

**“Examining mainstream media discourses on the squatters’  
movements in Barcelona and London”**

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## **Abstract**

This article brings together separate research on mainstream media discourses concerning the squatters' movements in Barcelona and England and Wales. The previous findings are introduced and then compared. Using the technique of Critical Discourse Analysis, we assess the presentations in the mainstream media of the squatters' movements and analyse how they individually contest these portrayals. Mainstream media discourses often present a negative stereotype of squatters which in both cases facilitated repression. These dominant narratives both shape and are shaped by public opinion, as indicated by specific examples. The findings for London and Barcelona are compared and three specific concerns are addressed, namely how squatters are presented as a deviant other, ways in which squatters formulated new meanings of squatting through linguistic methods and how mainstream media discourses can be contested.

Keywords: squatting, critical discourse analysis, CDA, social centre, criminalisation, squatters' movement, okupa, Barcelona, London.

## **1 Introduction**

The work of scholars such as Norman Fairclough (1989; 2007; 2013) and Teun van Dijk (1987; 1988) in Critical Discourse Analysis demonstrates that in every area of public debate, there are many different narratives but that there is often one hegemonic discourse which both informs and is shaped by public opinion and other factors. Such a discourse can be termed a dominant ideological discursive formation (IDF). It is our contention that such a formation, which framed squatters as a dangerous other, which was a crucial factor in the repression of squatters in two European cities, namely Barcelona and London.

We would argue that discourse analysis can be useful for social movement

theorists and participants alike, since events and groups are often affected by the stance of the mainstream media. To give one striking example, in his comprehensively documented book about the 1984-1985 miners' strike in the UK, Seamus Milne (2004) examines the subsequent persecution of trade union leaders. Arthur Scargill and others were accused of corruption and fraud, but all the allegations were eventually proven to be false, whilst their accusers themselves were in turn revealed to be deeply corrupt (2014, 314-315). The important point for our purposes here is that Milne emphatically states that the trial by media of the democratically elected union leaders was organised and controlled by the Conservative government of the time, in collusion with other aligned interests. He writes (2014, 362) that "the media onslaught unleashed by Maxwell's Mirror and Central Television on the miners' leaders was in reality a classic smear campaign. Indeed the treatment of the whole farrago of allegations and legal cases was a particularly revealing example of how the British media - and particularly the press - routinely operates against designated enemies". Social movements of all strands can be affected by the discourses created about them, and as we shall see, negative discourses about the squatters' movements indeed facilitated the criminalisation of squatting in various forms.

This article brings together separate research on mainstream media discourses concerning the squatters' movements in Barcelona and England and Wales (Debelle 2010; Dee 2012; 2013a; working paper; 2015 with Deanna Dadusc). Building on previous work, we first outline our findings and then compare them. Using the technique of Critical Discourse Analysis, we examine the respective political squatters' movements' presentations in the mainstream media and how the squatters contest these portrayals. The previous research approached the same question in different ways, namely how mainstream media discourses presented a negative stereotype of squatters which facilitated repression. As the epigraph (a quotation from Steve Platt) suggests, the mainstream media tends to select easy stereotypes, in this context the 'good' and the 'bad' squatters is a framing which often occurs. We then compare our findings and address three

specific concerns, namely how squatters are presented as a deviant other, ways in which squatters formulated new meanings of squatting through linguistic methods and how mainstream media discourses can be contested

Our previous research has taken different tacks but we have both employed Critical Discourse Analysis and our approaches can be productively compared. Most obviously, there is a difference between research based on one Catalonian city (Barcelona) as opposed to two countries (England and Wales), although to reduce that difference, examples here have mainly been taken from the case of London, so this work is able to compare situations in London and Barcelona. Another difference is the existence of a strong political squatters' movement in Barcelona, whereas in England and Wales squatting is more precarious and whilst a political movement did coalesce to some degree in opposition to criminalisation, the squatters' movement is generally more diffuse and disorganised.

However, thematic similarities can easily be observed and one specific example is that both analyses engaged with the notion that there are media narratives concerning 'good' squatters and 'bad' squatters. As Dee (2013a, 257) writes “there is a certain shorthand at work which enables ‘good’ squatters who are protesters, occupiers or an art group to be distinguished from ‘bad’ squatters who are aggressive, lifestylists, serial, unlawful and unwanted”. We will examine these moral categories and critique them. Further, we will observe that for squatters attempting to conform to the description of the 'good' squatter, there are dangers. The distinction is of course imposed and arbitrary: some squatters do not intend to fit into the 'good' stereotype and nevertheless end up categorised as such, or perhaps use it as a tactical part of their identity in a situation such as a court case. The internal debates of the movement show that these categories affect not only the perception that unpoliticized citizens have of squatting, but indeed can be reproduced inside the movement, although under different terms. Our comparative work hopes to shed some light on this matter.

For London, E.T.C. Dee evaluates research which focused more generally upon England and Wales, since he was working on media discourses around the issue of the criminalisation of squatting, which in the end occurred on September 1 2012. He analysed 235 stories about squatting in eight daily newspapers (seven national and one London-specific) over the time period from January 1 2009 to December 31 2011. However, the majority of stories focused on London, home in turn to the majority of squatters. We examine this research first.

For Barcelona, DeBelle (2010) examined stories from four newspapers concerning two cases where squatting received considerable media coverage, namely El Forat de la Vergonya and La Makabra. The news articles were analysed in order to assess the quality of the journalists' coverage in terms of accuracy and reproduction of stereotypes regarding squatters. In addition, an analysis was made of editorials mentioning squatters in these two cases, and also when the housing issue was addressed. We examine this research second, after providing a brief theoretical presentation of the squatters' movement in Barcelona.

Following the presentation of the two case studies we then turn to a consideration of the similarities and differences in discourse between the two contexts.

## **2 London**

In the work of E.T.C. Dee (2012; 2013a; working paper; 2015 with Deanna Dadusc) on discourses surrounding the criminalisation of squatting in England and Wales, the technique of Critical Discourse Analysis is employed. This was developed by Norman Fairclough and includes the concept of the 'ideological discursive formation' (IDF), a collection of beliefs about an issue which both shapes and is in turn shaped by media discourses. Fairclough argues (1985, 751)

that one formation often becomes hegemonic and thus the views it contains then are taken as natural and self-evident. Dee asserts (2012, 251) that the dominant IDF regarding squatting in England is that squatters are dangerous, criminal, marginal characters, whilst at the same time there also exist other discourses more favourable to squatters.

