

**The struggle to belong**  
*Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.*

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**“Will the real Raval please stand up?”**

**Identity, contentious dynamics and the issue of representation**

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## **Abstract**

*The paper analyses the issue of political and social representation in the case of Raval neighbourhood in Barcelona, starting from recent conflicts that have confronted residents' associations and committees, neighbours and the local administration. Located in the historical centre, and traditionally characterised as a working class and marginal neighbourhood, Raval hosts a very heterogenic population in terms of ethnicity and social features. Conflicts and consequent protests over the control of space have become routine and new cleavages (established/outsiders, autochthonous/foreign) have turned out to be relevant. Keeping in mind that social and ethnic mix does not automatically produce hostility and conflicts, the paper aims at understanding the process which led to this situation of social and political fragmentation, taking into account the evolution of social movements in the neighbourhood, the role played by the local administration in preventing dissent and the downsides of citizens' participatory practices in Barcelona's governance model.*

## **Introduction**

Fragmentation has become one of the key frames employed to read the contemporary social and political landscapes of cities: fragmentation in cities is the consequence of the difficulty of recomposing a double plurality created by the diversity of referential systems and human activities (Pattaroni 2007). Conflicts themselves are increasingly fragmented and diffused (Podestà & Vitale 2010) and the governmental landscape - which must find quick responses to demands generated in a context of generally mediatised public debate and politics - is itself fragmented and destabilised (Uitermark & Duyvendak 2008).

With this background in mind, the paper analyses a paradigmatic case of urban social and political fragmentation: the case of the Raval neighbourhood in Barcelona. In particular, I shall take into account the issues of political and social representation, starting from recent conflicts among residents' associations and committees, neighbours and the local administration. Located in the historical centre of the city of Barcelona and traditionally characterised as a working class and marginal neighbourhood, Raval hosts a very heterogeneous population in terms of ethnicity and social features. The area has experienced massive settlement by non-European immigrant groups, as well as processes of urban reform that have attracted new and wealthier residents, transforming it into a place for leisure and consumption. Conflicts and consequent protests over the control of space - especially related to noise, dirtiness, street prostitution, petty delinquency, drug dealing and consumption - have become routine, and committees of neighbours with clear anti-institutional discourses have gained prominence.

Specifically here I will refer to mobilizations of small groups of residents known as *plataformas de vecinos* which, through a repertoire of action and argumentation mainly based on protest, have

succeeded in drawing the attention of public opinion to Raval and some of its critical situations.

I will consider these groups' protests and mobilizations as a starting point to reflect on issues of social and political representation. Studying such issues in a critical moment, the one of protest, is particularly enlightening because contextual and relational elements become more evident, and the logic of the situation prevails over that of identity (Vitale 2007).

Starting from specific conflicts experienced by the different actors in the neighbourhood, and some of the specific "tests"<sup>1</sup> they faced to legitimate their protest, generalise their claims (Thevénot 2006) and demonstrate their representativeness of the neighbourhood, I will focus on the cleavages that have become relevant. In particular, these include the fragmentation of the neighbourhood association network, which shows how the construction of a common voice able to speak for the neighbourhood, oppose, and represent a legitimate speaker in the debate for its future, it still far from being attained.

In this paper I will argue that this is not (only) the result of the social heterogeneity of the neighbourhood itself – a social and ethnic mix does not automatically produce hostility and conflict. The situation must instead be read as a consequence of long-term processes which involve the evolution of social movements in the neighbourhood, its associational knit and the role played by the administration in attempting to prevent dissent. These facts, which are to a large extent peculiar to the Raval neighbourhood, must nevertheless be understood in light of the role of participatory practices in the Barcelona Model (Blakeley 2005, 2010), in the process of the neo-liberalization of local governance (Guarneros-Meza & Geddes 2010) and the transformed role of the neighbourhood movement.

The paper is based on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork that lasted one and a half years, and the analyses of the different groups' claims and the local administration's discourse based on interviews, informal conversations, participation in residents' meetings and political actions, participation in the district public audiences, and the analysis of media, blogs and internet websites. The paper is structured as follows: first, I will consider the evolution of the Barcelona Model, focusing on its contradictions and on what this has implied for its historical centre; second, I will consider conflicts and resident mobilizations, and in particular the case of the *Raval per Viure plataforma*; third, I will elaborate on some particular episodes in order to see the different ways conflicts and problems are framed by the different groups, analysing the moral boundaries that

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<sup>1</sup> The "test" (épreuve) is a central concept in the French pragmatic approach that refers to the research program of the 'Groupe de sociologie politique et morale' launched by scholars such as Boltanski and Thévenot in the 1980s. "Tests" are devices in which the actors and their actions are evaluated according to one or more criteria, leading to the attribution to each actor of a specific position in a hierarchical order (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

delimit such groups. Finally, I will analyse the situation in Raval in light of wider processes at the city level concerning participation and the role of the neighbourhood movement.

