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The Struggle for Social Autonomy:
What Have We Learnt about Urban Politics from Squatting in Europe ?

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Abstract

Squatting empty properties for living or to develop public activities has lasted in European cities for more than three decades. Although local and national contexts differ significantly, there are also some general trends and patterns that deserve sociological attention. When squatting occasionally appears in public debates, controversy is generated and many gaps open between academic, social and political perceptions. In this paper I use evidence from several European cities to argue that the squatters' movement has produced an original impact in urban politics. The main feature of this impact has been to legitimate a relatively wide autonomous and mainly non-institutional mode of citizen participation, protest and self-management. How has this been possible? Which are the specific contributions made by this urban movement? I propose to answer these questions by going a step beyond the left radical claims expressed by political squatters. Thus, four modes of articulation between discourses, practices, contexts and actors involved may be distinguished: 1) opportunities and actions; 2) local and global dimensions; 3) social diversity, weak ties and contentious politics; 4) and the conflictive edge of institutionalization. These analytical dimensions are combined in order to explain both the main factors, conditions and opportunities behind squatting in Europe, and the valuable effects in urban politics that are usually hidden, misunderstood or widely repressed by authorities.

Introduction

The occupation of empty buildings and houses in order to satisfy housing needs or to develop social activities, has been a widely spread practice all over Europe since the 1970s, although it also occurred occasionally in the past (Bailey 1973, Wates et al. 1980, Colin 2010). Various authors identified this wave of squatting during the last four decades as a new urban movement (Lowe 1986, Ruggiero 2000, Pruijt 2003, Martinez 2007) rather than as isolated social practices characterised by: a) its mostly illegal nature (squatting as a violation of private property); b) the subcultural aspects of squatters' dress, discourse and lifestyle; and c) exclusively involving youngsters.

As an urban movement, squatting began to grow in European countries like Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Switzerland and Italy from the late 1960s and early 1970s onwards.

Despite particular cycles of evolution in different cities, the tide of squatting rolled through other countries in the coming decades such as Denmark, Spain, Greece, Poland, etc. There is good evidence (Koopmans 1995, Herreros 2004, Martinez 2002) that this expansion was due to transnational imitation and multiple personal connections which constituted diffuse social and political networks.

Since the seminal work of Castells (1983), debates on the definition of urban movements have been ongoing (Pickvance 2003, Mayer 2006). While Castells emphasized the effects of movements on 'structural social change' and 'urban meaning', other authors focused more, for instance, on constraints coming from a wider context, organisational resources and internal dynamics (Villasante 1984; Pickvance 1985, 1986; Fainstein and Hirst 1995). What are, then, the main features of squatting as an urban movement? Firstly, squatting of empty buildings encompasses both hidden and visible actions. The latter emerge when a set of organised groups makes public claims for the legitimacy of squatting --banners and flags on the walls, or leaflets distributed to neighbours are frequent indicators. Both long-lasting political organizations for whom squatting is a central struggle and coordination platforms set up by squats at city wide or district levels, are also proofs of the consistency of social networks linking squatters with each other. In addition, many invisible squatters are helped by political activists and make use of informal ties that allow them to squat, remain, and oppose threats of eviction. Secondly, beyond the immediate satisfaction of squatters' material needs, a more general political frame underlies every wave of squatting initiatives. According to this frame, squatting challenges housing shortages, urban speculation, absolute private property rights, and the capitalist production of urban space as it is conducted by the State and private interests. Thus, squatting fits into the broad category of left-libertarian social movements (Della Porta and Rucht 1995).

Squatting is an urban movement in which there is a close connection between a broad range of political activities (meetings, demonstrations, direct actions, campaigning, etc.) and a practical development of collective self-management on many dimensions of life. These include the rehabilitation of buildings, the sharing of food and various resources, the ethics of do-it-yourself and mutual-aid, the promotion of counter-cultural expressions and radical left ideas, etc. (McKay1998, Notes from Nowhere 2003) This connection indicates the constitution of a persistent *autonomous* and *radical* urban movement with a pragmatic orientation, although some institutional

bonds and constraints can also play a significant role in its expansion.