In order to test this claim about the dominant IDF, Dee collected (working paper) 235 individual news stories about squatting which appeared from January 1 2009 until December 31 2011, using UK Newsstand. The newspapers analysed were the Daily Mail (tabloid), the Daily Mirror (tabloid), the Daily Telegraph (broadsheet), the Guardian (broadsheet), the Independent (broadsheet), the Sun (tabloid), the Times (broadsheet) and the Evening Standard (tabloid). All except the latter are daily national papers, the Standard is London-based daily (and since October 2009 is distributed for free). The newspapers cover a range of political colours and seven out of the top ten selling national newspapers are included (National Readership Survey).

Of the 235 stories, Dee found (working paper) 32% to be presenting a negative discourse about squatting, 15% to be presenting a positive discourse and 53% to be neutral. Dee took this to indicate that whilst the dominant IDF is set against squatters, other discourses also proliferate. Whilst the majority of stories were neutral in tone, this was often because squatting was itself not the main focus of the article and it is significant that there were more than double the number of negative stories as opposed to positive. Dee (2013) drew up a list of discourses around squatting and criminalisation, shown below in figure 1. We can see that there at least eight, some of which can themselves be framed either negatively or positively. As an example, there is the moral discourse, which either frames squatting as an attack on private property (bad for the wealthy) or as a useful way of housing people (good for those not rich enough to afford a house).

**\*INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE\***

Further, what Dee discovered was that negative stories tended to cluster around specific events to form part of a larger narrative whereas individual positive stories occurred every so often but remained isolated. The larger narrative correlated with a stereotype of squatters as a threatening other (possessing such supposedly deviant values as being foreign, young, criminal, anti-capitalist, drug-using and so on) and thus easily fed into a moral panic about squatters which arose when the debate about criminalisation heated up. This then served to create the impression that something needed to be done to eliminate the threat posed by squatting, despite this threat being itself generated by hysterical media stories about a few specific cases. Two examples are discussed below, after a brief discussion regarding the creation of the stereotypes of the 'good' and 'bad' squatter.

In analysing media discourses, one quickly discerns the inclination of the mainstream media to break up squatters into the 'good' and the 'bad.' The 'good' squatter occupies an empty house and repairs it, getting along with her neighbours, in contrast to the bad squatter who is a terrifying beast from foreign lands. In their most extreme form these categories are clearly evinced simply by reading the title of the story, to give two examples from the case of England and Wales: 'Squatters refurbish £3 million mansion' in the Sun (Syson 2009); 'Rave hordes in 18 hour spree of destruction at former Royal Mail depot in central London' in the Daily Mail (Cohen 2010). Yet the fact that both these stories come from right-wing tabloids demonstrates that different discourses are in circulation.

Moving forwards, we will now look at some specific examples. Firstly, in early 2011, a man of Latvian descent named Jason Ruddick became the subject of no less than seventeen substantial mainstream media stories. The first cluster of articles, appeared in five newspapers on January 7, 2011. The title for the Daily Mail article was 'Come over and join me in soft-touch Britain, says Latvian in a

£6m squat' (Bentley, *Daily Mail* 2011) and it recounted how Ruddick and a "gang of immigrants" were squatting in a ten bed Highgate mansion. Other titles were 'Latvian travels 1,500 miles to milk Britain's 'soft' laws against squatters' (Wardrop, *Daily Telegraph* 2011), 'SQUAT A CHEEK: 1,500 mile trip to scrounge in "easy touch" UK' (Fricker, *Daily Mirror* 2011), 'The £10million home "not good enough" for squatter gang' (Moore-Bridger, *Evening Standard* 2011) and 'I came from Latvia to squat in Pounds 10m home in easy-touch Britain: PENNILESS SCROUNGER BOASTS' (Flynn, *Sun* 2011).

Ruddick and by extension squatters generally are characterised as possessing deviant values which place them in opposition to decent, law-abiding citizens. There is certainly a racist element to this, since Ruddick's status as a foreigner is another element being utilised in the othering process. As a result of stories such as this and others which played upon fears of home-owners that they could go out for five minutes and have their homes squatted by the time they came back (Dee working paper), a moral panic thus arose which was centred on the enemy (the squatter), the victim (the home owner, who is by extension any well-behaved British person) and the required consensus, which is that 'something must be done' about the supposed menace of squatting (this analysis follows Stanley Cohen's seminal 1972 formulation of the constituent requirements for a moral panic in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*).

Another cluster of similar stories appeared in March/April 2011 (in the *Independent on Sunday*, *Sun* and *Evening Standard*), when Ruddick was now squatting in the former home of the Congolese ambassador. Notoriously, he was reported to have said: "This place isn't nice enough for me. I want somewhere posher, with a swimming pool if possible. I want a shower and hot water. But I want to stay in Hampstead. It's a very nice area" (Dominiczak 2011). This quotation was then repeated verbatim by Mike Weatherley MP in the House of Commons debate on the criminalisation of squatting on March 30, 2011 (Hansard).

As a second example, another cluster of stories happened one year later, in January 2012, when Janice Mason's house was squatted. Articles were entitled 'My childhood home has been invaded by Moldovan squatters' (Levy, *Daily Mail* 2012), 'Why can squatters take over our house?: Homeowner begs ministers to speed up change in law' (Parsons, *Evening Standard* 2012), 'Stop this squat hell' (Anonymous, *Sun* 2012) and 'Moldovan squatters and a week that showed how good citizens suffer while parasites flourish' (Hastings, *Daily Mail* 2012).

We should note here that all of this is in fact nothing new or particularly surprising. Steve Platt (1999, 107), writing on squatting in the UK in the 1970s (when criminalisation was also proposed but not implemented), states that the mainstream media “could at times be almost unrelievedly hostile.” He observes (ibid) the media drawing an arbitrary distinction between “‘respectable’, self-evidently 'deserving' cases of homeless families occupying empty council properties” and cases where the squatters “were perceived to be less respectable and deserving - single people, 'outsiders', 'hippies', 'dossers' or drug-takers.” Further, he gives (ibid) the example of the now defunct London Evening News commenting on “foreign scroungers here for the social security and free accommodation.”

In contrast, positive stories tended to be isolated events not linked into any larger narrative of squatters being a useful part of society. Such random stories would include (Anon 2011) 'The squatter locals want in their village' (and also the 'Squatters refurbish £3 million mansion' article mentioned above). This story indicates rather well the discourse of the 'good' squatter, since a local person offers the opinion (ibid) that “Squatting may be illegal but it's criminal to let a dwelling like that go to ruin, especially with the need for housing there is.” In contrast the owner states (ibid) “I find it horrible that someone can just break into a property and live in it. How would people feel if it was their property?”

