

SqEK

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dqEd

It's always fascinating when collectives fall apart, so we decided to publish this view on the end of the SqEK, which has produced some texts on squatting most of them quite readable. It is quite niche, but heyho, we're niche anyway. Thanks to the people who read versions of this text and hopefully made it more accessible.

Well, well, WELL. Here we are, it's been the best part of a decade and now SqEK is dead. I have mostly enjoyed my time being part of **Squatting Everywhere Kollektive** (SqEK) ever since I popped up at the London 2010 meeting, having seen a post on Indymedia UK (RiP). On the whole, being a member of the collective has been a productive and inspiring time. I have written a few book chapters and journal articles about squatting, a couple in collaboration with people, and none of these things would have happened if I hadn't got off my arse and taken that train up to London.

The annual conferences have been an amazing opportunity to engage with local squatter and radical leftwing movements in places like Barcelona, Berlin, Catania, Copenhagen, Paris, Prague and Rome. Disparagingly described by someone leaving the collective

back then as “just people meeting up to go visit various squats,” these meetings have actually been amazingly fertile encounters between us as SqEK and social centre participants in places like Klinika (Prague, recently evicted), Can Mas Deu (Barcelona), New Yorck im Bethanien (Berlin), Candy Factory and Trampoline House (Copenhagen), Poortgebouw (Rotterdam), Studentato Occupato (Catania), La Gare XP and Transfo (Paris).

After an unintentional(?) misfire in Barcelona where we ended up doing an academic conference sponsored by Antipode in a university setting and were mostly ignored by the local scene, I was very pleased to organise a DIY no-budget meeting in Rotterdam which was based in a legalised squat and whilst using venues of differing institutional status, also had a self-organised (and anti-gentrification) theme.

Overall, the conferences, the books we produced, the conversations with people have informed my activism and writing, as well as giving me intellectual stimulation and the impulse to carry on when little else does.

Sometimes we dropped right in on massive local controversies and perhaps (!?) our interventions made a small positive contribution to these inevitably acrimonious debates eg artists versus anarchists (see *"I've painted myself into a corner"* [1] in ***Using Space 8***), or an unpleasant internal power struggle at Klinika, or the eviction meltdown at the Foundry in London (I don't think we helped much there) or the big Cox 18 versus Leoncavallo debate (in Milan). I possibly and inadvertently stoked the fires of the latter when I gave our 'fresh off the press' Pluto book ***The Squatters' Movement in Europe: Commons and Autonomy as Alternatives to Capitalism*** [2] to the Cox 18 library, not realising the book comments on the debate in a postscript I hadn't yet read (I guess it was submitted too late for copy editing). Luckily I don't think they realised it either, but I did get a hilarious lecture about self-organisation:

-Did you write this book yourselves?

-Yes I wrote that chapter

-Did you edit it yourselves?

-Yes I copyedited the book myself actually

-Did you print it yourselves?

-No we got it printed by the publisher

-Ha! Take this book - we printed and published it ourselves. Now that's self-organisation!

Our collective never defined its politics too much beyond supporting squatting and being antifascist and I was quite happy about that, there's really no point in having abstract doctrinal issues ripping us apart (let's leave that to the Marxists), especially since ideological formations depend a lot on local contexts, for example legalisation is/was controversial in Spain, it's not controversial in the Netherlands and in the UK, most squatters can only dream of a place existing long enough to legalise it.

Through SqEK, I met some really cool anarchist-minded folks from all over the world. Also of course, there were the more liberal-minded people and ironically for a collective interested to compare and contrast how squats institutionalise in different places, there was always the fear for me that SqEK would itself institutionalise. I really did worry about that for a few years, hoping against hope that it wouldn't happen, because things were so great. And somehow we did preserve our marginality and radical nature for a while, despite having a core of older white male academics running the shop.

Through my relatively early membership and my gender and my skin colour, I appear to have joined this inner clique in some ways. I picked up on the frustration of younger female and/or queer participants and was disheartened that they often came once and never returned, yet my addiction to the central matter (namely sitting around with a bunch of intelligent people of all nationalities, disciplines, genders and ages to discuss squatting movements) always won out, since I simply could not have found such a high level of discussion elsewhere.

