

# WHAT IS A LIFE?

**Movements, social  
centres and collective  
transformations**

the  
**FREE**  
association



# WHAT IS A LIFE?

Walk into a bookshop and you'll see the shelves groaning under the weight of self-help books. Pick up a newspaper and you'll be groaning under the weight of lifestyle guides. Yet every survey shows an increase in fear and a decrease in happiness. This shouldn't surprise us. Just as the avalanche of cookery programmes on TV hasn't made us cook any better or any more often, this lifestyle advice isn't meant to change our lives. Alongside food-porn, or garden-porn we get lifestyle porn.

**Can you imagine self-help guides that really did aim to transform your life?**

**A reader writes in complaining of dissatisfaction with her relationships, the agony aunt replies: “If you want a real insight into love you should participate in a riot.”**

**A lifestyle columnist writes a piece on their feelings of tiredness: “I’ve found the cause, it wasn’t a zinc deficiency but capital’s inherent need to increase its value.”**

**A book of tips on how to be effective: “Creativity happens in groups, form one and collectively create new worlds.”**

**Surely any honest self-help book would have to start here but it would have to end by destroying our idea of what a self is. A self-help book against the self – let’s pre-order.**

**This idea isn’t as frivolous as it sounds. The self-help industry emerged because our struggles in the 1960s and 70s destabilised the post-war institutions that used to give us a firmer sense of self. Now we no longer have a job for life or communities based around an industry. The self-help industry is there to shore us up. But it also developed out of the subjectivities thrown up by the struggles of the 1960s. Through the 1970s there was a movement away from collective experiments with anti-capitalist moments towards a concentration on the self. Anti-establishment attitudes have been eaten up by capital and used as the basis for a whole new wave of consumption and work. But we have to ask if capital has found anything indigestible in what it has swallowed. Are there traces of collective anti-capitalism that can still be re-ignited?**

**This urge for self-transformation is the same urge that animates social movements. All that is needed is to exceed the straitjacket that capital has imposed on it. Hidden away**

on the pages of the Sunday supplements, obscured by the empty sheen of the latest commodity, we can still detect the outline of moments of collective creativity when people asked such fundamental questions as: What sort of life do we want to live? Or indeed: What is a life? We want to re-insert that collectivity back into the urge for self-transformation.

**In order to be happy I'll have to change the whole world!**

## **REAL WORLD**

In our lives we've all experienced moments of excess during which we feel that total connection with our fellow human beings, when everything becomes possible, when absolutely anything could happen. They might be small, almost personal moments like weddings or falling in love. They might take place around counter-summit mobilisations (like Gleneagles or Evian or Genoa). Or they might rise up over a few months (like the anti-war movement of 2003, the anti-roads movement of the late 1990s or the Argentina uprising of December 2001, or, from another time and space, punk). They are moments when our energy threatens – or rather promises – to spark a cascade of changes, which sweep through society, opening up a whole new range of possibilities. When we rupture capital's fabric of domination: breaking time. Rapture!

But these events – these moments of excess – can't last forever, at least not in that form. It's simply not possible for our bodies and minds to survive that level of intensity indefinitely. Part of the dream-like unreality of those moments is that we are cut loose from our normal day-to-day life (home, kids, work). At Gleneagles, for example, we could really act fast and be open to all possibilities because we were stripped bare. That's why counter-summit mobilisations

are so attractive: they have the potential to catapult us into a different way of being far quicker than would be possible if we had to take all our 'baggage' with us. But it's also why the high wears off: because (all other things being equal) it's unsustainable in the face of 'normality'. When we take part in these events we often leave behind lovers and/or loved-ones behind – whether physically or mentally. We feel the tug of our allotment or garden, or maybe there's a favourite bike ride or view we need to enjoy again. 'There is a rose that I want to live for... There is a town unlike any other.'

We need to understand what happens when we 'return' to the 'real world'. What role can such moments play in a life?