Strong repression and generalised attempts to legalise squats, for instance, can reduce the autonomy and radicalism of the squatters' movement (Mikkelsen and Karpantschof 2001). Privatization and outsourcing of collective consumption can also threaten the influential model of self-organisation at squatted social centres (Moroni et al. 1996, Membretti 2007). According to Castells (1983: 322), autonomy means, basically, a neat separation of institutionalised actors like political parties and unions. This also implies serious attempts to set up both movements' own cultural identity and political, local, decentralised, and self-managed institutions. Movements' ideological and organizational autonomy cannot avoid connection to the society at large through some institutional actors, professionals and communication media. Since some authors have criticized the term 'autonomy' because is charged with the burden of a liberal and individualistic affiliation (Bookchin 1998), the expression 'social autonomy' can still preserve the emphasis on the dialectic dependence of individuals upon society, and viceversa, which is familiar to 'social anarchism' as the setting up of an anti-capitalist urban communities of equals (ibid.). Social autonomy also recalls the Italian Operaist refusal of an institutional representation of class struggles (Mitropoulos 2007), and the Situationists' claims for a *total participation* in urban affairs (Knabb 1997).

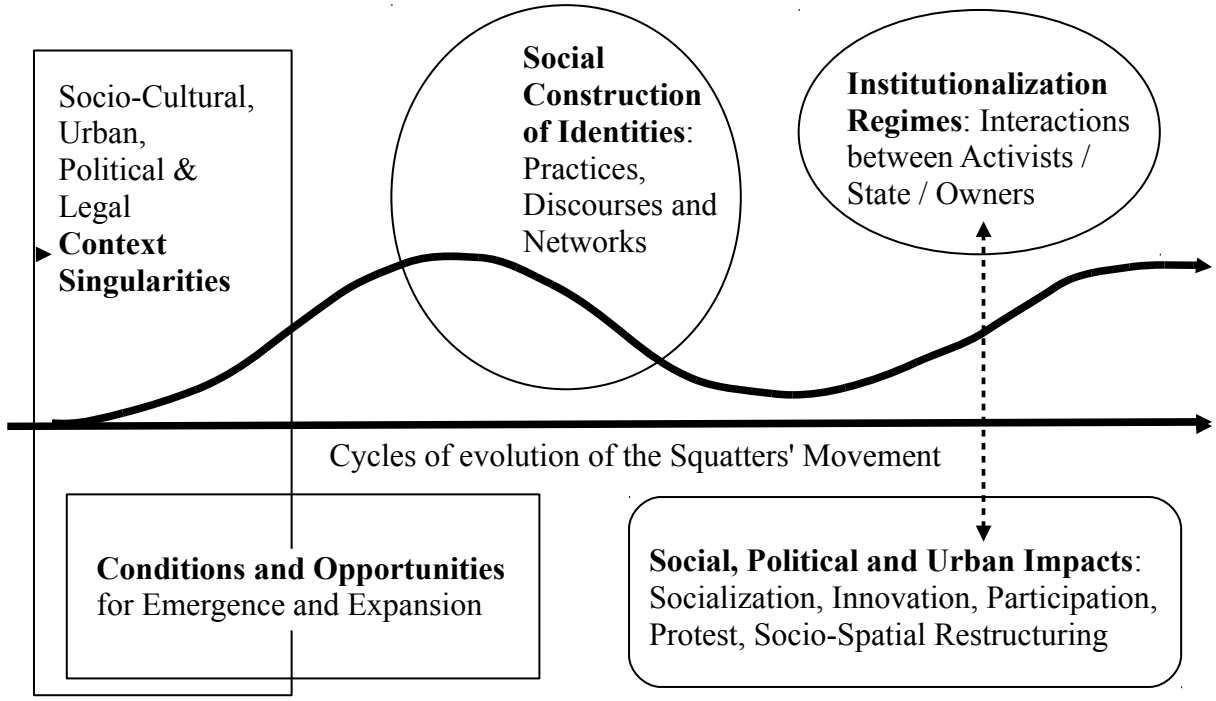
Squatting can be understood also as an *immediatist* struggle in the sense that Foucault means it: “In such struggles people criticize instances of power which are the closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals. They do not look for the 'chief enemy' but for the immediate enemy. Nor do they expect to find a solution to their problem at a future date (that is, liberations, revolutions, end of class struggle).” (Foucault 1982) Squatting is, above all, direct action aimed to satisfy a collective need through social disobedience against the oppressive protection of property rights. The mostly temporary appropriation of abandoned spaces is a partial attack on the unjust distribution of urban goods, but it is also a grassroots political intervention at the core of urban politics. Squatters defy the rules of the urban growth machine both for the sake of their own needs and to promote citizens' protests that can be easily imitated until the last vacant space is reclaimed by those who are dispossessed (Piven and Cloward 1979, Alford and Friedland 1985, Vitale 2007).