Naturally, most housing activists are interested to talk about squatting, many of them squat themselves, yet in my experiences of squatting and activism in the UK and the Netherlands, I always found myself both able to have good chats with anyone but also at a certain point needing to look elsewhere for stimulation. SqEK scratched that itch. It was such an amazing feeling to go to that meeting in London and realise I was in a room of ten people and everyone liked talking about squatting just as much as I did! We seriously could go on discussing issues for days without stopping and of course the breaktime conversations were

always superinteresting too. The SqEK format was way more relaxed, informal and interdisciplinary than the standard academic fare which is ring-fenced, super formalised and boring.

Let's take the Catania meeting as an example. We had a lovely airy, light room in a squatted student project where we sat around and discussed different presentations. Some food was provided by university catering thanks to our connections, some we cooked ourselves. At night we hung out with the people we were staying with and they took us off to show us stuff in town. We went to this longterm social centre (with a crazy backstory) for a gig and there were our hosts from Spazi Sociali Catania, doing everything: the door, the tickets, the bar, selling the Tshirts! Another evening we had an amazing gathering, where SqEK people were sitting on one side of the table and the other side slowly filled up until the room was bursting with waves of local activists, by which I mean all the way from those squatting in the 1970s up to and including the present generation. A long scroll of paper with a handwritten timeline of events was unfurled

and stuck to the wall. People who were **actually there** told stories about how they interacted with mafia and owners, how they dealt with hard drugs in the scene, how their group didn't really get on with other groups, why they squatted a certain building and so on. Tireless translators went between Italian and English. It seemed like everyone who wanted to speak got to speak. It was an incredible experience!

And then afterwards the local SqEK people said they were a bit frustrated because we heard so much about Catania but we didn't get to tell them about our local projects so the engagement had only gone one way!!

SqEK spans different disciplines, we don't talk about it much because that is simply the way it is, but that in itself it is really an amazing phenomenon and rather unusual. We have sociologists, architects, hardcore activists, historians, geographers, journalists, anthropologists and so on, all mingling and for the most part respectfully communicating. That's really incredible! Especially when we consider the participants are from places as diverse as Sao Paulo,

Lausanne, Brighton, Madrid, Stockholm, New York City, Middlebury, Rome, Rennes, Potsdam, Prague and Ljubljana!! And as I suggested before, these informal meetings are so much better than usual academic conferences where 3 papers are presented in 2 hours and then there is supposed to be a discussion but there is never time. SqEK meetings were nothing like that. The informality was created by the mindset of the people and I love how there wasn't much hierarchy of knowledge: a professor can talk on an equal level with a student since in the field of squatting studies everyone is welcome to give an opinion (assuming the opinion is based on some knowledge of course, not all hierarchies are bad, sometimes we had to suffer way too long from ignorant architects blathering about their bullshit).

There has often been the complaint that we are talking about squatting instead of doing it. Some activists seem to find that simple statement 100% damning, despite the severe risks which would be entailed practically anywhere in the world by expecting a group of 30 people who only know each other vaguely to take and hold a building for a

week. For me it's not a problem, I've been squatting the last five years **and** I like to talk about it too. It would for sure be good to have more people in SqEK who are actually squatting but I don't want to get caught in the deadend of identity politics here.

Another general complaint which seems to rear its ugly head often is people telling us to stop studying squatters and putting them in boxes. I see some merit in this but it mostly comes from people unaware of the sort of books we have actually written **AND** from people who are actually themselves academics, nursing some twisted guilt for their own positionality.

My complaints come from different angles. And I've cut out the really fruity bits.

So what went wrong? Why am I now at the moment of throwing up my hands and walking away from the collective? As you will have seen, I have found much for myself to nourish and enjoy in SqEK, but there have also been issues, which after not being dealt with for so long have festered and become ill-smelling boils. People tend to just leave when they get fed up, but I feel like saying my piece, since my affection for

the collective and most importantly **what it could be** motivates me to do so.