In these events we feel a real rush of energy, a coming-together. But afterwards how can we sustain this movement in our 'habitual lives', and avoid recriminations and a general falling-apart? After the high point of *autonomia* in Italy in 1977, thousands turned to drugs or cracked up. Not just because of State repression, but because the forms of life they had been living were no longer sustainable. The expansive experiments broke down and the collective body was dismantled, and so attempts to live this life reverted to the level of the individual where contradictions were, for many, too intense to handle. How do we avoid this? How can we 'do politics' in the 'real world'? How can we 'live a life'? Not as a question of survival – hanging on in there until the next event, or our fortnight's holiday in the sun, or our Friday-night bender, or our Sunday-afternoon walk in the park, or our 'adventure weekend' – none of which are any real escape from capitalism at all. How do we live a life despite, and against, capitalism?

There are no universal answers to these questions. But we believe that thinking about them can help us understand the

potential of various issues and struggles – urban development and ‘regeneration’, climate change, precarity and so on – perhaps help us recognise our own power in a productive way, that is, in a way which allows it to resonate and become amplified. It can help us understand what we do in social centres, for example, and the way we conceive the borders between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, between what is ‘pure’ and what is not. And it involves recognising that we always live in the real world, that there are no ‘pure spaces’, there is no ‘pure politics’, and that we should welcome this. Because purity is also sterility. It’s the messiness of our ‘habitual’ lives which gives them their potential. This messiness, this ‘impurity’, the contaminations of different ideas, values and modes of being (and becoming) are the conditions which allow mutations, some of which will be productive. It’s from this primordial soup of the ‘real world’ that new life will spring. ‘Only in the real world do things happen like they do in my dreams.’

## **SAFE EUROPEAN HOME**

One of the tools we’ve used to think about these questions is the idea of ‘safe space’. In the context of summit protests we can see the development of convergence centres as the emergence of safe spaces – temporary zones to which we can retreat after a protest, gather our thoughts and re-compose ourselves before we sally forth again. Just as in breathing, they are moments of contraction, before and after expansion. The Hori-Zone at Gleneagles (the eco-village in Stirling) worked really well as an example of this, providing space for food, drink, sleep as well as consensus decision-making and a thousand fireside chats – all of which combined to allow us collectively to feel our strength and focus our energies. It’s no

surprise that if you look at the development of counter-summit mobilisations from Genoa through Evian to Gleneagles we see the convergence centres playing a more crucial role each time. After every moment of excess there must be a retreat back to a safe space, back to a stratified body of some kind in order to analyse and recuperate before we can launch forth on another intensive experiment. And this idea of safe space doesn't stop there. We can link it to the development of a whole network of social centres, both in the UK and across the world, which perform the same function of concentrating energy and allowing collective creativity to flourish.

But this is where things start to get complicated. At summit protests, as convergence centres have become more established, they have become more open to the criticism that they are divisive, housing 'activists' in one or two designated areas while the rest of the world passes by on the outside. Some people refused to take part in the Hori-Zone at Gleneagles for precisely this reason. While some of these criticisms are harsh (there are practical considerations here after all), it does bring us right back to fundamental ideas of the 'movement'. It's a word that gets thrown about like confetti but just what does it mean?

The most obvious way of thinking about this is to say that the movement is a collection of individuals connected by means of some shared ideology or practice – the global anti-capitalist movement is simply made up of those individuals who are consciously, collectively and actively opposed to capitalism. And it's a kind of shorthand that we all use on occasions. But it's not an idea that's particularly useful. First, what does 'active opposition' mean? Obviously it includes everyone who tried to blockade the G8 summit at

Gleneagles (and partly succeeded). But would it also include everyone in the Hori-Zone, for example? And what about those who couldn't make it? Or those who would have gone if they'd known about it? Second, and more fundamentally, what about those who took part in the Make Poverty History demonstrations? Are they part of the anti-capitalist movement? Or those who went to the Live8 concerts? Or even Bob Geldof, infamous for describing many of us as "a bunch of losers"? Just where do we draw the line?