Instead of looking at the specific unintended consequences of squatting in some processes of urban renewal and gentrification (Uitermark 2004, Holm and Kuhn 2010), or at other internal

contradictions in terms of segregation and the reproduction of inequalities (Lowe 1986, Adilkno 1994, Martinez 2002, Owens 2009, Aguilera 2010), in this paper I will emphasize what made squatting possible and what social *benefits* it has had for both the people involved and urban politics in general. This reflection distinguishes four modes of articulation between discourses, practices, contexts and actors involved (see Figure 1): 1) opportunities and actions (conditions for the movement's emergence and expansion); 2) local and global dimensions (context singularities); 3) social diversity, weak ties and contentious politics (social construction of identities); 4) the conflictive edge of institutionalization (as part of the different impacts produced by the squatters' movement). For the sake of brevity, I will concentrate my efforts in answering the two main questions --what made squatting possible and what was squatting for-- while combining these four analytical dimensions.

A short remark on methodology: I have been researching on squatting in Spain since 1998, collecting documents, interviewing activists, attending activities in squats and participating myself as an activist in several squatted social centres. In January 2009 SQEK (Squatting Europe Kollective) was founded, and now includes more than 40 members. The meetings promoted by this network (in Madrid, Milan, London, Berlin and Amsterdam) gave me an opportunity to contrast my data and interpretations of squatting in Spain with other scholars and activists across Europe. Regular debates, site visits and the reciprocal exchange of insightful papers were an excellent inspiration. My present depiction of a few patterns of the squatters' movement in European cities is still a work in progress, but stems from the participatory activist-research we developed in SQEK during the last two and a half years. Accordingly, I found that questions about the social conditions of possibility of squatting and about its social and political impacts, were some of the most relevant ones for both activists and researchers. Therefore I reflect on them now and skip other aspects or side effects of this movement.

Figure 1. Analytical framework for researching on the squatters' movement



Source: author.

1/ What makes squatting possible?

Above all, squatting consists of a set of collective actions aimed to use empty or abandoned properties for housing purposes and/or for the promotion of social activities. The kind of owner and the duration of vacancy varies. The important condition here is the existence of a sufficient amount of buildings able to be occupied directly or after light works of rehabilitation. Squatters tend to do a serious research on the specific legal and economic situation of each, apparently in disuse, building. Frequently, neighbours are the best source of information. Higher proportions of vacancy correlate with several factors apart from the activists' wishes: economic crisis and slumping construction, reduction in rental housing stock, privatization of formerly public houses, increasing levels of private ownership of housing, changes of use in specific buildings, decline of industrial activities, urban renewal processes, etc. Accordingly, the opportunities for squatters seeking a place depend upon these macro dynamics to provide a quantity of effective spaces ready to be squatted.

Fortunately for squatters, capitalist urban speculation is based on a convenient stock of empty buildings which allows owners to delay works or sales for a certain period of time, while negotiating the better price. The ideal speculator wants his or her ownership to be renewed, sold or rented at the highest price and at the earliest moment. This would result in a total occupation of the built environment in a given moment, without any loss or waste of owned space, and squatting would be impossible. Quite the contrary, that ideal situation never occurs and permanent black holes within private and public real-estate markets are usually protected by laws. As a consequence, all the information that squatters obtain about that essential gap and tensions within the process of capitalist accumulation (Harvey 1985: 150), will open a window for going ahead with squatting actions (Martínez 2004, Péchu 2006).

The crucial factor of emptiness often depends upon urban planning and restructuring of specific areas. Displacement of industrial factories, vacant schools or public facilities which have moved to a different location, residential units subject to new regulations -all often occur when a whole area has been designed for accomplishing new functions. Authorities, planners and investors would argue that old-fashioned areas, poverty, crime, ruins, sub-standard housing and pollution demand a transformation of public space and, simultaneously, of the residential buildings and existing population there in. New roads or mega projects (like museums, stadiums, waterfronts, commercial malls, etc.) may also account for the elites-driven vacancy of a great part of dwellings in a particular urban area (Fainstein 1994, Martin and Moroni 2007). The slower is the rhythm of these reconfigurations, the higher are the opportunities for squatting and campaigning against the plans. Old owners and tenants appear as the natural allies of squatters opposing the authoritarian (or even the restricted participatory) manner of these urban interventions (Mayer 1993).

