is that makes people uncomfortable with the sight of a 'lavishly bearded man in a skirt' in the first place.

The counter argument to that appears to a fear that such marginal types will stop the left communicating with mainstream 'normal' society. To be honest I think this is the standard fear of the normal acting leftist that fails to realise that many in the society they are trying to appear normal to is very much more diverse and accepting of difference than they presume. Even with this example people trangressing gender boundaries is far from unusual or new. David Bowie built his early career out of it and the most popular figure in the long running British soap Coronation street is Harley Patterson, a trans woman character who married and adopted children with Ray Cropper. If our sought after normal person, and what is more normal than Coronation street, can accept that sort of storyline they probably won't be that surprised that a radical social center turns out to be a space where some people are either outside the gender binary or are a gender other than that assigned to them at birth are to be found.

In the 'seriousness politics' conclusion he presents what has got to be one of the worst possible alternatives, the serious students of the FA Lyon rising from their beds at 5am to sell papers to factory workers. The assumption being that these factory workers would identify with the strange behaviour of the students long before the that of the 'lavishly

There is a long standing and in my view pretty counter productive hostility between left political organisations and the radical counter culture. This piece grew out of a reply to 'The Limit's of the Counter Culture' which is part of an online publishing project of Chekov Feeney. Chekov was a member of the WSM for many years and is using this project to slowly reveal his new analysis of radical politics and other ways things might be done. I've known him for about 15 years since we met in one such counter cultural political space, the short lived Garden of Delight in Dublin. In any case what started out as a somewhat annoyed response to his piece sat on my drive and grew and grew as I edited it into something more constructive and ended up far too long to post as a comment on his site. So rather than wasting it I'm posting it here.

This piece I'm replying to and Chekov's subsequent piece 'Into the Far Left' are particularly interesting for me as I've been thinking, talking and being educated a lot around the tendency to value appearing 'normal' and the problem this creates in further marginalising the 'not normal'. A problem not just in moral terms because it means choosing to downplay particular oppressions but also in terms of how the 'wanting to appear normal' left come to be composed. I intend to develop the ideas here in a more fleshed out form in the future, this is something of a difficult early experiment in publishing my thoughts.

That probably means I'm probably going to be dealing with a number of themes that Chekov didn't perhaps intend to focus on but there is a value to considering why they crept in unintended. To me and at least some others I've talked to what I'm addressing comes screaming out of his piece. It's also worthy saying that this is a 'yes but..' piece as from our shared political histories there is a lot I agree with but also a good bit that I don't. In part because our experiences have diverged and my thinking and perhaps his has changed around some of the differences I discuss below. In some of this we now appear to sharply disagree.

As a starting point the discussion of the counter productive 'Lifestyle Anarchism v Social Anarchism' debate of the 1990's should really be a warning against reproducing that empty polarisation that had far more to do with cranky old white men parading their ego's than any wish to provide a useful set of discussion points for a broad movement. It's become one of my go to examples of how not to have a useful political

discussion — from the start it had far more in common with a sports event where you pick and cheer on a team for entertainment. An awful lot of 'serious' left attempts to discuss counter cultural spaces suffer from this approach — they are not really discussions at all, just a set of standardised cliches designed to elicit a cheer from those on your side 'go team' style. And the same is true for the argument in the other direction. To a large extent it was a debate the writers on both sides used to open up an 'unbridgeable chasm' to boost their own stardom and in doing so damaged the re-emerging movement in the process. It's worth noting in passing that the damage was greatest where the movement was most lacking in experience, North America as the lack of active involvement of older activists with the organsing experience to know to avoid pointless conflict saw much of the new movement taking sides in what were often pretty meaningless red v green or social v lifestylist debates that were the creation of older theorists seeking to carve out a following.

In my opinion we need to get beyond this empty conflict between 'political' and 'cultural' organisation to an understanding of why the two are always found hand in hand despite the re occuranece of these sort of critiques. In what follows I'm focusing in specfically on social centres and the counter culture / rejection of mainstream morality that is often quite fundamental to their existence. Where Chekov presents this as a weakness I see it as a strength.