Maybe drawing the line is the problem. If we simply expand the definition of movement, we're still limited by the fact that we're thinking of movement as 'a thing'. It is something that can be defined, whose boundaries can be clearly mapped, and which stands outside and against something else called 'capital'. We might argue over the exact terms of the definition (do we include Make Poverty History or Globalise Resistance?) and we may agree that these definitions will shift but this movement is still seen as a 'thing'. But it's difficult to reconcile such a static, 'thing-like' view of the anti-capitalist movement with the realities of everyday life where the vast majority of us around the world exist both *within* and *against* capital. 'Capital' is not something 'out there', something that we can fight against as if it were external to us and part of someone or something else – even if we sometimes talk about it as if it is. 'Capital' is not a person or group of people, nor an organisation or group of organisations. Capital is a social relation mediated through commodities. Capital is the way we live, the way we reproduce ourselves and our world – the entire organisation of the 'present state of things' as they are today.

So, if there is a line, then it's a line which runs through each and every one of us. And that's why capital fucks us up

– because everyone of us is fragmented, contradictory. Or if there is a line, it's fractal, with sometimes only a hair's breadth separating the 'revolutionary' from the 'capitalist'. Or maybe rather than drawing lines to say who is and is not in this thing called movement, we'd be better off drawing lines like projected or potential routes to follow – directions, deviations, lines of flight. Not where we are, but where we're *going*. It is human practice – what we *do* – which is central, because capital is the way we live, the way we reproduce ourselves and our world. So we're all always already moving, even when we think we're standing still. And we're moving along several lines and through several planes at once.

**>> The road to the station is blocked by a line of CRS police vans, in front of which is a small pro-CPE demo of about 10–15 people, in front of them there's a line of CRS on foot, and in front of them a double line of demonstration stewards preventing a confrontation. Most of the demonstrators are not up for a confrontation, but some chuck eggs, cans, fairly light things at the pro-CPE demo. The stewards, who are mainly students, are urging demonstrators to continue quickly past – they're really enthusiastic about giving orders. Someone ironically shouts, "Be submissive! Do as you're told!" One of the stewards I know personally – he's the son of anarchist friends: I shout angrily at him, "Have you got no shame? How can you protect your enemies?" He looks upset. Lycée and technical college students hold a sit-down meeting in the big square in the centre of town, lots of different youths getting up to speak, though nothing beyond youth precarity is talked about. A cry goes out – "To the station!", echoed by a**

To put it another way, if we begin with the doing, then 'movement' is a dynamic process, one that resists definition. So our movement is a historical phenomenon, not a 'structure', nor even a 'category', but something which *happens*. Movements are the moving of these social relations of struggle – in crude terms, movements not of people, but of people doing things in a particular time and space. A series of contractions and expansions, as social relations move through moments of excess. And this matches our own experiences: we've never come out of these moments the same as we've gone in. Whether at Evian or Gleneagles, we've come out as different people.

**16 year old girl from my village, who says she wants to occupy the railway tracks. Having given her a few English lessons a year or so before, I had no idea she was rebellious. Funny how you don't know people until there's a situation like this – and perhaps people don't really begin to know themselves until there's a situation like this... People return to the main square, where already people are drifting off towards the Corum Theatre in order to occupy it. Some think the call to go to the station was a manipulation so as to have time for the cops to get to the Corum... I see the guy I knew who'd been a demo steward protecting the pro-CPE demonstrators three hours earlier, the son of anarchist friends, and he waves me over, saying, "What I did earlier back there was stupid, really stupid, but I was the first to get truncheoned by the cops here, trying to get into the Corum." If I was religious, I'd call it 'redemption', but let's just call it 'radicalisation': sometimes radicalisation only takes a few hours. <<**

Looking at things this way round gives us a fresh perspective on safe spaces and the way different ideas of movement fit into them. One of the common ways of looking at social centres is to think of them as static safe places that incorporate a number of people, and so by definition exclude others. So we often talk about them in terms of exemplary practice: “This is a model of how the world could be run, without bosses, without money, without hierarchy, without milk...” This notion also underpinned much of the Hori-Zone at Gleneagles. But models only work when all the actors within them know their lines. They are tightly scripted performances, with an inside (the activists) and an outside (variously described as “consumers”, “ordinary folk” and even “people who’ve not had the benefit of a university education”). It’s not that far removed from the traditional Leninist view of a disciplined cadre who organise the rest of us. And in fact that inside/outside distinction gets taken even further as we start to look for points of intervention in the ‘outside’ world. “Precarious workers, asylum seekers, Zapatistas – there’s a whole world of struggles out there we should be engaging with...” – as if these struggles are already separate from us.