Since I contend that squatting in Europe is deployed as an urban movement and this is more than the sum of individual squatting actions, I suggest a third condition of possibility: squatters pursue multiple goals of social change beyond the right to a free or affordable (mostly urban) space. This is a common ingredient of radical left and *countercultural* movements (Rucht 1990, Koopmas 1995:21, 32-35) in contrast to the single-issue orientation attributed to other new social movements such as environmentalists, women and pacifists (Offe 1985). Global (or, better, alter-global) concerns and the contestation of liberal democracies and capitalism are usually claimed by squatters (Wakefield 1995, Notes from Nowhere 2003, Martinez 2007). This implies a coexistence of both

local and global perspectives. Each squat has local-urban roots in a specific neighbourhood. Squatting is, thus, an end itself once is publicly claimed and defended. Without losing this local ground, squatting is also a means to foster other local protests, but some more general class and global struggles too. Tactics and strategy, then, reinforce each other. This discourse pervades the public face of most political squatters, but it is not necessarily accepted or reproduced by many of the different groups who squat or participate in squats. Among the internal diversity of squatters, some can emphasize squatting only as an ends, while others emphasize squatting solely as a means. In addition, these different political identities within the movement are imbricated with context factors relating to the city or the world at large. The easiest way of discovering this imbrication is attending to the multiple connections that squatters have with other alternative or counter-cultural social movements. The latter, as I will argue later, is well proven when 'social centres' acquire a prominent visibility within and outside the movement (Martinez 2004, Mudu 2004, Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006, Membretti 2007).

Concerning the legal issues there are, theoretically, three options: a) strong criminal persecution, b) light criminal persecution, c) specific legal requirements that permit squatting occasionally. When the first option applies and authorities work hard to implement that legislation, squatting becomes too difficult, marginal and infrequent, although not absolutely impossible. Denmark, Germany and Sweden, for example, are the national contexts where this policy rules. However, it is important to note that the squatted community of Christiania in Copenhagen survived in a difficult environment where almost all squatting was repressed without concessions (Mikkelsen and Karpantschof 2001, Hellström 2006, Fox 2010). In Germany the squatters' movement gained great strength during its first phases, and could preserve part of its radical identity and self-managed practices after waves of either hard repression or comprehensive negotiation took place (in the early 1980s in general and in the early 1990s also in Berlin) (Mayer 1993, Sabaté 2007, Holm and Kuhn 2010). Legislation and quick repression of attempts to squat have prevented the emergence of a squatters' movement in Sweden where, notwithstanding, social housing was easily accessible for the majority of population (Thörn 2008).

Spain and France experienced criminal prosecution of squatting with significantly different outcomes. While the French case is close to the German one due to the urgent negotiations imposed by authorities after every squatting occurs, some special conditions apply such as a legal exception

that avoids evictions during the winter term (Aguilera 2010, Colin 2010). An equivalent *light* restriction applies in Spain when judges are not able to clearly identify who has the *will* to remain and to obtain the possession of a squatted building (Baucells 1999, Martinez 2002: 84-94). Thus, even when evictions increased after 1995 (when the criminal law was passed on), few people was finally sentenced to jail. The Netherlands is experiencing a new situation after the criminalization of squatting in 2010. Squatting is still possible and encouraged by former political organizations, but it is rapidly repressed. There, squatters enjoy the heritage of thousands of squatted places squatted in the past decades when there was a greater tolerance. Squatting was legal in the case of *liveable* buildings left vacant for more than one year and, crucially, in case the owner had no ready-to-act plan for the building. This legacy, the accumulation of experiences, can be sharply reduced but cannnot be easily destroyed in the short run (Owens 2009, Pruijt 2010). The United Kingdom is the sole European country that still fits the third category, although the coalition of conservatives and liberals in the central government intends to legislate against squatting following the path of the Dutch government. In conclusion, not only should the legal framework be not too restrictive in order to allow a certain degree of squatting (to open a building and remain for some weeks or months, at least), but also the judicial machine and the police repression must not act too fast and in an inefficient manner so that squatters can risk part of their assets to defy the law.