Probably I should start by saying that I find the way Chekov tries to place social centres in the tradition of the utopian socialists problematic. That tradition of setting up communes isolated from the rest of society shares more in common with the similar religious experiments of that period that the vast majority of social centers I'm familiar with. They have tended to be more an intervention into the neighboorhoods & non geographic communities around them rather than something seperated off. And setting up the debate along the lines of "intervening in the economic struggle between the providers of labour and the owners of capital rather than establishing autonomous communities as islands of alternative values within the capitalist system" goes a long way to illustrating the limitations of his idealised picture of the 'normal' left.

exist, probably unchallenged and while you won't lost certain people through the disruption of having to deal with him you will lose other people who no longer feel safe in that space. It's worth stopping to consider here who leaves / gets driven out in each case and what sort of long term impact that has on the way movements look and who they involve.

What is the influence of counter culture / social spaces on society?

I don't think the important measure of this is whether these spaces spread to fill society but rather whether they shift the balance of social attitudes in a more progressive direction. The mechanics of such shifts would seem to be that they are driven by outliers whose ideas are seldom if ever taken up in a pure form but who all the same can have enormous impact over time, probably in a punctuated way where a lot of that impact happens over brief but intense intervals. Queer liberation is probably the strongest example of this, in particular in Ireland, in the time frame of our adult lives. The first Dublin pride march I attended had a couple of hundred people on it and was literally attacked by stone throwing kids, today its the second biggest street party after Patricks day — something my 20-year-old self would never have imagined.

What role did the social centres of northern Europe have on shifting social attitudes in Denmark, Germany or the Netherlands in a context where hundreds of thousands of young people spent their most formative years in contact with them? I'm not sure how you would even start to measure such a thing, in particular as you couldn't really isolate that experiences from contact with the more conventional left etc. But I suspect if we were to talk of impact than that is where it is to be found rather than in the measure of how many weeks, months or years a centre survives or goes between crisis. I'd suggest in terms of goals that shift in social attitudes is probably a much more useful measure than the question of 'institutional permanence' — not everything can meaningfully be measured by the square meter of office space occupied multiplied by time.

to these questions that make a paper qualitatively better than a social center rather than just another organising tool.

Do we want Moralism or Alter-moralism?

What Chekov describes as hostility to 'moralism' is where we seriously start to take different approaches. What he writes has the outward appearance of judging a set of important political / organisational issues on the grounds of whether they are hard / easy to implement. That's a fairly privileged way (yes I used that term — it fits here) to look at issues like sexism & racism and the attempt to replace 'outside' attitudes (morals) with collectively developed 'inside' ones. It is true that this process is going to be a bit uncomfortable for those of us with relative privilege and also that from our point of view there may not be that much benefit to us in that process. But that sort of misses the point of why it might be useful in terms of creating a movement that is not simply comprised of people like us (straight white cis males).

From observation I also don't think its the case that these attempts often fail due to individuals who evade these alter morals. That sometimes happens in some spaces but other ones successfully create and maintain alter-morals (Safer Spaces) over long periods of time. In such cases 'cynical & stubborn' individuals are simply removed from the space — I've witnessed that happen many times now. Where there is a strong sense of collective agreement around such rules that process can be so rapid as to almost be instant (eg guys groping people on the dancefloor at club nights). It does become more complex when someone has managed to insinuate themselves into the core organising group, but then this would be also the case if that group happened to be a sports club or a conventional political party.

Yes as new people come in such alter-morals are liable to be contested, sometimes angrily. And that can be quite difficult and disruptive to other ongoing organising efforts. But the point that I think is missed is that they are also central to such organising efforts, the process and its repetition is in itself intensely political and movement forming. If you don't have this sort of collective process then your predator will still

Why can't social centers take over the world?

Chekov says he learned through experience that such centers shared a "broad set of problems which effectively prevented them from scaling" and had " core problems that limit the strategy's potential for successfully inducing social change." But its not necessarely the case that the goal / vision of such spaces is to expand to all of society so setting that up as the test of success is in my opinion badly flawed. I'm not sure most, never mind all, social centres define themselves as wanting to be generalisable or transformative in terms of turning all of society into social centers or even bringing everyone through their doors.

