

Beyond “cake or death” (or, the gap between theory & practice in the Factory)

Dear Factory,

I'm writing this as a participant in the project, as responsible as anyone else for the problems that I see. I'm writing it for myself as well as to share – I want to try & think my ideas through. I know that there isn't one opinion shared by everyone who works on the Factory, or even a simple split between two sides. Really, I just want us to discuss things more & I'm curious to know what you all think.

I'm not interested here in trying to evaluate how successful our project has been so far or trying to balance our achievements against our problems. I am also not exploring the use of the building as a household, which is a very important aspect of the project & one that we discuss the politics of even less than we discuss other aspects. What I've been thinking about is what we tell ourselves and what we tell other people about what we're doing & what ideas we promote.

I can't remember which of the residents coined the phrase “cake or death,” but I think it first came up during the St Paul's Carnival. It was a beautiful sunny day & we were out on Portland Square giving away skipped vegetables & flowers & homemade cakes. And we were also giving out material from the infoshop: *325 & Fire to the Prisons* & other insurrectionary anarchist pamphlets about prison & flames & attack.

So the phrase has become a bit of a joke for us, & an exaggeration, but I think it also points to something of a problem. There's an uncanny gap: what we do & how we talk about the Factory as a project is nearly all about “cake”, while the posters we have on the walls & the zines we offer to people who enter the building promote something that seems very different.

“Cake” is about far more than cake. It's about the side of our project that is about trying to be friendly & welcoming to neighbours & strangers, the generosity of sharing vegetables that we rescue from the waste & meals we make from them, the idea that sharing food can bring people together, the idea that we can put into practice positive alternatives to the things we oppose. It's about herbal medicine & art & growing vegetables on the roof & trying to turn an abandoned building into a space that's welcoming & becomes used & owned by people outside of the existing squatter/anarchist/punk milieu.

When it comes to promoting the Factory on our flyers & posters, this is what we talk about. We promote ourselves almost solely as simply an open space & the project as simply about renovating & opening a building for people to use. Beyond that we don't talk much about what we're doing & how it might fit a revolutionary strategy. We don't mention anarchism or any political beliefs beyond a vague sense of being not-for-profit. We generally don't even mention the fact that we're squatting the place, let alone that, if it came to it, we would fight to defend what we've created.

We seem to worry that if we mention any of this that people won't come – that any mention of our political beliefs would be intimidating & alienating. That we just need to get people – any people – using the building that we've put so much work into. I think to people who know our codes ('social centre', for example) what we're doing is clear, but I worry that for people who only read what we say about ourselves we could be anything – a government-funded youth centre, a christian charity, part of 'the big society'.

Then, if people who come along are interested in what we're doing & why, what do we have to give them to explain ourselves? Posters of burning cop cars, zines & pamphlets that promotes attack & confrontation with everything that restricts our freedom. The rhetoric is often very general, not wanting to narrow to single-issues - & when it relates to more specific situations, it's usually someone else's situation elsewhere. The question is, how does this material relate to our lives? How does it

relate to our project? How does it relate to the lives of the visitors who use the building?

There's a line between frightening people (with heavy complex rhetoric &/or with the idea of extreme confrontation) & not being honest (by hiding our broader agenda, not being clear where we stand). In what we say about the project, we head towards deception. In the politics put forward in the building, we head towards frightening.

To take the piss a bit: What is our plan – invite people in, never mentioning that we have political motivations beyond wanting to use & preserve an empty building, then give them a zine full of news about explosions & translated prison communiques? What exactly are we hoping will happen?

Why don't we talk more explicitly – I'd argue more honestly – about our politics & the politics of the project? Or, why is there such a big gap between the politics of the project & the politics expressed in material inside the building?

I think there are a few reasons.