Obviously at times it’s useful to draw lines. Sometimes it’s even essential. When we were setting up a social centre in Leeds, it felt like there was a lot at stake (we were in a ‘precarious’ situation where decisions carried real weight), so destructive influences had to be confronted and contained before they jeopardised the project. Boundaries were set and one person physically expelled. But this was also productive, allowing people who had never worked together to immediately find common ground. Sometimes that sort of cramped space can itself generate intense creativity, as we

fight to overcome the limits we have set ourselves. In this case, it enabled us to hold one of our most exciting and expansive meetings where people outlined what they wanted in a social centre, irrespective of cost or practicality (we never did manage to get the 50 metre swimming pool...).

All the same, if movements are a moving of social relations, it doesn't make sense to talk of static boundaries or limits: "These people are involved at the social centre, and these people aren't..." Instead of looking at social centres as models from which we can try and establish some sort of hegemony, it might be more fruitful to think of them as *experiments*, ones that by their very nature over-run boundaries and definition. To take one example: why do many social centres take it as axiomatic that they should open a cafe? If we think of centres as models, then a cafe can instantly offer a more environmentally sound lifestyle, living proof that we don't have to fuck over the planet to survive. But if we think of them as experiments, as attempts to create multiple new worlds, then a cafe is not an end in itself, it's a precondition – a way of getting people into a building and making interesting things happen. Perhaps a cafe isn't the best way, maybe poetry readings or sculpture classes would work even better. In fact, the most obvious way – having a bar and selling alcohol – probably makes more sense, but tends to cause the most prolonged ideological arguments, along the lines of "we shouldn't sell drugs" and "if people want to drink in town, there's plenty of bars already."

## **LIVING LA VIDA LOCA**

Let's stop for a moment. We seem to have come a long way from the fields and woods surrounding Gleneagles, and yet

maybe not far enough. Perhaps the problem lies in the concept of safe space itself. It has overtones of liberated space, as something static that doesn't need to change, something that isn't itself part of the transformative experience. The whole idea of a model suggests that it's possible somehow to carve out a pure space, autonomous from capital and untouched by such problematic ideas as money or drugs or leadership. And as that idea of 'purity' makes less and less sense, the more tightly we seem to cling to it.

To escape that problem we need to get a different angle on it; let's use the concept of the refrain to think this through. A refrain is a snippet of music but what we're trying to get at is the way we use those snippets to build a world around ourselves. Think of this image: *a child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts herself by singing under her breath. She walks and halts to her song. Lost, she takes shelter, or orients herself with her little song as best she can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilising, calm and stable, centre in the heart of chaos.*

So a refrain marks out a mobile territory, just like a bird marks out a territory through its song. Refrains create a mobile home and, despite the image above, refrains are collective – they aren't just songs that we sing to ourselves, they allow disparate elements to come together. Both of these ideas (mobile and collective) fit perfectly with our notion of social centres as not just bricks and mortar but ways we create a feeling of commonality. Or as we've put it in meetings in Leeds, "the CommonPlace isn't a building, it's a way of doing things." Obviously refrains are not just sounds, but can also include institutions, attitudes, tactics or even subjectivities. They are the repetitions out of which we construct ourselves, repetitions that change as they repeat. Perhaps we can look

at the affects we experience during moments of excess as refrains that we start whistling again when we hear a similar tune or experience similar levels of intensity or precariousness. Refrains are what we return to when we get a bit lost. They are what we use to lower the level of intensity, to lower the level of precariousness.