A final strand of the constitution of an *autonomous* urban movement is <u>independence</u> from political parties, labour unions, formal organisations, private companies, State bureaucracies, professionals and mass media (Castells 1983, Mayer 2006, Toret et al 2008). This does not mean a complete impermeability or the absence of any mutual links. Every group of squatters has the power to define a proper strategy in order to defend their stay (Martinez 2010). To pay an attorney is a typical *forced* participation in the State apparatus, even though some squatters also refuse to do it. Alternative and independent media are preferred over commercial media, but all means are likely to be used when tension is at its peak. In case of negotiations, punctual contacts with and support from friendly political parties and civil society associations can be extremely helpful. The autonomy of the movement, then, resides in this unstable balance. On the one hand, squatters need to strength on the internal cooperation among activists and sympathisers, and the transmission of experience from pioneers to newcomers. On the other hand, the weakness of ties and resources of the core group - -although surrounded by thousands of participants, users, visitors, friends, other movements' militants and supporters (Moroni et al. 1996)-- requires occasional alliance with more stable social

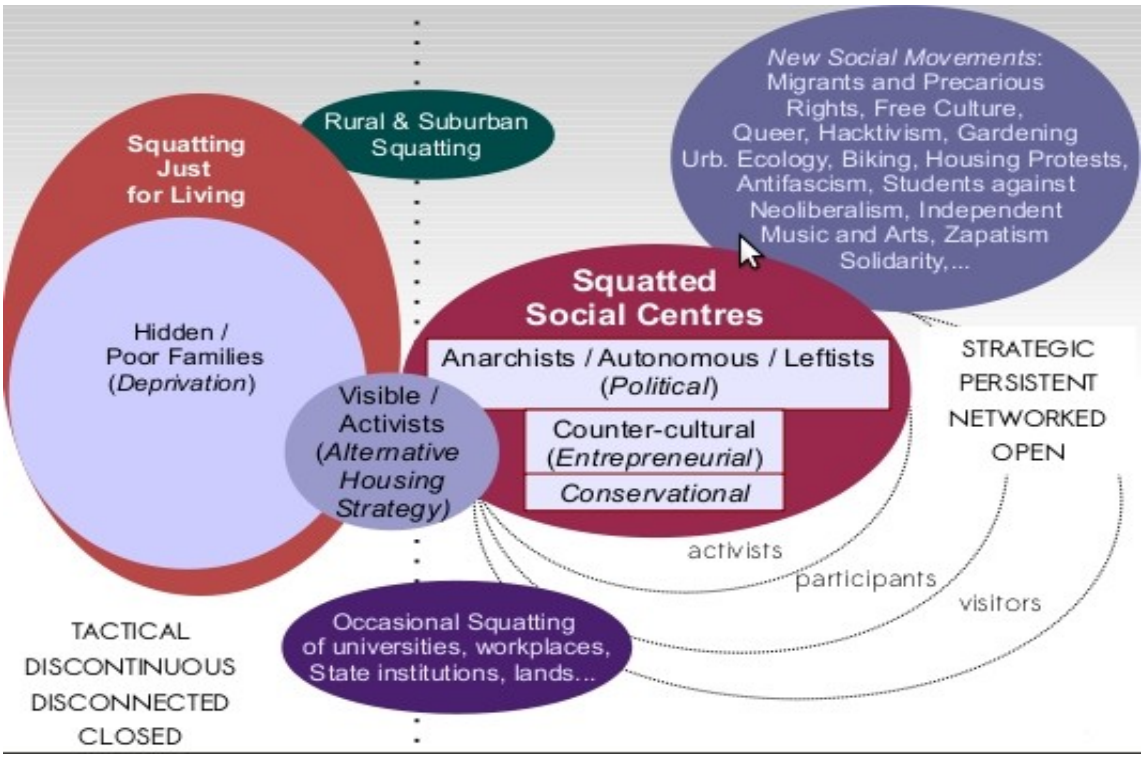
structures (Tarrow 1998). Therefore, a regular and not too aggressive mass media coverage, even if it treats squatters with some unfair stereotypes, can legitimate the struggle in the eyes of a wide audience.

2/ What is squatting for?

During the valley stages of the squatters' movement cycle (see Figure 1), academic debates obliterate the whole picture of its evolution, intentions and consequences. Controversies tend to focus on some unintended effects of squatting like their consideration of early gentrifiers. However, these effects are due to different interacting factors of neoliberal policies and pressures to restructure cities, rather than solely to the actions of squatters. I will set aside this discussion now, and briefly look at the *beneficial* consequences of squatting for squatters themselves, but also for other social groups and the democratic quality of urban politics in general.