Despite the open nature of the collective and its many good points, it has become painfully obvious to me that for a certain minority the collective is nothing more than a blood-sucking organisation designed to facilitate academic knowledge extraction. With all the oneupmanship that comes with that. Attempts for more activist discussions are brushed aside - witness the person who wanted to add fairy tales to a project being brusquely rebuked, or the younger people pushed away by older white males, or the consistent refusal of those with access to academic funding to allot this money towards radical projects such as translating the SqEK books into other languages aside from English.

For me, SqEK has run its course. It was fun, it lasted longer than I could have hoped, but now it's over and should dissolve. SqEK never really became useful for social movements in the way I had hoped it could and now I would argue the opposite, it's becoming useful for agents of repression.

Not too long ago, someone sent a superinteresting link [3] to the sqeklist about how studying migrants can only harm them. I don't agree with what it says 100% by the way, but it's an important (and open published) article which deserves a read and has obvious implications regarding the study of squatters.

I think the article makes some very astute points but also becomes a bit dogmatic. Of course research can benefit participants, of course there are cracks. Was there a discussion about this on the list? Was there fuck. Maybe it cut too close to the bone, that's what I thought at first. Now I think people will only actually engage in things which will result in beefing up their academic scorebook.

Speaking of which, now I see a callout for a SqEK in Madrid. This is nothing more than a desperate attempt to keep the dying parasitical organism alive. It needs more blood! Social centres in Madrid have already rejected the parasitism of Miguel Martinez, who wants to organise this "10 years of SqEK" meeting. He was explicitly called out for his behaviour in a book, in which he was called a **"wolf in sheep's clothing"** [4] for

his methods. Patricio Matorras refused to talk to him again after he published **Okupaciones en Movimiento**. He also steamrolled a friend who lives in Madrid out of the collective. And now the proposal is to do a SqEK in Madrid... This is bringing the good name of SqEK into disrepute. Remember this is a name I (amongst others) helped to create with my activist connections and my preference for freely accessible and high grade academic work. I hope you can understand my anger here.

Martinez also contributed an article to our journal, got lots of fine-grained advice and then published it elsewhere without giving credit to the unpaid labour. And of course this person talks a lot about collaboration, washing the dishes, feminism and so on. This talk, with all these buzzwords, don't count for much when you look at the actual behaviour. OK, one time you might give the benefit of the doubt, but how to explain away all these incidents?

Sure, this is how it goes in the cutthroat world of academia, but I thought our collective wanted to do things differently. It won't surprise you to learn that this person's name is plastered all over our

supposedly communal projects.

I have the feeling that my time and activism willingly spent promoting SqEK as a collective and also the books in which I contributed articles (as one of the few independent researchers amidst a glut of academics I might add) is now supporting a project which I no longer endorse. Although I have made my opinion quite clear on multiple occasions (Copenhagen, Barcelona, Prague, Catania) the new path is the commons ... not practicing the commons of course which might make some sense, but studying it for personal academic and financial gain.

Despite the many amazing experiences I've had in SqEK, I no longer feel welcome since I dislike the structural problems. I'm staggered that these patriarchal dynamics are replicated after so much hot air has been spoken precisely about **not** doing that.

It really bugs me that these fruitful conversations I've had and amazing encounters might now be legitimating SqEK and allowing it to enter other squats, only for the academics to take what is good for them and give nothing back. We stayed in some wonderful places, but let's take Klinika for example, when it was under eviction threat we did nothing to help.

I was thinking previously to go to the next conference and organise a session on academic (ir)responsibility, but this collective is already dead. SqEK for me is now just another part of the academic sausage factory and I sincerely regret helping few people's careers out. For me it was always a political struggle in support of squats and social centres. Now some people in the collective support Colau in Barcelona. And **she is evicting squats..** [5]

Culture is the hook with which journalists and academics are trying to recuperate our struggles. There is a world of difference between attempts, whatever their limitations, of people involved in struggle to reflect on it, to theorize their practice, and the efforts of academics and journalists to write about such movements. Whether hostile or sympathetic, as expressions of the fundamental division of labour in capitalist society - that between mental and manual labour - these specialists in writing and in ideas are forcing a praxis that is escaping this division back into it. For those of us engaged in the collective project of getting out of this world and into the one we all feel and know is possible, a critique of the category of 'DiY culture' and the recuperative project which lies behind it is becoming imperative. [6]

Hilariously, this quote is from Aufheben. It's probably written by the sellout who ended up thinking it was OK to advise the police on riot control. It just goes to show

how much shit people can spout while not looking at their own behaviour.