## **1. The changing Barcelona Model**

Since the restoration of local democracy (1979) Barcelona has experienced profound urban and social changes: what was known during the Franco period as “grey Barcelona”<sup>2</sup> became in less than 20 years a vibrant and internationally attractive city which successfully hosted the 1992 Olympic Games. Barcelona has been converted into a post-industrial city in which physical transformation has been accompanied by a good service economy and a certain degree of attention to the democratic and participatory dimension in the transformation process. What became internationally famous as the “Barcelona Model”, the successful post-industrial urban reconstruction process, was in fact based on urban democracy and consensus in the political sphere, public-private partnerships in the economic realm, effective management in urban transformation, and local identity, civic culture and social cohesion in the social sphere.

At the beginning of this period, representative and participatory democracy joined, forming a coalition government with a programme of redistribution of urban resources, and the aim of consolidating civic and political rights (Garcia 2008: 99). During the first period of the Barcelona model the objectives of institutional proximity and citizen participation were achieved through decentralization; the creation of districts and neighbourhoods integrated neighbourhood activities, brought the administration closer to the people and made municipal policies more responsive to the needs of peripheral and working class areas (Borja 2004)<sup>3</sup>.

The neighbourhood movement had played a major role in the transition from dictatorship to democracy, both as an actor for social change and by generating a new urban political culture (Molinero and Ysàs 2010). The movement also played a major role after democracy was restored, pursuing effective solutions for neighbourhoods experiencing serious deficiencies in terms of social

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<sup>2</sup> This was the porciolismo effect, derived from the name of Josep Maria de Porcioles Colomer, Mayor of Barcelona from 1957 to 1973: the abandonment of the city to speculators, the dramatic lack of housing policies, public spaces, and social infrastructure, and the persistence of barranquismo (slums).

<sup>3</sup> In 1984 Barcelona was divided into 10 districts, each governed by a council nominated from the party lists in proportion with the electoral results in each district: therefore, the political representation in each district reflects the political majority of that particular district rather than the overall majority in the city, permitting a significant diffusion of power and a degree of political pluralism. The districts administrate a number of functions and services, such as welfare, social and leisure services and have their own budgets (Blakeley 2005).

infrastructure and public spaces, mainly through the orientation of the political programme of the new local governments.

Later on, the movement faced a period of crisis related to the new political situation and the fact that many activists were involved in political campaigns and co-opted into the local administrations. This heralded a weakening of the movement<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the fact that the success of Barcelona cannot be attributed to a citywide neighbourhood participation process in its planning and implementation (Calavita and Ferrer 2004) it is nevertheless true that the democratic administration repaired the damage left by more than 30 years of city management under Franco. Neighbourhoods have been equipped with public buildings and infrastructure, new public spaces (squares, parks, ramblas, etc.) with the aim of reducing spatial and social segregation (Borja 2004: 98 -99). This process went hand in hand with the Barcelona's transformation into a city of services with an exceptional and successful urban planning process. The latter, driven by the Olympic strategy, was the result of consensus at different levels of governance actors.

Thanks to the Olympic Games, Barcelona had the opportunity to promote itself as a cultural enclave and to present its renewed image worldwide. In this period, tourism was boosted and quickly became the flagship of Barcelona's urban economy. It was seen as a strategy to attract investors, and used in order to face a precarious situation in terms of the service and finance economy (García e Claver 2003). At this time (1994) the city entered the second phase of its model, with increasing space being given to market forces and the private sector to the detriment of political planning (García e Claver 2003, García 2008, Blakeley 2010). In general, criticism (Capel 2005, Balibrea 2004, 2005, Delgado 2007, Zusman 2004) sheds light on the relevance given to tourist, commercial and real estate initiatives, rather than to social policies and neighbourhood schemes. Barcelona has become a post-industrial tourist city where residents live side by side with an increasing number of visitors who use their services, both public and private (García 2008). Moreover, real estate prices have increased constantly, engendering processes of gentrification and the consequent expulsion of lower-class residents. This situation has provoked discontent among poorer citizens (especially in the city centre), who feel that the authorities prioritize visitors and market brokers' needs, overlooking their own. Residents are increasingly distrustful of this "model", and display growing feelings of disenfranchisement from the decisions taken by local authorities. More recent facts have

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<sup>4</sup> The crisis of the movement has been nevertheless interpreted differently: a more militant literature has clearly blamed the majority left parties for such a crisis (Recio, Naya 2004) while others scholars consider this issue to be more complex (Molinero, Ysas 2010).

worsened the situation: in Autumn 2010, a diffuse network of corruption involving officers and politicians in the administration at the Ciutat Vella district and the Ayuntamiento was exposed<sup>5</sup>.

The most evident and deep-seated urban transformations affect the city's historical centre, the district of Ciutat Vella, put under pressure by increasing visitor flows, commercial and real estate initiatives and speculation, at a time when the city was attracting a consistent number of immigrants from outside Europe, raising new challenges and issues at the local level. The case of Raval is particularly interesting since it was until the 1990s considered a "no go area", the home of various marginal activities, but has now become a cultural and tourist neighbourhood, attracting middle class residents (Subirats y Rio 2005). The transformation "del Chino al Raval", is a an accomplished process in the northern part of the neighbourhood, but still in progress in the southern area.