Following Pruijt's (2004a) classification I have tried to associate the *autonomy* and *radicalism* of the squatters' movement with the strategic, persistent, networked and openness tendencies of the initiatives and *circles* of people involved (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Types of squatting and autonomous-radical orientation of the squatters' movement



Source: author.

Squatted social centres are placed in the centre of the graph because they accomplish two basic functions for the constitution of the squatters' movement: a) they provide a public resource for meetings, information, leisure, expression and sociability which are essential both to get in touch with kindred people and to launch new squats; b) beyond its value as a material infrastructure for activists, squatted social centres are the most visible examples of squatting (public opinion, mass media, local authorities and neighbours), and the most open to recruit new activists, and attract participants, visitors and sympathisers with lesser degrees of commitment. Some of the buildings working as social centres host many political discourses and events closely related to other social movements (migrants' and precarious workers' rights, hacktivism and artivism, urban gardens and organic food, etc.). They also offer their facilities to different social and political organizations. Some others combine weaker political concerns with a stronger dedication to organising music concerts, workshops or cheap meals and drinks. Artists, militants and several social groups mix together in most of the counter-cultural or *entrepreneurial* social centres, but they can also split off into more specialised venues.

Conservational squatting reclaims and preserves historical sites or urban areas so that squatting of houses, events at the public space and social centres can be combined as in other types of squatted buildings. When residence and social centre coexist within the same building, a neat separation of both activities tends to be established. Therefore, self-managed social centres play a crucial role in the symbolic legitimation and promotion of squatting as a radical tool for grassroots urban intervention. In Italy, Spain and the UK, activists and scholars sometimes refer to a 'social centre movement' (Mudu 2004, Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006, Toret et al. 2008) more than to an ambiguous squatters' movement as such. Even when social centres are not squatted any more, they can be considered part of the autonomous and squatters' movement / scene if they continue with a similar style of self-management and political priorities.

Social centres often substitute for the lack of established organizations and city coordination of squats. Social networks of activists arise from demonstrations and informal encounters, but social centres add a direct and tangible example of how things can be managed collectively and, hopefully without paying a rent. These valuable outcomes are more difficult to attain for the squats which are taken just for living space. The less well connected squatters are among them and with the nodal point of social centres, the less probability to stand by each other, and to create a cohesive and powerful movement. Public visibility is also a bigger challenge for squatted houses than for squatted social centres. These needs can be filled by housing and formal organizations who occasionally support squatting, but they also quit supporting that tactic as soon as they get subsidies or accessible social housing for their members (Bailey 1973, Corr 1999, Pruijt 2003, Aguilera 2010).

Radical squatters do not always expect to squat during the entirety of their lives; this is, in fact, very unlikely (Wakefield 1995, Llobet 2005, De Sario 2009, Owens 2009). For most people who squat for living, squatting is a stage along the way to a permanent residence. The more deprived they are in the housing market, the more they are likely to consider squatting as a tactic political tool or means (illegal immigrants, for example: Bouillon 2009). Groups, organizations and networks of radical activists consider squatting strategically when squatting is for them both means and end. Long-lasting squats, either houses or social centres, offer solid and strategic examples, symbols, of the movement's success, although abundant flows of communication among activists and with the rest of society (i.e. visibility and networking) equally enhance the squatters' social

portrait. The *Witboek* (White Book) published by Dutch squatters before the ban on squatting in 2010, and a recent publication made by English squatters facing a similar threat (SQUASH 2011), constitute excellent responses to the strategic challenge of communicating the goal that nurtures the core of this movement.