So what does a refrain look like? What does it feel like? You can see them at work in football. When the opposition's attack breaks down, a team will often revert to defensive triangles. They're little routines that slow down the game and allow you a breathing space. Because they've been worked out a hundred times in training, you can fall into them almost automatically, allowing you to regain control and then prepare to counter-attack. They provide the base from which innovation can develop. You also see (or hear) refrains working in jazz. After each virtuosic solo, the musicians return to the same chorus. The restatement (even with variations) of that familiar melody – the refrain – provides both musicians and listeners with the reassuring basis from which to throw themselves into the next piece of crazy virtuosity.

Slightly closer to home, consensus decision-making is another example. Democracy, as we normally experience it, rests on a plane of equal, atomised individuals. So it channels all politics into a framework that's bound up with existing social relations, with the world as it is. Consensus decision-making, on the other hand, can create a different world by refusing to act as if we are atomised individuals, and by treating decisions as collective jumping-off points rather than conclusions. So it's a refrain that we can keep returning to when things get heated or bogged down or problematic. For the road blockades at Gleneagles, for instance, we had adopted

swarm tactics – people had to get themselves to the general area along a seven kilometre stretch of road at the same time and then cohere together and block the road. As the police came and dispersed us, we had to work out ways of cohering back together at a different part of the road. This went on all morning. But at certain times consensus decision-making meetings were called. We would retreat away from the road and assess and analyse how things were going and what to do next. On the morning of the blockade we took part in three of these meetings, each involving over 100 people. This was only possible because so many of us knew the refrain. And we don't simply mean the techniques, but also the themes that lie behind them: pragmatics rather than a defence of positions, humour rather than posturing etc. In this way the consensus and spokescouncil meetings were used to reduce the level of intensity and slow down the speed of decision-making. They were also a way of providing reassurance, a way of reaffirming our mutual trust and collectivity.

Now refrains aren't by themselves inclusive: if you don't know the tune, it's hard to sing along. But they're not a chorus, where we all sing the same words and nothing ever changes. Instead it probably makes more sense to think of them as some sort of jazz riff or theme. It takes a while to work out what's going on, but once you get it, you can join in. In fact refrains depend on people taking part and then carrying things forward. They change and adapt – like birdsong, refrains are in constant evolution. Perhaps that's another way of thinking about a moment of excess: a wild jam session where so many people are improvising that the refrains are just keeping it together or the refrains are modulating so quickly you can only just follow them.

And these marginal zones, right on the border of chaos, are always the most productive places to be. The most beautiful football is played on these margins: a few millimetres or milliseconds may separate an exquisite goal from the possibility of a goal conceded. The best jazz always exists on the edge of unlistenable noise, as the limits of tempo, rhythm, harmony are probed. And a modern fighter aircraft's extreme manoeuvrability comes about because its design puts it right at the border of instability.

Looked at this way, social centres make more sense as places that aren't separate from the rest of life, as spaces that are never 'pure' but are constantly engaging with existing social relations because they are part of them. This explains how our practices – what we do – can resonate with others, even though they might not consider themselves as part of any 'movement' however it's defined. It's easy to think that consensus decision-making, for instance, is something special or exceptional; in fact it's the way we all arrange our social lives. How else could we possibly manage to decide on a pub to meet in? By a majority decision? So by seeing social centres as places that exist within this world, we begin somewhere 'in the middle', attempting to unravel existing social relations, collectively creating new worlds and all the time carving out breathing spaces to allow us to think about all of these things. It's a more pragmatic approach which makes it harder to use ideas like 'compromise' or 'sell-out' without raising a smile.

## **FAIRYTALE IN THE SUPERMARKET**

Hang on a minute, there's a problem here and it's the same one we identified earlier. Refrains aren't pure. In fact because they make heterogeneous elements cohere, they are also

vitaly important tools for capital. They are what capital uses to construct its worlds. We can see brands as refrains, used to *reassure* us. McDonalds sells refrains. With its food tasting the same in every country it wants to create its own world of familiarity and constancy, a world of bright colours within which we can live our lives. But these worlds are just a surface sheen trying to obscure the parts of our lives, and the parts of the world, we don't want to deal with. Those disavowed invisible realms are inescapable and provoke a constant affect of anxiety. Dissonant notes constantly float into the refrains. Yet in circular fashion, the ultimate hollowness of these worlds just makes us more need reassuring refrains.