The squatter is of course caught in the middle and quoted as saying (ibid) “I don't want to cause trouble. I just wanted a roof over my head. If the judge asks me to leave I'll have to comply - I don't want to be arrested.” He appears to be using a moral argument regarding the 'crime' of emptiness to support his enterprise in housing himself and conserving the building (unfortunately what eventually happened in this case is unknown). The 'good' squatter discourse represents an occasional disruption to the dominant IDF concerning squatters. Further, whilst some sympathy for the squatter may be expressed, the law of private property still over-rules any other arguments in almost all cases.

Another article (Pidd 2009) concerned the London-based Oubliette, an arts collective which squatted properties such as an old language school in Waterloo, a Mayfair mansion left empty for twelve years and two former embassies near Green Park. Their spokesperson, Dan Simon states (ibid) that in each place the group has attempted to make contact with the owner, proposing that they run the arts project until whatever time the owner requires the use of the building again and offering to maintain the building, with the twin benefits being that neighbourhood property values do not fall as a result of dereliction and the need for paid private security is removed.

This story fits into another narrative, that of the art squatter, and further, both examples I have supplied fall under the meta-narrative of the good squatter who occupies something derelict and puts it to good use. However, this narrative, if tolerated, tends almost always to be trumped by the eventual right of the owner to do what he or she wants with the property in question. As mentioned above, it is rare for the absolute right of private property, so central to the operations of capitalism, to be challenged, but one rare occasion when this occurred was the occupation of Saif Gaddafi's London mansion in March 2011 during the Libyan revolution which was almost universally condoned (Addley 2011). An amendment was even tabled to the parliamentary Early Day Motion proposing to criminalise squatting which would have exempted this particular instance

from prosecution and only the local Conservative Member of Parliament dissented (Dee 2013, 255).

As a last point, it is also important to note that discourses are not fixed, but rather they shift and change over time. Thus, whilst it was difficult to document, we would claim that as the moral panic swelled, certain discourses became more negative. For example we can turn to the discourse of 'millionaire squatters' (and indeed the art squatters, all these discourses are intertwined), which concerned the occupation of London mansions left empty by the super-rich, including celebrities such as Nigella Lawson. As Dee comments (2012, 253), "until quite recently, when other factors appear to disrupt the tone, there tends to be some sympathy for the squatters which could be explained by the framing of the squatters as slightly mythologised 'Robin Hood' figures, taking back for the people what has been stolen from them by the ultrarich." This sympathy was then drowned out by stories discussing the same sort of occupations but using them now as justification to clamour for a change in the law regarding squatting. Thus a Daily Telegraph article (Jamieson & Leach 2011) about the occupation of Guy Ritchie's Fitzrovia mansion, which a year earlier might have expressed some concern that Ritchie was leaving property empty, was instead entitled 'The middle class serial squatters exploiting the law' and claimed that "a ragtag bunch of up to 40 activists and undergraduates exploited legal loopholes to live for free in a string of historic buildings in London." This story was flanked by three other Telegraph articles in the same month which discussed how the law would be changed to criminalise squatters (Dee 2013, 260).

### **3 Barcelona**

Now we turn to Debelle's work on Barcelona (Debelle 2010). Following E.T.C. Dee's approach (2013), the media portrayal of the two specific cases can easily be broken down under the stereotype of the 'good' and the 'bad' squatter. The case of El Forat consists of the analysis of news articles where squatters are

accused of being troublemakers who caused riots after a protest. These are the 'bad squatters': uncivil, violent, unpoliticised, and dangerous. The case of La Makabra allows for the study of 'good squatters', since this arts collective made a peaceful squatting action to claim a cultural space. Finally, we study in the newspaper editorials three themes which received the most media attention.

Dee's approach permitted a broad vision of the discourses on squatting, in a country where the political squatting movement is much smaller than Barcelona. As our hypothesis is that discourses circulated by politicians and the mainstream media facilitated the criminalisation of squatting, it is therefore logical that a moral panic was harder to create around politicised squatting, since Barcelona has a large and visible squatting movement which undertakes significant actions. News articles about squatting for economic reasons (homeless, poor individuals or families etc.) also exist in the Catalan press and were not studied. Thus, Dee's quantitative study concerns mostly unpoliticized squatting, while Debele's qualitative approach sheds some light on how politicised squatting is depicted.

### *3.1 The evolution of squatting in Barcelona*

In Barcelona, squatting has existed as a social movement only since 1996. This is a restrictive interpretation, as politically minded squatting projects which had a public presence can be traced back to the beginning of the 1980s (Martínez 2007, 226). Occasional public squatting projects occurred up until the Criminal Code changed in 1996 to include draft evasion and squatting of private property (Asens 2004, 329). As a response, squats organised as a movement and a strong identity around political squatting emerged. Over the following years, squatting received considerable attention from both the media and politicians. Although repression grew, the number of politically active squats augmented in absolute terms during the following years (Martínez 2007, 229-231).

From 2000 onwards, the global anti-capitalist movement emerged. This movement aggregates struggles such as ecologism, cooperativism, anti-racism, feminism, LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bi-Sexual Transgender), anti-militarism, squatting and other social movements. Squats participated in the global movement organising counter-summits and then Social Forums, but lost their hegemonic status as other social movements became more active (Barranco & González 2007, 268-274). These social movements started themselves to use squatting as a tactic around 2000 and transform the 'okupa' identity. 'Okupa' stands for squatter and is derived from the word 'ocupa,' which in turn can be translated as 'occupy'. In Spanish, 'okupa' designates both the squat and the squatters. The squatters' movement at a certain point began to refer to their squats as 'okupas' using a 'k', a letter that also frequently substituted the letter "q" and silent letters after it. Thus, squatters were making a deliberate misspelling and emphasised their difference from normal codes of behaviour and existence.

The okupa identity becomes more diffuse over time as several squatting projects started to define themselves on other aspects of social change and other social movements start creating social centers too. The okupa identity is the product of the interaction between the discourse of squatters and the one of the institutions (city hall, police, media etc.). It does not strictly exist and yet it is used politically by most actors, who try to shape its meaning in their own interests.

Although the squatting movement ceased to be strongly united around a single identity around 2000, it is in 2006 that most news stories were made about squatters in Catalonia (Debelle 2010, 149). Although late 2006 is the period when more news on squatters was produced, it is important to note that the criminalisation process started in early 2006. One important story which contributed to the stigmatisation of squatting (and which we will only mention in passing here) is the 4F case. On February 4 2006, a police officer went into a coma after being hit by an object which fell from a squatted house where a large

party was happening. Innocent people arrested on the street were blamed and police officers forged evidence. One of the people arrested that night, Patricia Heras, committed suicide in 2011, after spending several years in jail. Most spent several years in jail. The arresting officers have been involved in other cases of corruption and torture and following the release of a film about the case in 2014, the convictions are now being questioned. The investigation shown in *Ciutat Morta* is both an inspiring example of independent journalism and a factual proof of the interests of the ruling elite to criminalize squatting.