## **2. Urban reform and the role of social movements in Raval**

Raval has always been a marginal and poor neighbourhood in the city of Barcelona: a pole of attraction for immigrants, a working class neighbourhood and a place of vice and marginal activities<sup>6</sup> generally neglected by local administrations. From the 1970s, those who could or did not want to leave the neighbourhood to move to new industrial suburbs outside the city began to call for reforms, for more social services and an enhancement of living conditions. With the advent of democracy, the Special Plans of Internal Reform ("Planes especiales de reforma interior" PERI) came into force with the intention of improving buildings and equipment, and also of changing activities and functions in the historical centre. Raval's PERI were approved in 1985, with three main objectives: creating new public spaces, transforming existing buildings into public institutions and new public housing, and encouraging renovation and the replacement of old dwellings (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona 1985). The project was led by a public/private company, PROCIVESA (Promociò Ciutat Vella S.A.), which later became FOCIVESA (Foment Ciutat Vella S.A.).

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<sup>5</sup> Residents' discontent with the socialist administration and general distrust of the political system led to high rates of abstention at the last municipal elections, held in May 2011, and the success of the CIU, *Convergència i Unió*, the right-wing Catalan party.

<sup>6</sup> Raval's physical and social situation (narrow and winding streets, overcrowded buildings), its marginal activities, the presence of many bars, restaurants, music halls, and brothels led to the neighbourhood's moniker "barrio chino", evoking the "mysterious" and romantic image of San Francisco's Chinese quarter. Barrio Chino became well known not only in Barcelona but also in Europe, as a place of vice, a red light district serving the working class as well as the bourgeoisie.

The plan foresaw two different programs for the northern and southern areas of the district<sup>7</sup>. The southern part of Raval was affected by the existing Central Plan (“El Plan Central”) for urban planning, which aimed carve out new streets in the historical centre. The main result of the project, modified in 1995, was the opening of a large public space - the “Rambla de Raval” - through the demolition of 5 blocks lying between the old calle Cadena and Sant Jeroni. Approximately 2000 people had to leave their homes; most of them were rehoused in other buildings, but many did not have legal rent contracts and could not therefore resist relocation or expulsion. This policy has been widely criticised by planners, antagonist groups and the media, and led to a second phase of the PERI in which the emphasis was put on renovation rather than demolition (Degen 2008: 101). The role of civic associations in the urban reform process was ambiguous and difficult.

Maza et al. (2002) note that after the Civil War, Raval did not see the birth of an important urban movement, not even in the 1990s when social and spatial transformations were radical<sup>8</sup>. Mobilizations and residents’ claims never evolved into an effective urban movement strong enough to influence urban and social reform. This may be due to the transitory character of the area’s population, but even more so to what the authors define as a social “counter movement” created by the local administration to prevent the birth of any strong urban movement. This policy of control used different tools with the aim of preventing dissent: the production of an “anaesthetic”<sup>9</sup> discourse through municipal media and propaganda, and the practice of municipal agents working or mediating with associations of all kinds, including providing funding.

The role played by the official residents’ association (Asociació de Veïns de Raval, AV), eager to proceed with the regeneration as rapidly as possible, led to their abandoning any position of protest or dissent, limiting their role to supporting residents’ legal claims<sup>10</sup>. Because of this position, a group of citizens detached from the association and started an independent association that claimed the dramatic changes did not respect the neighbourhood’s social fabric, nor its more vulnerable residents’ needs. The force of this group was subsequently weakened by a media-orchestrated campaign smearing the association by connecting it with a suspected paedophile and accusing it of

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<sup>7</sup> The first, named “Del Liceo al Seminari”, transformed the northern area into a “cultural district”, converting its buildings into museums, cultural institutions, research centres etc. (MACBA, CCCB, Faculties of the Universitat de Barcelona etc.). The idea was to make a place for different urban populations to enjoy, but especially to make it attractive for tourists and visitors.

<sup>8</sup> This aspect is also recognized by Domingo i Clota and Bonet i Casas (1998, p. 151) who nevertheless recognize the importance of some of the protests and claims of the official neighbourhood association.

<sup>9</sup> see Coordinadora contra la Especulació dRaval (2004).

<sup>10</sup> A totally different story can be read in Domingo i Clota and Bonet i Casas (1998) who consider the role played by Raval’s AV in the PERI reform as positive; the authors affirm that instead of specific claims, the AV has chosen a “global claim” which was what the neighbourhood needed, “for this reason, the AV immediately got involved in the plans for reform boosted by the democratic municipality” (ibidem, p. 148).

being part of a network sexually exploiting children. The “Raval case” is considered by many as the instrument used by the main actors in the reform process to stop dissent, as well as a weapon for the official neighbourhood association to prevent La Taula de Raval’s members from gaining power.