But only part of this is about reassurance, there's also a linked refrain around *novelty*. It's a tune about the new, the hip, and the cutting edge. This might seem contradictory but both refrains are inherent to the structure of the commodity. Dissatisfaction is built into the commodity. If we were satisfied we wouldn't need to consume again, the cycle would stop. Just as being famous for being famous is the pole towards which all celebrity tends, shopping for the sake of shopping is the pure pole of consumption. There is a buzz to shopping: it can be therapy; it can block out the stuff we don't want to deal with; it can help us get through the day.

These are the refrains of consumption out of which we create a particular subjectivity: we create ourselves as consumers. It's a serial process, as we rush from product to product, event to event. Whether it's the next counter-summit mobilisation or the next series of *Big Brother*, it doesn't seem to matter – all that's important is that we experience the Next Big Thing. There is a sort of infantilism at work here; consumption takes place in a perpetual present, the moment

of acquisition. As we move from buzz to buzz all questions of finitude have to be banished, pushed from view. We have to pretend we will live forever or the futility of consumption's buzz will creep into view. The refrain of novelty helps us avoid facing such fundamental questions as: what is a life?

Perhaps the animating force for this frenzied search for novelty is the urge to transform our lives, but it's always reduced to the tick-tick-tick of capital's metronome. Capital's need to valorise means that every innovation, every experience must pass through the commodity form. We have a whole range of potential *becomings*, but they are reduced to series of potential *havings*. This is exactly how capital acts as a limit on possibility. Capital is a vampire, it is dead, but it is hard to distinguish from its outside. And there is no universal garlic to ward off this vampiric onslaught.

In order to re-ignite this urge for transformation we have to collectively develop tools which will help to ward off enclosure and capture. Part of this involves creating refrains which will allow us to continuously and immanently analyse what we are doing – *continuously*, because there are no pure autonomous zones, however temporary; and *immanently*, because we need to search for possibilities in the situation we find ourselves, without appealing to some transcendent idea of what it means to be 'anti-capitalist'.

We have to do this because capital continuously takes our old refrains and uses them against us. And it can colonise any refrain because capitalism is ultimately meaningless. Not only is its *raison d'être*, the increase of zeros on an accounting sheet, objectively pointless but also capital is not tied to any beliefs. It attaches itself to serial meanings but it doesn't need any of them. Nihilism is the limit point of capitalist

subjectivity. Just imagine a blue jeans-clad Jeremy Clarkson speeding up the motorway in a four-wheel drive shouting, “Global warming? Bring it on!” We have to recognise this as an inheritor of punk’s version of cool: “we don’t care.” Capital’s pretty vacant.

But of course we can also liberate refrains from capital. Let’s look at the refrain of the ‘entrepreneur’. For the left this is a dirty word, and with good reason: it conjures up images of Richard Branson, of creativity channelled into money-making. But it also contains a certain dynamism, an air of initiative, in fact an imaginary of a kind of activist attitude to life. Indeed we might be putting on free parties, gigs, or film showings, rather than launching perfumes, but we still act in ways somewhat similar to entrepreneurs: we organise events and try to focus social cooperation and attention on certain points. We’re always looking for areas where innovation might arise. The DIY culture of punk is a great example of how a moment of excess caused a massive explosion of creativity and social wealth. There is a difference in perspective though. A capitalist entrepreneur is looking for potential moments of excess in order to enclose it, to privatise it, and ultimately feed off it. Our angle is to keep it open, in order to let others in, and to find out how it might resonate with others and hurl us into other worlds and ways of being.