That same year, the pro-housing movement became more politically relevant than the *okupa* movement in 2006 and several significant peaceful protests were held. Two years later, the mass anti-eviction movement "PAH" ('Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca' or - this could be translated as 'Movement of Mortgage Victims') was created.

### *3.2 Sample*

Debelle (2010) chose four newspapers which cover the ideological diversity of the Catalan press. *El Periódico* is the traditional left-wing newspaper. *Avui* is a centre-right newspaper with a Catalan nationalist agenda. *La Vanguardia* is the traditional right-wing newspaper with a Catalan nationalist agenda. Finally, *El Punt* is an independentist left-wing newspaper with a regional basis. By then, this journal had a strong local implementation, with several regional editions. These were the four most read newspapers in Catalonia by then (Huertas Bailén 2009; MME 2009). Debelle selected the period of late 2006, due to the massive volume of news on squatting that was then being produced. All texts were taken from found between October and December 2006, except one editorial on housing from *La Vanguardia*, which was dated found in January 2007. Two samples were made, one of editorials and the other one of news articles. Articles from each case and journal were selected, most of them synchronically (Debelle 2010, 47). The sample of news articles consists of the analysis of two cases with

relevant media coverage: El Forat de la Vergonya and La Makabra. A total of 16 editorials and 24 articles were analysed.

The first case provides evidence regarding the coverage of 'bad squatters'. El Forat is a public square in the centre of Barcelona that had been self-managed by the neighbours since 2000. In late 2006, the City Hall evicted the square, destroyed parts of it, and secured the perimeter with a police guard. A protest was called and a confrontation occurred in front of the MACBA (Barcelona's Contemporary Art Museum), a symbol of the undemocratic urban transformation of the city. If we are to speak of violence in the context of this article, one should bear in mind the institutional violence that surrounds the move by City Hall to evict the square. It was there that several innocent people had been sent to jail without any kind of evidence, some because of their foreign birth, others based on how they looked (ie if they were punks, had dreadlocks and so on, thus conforming to the 'bad squatter' stereotype). It was also where the neighbours self-organized their comunal space throughout 6 long years of struggle. Finally, the squatters were blamed by the authorities for the disturbances which happened after the protest and the media followed the story instead of giving contextual. Thus, the story is that "bad squatters" ruin the protest of the neighbours. A total of 34 articles were found in the newspapers, of which 14 were analysed.

In contrast, the case of La Makabra permits a study of the representation of 'good squatters' in the press. La Makabra was a huge squatted warehouse in which one could find a circus workshop and the facilities needed for artists of all kinds to practice. When the eviction occurred, the collective decided to squat Can Ricart. This building had been claimed by the neighbours for decades, and several associations joined the squatting action. The squatters attempted to legitimate themselves and in response the police besieged the building to prevent food and beverages from being brought in; the Red Cross and a secretary from the UN intervened. The squatters stayed 10 days in total,

receiving much media attention. As a result, the total sample for La Makabra's case is much bigger than the one of the Forat. These events account for 84 news articles in total, of which 10 were analysed. Only the day of the eviction and the day of the squatting of Can Ricart were selected. Although it would have been interesting to consider if journalists changed their views on squatting over these two weeks' of coverage, we decided to focus on studying the 'good squatter' stereotype. To do so, we only analysed the articles which were written before the journalists had the chance to actually meet the squatters.

Previous academic research on squatters in the press identifies the main themes of squatting in the Spanish media: violence, evictions, and housing (Alcalde 2004, 236; Rodríguez 1999, 222). These three themes account for more than half of the news produced on squatting. Editorials on violence were selected in the case of El Forat, those on evictions were found in the case of La Makabra, and those on housing were selected whenever the journals decided to write on that subject. The sixteen editorials we found were analysed. All were selected in the period between the Forat's protest in October and late December, except for one which was taken from La Vanguardia on late January, during the political debate around housing. In this period, squatters received the largest share of mainstream media attention, since an intense debate about 'violent squatters' and 'peaceful squatters' monopolised the public sphere. The fact that the regional elections were to occur in early 2007 explains the public debate on squatting in Catalonia during 2006, since the politicians were being pressured by considerable social discontent.

Drawing upon the Critical Discourse Analysis of van Dijk (1987) on squatters, we analysed news articles in order to assess the quality of the journalists' coverage, in terms of both accuracy and reproduction of stereotypes regarding squatters. We combined his methodological approach with that of Giró (1990), who offers a technique for studying editorials.

### 3.3 Results of analysis of news articles

The criminalisation of 'bad squatters' happens in various ways and we will give a detailed example here. On October 7, 2006, both *La Vanguardia* and *Avui* quoted Martí [the Mayor of Barcelona] saying that organised groups of violent protesters were somehow related to the squatting movement, but they were not the same thing. Nonetheless, the headline's subtitle in *La Vanguardia* is 'City hall blames organized groups and the neighbours of Santa Caterina repudiate *okupas*', thus implying that *okupas* are to blame (Peiron & Castells, *La Vanguardia* 2006). Also like *Avui*, *La Vanguardia* says the protest was convoked by *okupas*, instead of neighbors (*La Vanguardia* 2006a, *ibid*). *El Periódico* is more cautious than *La Vanguardia* and *Avui* on the 6th, and only says that some violent protesters had "*okupa* aesthetics" (Fernández & Subirana, *El Periódico* 2006). In contrast, on the next day, *El Periódico* exaggerated the claim of the City Hall by publishing an article with the following headline: 'City Hall attributes disturbances at the Forat to radical *okupas*' (Ollès & Subirana, *El Periódico* 2006). *El Periódico* is the only journal which did not reproduce the full statement of Martí (Ollès & Subirana, *El Periódico* 2006). Thus, the threat by association proposed by a politician was magnified and distorted by journalists (except by those of *El Punt*, where squatters were not mentioned at all).