The neighbourhood association has never attained cohesion and unity to the extent to become a legitimate speaker in the debate about the area’s transformation. The situation today is if anything even more fragmented, with the rise of new groups, *plataformas de vecinos*, which fight on specific topics. Raval sud, where these groups arose, has the highest percentages of immigrant populations<sup>11</sup> due to the presence of old and sometimes shabby housing. At the same time, some parts of the area which have been restored have seen the arrival of new residents from other neighbourhoods or abroad. It may be said that in Raval, gentrification dynamics cohabit with the persistence of poorer residents and the fact that the neighbourhood has been progressively converted into a leisure and consumer district attracting visitors and tourists. The picture is completed by the presence of marginal activities such as street prostitution, petty delinquency and drug dealing, as well as by the high presence of needy people and unaccompanied minors. To a certain extent, this situation is compensated for by a wide network of associations and NGOs, partially funded by the Administration. Most of these work under the aegis of a private foundation named Tot Raval, which is very close to the local administration.

At the present time, urban transformation is affecting Raval sud and more changes will take place as a consequence of a large scale project named *Pla de Barris de Raval Sud (Projecte d’Intervenció Integral)*, equally financed by the Ayuntamiento and the Generalitat de Catalunya through the “Llei de Barri” for a total amount of 15 million Euros. This project tackles the neighbourhood as a whole, encompassing both physical and social interventions<sup>12</sup>. The project reflects the same problem that generally afflicts processes of urban transformation in the city: the scarce control of residents over the interventions, and the use of citizens’ participation as a tool to prevent dissent rather than create debate around issues of public interest and the collective good.

Another process of transformation which will most probably have important effects on the social knit of the neighbourhood affects the area of the Rambla de Raval, which constitutes the hearth of the neighbourhood. The “Filmoteca de Catalunya” will soon have its venue in a new building in Salvador Seguí square, in the centre of the area where street prostitution is concentrated and where

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<sup>11</sup> In 2009 the foreign population in the neighbourhood was 51% of the total resident population (Estadísticas – Ayuntamiento de Barcelona).

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.fomentciutatvella.net/noticies\\_fitxa.php?idNoticia=66](http://www.fomentciutatvella.net/noticies_fitxa.php?idNoticia=66)



many of the conflicts around the use of public space take place and residents' discontent is high.

### 3. Conflicts and resident mobilizations in diverse Raval

The southern part of Raval faces conflictual situations as a result of the coexistence of different urban populations. Conflicts arise from a complex situation in which residents, workers, city users and tourists cohabit yet have different interests. Despite the fact that this is to a certain extent normal in contemporary cities where diversification is the rule, it is also true that in some parts of the neighbourhood the situation is particularly delicate because of the coexistence of marginal activities - street prostitution and the sale of drugs – with the daily activities of residents.

For some residents in the neighbourhood, the situation has become unbearable in recent years, leading to their decision decided to join together and protest. In March 2009, a group of residents and entrepreneurs from the neighbourhood decided to make their discontent public and opened a new internet blog named “Raval per viure” (RPV), which is the name of the committee itself.

The group presents itself as follows:

*Raval per viure was created to unite outraged residents and entrepreneurs' efforts because of the local administration's lack of solutions. Its aim is that Raval may keep on being a decent and liveable neighbourhood. A place free from delinquency and incivility, where neighbours can walk around without being worried about their safety. The Raval to live in.*

The group<sup>13</sup>, which sprang from an informal meeting between neighbours and entrepreneurs worried about safety and order, and threatened by drug dealing and consumption, petty delinquency, street prostitution, noise, dirt and uncivil behaviour in general<sup>14</sup>, started to highlight the neighbourhood's problems and make them public through different actions. As often occurs in this kind of mobilization deeply rooted in the “régime du proche” (Thevénot 2006) – that is in what is lived as relevant by actors in everyday life - organized protest may originate from a moral, esthetical or civic shock (Cefaï 2007). All three are relevant in the case of RPV; the feeling of

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<sup>13</sup> Raval per viure is not the only resident committee that exists in the neighbourhood. There are others that protest for different reasons (against noise in the Rambla de Raval, against a drug addiction centre, etc.), Each has its own internet blog. Nevertheless, these committees work together, since Raval per viure, the group that has become most public, and has wider repertoires of argumentation which also include the other groups' claims.

<sup>14</sup> A great deal of stress has been placed on the issue of civility since the end of 2005 when the local administration approved the “Ordenanza del civismo” to promote and guarantee cohabitation in the public spaces of Barcelona. In this respect, one of the main complaints of the committee is that the ordinance has not been enforced.

indignation and “exasperation” (Stavo Debauge 2003), framed in personal experience, led people to decide to act in public.

The first action carried out was the exhibition of banners reading “Volem un barri digne” (we want a decent neighbourhood), which in turn became the group’s distinctive motto. The banners hanging in windows and from balconies soon became numerous and helped the protest receive press coverage, in particular after the murder of a young Algerian in August 2009 and the publication in El País on 1 September 2009 of pictures of sexual intercourse between prostitutes and clients in the streets of the neighbourhood<sup>15</sup>. From that moment, more banners appeared and local and national media coverage became wider<sup>16</sup>, clearly showing how the media play a constitutive part in local mobilizations rather than a supporting role reflecting the discourses of social mobilizations (Neveu 2001).