With the centrality of squatted, and some non-squatted, social centres and the emerging structures of coordination of squatted houses, we can see some of the least known contributions of squatting to shaping an autonomous arena in urban politics. First of all, squats provide spaces where activists belonging to different social movements can meet. This provision is administered through collective principles of horizontal and direct democracy, self-management, non-bureaucratic regulation or State control (Piazza 2007), and free or cheap access to goods and services. Recycling, dumpster diving and sharing resources show how to live at low cost and to be environmentally friendly in urban settings. Moreover, social centres and squatters' organizations encourage people to experiment with alternative modes of living which are outside of the mainstream of culture, politics, economy and social relationships. Squatting offers immediate results in the practice of direct action and social disobedience against the unjust distribution of wealth. Both by means of creative cultural expressions, and through organized opposition around broadly censored issues (police brutality, political corruption, current situation in jails, unfair global trade, etc.), squatted places expand the consciousness of their participants into the realm of dissidence, resistance, temporality and uncertainty. According to one publication put out by Barcelona squatters (VVAA 2004), squatted socials centres involve: “struggles against the destruction of neighbourhoods by speculators”, “workshops for collective learning without money”, “raising funds for the social centre and other projects”, “popular culture”, “non-commercial leisure”, “assemblies and meetings”, “networks of affects and solidarity”, “independent and horizontal media communication”, and “constructive resistance”.

For the homeless, deprived, under-privileged, working-class, unemployed and dropouts of the institutional systems - -education, asylums, juvenile homes, etc.--, squatting forms a key survival tactic and sometimes strategy. Not only can an affordable shelter be conquered, but also one can be actively involved in the satisfaction of basic needs. This is usually achieved thanks to the interaction with wealthier and more skilled individuals, resulting in a clear increase of social capital and mutual learning for all. Most of those engaged in squatting benefit from the empowerment, skills,

opportunities and self-confidence that these collective actions entail (Wakefield 1995, Martinez 2002, Pruijt 2004, Llobet 2005, Hellström 2006, Bouillon 2009). It has not been widely recognised that, in comparison to other forms of activism, squatting comprises almost the whole everyday life of the people involved. Domestic tasks, gender relations and the emotional dimensions of activism are regularly tackled, obliging squatters to transform their previous approaches to these questions. Among the skills squatters gain is the capability to deal with their own physical space in the context of urban affairs of the local neighbourhood, the city and the metropolitan area. Private life and communal living demands as much effort as public life and urban struggle, especially in relations with the city councils, officials, politicians, judges, lawyers, private owners, companies, real estate developers, journalists, researchers and all kinds of neighbours, be they in favour of squatters, against them, or seemingly indifferent.

Conclusions

The main argument in this paper is that the squatters' movement has evolved in Europe during the last four decades as a genuine autonomous urban movement. Its practices around collective consumption, housing shortages, and alter-global movements, contributed to the satisfaction of social needs and to the legitimation of a radical democratic approach to urban politics. As I have argued above, the mix of squatters enduring various degrees of precariousness, and the rich set of political experiences they display cannot support labelling squatting as simply lifestyle anarchism or as a vague leftist and radical discourse.

Along the last decades, most of the European countries have approved legislation that forbids squatting, with Holland and United Kingdom until recently the most tolerant. At the same time this general prosecution of squatting opened room for institutional arrangements allowing some cases to be legalized. Far from losing autonomy or becoming isolated from other social movements, many former squatters remain involved in urban politics. Still, the firm conclusion of this analysis is that wherever the aforementioned structure of political, urban and cultural opportunities - - despite constraints- - appears, it is likely that groups of squatters will take advantage of it. This means that even in a repressive context, key information and actions carried out by squatters make use of favourable conditions such as a sufficient amount of abandoned properties, the slow rhythm of

restructuring and renewal of urban areas, connections and fruitful exchanges with alternative social movements, appeal to rights and exceptions within the legal frameworks, strength and internal cohesion, and a not too critical coverage by mass media.

In addition, the squatters' movement has spread out according to different configurations. Social centres and political squatting provided public visibility, political legitimation and strategic urban locations capable of interconnecting the different and specialised forms of squatting. Networks involve both squatted social centres and houses, but also non-squatted social centres, rural squatting and tactical squatting. Although ties with other movement organizations are weak, the persistence of the whole network indicates a significant strength based on specific impacts on the urban politics of each city. In particular, squatted social centres constitute accessible meeting spaces for many individuals, groups and movements. Besides, the whole domain of everyday life is affected by the collective practices of self-management. Not the least, squatting for living purposes offers affordable housing and empower people with new skills of self-help and social cooperation.

All of these transnational patterns deserve more careful and ongoing research. Relevant internal differentiation, the need of acting together at different spatial scales and specific local coalitions with other citizens' and broader social movements, can set the future agenda. Nonetheless, new political issues and innovative repertoires of action confronting the ongoing wave of neoliberal urban governance, also pave the way for more in-depth insights on the conditions and impacts of the squatters' movement.

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