The day following the eviction of *La Makabra*, media articles stated that the social centre was an important circus space for Barcelona. Only *El Punt* acknowledges this in any detail, while *Avui*, *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico* limit themselves to quoting the art professionals who were there on the day of the eviction and informed journalists about the importance of that squat for the local art scene. Then, when *La Makabra* squatted *Can Ricart*, the squatters were presented as unpoliticised in the next day's articles. This is exemplified by the way that journalists designated the spokesperson of *La Makabra*'s assembly, *Gadis Romero*: *La Vanguardia* correctly identifies her as a "spokesperson", but

considers that she is speaking on behalf of the "squatting movement" (Peirón, *La Vanguardia* 2006); Avui also quotes Romero as the "spokesperson", this time of the "artists", or of the "evicted artists" (Rourera, *Avui* 2006); *El Periódico* quotes on several occasions "representatives" or "coordinators" of the "squatter movement" (Placer, *El Periódico* 2006; Placer & Pereda, *El Periódico* 2006). The squatters' movement organises in assemblies and rejects representation and hierarchy, so both of these categorisations are incorrect. Barcelona's Squatters Assembly sometimes designates spokespersons, but this assembly does not pretend to represent all squats. Only *El Punt* reveals a correct understanding of how the movement organises, thus referring to Romero as the "spokesperson of Makabra's assembly" (Barrera, *El Punt* 2006). This small yet significant point indicates how a dominant ideological discursive formation presents the squatters movement in a certain way according to its norms, rather than the way the movement itself actually organises.

Positive representations of squatters seldom exist regarding news on squats and evictions. Thus, we considered the first day of coverage of La Makabra at Can Ricart as being the most relevant, as far as the 'good squatter' stereotype is concerned. We were able to conclude that the stereotype of the 'good squatter' is largely unpoliticised, although further research might show that journalists changed their stance as days went by.

### *3.4 Editorial stance of newspapers*

The analysis of the editorial stance of the newspapers shows that each has a coherent vision of what 'okupas' are and also that each response is individualised. Studying the editorials allowed us to give more strength to the conclusions we reached while analysing the news articles.

All the editorials opine that squatting is a criminal practice, which sometimes degenerates into violence. None of the newspapers questioned the juridical

system, although only La Vanguardia pushed for stricter laws towards squatting. All newspapers, except El Punt, defended the actions of the police. All of them argued against 'violent protesters'. El Periódico characterises these protesters as "minority groups of radical squatters", mostly foreigners "who claim to be libertarians", and distinguishes them from the squatting movement (which it claims is 95% pacifist) (El Periódico *El Periódico* 2006a).

La Vanguardia, El Punt and Avui all criticize the postponement of an international meeting on the housing issue which was to be held in Barcelona, although in different ways: La Vanguardia argues that "violent groups, okupas and anti-system collectives" are "groups of delinquents" ready to create disturbances during the summit; El Punt complains about the fact that "200 troublemakers that are already identified by the police" were a valid reason to cancel it (El Punt *El Punt* 2006a, La Vanguardia *La Vanguardia* 2006a); Avui published an editorial on October 15, 10 days after the Forat protest, accusing the "very active minorities" within "the far left, anarchists, okupas, independentists, etc." of making people feel insecure, while criticising the decision to postpone the summit with nationalistic arguments against Madrid (Avui *Avui* 2006b). Thus, a moral panic was created against the political ideologies and marginalised groups which allegedly were responsible for violence and were endangering the population of the city. The summit at which the issue of violence was to be discussed was itself cancelled, thus turning a brief disturbance into a major issue.

Turning back to the case of La Makabra, El Punt was the only newspaper which acknowledged that the squatters' movement had the potential to generate alternative popular culture. Thus, this newspaper argues that cultural spaces should be offered to squatters, whilst at the same time criticising the authorities for knowing that La Makabra would squat Can Ricart and doing nothing to prevent it (El Punt, *El Punt* 2006b). Avui briefly questions the squatters' good intentions on October 4 and then publishes an analytical editorial on October 6

which argues throughout against squatters (Avui, *Avui* 2006c; 2006d). Avui and El Punt do not exclude the possibility of negotiation, whereas La Vanguardia considers the squatting movement to have a clear tendency towards vandalism. In La Makabra's case, where the squatters were clearly peaceful and politically active artists, La Vanguardia limited itself to criticising the deviant and bohemian lifestyle of the squatters (La Vanguardia, *La Vanguardia* 2006b). El Periódico seems to be superficially aware that the squatting movement is a social movement, but then argues that private property should be protected (El Periódico, *El Periódico* 2006b). It is implied that squatters can sometimes claim their constitutional right to housing, but cannot do so when they are claiming "non-basic needs" (El Periódico, *El Periódico* 2006c). This argument would seem to be replicating the dualistic thinking which Platt (1999) notes concerning deserving and undeserving squatters. Thus, we can see that stereotyping is employed by the four Barcelona-based newspapers in much the same way as the English language media. Table 1 below sets these findings out for comparison:

**Table 1 : Results**

	EL PERIÓDICO	LA VANGUARDIA	AVUI	EL PUNT
				200
<b>Violent squatters</b>	95% of squatters are pacifists, only 5% are violent	Organised and dangerous okupa groups	Okupa groups caused trouble	trouble-makers already identified by the police
<b>Forat de la Vergonya</b>				The City Hall is doing a bad job, laws should be flexible
<b>Morality of squatting</b>	Laws are correct	Law should be made tougher	Laws are correct	
<b>La Makabra at Can</b>	<b>Pacifist</b> No negotiation with La Makabra	No negotiation with any squatters	Negotiation can be justified	The City Hall must negotiate

<b>Ricart</b>	<b>Negotiation with squatters</b>	Squatters who claim			La Makabra
		their constitutional right are legitimate, those who claim « non-basic » needs are not	Bohemians and ravers abused an abandoned factory	The patience and trust of Catalans is being abused by squatters	should be granted a space, their labour is valuable for society.

#### 4 Comparing the two case studies

Having drawn out several points from the case studies above, we now move to making thematic comparisons. These are (in order of appearance) the process in which squatters were represented as a threatening other possessing deviant values, ways in which squatters contested the meaning of squatting through linguistic variation and a final evaluation of how the mainstream media easily resorts to stereotyping squatters. Before comparing the results we obtained, we include a brief comparison of each movement. This description of the movements will be treated in more detail in section 4.2 and 4.3. Firstly we provide a general picture of each movement in order to discuss the othering process in section 4.1.