The committee has constructed repertoires of argumentation initially built on 'empirical proof' collected by members in their daily experiences in the neighbourhood. These are then further expressed in generalised forms (ibidem). By stating specific motivations, they want to demonstrate how the situation they live in would be unacceptable to every civic-minded and “normal” person, and show their engagement to be politically and ethically necessary by making reference to a general system of values. This is how the neighbours face the test (épreuve) (Boltanski, Thévenot 2006, Vitale 2007) of constructing a form of generality in the “civic order of worth” (Thévenot 2006), which claims detachment from bonds of personal dependence.

The *plataformas de vecinos* share most of the features della Porta (2004) outlines with reference to the “comitati di quartiere” in Italy. They consist of organized groups, although weakly structured, which meet on a territorial basis and use forms of protest to demand an improvement in living conditions in their specific context. They have a local identity, an organized, flexible structure based on participation, with low levels of coordination and action strategies mainly based on protest. This mobilization has a clear contentious and political character (Tilly, Tarrow 2007) as well as a specific “urban” nature, since it is related to the particular allocation of goods and services and specific activities that take place in public spaces. The conflict in this case takes place around specific choices in urban politics (Vitale 2007). To some extent, the *plataformas* protest recalls Castells’ defensive reactions by local communities “against the imposition of global disorder and

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.elpais.com/articulo/espana/Sexo/pago/plena/calle/junto/mercado/Boqueria/Barcelona/elpepiesp/20090901/elpepinac\\_12/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/espana/Sexo/pago/plena/calle/junto/mercado/Boqueria/Barcelona/elpepiesp/20090901/elpepinac_12/Tes) (accessed on 23 May 2011).

<sup>16</sup> The word “Raval” appeared in 1240 articles in La Vanguardia during 2009, which represents the widest coverage received in the last 20 years. The group named “Raval per Viure” appeared in 3 articles in El País, 5 in La Vanguardia, 8 in Avui (the more local the media, the wider the coverage).

uncontrollable, fast-paced change” (1997: 67).

From another point of view, these groups are sometimes labelled as NIMBY - Not In My Back Yard – because of the main focus of their discourse on refusal, opposition and – whether apparently or not – egoism. Nevertheless, such a label must be used with care, first, because the label itself is no longer considered a useful and relevant analytical category (Podestà, Vitale 2010, Fedi & Mannarini, 2008; della Porta, Piazza, 2008) and, second, because its use risks a reductive and simplified interpretation of the conflict.

In these respects, the mobilizations studied here, cannot be considered as progressive forms of contestation because of their conservative and sometimes exclusionary accents, and their incapability to move beyond the pursuit of specific goals. They are still, however, positive processes insofar as they unmask critical issues particular to the neighbourhood itself: the problems inherent in its associational knit, the role played by the local administration in preventing local dissent, and more general issues about participation and representation in a diverse neighbourhood. The *plataformas* protests in Raval, based on specific groups’ particular interests – new and established residents, Spanish and Catalan, middle class, or low-middle class, but generally higher than the average of the neighbourhood - resemble Harvey’s “militant particularism” (2001): they are not conservative by definition, but can easily become so should they fail to engage with political issues that go beyond the community itself. What the community is in this case, i.e. who does the *plataforma* represent, is the issue at stake to which I will now turn.

#### **4. Political and social representation where strongly contrasting groups cohabit**

Despite having gained visibility in the public sphere, especially thanks to the media attention it received, *Raval per Viure* has failed to become a legitimate speaker for the neighbourhood: it did not succeed in constructing a form of generality demonstrating its detachment from particularistic interests. The reasons for this may be several, but the problems of identity and representation must be stressed. The tension between participation and representation is a common feature in local mobilizations as well as in social movements, posing problems about the legitimacy of different groups’ protests and claims (Vitale 2007).

The last initiative taken by the group, for example, was widely covered in the media, but showcased its weakness and the scarce social representation of the group. Some of the members, together with a young architect living in the neighbourhood, developed a proposal for a plan to regulate street prostitution, a sort of “red-light district” based on the model of the Antwerp case. The proposal, diffused in a grand style through a press conference, soon provoked the disapproval of neighbours

and tension and conflicts within the groups itself. The wide media resonance that the proposal received exacerbated the condemnation by the residents of the streets included in the plan, who had not been consulted.

The *plataforma*, whose core group is constituted by both established and new residents, mixed in terms of age and gender and reflecting diverse political positions, is not representative of the ethnic and class heterogeneity of the neighbourhood. Because of this and a certain ingenuity in political strategy (most of these people are new to social movements), the group has gained a negative reputation among many sectors of the neighbourhood which label them as *fachas* (right wing), racist or, from another point of view, think that they are just a handful of *pijos* (gentrifiers), new residents coming from other parts of the city in search of a hip neighbourhood. Cleavages such as established/outsiders (in terms of the length of their presence in the neighbourhood) autochthonous/foreign (in terms of ethnicity, nationality or culture) combine in different forms together with economic and cultural capital differences. The established/outsider cleavage has been a classical theme in the study of local communities since the work of Elias and Scotson (1965). Yet the construction of symbolic boundaries (Lamont, Molnár 2002) in contemporary neighbourhoods must nevertheless take into account the greater complexity that marks such environments; the division between insiders and outsiders cannot be reduced to a totalized and absolute dichotomy (cfr. Crow et al., 2001)<sup>17</sup>.