And this brings us right back to where we started, away from the realm of consumption and back into the hidden abode of production. The intense surge of creativity and common wealth thrown up by moments of excess always feeds into a wider movement (a moving of social relations). There’s a tension between continuing this excess, allowing it to spin off into wilder things, and the need to ground it, to

find some sort of home, however temporary. Social centres are one possible way of riding this tension, providing we can work out ways to keep them open as experiments. They may also help us to work out how transforming the world might move through durability, rather than succumbing to the endless chase for the Next Big Struggle. As moments of excess fade, the refrains they've thrown up make less and less sense as capitalist social relations re-assert themselves. We need to create spaces where we can continue to develop those refrains, especially as they stop making sense. This could undermine the linear notion of time that leaps from event to event, and would also point away from the typical trajectory of heavy involvement, growing frustration and then a 'principled' withdrawal when you find out your fellow humans aren't sufficiently vegan/activist/proletarian (delete as appropriate). If we could work out a different articulation of these experiences of time, it'd be easier for people to 'take a break', fade in and out etc, which could help solve all those niggling problems of rotation as well as burn-out. And here we can point to our own attempts to tackle the idea of durability. Most of the authors have been doing stuff together for the past 15 years (i.e. for most of our adult lives). Partly this is because no-one else will have us, but it's also down to a stubborn persistence. It's an ongoing project to make sense of our lives and the worlds we make – and in that sense, it's hard to see how it could ever end.

## **TOUR DE FRANCE**

But how does any of this help us in practice? Let's think about the events in France earlier this year where the government attempted to bring in a new labour law liberalisation package,

the CPE, which would allow employers to hire 18–26 year-olds on two year contracts and then fire them without notice, and without explanation. Opposition was massive – nearly all of the country’s universities were occupied by students and striking staff, and schools began to shut down as well as pupils, parents and teachers occupied them. General assemblies – directly democratic bodies of young people, students and workers – were set up to co-ordinate the occupations and resistance. A national strike was called at the end of March, and three million people took to the streets. More importantly there was an explosion of unofficial actions, with wildcat strikes, unsanctioned demonstrations and huge blockades of motorways, train stations and even airport runways escalating and becoming more frequent. In the face of all this, the French government was forced to cave in and withdraw the law.

It’s possible to think of this in fairly orthodox terms as an old-fashioned labour struggle: the state attempts to attack the gains made by the working class; the working class resists

**>> As I left with the militants I had come with, yesterday afternoon, we saw a *manif* (demo) of 1000 *lycées* (schoolkids) The militants didn’t have a clue what it was about. It seemed to be heading to the *centre commerciale* (shopping centre), where a blockade had been organised for the next day. But it was a day early. When people refuse to wait for organised days of action but just begin; when militants don’t know every demo’s time and place; when the cry of ‘*vive la commune*’ goes up from 2000 on a spontaneous demo in Paris against the propagation of the CPE – we live in interesting times. <<**

casualisation and wins a (temporary) reprieve. And in doing that you'd have to acknowledge what was uniquely *French* about the whole affair. But in other ways what was so exciting about France was how events kept exploding outwards, jumping over all definitions imposed on them, whether from within or without. So while the flashpoint was a proposed change to labour law, it quickly blew up into something more general, a questioning of a growing and generalised 'precarity'. In that sense the law was not an assault on existing workers, but on workers-to-be. This opened up the whole question of the future and the kind of world we live in, the one kind of question that we're not meant to ask. On the surface the demands of the movement were straightforward: scrap the law. But people generally don't go out on to the streets to keep things the way they are, we go out because we sense that things could be different. And so rather than seeing the whole thing as peculiarly French, it's more useful to see how *global* it was: in many ways, it most closely resembled the explosions in Argentina at the end of 2001.

The occupations, the assemblies, the wildcat actions, the talk of precarity – all of these acted as refrains, enabling people from different backgrounds, moving at different speeds, to come together and collectively make more things happen. And so we return to the idea of 'movement' as a moving of social relations, not a thing but a *process* – and a process that has no end. One of the great pieces of graffiti from France is 'I don't know what I want but I know how to get it'. Apart from being as punk as fuck, it's also a great take on 'one no, many yeses' and 'walking we ask questions'. We don't know what we want – how could we, when we simultaneously want *everything* and *nothing*? – but we have the refrains that will help us get it.