And all that glitters is not gold.

Let's be honest from the outset, it would have been weird if there had never been any flareups concerning ethical or political issues with a collective like SqEK that researches squatting. In the time I have been involved with SqEK, squatting has been criminalised (totally) in the Netherlands and (in residential buildings only) in England and Wales. Therefore working on this topic can (and should) raise huge ethical concerns not least in the sense that providing evidence to the forces of repression about things that they deem criminal and/or a threat to public order. And I know that at least for the people I consider comrades it does raise these worries. For me this probably explains why having tried to study how criminalisation was being achieved in order to stop it, I have now veered off into historical studies since studying the past avoids these issues to some extent, like I'm not going to get anyone arrested for writing about squatting in Rotterdam in the 1970s. Another reason would be the hope to inspire future squatters by documenting all the hidden,

inspiring stories from the past. And another reason would be that sadly in both the UK and NL, squatting movements are really winding down. To the extent that the places I work on are pretty much gentrified to fuck nowadays :(

Most people in SqEK are from the same sort of activist milieu as me, in which hatred for the police, refusal to snitch, support for social movements, solidarity with prisoners are so normal as to not even be worth mentioning (and if this makes you raise your eyebrows, congratulations you are the sort of person who fucked up the collective).

When meeting a new person in SqEK, I would always have to check if they were politically aware or merely some academic parasite. For sure we did have a few masters students focusing on squatting as an interesting and trendy topic before spotting the next trend with which to continue on with their academic career and in addition we did have a few horribly perverted career academics who wanted to suck all the energy they could out of the nearest available

movements, using the cultural cachet of SqEK to gain access to groups they would otherwise not be able to reach, BUT overall most people in SqEK are really sound. Just as I found out when talking to scholars of adverse possession in the UK, it seems that rightwingers are interested in other things. We are generally an amicable left-wing bunch.

The problem is that suggestions to collaborate on projects are only interesting for people if they can make money from them and/or further their academic career. Now if people want to do that, fine, although it's not interesting for me and I would hope there would be some sort of ethical evaluation regarding how to treat the "objects of study." If some SqEK people want to do that and find it morally justifiable to earn loads from studying the commons whilst giving very little back, well it's their life I guess, but then I would also expect more activist projects to have a look-in too. But the idea for translations has gone nowhere, and my proposal to interview squatters locally and pool resources generated no interest at all except for the parasites whose eyes lit up when they realised they could use the

interviews for their own projects (it's free real estate).

Within SqEK I have tried to discuss these issues several times, with various degrees of success. Regarding academic (ir)responsibility, in Copenhagen, I made a short presentation about Aufhebunggate [7] (referred to above, total bunfight, would def recommend looking into it if you don't know it and like a lonely evening on the computer with the popcorn), then opened up the discussion with the intention of generating a debate about academic responsibility. And for once the collective was silent! That doesn't happen very often.

In Barcelona we got into things in our evaluation meeting at Can Mas Deu, sitting in the shade of a beautiful elder tree. My initial point was that not everyone gets to live in a place where there's a lot of activism and radical culture, so there's no need to judge people purely on their anarchist points. People don't need to be squatting to have interesting things to say about it. I do even think there is a place for quality abstract academic work, this can be hugely influential. But I also think people need to have their heart in the right

place. If you think squatters need 'guidance' or that you know better than them because you are more intelligent/ cultured/ whatever, then your work will no doubt be shit and I won't help you with it. That's my opinion.

On another tangent, it always surprised me how much we published in English. Sure I'm a native English speaker and so hohoho I'm alright, but it's strange how dominant English is in the academic world in the disciplines favoured by most SqeK scholars. I was always hoping we could generate some cash through grants to translate stuff or indeed do it ourselves since the many people in the collective were producing texts (short and long) in English which presumably would be fairly easy to create again in their mother tongue(s). It's even possible the texts already existed in another language!.