They tend to be more like a left magazine then a left newspaper — targeted at niche audiences that are expected to have a fair level of interest and therefore an assumed willingness to do some learning. At least in my experience the organising groups are generally quite aware that the role of the space is narrow and specific rather than general and broad although they mightn't express it that way. It's one of the problems with the piece that it judges them as failing at something that very few, if any, ever set themselves up to do in the first place, you might as well argue that a reading group isn't generalisable or transformative. Like a reading group social centers tend to see themselves as a part of a wider movement, a part with a partiuclar function rather than being 'the movement'.

That this isn't a goal could be a criticism but only for those spaces / individuals prone to denouncing everyone who is not doing 'revolution' like they are. You do find that type in social centres and it is an attitude central to the writers who have attempted to claim to be the theorists of such spaces, but you find that type in any movement of significance particularly one that draws in youth. Entire Social Centers built around that premise are not something I've come across often (if at all) and I've been in quite a few over 25 or so years (I talk with others about some of that experience in this audio from 2008 as part of a discussion in Seomra — its based on visting 40 space and gives some idea of the diversity of approaches that is found). OK there is an observer selection

effect in operation here as I'm probably much less likely to find myself in such spaces — in Chekov's narrative he was seeking out counter cultural spaces before moving on to 'real politics'. But I've been in at least a couple of dozen social centre spaces in Ireland, Britain, USA, Canada, Spain, Netherlands, France, Germany & Italy so at the very least there is a substantial block of them that do not follow his description of limitations which are presented as universal.

Likewise 'institutional permanence' is an odd measure of success to use of a movement that doesn't appear to define that as a goal at all. Its particularly not true of the type of social center activist Chekov seems to build his critique around, that type that in so far as they exists are likely to have a copy of TAZ (Temporary Autonomous Zone) tucked into their rucksack. Permanence to that set is a bad thing rather than a goal they have failed to achieve. For the rest there are some social centers that have been around decades, sometimes in the same location, sometimes through regularly moving. And many others that exist for 1–5 year spans, lifespans typical of many left projects that fail to and over from the initial enthusiastic organising group.

Can safer spaces deal with bad behaviours?

Chekov build a lot of his argument about the supposed inability of social centers to deal with people attracted to them as permissive spaces. This list is problematic in itself lumping in as it does homeless people and people with mental health issues alongside sexual predators. I'm not aware of any evidence that politicised social spaces are prone to have above average rates of sexual predators in comparison with other spaces in society where people gather to socialise.

Anecdotally I think the ratio is likely to be considerably lower in most social centers because its often the case that such spaces are collectively regulated via Safer Spaces policies designed to exclude such behaviours. Which means whatever incidents there are tend to be brought to light far more often than in society outside such spaces. But this really isn't a fixed variable and has a lot to do with how politicised a space is and what form that politicisation takes, in particular the strength of its feminist

content. In that context it is more than a little unfortunate that he singles out a wish to 'transform inter-gender relations' and opposition to 'slut-shaming' as negative examples of the construction of alter-morals to the mainstream. Both have a significant relationship to excluding sexual predators who might otherwise see Social Centers as an easy hunting ground.

Isn't there always a core and periphery in organising?

Chekov's observation that social centres depend on a core of highly committed organisers is correct. But then pretty much every 'not yet successful' political movement depends on a core of 'highly committed and idealistic organisers' — its only with success that the careerists tend to move in. Just as a newspaper has people who produce the paper and people who mostly consume it a social centre has people who reproduce the space and a much larger number who consume it in various forms. Generally there is far more interaction / involvement of consumers with the maintenance of a social center than there is with a newspaper but still most people most of the time will be in the periphery. If this wasn't true it would be a bad thing as it would mean the centre had become a completely inward looking bubble. My own experience, mostly based on observing Seomra Spaoi, is that there is a healthy tension between bringing new people in and developing the consciousness of those who use the space that is part of the dynamic of creating and recreating the essential group of core organisers.

The comparison with a newspaper suggests that a Social Centre should probably be viewed as a tactic that a core group can use to engage with a broader population and that any judgement of success or failure can only be a comparative one with other methods. Does a space like Seomra Spraoi have more of a lasting impact on more people than Socialist Worker (they probably consume similar resources). Are there differences in the sort of people it has this impact on and the level of activity does it encourages them into? I'm not convinced there is a general answer