- Part of the problem when it comes to explaining why we're doing this is that we don't really have a collective answer. Different people in the project have different answers & different motivations. There's almost a fear of talking this out – of finding out where we disagree. Or maybe we're just worried that it will be another boring meeting. Still, it's odd to put a lot of effort & to work beside each other for so long without ever being sure why we're all engaged in what often seems a crazy plan. It's a big project & a big building – there's room for us to disagree.
- There's a fear that to talk about our politics or our ideas is going to frighten people. That it is impossible to talk about what we believe without lapsing into jargon or specialised language that would automatically exclude anyone who wasn't already used to this language. It's hard, that's true, but it's not impossible.
- Belief that if we say who we are or why we're doing this that we'll exclude people who don't already share our views or our language. I think this is the biggest problem & I don't think it's true. I think if I saw the project as an outsider, I'd want to know *why*. I also think people will continue to judge us on our actions rather than our rhetoric – but our actions make more sense with some context.

In other words, people who already appreciate the meal on Tuesday nights are unlikely to run away if we explain that we're anarchists. People who might see it in passing & be curious but unsure whether or not to come in might be more interested if we explain, for example, that it's a free meal people make from food that would otherwise be wasted, & that we're trying to take care of each other because we don't want the government to control our lives, & that it's free because we want to get away from a system where everything is bought & sold & most of our time is spent working to someone else's orders for someone else's profit. Or however we choose to explain ourselves.

Stating our politics – our strategy – doesn't have to be a list of rules, a list of principles that we require people to agree with before they step foot in the building. I also think it's very easy for people to feel excluded already – in some ways, the lack of explicit political identification makes it even easier, as it becomes a matter of codes & insinuations.

- I think part of the problem is that we sometimes view 'the public' as a homogenous mass that is not already in conflict. We have the idea that 'other people' like cake but that they'd be turned away by talk of politics. That all we can really offer people is nice things & space. Whereas, surely, if anarchist ideas have any real meaning – and any chance of actually contributing to significant change – they are actually shared by more than a sect of 'revolutionaries'. If the idea of attack is actually so unattractive, so removed from the daily life we share with others, then we're wrong.

I don't believe that 'we' have the answers, that we have some way of living that can be an example to 'other people' who are trapped in dull consumer lives. I believe that tension & rebellion – against work, against social control, against the dead-end of capitalist recreation – arise everywhere. That the answer is not to show the way, or spread the word, or any such missionary tactic, but to recognise & try to connect with what subversion occurs while creating our own. This means communicating with people.

- On the other hand, I think we need to remember that our ideas are *meant* to be threatening to some people (or at least to certain social positions). All the welcoming community spirit & bright curtains in the world aren't going to convince a property developer that fighting to defend a squat is a good thing. No matter how nicely we cook up the food, a supermarket manager would rather we paid for it. If our function room gets used for subversive gatherings, cops & university administrations & bosses will want the space shut down. Fascists are never going to like us.

I also think we have to be honest, if only with ourselves & say that for many of us (for me at least) the fact that we're outside the law (if not specifically illegal) is an aspect of the project's appeal.

I guess what I'm proposing is shifts on both sides – not to an imaginary middle ground, but towards a greater sense of a holistic project. That while we give away cake we talk more about why we're doing it – first to each other, then to everyone else. That while we talk about confrontation & rebellion we think more about what it actually means in practice, in the lives we're living. That if the texts we're distributing & the posters on our walls don't actually reflect enough aspects of our lives & our rebellions, then that we find – or create – others to complement them. Or, that if we want our lives to be differently rebellious that we start being honest about what that will actually mean.

Perhaps it's more simple: that it goes without saying, for us, that the anarchist project involves both cake & attack, creation & destruction. I think we need to be clearer – perhaps it's better to say more honest – about the fact that the nice things we do are rooted in a radical critique.

I spent the time writing this & then found out that someone else already said it much more concisely:

“The anarchists must simultaneously be those who are blamed for acts of startling indecency, of inappropriate extremism in all the right causes (they burned four police cars at our peaceful march!) & those who are around town cooking & sharing free communal meals, holding street parties, projecting pirated movies on the sides of buildings, running libraries & bicycle repair shops, & appearing at protests ('oh look, it's those lovely anarchists again!').

We will be safest from the right hand of repression & the left hand of recuperation when everyone is thoroughly confused as to whether we are frightening or loveable.”

“Sowing anarchy in the metropolis”, A.G. Schwartz

with love,
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