The boundary between “established” residents and “newcomers” became a relevant frame of interpretation in a concrete conflict that took place in one of the narrow streets of the area. In this street newcomers and established residents cohabit, the young people of the neighbourhood, experiencing difficult social situations, loiter, and drug dealing occurs. What at the beginning was a simple altercation between neighbours in a building became a big case which saw the opposition of E. – a computer engineer who had bought a flat in the building three years ago – and young established residents who struggle to get along with precarious jobs and occasionally deal in light drugs. E. started a sort of crusade against the sale of drugs, labelled these young residents as “drug dealers” (and, indeed, there are some such dealers, young males of immigrant origin who do not reside in the street) and gave interviews to TV and newspapers. E. soon became the victim of insults and threats - his protest was partially supported by *Raval per Viure*, which organized a series of night “caceroladas”. The first of these ended in a confrontation between those protesting and another group, including the young residents, who accused the protestors of having nothing better to

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<sup>17</sup> See May 2004 and Hogenstijn et al. 2008 for examples of the use of Elias’s analytical category overcoming its limits.

do than bother others. The conflict, which was even taken before the courts, originated in a situation in which different visions of the neighbourhood clashed. While there is a concrete problem with drug dealing and the appropriation of public spaces in a way that may exclude others, at the same time the way the problem has been framed and made public has triggered stigmatising processes towards a section of the resident population, and possibly the most vulnerable. The conflict has legitimated the vision of a strong cleavage separating new residents with high economic and cultural capital from poor established residents; the first are seen as unable to deal with situations “typical” of the neighbourhood and as people who thought they were moving to a multicultural paradise but found a completely different reality<sup>18</sup>.

The “established/outside” frame assumes another important configuration which is worthy of note; even those who blame the newcomers of ‘lacking the skills’ to live in the neighbourhood - established residents including both “autochthons” and foreigners -, and criticise *Raval per Viure* admit that “things have gotten worse over the last few years”. This particular frame, whose catchphrase would be along the lines of “prostitutes and thieves are not the same anymore”, is very diffuse in the neighbourhood among established residents belonging to different groups. The main idea is that in the past Raval was ruled by a kind of “internal order” made possible by the existence of strong and weak social ties. For instance, the fact that prostitutes and neighbours knew each other allowed them to negotiate a cohabitation based on reciprocal respect and even mutual help. Similarly, petty delinquents, who have always lived in the neighbourhood, used to have a kind of “ethical code” which prevented them from bothering Raval neighbours and entrepreneurs. Different actors agree in their view that since the 1990s this internal order has come to an end as a consequence of the opening of the neighbourhood and the arrival of new groups, immigrants at first, then middle class residents and tourists. Some actors go further, saying that it is the mass arrival of poor immigrants that has caused an increase in delinquency and in particular a change in its nature: more aggressive, not respectful of neighbours and shopkeepers etc. The family basis (base familière) on which cohabitation used to rest has been disturbed by the arrival of “others”; conflicts in Raval originate in “foreign trouble” (troubles de l’étrangeté) (Breviglieri and Trom 2003) where feelings of “indignation politically oriented towards grammars of the public good” (ibidem, p. 407) are sharpened: the latter in this case being safeness and civility at the neighbourhood scale.

The issue of otherness/foreignness is important in Raval: despite the fact that immigration has been

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<sup>18</sup> This specific conflict has nonetheless given opportunities for participatory processes to take place thanks to the work of a neighbourhood association - “Casal dels infants” - and its project “Barri Educador” (educating neighbourhood). The aim of the project was precisely to tackle residents outside the associations, those who remain invisible in the formal participative processes, and to build bottom up participative processes starting from conflicts.

seen in the neighbourhood since its beginnings (first from other parts of Spain, then from foreign countries), and despite the fact that half of the population is made up of foreigners, some Spanish/Catalan residents are still reluctant to see the latter as legitimate residents and public space users. In this respect, it is interesting to see how RPV has handled this issue. Xenophobia can be considered as another example of a “collective engagement test” (épreuve d’engagement collectif): the RPV is accused of having an ambiguous position towards immigrants, thus aiding the spread of racism and intolerance. The committee refutes all accusations of xenophobia and considers this particular discourse as one of the ruses employed by the local administration and associations strongly connected to it to delegitimize the group and its protests. The issue of immigrants and xenophobic attitudes bring us to the theme of political and social representation, which is at the base of the contentious dynamics between different groups and associations in the neighbourhood. Which group can say that it represents Raval? Who can speak in the name of Raval’s residents? It should be remembered here that more than half of Raval’s resident population is of foreign origin. The most numerous groups are the Pakistanis, Moroccans and Filipinos. In Raval, there are different groups and associations which, in one way or another, speak “for the neighbourhood”, but generally have no relevant representation of the foreign populations of the neighbourhood. This a big issue if we consider, moreover, that immigrant people do not participate in the formal moments of participation that are part of the model of governance of the city<sup>19</sup>. This does not mean that immigrants have no representation at all in the neighbourhood: there are plenty of associations with specific ethnic or religious characters; most of these associations are service providers, however, constructing “clients” rather than “citizens”. At the same time, most of these associations work under the umbrella of Tot Raval, the already mentioned powerful foundation that gathers the most important cultural and social associations and entities of the neighbourhood, and which is considered to the Municipality’s outpost in the neighbourhood, taking the role over from Raval AV when the local administration needed a change of image after the scandals in which the that group was involved. Tot Raval played a significant role in the legitimation of the social transformation that took place in the neighbourhood after the reform, and it is said to have been the tool for the local administration’s change of strategy: that from repression to the neutralisation of critical voices through their integration in the foundation and funding (Coordinadora contra l’Especulació en Raval 2004).The relationship between the Ayuntamiento and Tot Raval can be seen as a ‘partnership’, a typical form of the governance structure, in which responsibility for social problems