The squatting movements in England and Wales and Catalonia are quite different. Squats in Barcelona last much longer than in London, something that has allowed for the creation of a strong political squatters' movement. Also, very few negotiations have happened in Barcelona between squats and local administration (Mir et al. 2013, 55-56). Although the norms of the movement are not that strict with regards to communicating with the mainstream media, squatters have shown a reduced interest in establishing a dialogue with journalists. Of course, the squatters' movement is very heterogeneous and several concrete squatting projects have decided to nominate spokespersons, such as La Makabra. The fact that these squatters had a lot of artistic resources

might have also contributed to the more positive accounts of the event, but again, this cannot be interpreted as an attempt to obtain favours from the City Hall, as in the case of artistic squats in Paris (see *Using Space*). That being said, La Makabra did sit down with City hall's negociators when these came to Can Ricard.

In contrast, the squatters' movement in England and Wales is diffuse and fairly disorganised, with the average lifespan for a squat being three months and a culture in which squatters are uninterested to communicate with mainstream media since (as we have seen) the coverage tends towards the negative in most cases (Dee 2015). It is worth noting that no-one has an accurate assessment of the number of people squatting, with the oft-quoted figure of 20,000 not supported by any evidence. The threat of criminalisation did provoke some (but not all) politically minded squatters to organise into various groups such as the Squatters Network of Brighton, Birmingham Tenants & Homeless Action Group, Manchester Housing Action and Squatters Action for Secure Housing (SQUASH - which also fought criminalisation in the 1990s and was reformed recently). These groups attempted to create positive discourses reflecting the squatters movement as one which provided housing for the vulnerable as well as allowing people to explore cultural and artistic projects, but it was an uphill struggle to counter the dominant narratives.

#### *4.1 Othering*

Although the socio-political context is very different indeed, there are some common aspects shared by the different repressive processes. In both cases, squatters are depicted as deviant subjects. One could argue that this is in some ways positive, as deviance is a precondition for the existence of social movements, which must always exist in opposition to some hegemonic norms or values (Colorado 2010, 1). Nevertheless, in the mainstream media stories which

we analysed, the squatter's deviance is characterised as criminality, dirt, youth, etc. Squatters are depicted as selfish parasites.

Dee's study shows how the general tone of the news on squatting in London was negative and how the tendency to produce negative stereotypes amplified as the criminalisation process advanced. On the other hand, DeBelle's study shows that in Barcelona particular sources of information are systematically privileged over others, receiving more attention and most importantly being reproduced without critique. These sources would include the security forces; the City Hall; the judicial system; politicians; (only sometimes) neighbourhood associations (DeBelle 2010, 118). Critical Discourse Analysis demonstrates that powerful actors have more weight given to their pronouncements (Barriga 2011, 73; Fairclough & Fairclough 2013, 112). Thus, institutions can be said to have contributed directly to stigmatisation by representing a certain view of squatters, both by generating a criminalisation process and by being the main actors in this process.

Further, in both case studies, squatters are depicted as a threat to the moral order of society. Heidi Rimke argues (2011, 209-210) that “the resurgent intensification of state repression against activism and 'anarchism' since the end of the twentieth century is legitimated by a society that has now been almost completely colonised by the discourse of security”. In the case of the Forat protest, the 'bad' squatter stereotype allowed the city mayor and journalists to explain why violence had occurred without referring at all to the actual structural violence which caused it. In England, the criminalisation of squatting was legitimised by a narrative concerning the vulnerability of private property (whilst the counter narrative emphasised the vulnerability of people squatting). It could be argued that the strength of the movement in Catalonia brought about a stronger reaction, but the underlying mechanism that legitimised repression is in both cases the same: squatters are a moral threat that justify this juridical control.

In the English context it is interesting to note that the Land Registration Act of 2002 made it harder for squatters to gain ownership of buildings or land through adverse possession, by notifying the owner of a claim and thus giving them the chance to begin eviction proceedings. As Cobb and Fox discuss (2007), this adjusted approach takes a moral stance which sees property owners as blameless.

In both cases, the mainstream media amplified a moral panic by ignoring fundamental contextual elements which would allow a better understanding of the conflict. The Barcelona study shows that despite their demands often being aligned with the local community, squatters' actions are rarely portrayed as related (Debelle 2010, 110). As A.K. Thompson writes (2010, 32) with regard to activism in North America (and the point applies equally well here) “representing activists as criminals and security threats (a category that takes on its full significance under the society of control) allowed state actors to initiate legal courses of action designed to more effectively regulate dissent”. Likewise the othering process not only characterised squatters as deviant but also represented them as a serious challenge to domestic security which needed to be dealt with.

As part of the moral panic which facilitated criminalisation in England and Wales, squatters were stereotyped as deviant characters, possessing such qualities as youth, aggression, foreign birth and uncleanliness. This process of othering makes a distinction between the typical decent citizen and the squatter, and fitted well to a hegemonic ideological discursive formation which already framed squatters as a threat (Dee 2013). As we have seen, hysterical media stories amplified this threat and thus a moral panic ensued, with the need for 'something to be done' resulting in criminalisation. In Spain, the discourses about the right for housing and for protest clashed with the discourses about the duty to be respectful, civic minded, citizens while doing so (with squatters being

those who claim housing and protest in a wrong and unacceptable way). The law was not changed in Catalonia after the criminalisation of squatting in late 2006, but criminalisation allowed for politicians to avoid talking about the demands of the already existing pro-housing movement, that has since turned into a mass movement at a national level.

In general, we could then say that the mass media the dominant representation of the squatter is of a young, abnormal person, frequently designated as 'radical', 'anti-system', 'alternative' and usually framed as being part of an urban tribe (Feixa 2004: 161). Framing squatters in this manner allows the media to avoid a serious discussion of the legitimacy of using private propriety for social purposes (VVAA 2003: 86). Also, the media often sees the *okupa* movement as a homogeneous group with shared goals, a vision which fails to admit the importance of the political subject that each social centre becomes (Rodríguez 1999, 211; VVAA 2003, 88).

It has been shown that the media tends to favour aspects of the events portrayed according to their news value instead of their explanatory potential (Vidal Castells 2004, 49). For instance, the media focuses on marginal violent episodes in demonstrations while giving little attention to the aims of the march itself (van Dijk 1988, 261). On the contrary, news stories concerning social centres' regular activities are minimal (Alcalde 2004, 234; Feixa 2004, 161; Pretel 1999, 222; VVAA 2003, 83). In general, the media tends to marginalize groups categorized as radicals for their beliefs and strategies (Fairclough 2009, 331; McLeod & Detenber 1999: 6). As political squatting is not often mentioned in the media, squatters are incorrectly framed in terms of this recurring stereotype (Alcalde 2004, 234-236). More concretely, terminologies referring to the politicized nature of the movement are almost never used (González 2008, 52-54). Representing squatting in this fashion frames the act as a problem and therefore suggest the need to find a solution to it.