With our last book, **Fighting for Spaces, Fighting for our Lives: Squatting Movements Today** [8] I was actually quite disappointed that we didn't make a website for crowdsourced translations, by the end it felt like I was banging my head against a brick wall for six months just to get the fucking thing published so I gave up. Should

I have just done it? Well yes maybe but we are talking about a collective here. Anyway it took us the best part of a decade just to make the damn thing.

It is also interesting to note that with **Fighting for Spaces**, the academics basically weren't interested to contribute to something which would not be counted for their CV. Meanwhile, it's also worth noting activists often talked a lot about websites, interactivity, blabla and then disappeared again. In any case, I can't say I like the final product very much but I am very happy it exists.

Another thing we could have done much better is radical solidarity. Of course everyone (?) is busy in their local scenes and signing petitions is fairly pointless, but sometimes places we had stayed in and interacted with were under threat and we (two hundred people on the mailing list) could have done more to help out.

So having not dealt with these issues and demonstrating a notable reluctance to organise the next meeting before this bullshit offer from Madrid, the SqEK

collective is now dead in my opinion.

Vroeger was alles beter. Now SqEK is being pulled in new ridiculous directions as people grow older and want to talk about legalization and fucking commons instead of supporting radical projects and putting the spotlight on how the Colau administration can evict a project in Barcelona and then leave it empty for eighteen months until it's resquatted. And Salvini says he's going to close down all the freespaces and we are just going to watch? That's exactly what we did while the French state focused on closing down both the ZAD and the Calais Jungle after explicitly recognising them as threats to its authority.

If I say these things in the previous paragraph without the full context they may sound weird, that's because they come from hours of prior debate. Am I against the commons? No of course not, it's what we are all fighting for. Squats are an amazing example of the commons being implemented in everyday life. Am I against PhD students getting paid loads of money to study commons projects and giving very little back? VERY MUCH SO YES. Am I against SqEK valorising bullshit politicians like Colau who have

sold out the people they should support?
FUCK YES.

Bonus question: Am I against lame academic conferences? YES A THOUSAND TIMES YES

So let's pull the plug and let the parasites die inside the decayed and braindead organism.

So I started with the good and then went to the bad. Hopefully it is quite obvious why things are not good any longer. Things have changed. Everyone grows old. Projects grow old. This is part of life. SqEK has been in existence for over a decade now, which is pretty cool for an informal academic group. Finally the inner tensions seem to have ripped it apart and finally, I'm OK with that. I guess I had reasons to go down the academic path for a while and those reasons have expired and/or collapsed under my disgust at the way this collective is heading.

There's a lot of clever people trapped in academia who could do a lot more for the world if they cared to. **So why don't they?**

I hope the next project can learn from these things instead of reinventing the wheel.

And I look forward to continued collaborations with the friends I've made worldwide through this collective.

Boycott Madrid.

Up the squatters!

written feb - august 2019

This zine and previous issues of Using Space are online for printing at <https://cobblebooks.wordpress.com>

You can also read this text online there.

FOOTNOTES

1 *Using Space 8*

<https://cobblebooks.wordpress.com/2014/06/08/from-usingspace8-learning-from-the-divide-between-artistic-and-anarchist-squats-in-paris/>

2 *The Squatters' Movement in Europe: Commons and Autonomy as Alternatives to Capitalism* – hmm don't see a pdf link

3 Academics doing actual harm to migrants <https://movements-journal.org/issues/06.wissen/06.hatton--mars-attacks-a-cautionary-tale-from-the-uk-on-the-relation-between-igration-and-refugee-studies-and-migration-control.html>

4 «lobos con piel de cordero» page 66

<https://distribuidorapeligrosidadsocial.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/reformismo-y-okupacic3b3n.pdf>

5 Read about Colau <https://roarmag.org/essays/what-went-wrong-for-the-municipalists-in-spain/>

6 Aufheben *The politics of anti-road struggle and the struggles of anti-road politics - the case of the No M11 link road campaign*

7 Aufhebengate <http://dialectical-delinquents.com/articles/uncategorised/aufhebengate/cop-out-the-significance-of-aufhebengate/>

8 *Fighting for Spaces, Fighting for our Lives: Squatting Movements Today* - download link - <https://sqek.squat.net/fighting-for-spaces-fighting-for-our-lives-squatting-movements-today/>



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