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<sup>19</sup> They are represented as “immigrants” in the “Consell Municipal d’Immigració”, which features the participation of several types of pro-immigrant organisations (these include ‘autochthonous’ organisations, immigrant organisations strictly speaking and ‘mixed’ organisations – like the immigration strands of the mainstream unions).

is distributed across a large number of administrative levels and institutional actors (Uitmark & Duyvendak 2007). The president of a Pakistani association belonging to Tot Raval that I interviewed expressed disappointment over the control Tot Raval exercises in the neighbourhood, and the fact that it is there to prevent dissent rather than improve the situation for those living in Raval. He also expressed distrust towards the *plataformas* because of their particular repertoire of action, while sharing most of the reasons of their fight. Finally, he spoke about his own negative experience with Raval AV, where he did not feel welcome but judged for his national identity.

The issue of immigrant residents in the neighbourhood goes beyond that of social and political representation; people generally experience a feeling of disenfranchisement and exclusion which become tangible at critical moments, such as when Badre Benahsaine, a 16 year old boy of Moroccan origin, died in a square in the neighbourhood after falling. The ambulance had taken more than half an hour to arrive. His relatives, friends and neighbours reacted with rage, since they interpreted his death as the result of being both Moroccan and living in Raval.

As we have seen, the associational knit in Raval is quite fragmented and lacks an entity able to gather all the people's needs and problems and mediate them with more collective political aims. The traditional residents' association abdicated its aim, Tot Raval is an extension of the municipality, and the *plataformas*, despite embodying an oppositional role that is needed in the neighbourhood, remain relegated to particularistic issues and have failed to construct a wider political view. If this can to a certain extent be attributed to the diverse interests and visions of the neighbourhood that each group holds, it is nonetheless also the result of wider political and social processes, to which we turn now.

## **5. Making sense of Raval's specificity: Barcelona's participatory model and the urban movement crisis**

As explained in the above, the southern part of Raval is in a peculiar situation, which is largely the result of its particular political, social and urban history. Processes such as these cannot be fully explained and understood unless we take into account more general processes at the city level. Such processes can to a certain extent explain the rise of the *plataformas* in the neighbourhood.

As we have seen, citizens' participation and institutional proximity were relevant features of the Barcelona Model since its very beginnings, mostly as a result of the role that the neighbourhood movement played in the democratization process. Nevertheless, citizen participation involved the creation of non-binding, consultation mechanisms rather than any genuine handover of control over resources and services (Garcia 2008: 102). Through the years, a set of mechanisms and channels to

enable citizen participation were laid out, marking the passage from participation intended as a broad political process to participation as a public policy (Blakely 2005)<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, to facilitate citizen participation, local authorities worked to strengthen the associational fabric of the city, primarily via grants and subsidies.

Nowadays Barcelona constitutes an emblematic example of “governance beyond the state” (Swyngedouw 2005) with citizen participation as the third player after the Barcelona city council and the private sector in the governance of the city. The Barcelona case does not however escape the pitfalls of participation, which have been largely accounted for in literature (Melo & Baiocchi 2006, Silver, Scott & Kazepov 2010). Silver et al. in particular argue that “states use participatory forums to offload public responsibilities, defuse protest, co-opt opponents, impose social control and mobilize communities behind a neoliberal agenda. Often, citizen participation is not directed toward social justice at all, but rather ratifies and even carries out decisions that favour capital” (p. 455).

Barcelona is a case in point: the citizen participation apparatus has not necessarily led to citizens’ empowerment and the enhancing of local democracy (Blakely 2005, 2010). The brand new president of the FAVB defines citizen participation in Barcelona as a “failure”; effects such as the professionalization of participation, the “participation of notables”, and “consultation fatigue” stemming from the multiplication of consultation organisms have led to a situation in which there is no real empowerment of citizens. Power inequalities remain or are even reinforced, and the participatory mechanisms may become an instrument of social control and consensus production in the hands of the local administration.