To sum up, othering from the media facilitates criminalisation and repression of social protest, something that we have found in both case studies. This section has shown some aspects that are shared by both othering processes.

#### *4.2 Sidestepping the discourse*

It is interesting to note that squatters in London were keen to sidestep the negative stereotypes conferred by the word 'squatting' (Dee 2013, 263). Instead of respelling the word as the Barcelona squatters did, they chose to create new signifiers such as 'caretakers' or 'property maintainers,' but the essential motivation is the same, in that they attempted to reformulate the meaning of the word, to give it more positive associations. For example, in a Guardian article mentioned earlier (Pidd 2009), which is actually entitled "'We're not squatters,'" says art group occupying Mayfair mansion,' squatter Dan Simon claims that they are not squatting the building in question, but rather temporarily using it as an 'artshouse' promoting cultural activities without recourse to funding and at the same time, maintaining the building.

Pidd (2009) sees this as the squatters making an “attempt to turn squatting into a legitimate way of showcasing the arts without the taxpayer's help, while disassociating themselves from wilder, less well organised squatters in other London mansions” (and thus this also provides an example of a journalist jumping to use the 'good'/'bad' squatter distinction). In a related fashion, Mark Guard, part of a group which squatted a string of mansions in Belgravia, claimed in an Evening Standard interview (Curtis 2009) that they were “good squatters” as opposed to “bad anti-capitalist squatters.” And to give two more examples of squatters contesting their negative portrayal, one article from the Daily Telegraph (Gammell et al. 2009) entitled ‘Squatters occupy £3 million house on “millionaire’s row”’ quotes one of the squatters as saying “I don’t mind being called a squatter, but I am a good one. We are normal people, we go to work”; in another (Leach 2011) an un-named Lithuanian states “We are good

squatters. We treat the places we live in with respect. We keep the place clean and tidy – we ask visitors to take their shoes off when they enter – so we feel we should be treated with respect.”

This then brings us back to the danger of distinguishing between the good and the bad squatter, since the squatters who (not without effort) conform to certain standards might occasionally be tolerated longer in their squats whereas others who refuse imposed normativities would be evicted. However, since the average lifespan of English squats is just three months this does not often become a matter of concern, whereas it does in places like Paris, where artistic squatters are tolerated and anarchist squatters often quickly evicted (Using Space). Or to give another French example, in her article 'What is a “Good” Squatter? Categorization processes of squats by government officials in France' Florence Bouillon (2013, 239) describes how in a hypothetical court case regarding the eviction of a squat, the lawyer will be at pains to point out that the squatters “are not 'drug addicts', they 'don't steal' and their marginalisation does not necessarily coincide with delinquency. He affirms the occupants' insertion in their neighbourhood and if possible, presents letters and petitions of support signed by neighbours.” However, the Guardian article (Pidd 2009) states that Oubliette arts group have occupied five places in one year, so it does not seem that their caretaking proposition is meeting with success (even if Simon also does say he has “successfully negotiated consent to squat in eight properties in London in the past seven years”).

Instead of trying to produce a positive image, another tactic for squatters would be refusal to engage with the media (see Dee 2013, 253), although this then can result in the journalist simply making up the story and misrepresenting the squatters. This has repeatedly happened in Barcelona, where squatters have not traditionally engaged with the authorities or the media. As we have seen earlier, squatters in Barcelona defined their spaces as 'okupas'. In this way, otherness is (re)claimed as a positive value. That being said, the media has been able to

interpret the meaning of the 'k' spelling without much contestation, thus associating it with the negative connotations that we have mentioned. Regarding La Makabra, we have seen that the spokesperson designated by La Makabra never tried to avoid being labelled as an 'okupa'.

In 2006 a squat started a public discussion with the authorities to legalise squatting (Mir et al. 2013, 55-56). Since then, several attempts at negotiation have been made, but none under the identity of the 'okupa'. As we argued above, only Miles de Viviendas used the 'okupa with a K' spelling as an 'advertisement' for their intent to legalise squatting and to make it accessible to everybody. In other words, some of Barcelona's squatters tried to sidestep stigmatisation by arguing that everyone has the right to be a squatter. Although this campaign could have been done without identifying as 'okupas with a k', evictions through foreclosures provided a genuine need for the general populace to benefit from the techniques which squatters offered. The squatter movement has in fact been an integral part of the housing rights struggle. In 2006 politicians stigmatised squatters in order to avoid a serious debate on housing.

To sum up, this comparison shows that the strategy of social movements differs from the strategy of institutions. Also, although both London's and Barcelona's squatters have taken initiatives to sidestep criminalisation, specific contexts condition the ways in which each political actor positions itself regarding what is seen as 'good' and 'bad' squatting. The power balance between institutions and popular movements is crucial. Dee's study shows that London squatters had to gather in groups to find a voice and sidestep dominant discourse. Bouillon's study shows that French squatters have drawn from the legitimacy of popular organizations to deflect moral concern in court. Debelle's study shows that the only positive descriptions of La Makabra, right after the eviction and the squat of Can Ricart, were a result of association with the art world. Indeed in both cases, squatters tried to influence the mainstream media as well as producing their own media. Still, as we will discuss below, although it might become

*necessary* for squatters to engage with the media, it is certainly not a *sufficient* condition for success.

### *4.3 Creating different discourses*

As we have observed, despite being in a weak position to counter the discourses of powerful institutions such as the police, Government officials and the mainstream media, squatters do still remain actors with agency and can indeed turn the very process of othering to their advantage, embracing symbols of difference and declaring that they are on the one hand situated in opposition to some hegemonic values (such as property rights), whilst emphasising their normality on the other, since at a fundamental level they, like most people, are also searching for housing security. As Michel Foucault emphasises, the crucial task is to assume one's own subjectivity and at the same time to refuse and sidestep subjectivities imposed from above. This is a task he sees as "the political, ethical, social philosophical problem of our days" (Foucault in Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982, 216). We have been concerned here with how discourses present in the mainstream media can support dominant ideological-discursive formations which actively attack the creation of new subjectivities and instead impose different meanings upon squatters. We have shown how this negative stereotyping aided the criminalisation and repression of squatters in two contexts, but there is a broader lesson here for all antagonistic social movements, since if discourses are created and perpetuated by the media, this creates a crucial point of contestation and stereotypes can shift (and be shifted) over time in ways which are positive as well as negative for the movement in question.