Moving on from this, we can think about precarity in a different way, not as a sociological category, something that happens to McDonalds employees or migrant workers. It isn't just about contracts or the labour market or citizenship tests. Instead, increased precariousness in habitual life is how we all experience neo-liberalism in the global north – and that's what provides the potential of a commonality with struggles in the global south. Of course, precarity isn't a 'common condition' in the sense that it will magically create a common subject. For a start, we all experience it in different ways. But the refrains we develop to deal with it (tactics, tools, subjectivities, technologies etc) make sense to all of us. And they provide a breathing space, a platform from which we can collectively re-create precarity as flexibility, as the openness of becoming. Because precarity isn't something alien that's imposed on us from 'outside': in many ways it's just a particularly alienated and perverted form of the flexibility that we initiated with the refusal of work and the breakdown of Fordism back in the 1970s.

Capitalist time is the tick-tock of the clock, the ker-ching of the cash register, a metronomic beat that runs from event to event. But when it's shattered, we re-articulate time in a different way. We feel the irruption of the future (many possible futures) in the present. And we're simultaneously back on St Georges Hill in 1649. At Gleneagles some of us were flung violently 20 years backwards to the Battle of the Beanfield (and found ourselves standing next to people we'd known from that time). And in France many veterans of May '68 were the first to move: the refrains thrown up in the first months of 2006 – the assemblies, the wildcat stoppages, the resolute questioning of everything – resonated with

refrains from another time. In the same way, capitalist space is governed by borders and controls, discipline and measure: yet those differences can melt away in an instant so that Argentina or Chiapas or Gaza make sense to people the other side of the world. These are whispers across time and space that can't be silenced. However it's expressed – 'Omnia sunt communia', 'The poor shall wear the crown', 'Que se vayan todos' – we hear the same refusal, the same desire to stop the world as we know it and create something else. It's the return of the disavowed.

If our politics is one of active experimentation, of setting and then breaking limits, then it's a gamble: we don't know the outcome, and we can't measure our success. Instead we find ourselves working with a different idea of time and space, experiencing moments of intense creativity which resonate and amplify with others, throwing up new worlds, and new possibilities. This is where the question "what is a life?" begins to make sense. A life is made up of such singular moments, events that reveal how a particular life is individuated out of wider flows of life. This sense of a life revealed in its full connectedness to its outside shows that any idea of a true self is a limit. It's only by overcoming capital's serial subjectivities that we can begin to approach the full potentials of a life.

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## SOURCES AND REFERENCES

As usual, we've borrowed loads of people's ideas for this, although we've been using some of them for so long that they feel like our own. 'There is a rose that I want to live for...' comes from 'The Call-Up' by The Clash, while Buzzcocks sang 'Only in the real world do things happen like they do in my dreams'. The idea of class as "something which happens" was lifted from E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, while the notion of the refrain comes from *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Our ideas on different notions of time are echoed in 'Gleneagles: breaking time' by John Holloway and 'The 'brat bloc' and the making of another dimension' by Massimo De Angelis and Dagmar Diesner, both published in *Shut Them Down!* The stuff from France was lifted from the forums at [www.libcom.org](http://www.libcom.org) and [www.endangeredphoenix.com](http://www.endangeredphoenix.com). And well-known council communist Ricky Martin sang 'Living La Vida Loca'...

**Alex, Brian, David, Keir, Nate and Nette freely associated to produce this piece. We usually live in Halifax, Leeds and Minneapolis, but feel at home nowhere and everywhere. Comments, criticisms and communication welcome: [the.free.association@gmail.com](mailto:the.free.association@gmail.com). Our virtual home is [www.nadir.org.uk](http://www.nadir.org.uk). You can think of this piece as the third part in a loose trilogy. The first two parts are *Event Horizon*, a pamphlet handed out at Gleneagles in July 2005, and 'On the road', published in *Shut Them Down!* ([www.shutthemdown.org](http://www.shutthemdown.org)), an anthology of articles about the G8, Gleneagles and the movement of of movements. Both are available online at [www.nadir.org.uk](http://www.nadir.org.uk).**



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