These downsides have become particularly acute in neighbourhoods such as Raval where there are strong inequalities, complex and conflictual situations and a highly fragmented social knit. For example, existing participatory mechanisms have not given voice to immigrants, whose interests and needs are mostly handled by associations which are to a good extent under the control of the local administration. The ineffectiveness of participatory mechanisms has pushed Raval per Viure and other *plataformas* to search for new forms of participation, mainly based on contention and protest, as a means of escaping the circle of consensus production. Moreover, the conflictual situation in Raval has led local authorities in Ciutat Vella to pervert the role of specific participatory instruments such as the “consell de barri”, making the area as docile as possible instead of enhancing consultation and confrontation, adjusting the tool to the political interests of the District.

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<sup>20</sup> The first legislation on citizens’ participation was passed in 1986, then implemented in 2002 through the “Normas reguladoras de participación ciudadana”.



The fact that associations funded and supported by the local administration may become a mere extension of the latter rather than offer constructive alternatives is another of the main arguments of the *plataformas*. The issue is complex, since there are several examples – including that of the FAVB itself - which show that opposition is possible even when funded by the public sector. Nevertheless, the case of Tot Raval is too striking to go unnoticed: the foundation, which, as mentioned, gathers all the main associations in the neighbourhood, has, despite its excellent work with some of the most vulnerable sections of the population, and its attempts to promote a positive image of the neighbourhood, nonetheless imposed a discourse and helped the local administration to prevent dissent and obviate the existence of conflict between different interests.

The last aspect to be taken into account in order to understand Raval's situation and the rise of the *plataformas* is the role of the residents' situations, and what may be defined the crisis of the neighbourhood movement.

As explained before, Raval offers one of the best examples of the “mutation” of the role and mission of residents' associations. The Associació de veïns del Raval has almost completely lost its legitimacy: it dropped its democratic base and now functions as a nepotistic formation around the figure of its president, who has been in place for more than 20 years. Recently, he founded a party named “la Barcelona dels barris” which ran in the last municipal elections in May 2011. The fact that the AV in Raval has abdicated its capacity to aggregate residents and respond to their needs and demands can be seen as one of the factors explaining the rise of the *plataformas* in the neighbourhood. Indeed, what is missing in Raval is an entity able to aggregate residents around common issues and mediate between private and public interests. This has traditionally been the mission of the neighbourhood movement and the single associations working in the neighbourhoods. Residents' claims were not historically limited to the physical improvement of one street or neighbourhood, but were inserted into a wider frame promoting citizens' consciousness of citizenship and developing a new idea of the city (Alabart and Vila 1998, Molinero and Ysàs 2011).

The mutation of the residents association must be nevertheless read in light of the transformation of the neighbourhood movement itself, which in recent years led to the split between the FAVB and the neighbourhood associations working in the territory. Although the FAVB has continued to produce a critical discourse on the city and its transformations<sup>21</sup>, it has to some extent failed in empowering the neighbourhood associations, leading in many cases to a loss of power of action in

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<sup>21</sup> In particular concerning the Forum de las cultures 2004, the 2005 “Ordenanza de civisme”, and the more recent network of corruption in Ciutat Vella district.

the territory, and to what can be seen as a general crisis in the grassroots neighbourhood movement. To a certain extent the FAVB has run the risk of becoming an assembly of dignitaries, promoting a very critical discourse, but unable to trigger and support action on the ground. This situation has worsened in recent years because of internal conflicts in the FAVB board leading to its resignation in November 2010. A new board and President were elected in January 2011 with a strong will to bring the FAVB back to its roots in the territory. In this respect, one of the first declarations blamed the Raval AV for founding a political party, formally stating that a residents' association cannot be exploited for electoral goals. The general assembly of the FAVB, initially to take place in Raval, was moved to another neighbourhood to give the president of the association a strong warning.

## 6. Conclusions

The case of Raval is a paradigmatic example of the growing heterogeneity of cities, where strongly contrasted populations coexist, raising new challenges to political mobilisation and urban struggles. As a consequence of processes such as immigration, gentrification and the construction of the neighbourhood as a place for leisure and consumption, new cleavages have become relevant beyond the representation of Raval as a marginal, worker neighbourhood. The paper shows that symbolic boundaries between established/newcomers, autochthonous/foreigners reinforcing social boundaries around class, structure local conflicts and political mobilizations in the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, conflict does not arise automatically from ethnic and social diversity but it is the result of more complex political and social processes. In particular, the case of Raval shows that top down incentivized participation can lead to problems of opacity and representation, and that the local administration itself has prompted fragmentation in the neighbourhood.

Moreover, the case of the *plataformas*, but of the Raval residents association itself, show that grassroots participation is not always virtuous and, when particularistic interests fail to converge into a wider political vision, this can result in processes of exclusion and the stigmatisation of specific, vulnerable groups. In a situation like the one I have described, the construction of a common voice capable of speaking for the neighbourhood as a whole, bridging different groups and interests seems still far to be attained. The political and social history of Raval and the Barcelona's governance model downsides have not helped to construct a collective identity in the neighbourhood grounded in a frame of justice able to tackle diversity and the conditions of living together. What is needed is a movement able to represent all the groups at stake, overcoming the "us/them" cleavage and becoming a legitimate speaker in the debate about the future of the neighbourhood while escaping the pitfalls of the Barcelona citizens' participatory practices.

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