Of course, one answer is also to refuse to play the game, yet this is not always possible when the stakes are high enough. To return to the example of the UK miners' strike mentioned in the introduction, which Milne describes (2014, ix) as "without doubt a watershed in the country's postwar history," an unholy

combination of Conservative politicians, right-wing media moguls, anti-Communist Russian mining officials and shadowy intelligence operatives somehow joined together to attack the strike leaders and to crush the strike itself. The negative media coverage of the strike and also the subsequent hounding of certain officials was a key factor in affecting public opinion. Milne asserts (2014, 368) that MI5 (the British domestic secret intelligence services) actively manipulated press reports of the miners' strike and its bloody aftermath, with "three quarters of national labour and industrial correspondents [recruited] as informants of one kind or another." In a situation like this the miners' unions could not ignore such allegations but were forced to contest them (and were eventually successful although the process took years).

An important point made by Dee and Dadusc (2005) in discussing how squatters fought criminalisation in England and the Netherlands is that whilst possessing their own channels of communication (such as banners, flyers, independent media and so on) in order to communicate with the authorities, squatters were forced to engage with the mainstream media or else they were not heard. Also, a general tactic appeared to be to ignore racist discourses so as not to give them any weight, but as an unintended consequence "neither mentioning nor contesting these specific discourses has perpetuated and enabled the process of othering, a technique which had a strong role in raising the moral panic and legitimising criminalisation" (Dee and Dadusc 2005, 128).

In London, isolated sympathetic portrayals of squatters who fix up houses and get on with their neighbours were drowned out by rather hysterical stories of Latvian or Moldovan squatters who were depicted as folk devils needing juridical control (a discourse which of course ties in with a broader media-created narrative concerning East Europeans invading the UK, living off the benefit system and stealing English people's jobs). Steve Platt's work mentioned earlier shows that in the English context such lazy categorisations were already occurring in the 1970s. The dominant ideological discursive

formation has long regarded squatters as parasites and as Kesia Reeve observes (2015, 139), “this popular characterisation of squatters, and associated disregard to empirical evidence, has a long history. The media headlines in 2011 (including a campaign by the Daily Telegraph lobbying for a change in the law) were virtually indistinguishable from those 40 years earlier.” We would suggest that this stereotyping often happens in the portrayal of social movements more generally.

Still, the struggle against being stereotyped by the media is not self-evident. In the cases of both Paris and Barcelona, attempts by some squatters to avoid stigmatisation have unintentionally reinforced existing stereotypes and have created conflicts between squats. In Barcelona, pushing for legalisation created intense internal debates and a general rejection by the squatters movement of two squats (Miles de Viviendas and CSO Magdalenes), which tried to legalise. Unproductive tensions around the 'okupa' identity undermined the goal of Miles de Viviendas, which was to enable people generally to access squatting. It could be said that the strategy adopted by these squats was mistaken, as it clashed with the identity and the goals claimed by other sectors of the squatting movement. Thus, tensions around the 'okupa identity' were not only created by politicians and the media. There was also an intense debate (even conflict), which provided new anti-austerity social movements with an extensive repertoire for action.

We note in passing that another Spanish episode of negotiation which created conflict is the case of Patio Maravillas in Madrid, when a chicken filled with firecrackers was left to explode in front of the squat. Patio Maravillas was attempting to legalise and was also one of the few squats cooking meat. This extreme case of an attack on a squat by other squatters sheds some light on the importance which the movement attaches to its refusal of relationships with the authorities. What motivates some conflicts is the attempt of collectives to negotiate with authorities, more than the usage of a certain spelling or identity.

Thus, our comments only begin touch on several important issues.

Moving towards the conclusion, brief reference must be made to Can Vies, since it suggests a means to oppose the discourses imposed by the mainstream media. Debelle and Dee (2014a; 2014b) have described in several articles the riots caused by the eviction of the social centre, as well as the popular revolt that followed. The former were broadly discussed in the media, while the latter was almost completely ignored. Yet the revolt was interpreted by Can Vies' spokesperson as the legitimisation of their disobedience. In a press conference which gathered more than 20 television channels and mainstream newspapers, the discourses about violence were directly addressed, the spokesperson arguing that the violence emanated from the authorities, not the protesters. The success of this strategy rests on the popular support which Can Vies received (from the local community, in social networks, through economic solidarity with around 90.000€ raised through crowdfunding etc.). The press conference thus became a very effective tool to sidestep discourse. This confrontational tactic was only made possible by 17 years of work. Can Vies holds an important position in the Sants neighbourhood's recent popular history.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this article we have seen how in two different contexts, namely Barcelona and London, the political squatters' movements are presented in various ways in the mainstream media, with more negative discourses given more weight. In both cases, the dominant ideological discursive formation (IDF) represents the squatter as a deviant other in need of repression.

We have seen evidence in both cases of a tendency for media portrayals to lapse into dualistic stereotypes such as the 'good' and the 'bad' squatters, or alternatively the deserving versus undeserving squatters, or violent versus peaceful. Debelle's two studies show how squatters were pigeon-holed as violent

in the case of El Forat or represented unfavourably in the case of Makabra despite appearing to be peaceful, civic-minded squatters. Dee's analysis of 235 media stories indicates that despite the prevalence of a multitude of discourses, when squatting was under threat of criminalisation, the coverage in the mainstream media increased, clearly stoking a moral panic, which ultimately resulted in the criminalisation of squatting in residential buildings in 2012.

It is unsurprising that squatters are othered in such a way, since they present a challenge to the logic of capitalism by undermining the absolute right of the owner to enjoy his/her private property whether she/he actually puts it to use or not. Through repurposing derelict or disused buildings for use as housing, social centre projects, arts spaces, advice centres, infoshops and a thousand other uses, squatters take direct action to present a vision of a different society, in which access to land is determined by need, not wealth or privilege.

As Steve Platt (1999, 107) remarks, such “nuance and complexity” is easily lost in the stories published by mainstream media. Yet the process of othering can be contested and in the comparison section we have discussed how squatters have employed different tactics such as the refusal to talk to mainstream media, subverting stereotypes, creating new identities and of course continuing to occupy empty space. The success of these tactics depend on popular support, but also on collective unity in between activists. There is a clear tendency to form groups and unite against criminalisation, but the two different cases we have studied show that it would be hard to elaborate strategies that do not generate internal conflicts.

It is clear that the mainstream media affects the different discourses surrounding popular issues. But of course, another key factor is public opinion, which again both shapes, and is shaped by, the discourses in circulation. The recent example of the attempted eviction of the Can Vies social centre points to an inspiring example of people power overcoming powerful interests, since the

official narrative which declared the centre had to be demolished was itself demolished by a week of unrest (Debelle & Dee 2014a; 2014b). The Can Vies collective, supported by many local groups and individuals, is now rebuilding the centre brick by brick.

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