

Resourceful Cities

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Politics of Culture and the Spatialization of Conflicts during the Crisis in Spain - The Case of Salt in Catalonia

Martin Lundsteen*

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* Department of Social Anthropology and History of America and Africa
University of Barcelona
martinlundsteen@gmail.com

Introduction

At the beginning of February 2010 a small semi-industrial and -agricultural town in the northern part of Catalonia called Salt caught the attention of the regional and mass media due to a cancelled town hall meeting. Some 300 inhabitants had led a demonstration and interrupted the town hall meeting which finally had to stop due to the persistence of the demonstrators. Although nobody erected themself as spokesperson, the main claim transmitted through the journalists who had been talking to people outside the town hall, was that an insupportable rise in crime had taken place with a succeeding sense of insecurity reigning in the town. At the same time, though, a rather more racist imagery was hinted at, claiming that this development was directly linked with the rise in migration. Through this particular instance and others following, a specific idea was established at local as well as regional and State level: the conflicts were cultural conflicts, rooted in the high percentage of non-Spanish migration that the town had received during the decade arriving at 43% of the total population. I.e. the main chain of logic, accepted by the great majority of political parties, was as follows: (a) high migration rate is to blame and the problem is around ‘convivència’ – an otherwise interesting concept which refers to a kind of everyday conviviality but which has been used politically and through the media with in a quite different manner, (b) the conflicts were so to speak, interpreted as a product of cultural/ethnical differences. As a consequence measures have been taken including, for instance, ‘soft policies’ aimed at strengthening the ‘social cohesion’; community projects led by NGO’s on ‘intercultural conviviality’; and CCTV has been installed and repressive measures have been put into practice, like policing the plazas and halls of the centre, closing potable water fountains, and pacifying strategies on the public space. I have coined these measures ‘policies of quieting’, due to their double effect and *raison d'être*, in being symbolically effective both as calming measures as well silencing.

However, the problems of Salt go beyond ‘convivència’. Salt is one of the most deprived municipalities in Catalonia and it has been even more affected by the economic crisis than most of Spain, with exceptionally high evictions and unemployment rates (amongst young people it is around 60 %). As a matter of fact, the social fabric of the small town has undergone a small revolution in the last ten to fifteen years: due to a rapid population growth from 20.000 to 30.000 linked with the simultaneous migration processes of inwards-moving residents largely from the Global South and outwards-moving residents,

principally old ‘internal migrants’ from the south of Spain. In this way Salt is a paradigmatic example of a larger tendency in the geography of Spain and more generally of the South of Europe, where there is a drift towards a cohabitation of an old and precarious ‘native’ population with newly arrived, young but also indebted population, in suburban deteriorated spaces.

The mentioned features and contradictions make it a privileged case for an urban ethnography of the relations between migration and space, with specific attention to everyday intergroup relations, conflicts and coexistence, all of which is happening in an interesting social context of a small town – a setting to which very little anthropological attention has been granted within the broader fields of urban anthropology and anthropology of migration. This way this paper inserts itself within and in the head of recent trends of doing research in the peripheries as well as urban studies in small towns.

The chief aim of this paper is to discuss the interconnection between recent socio-economic changes in Spain and Catalonia at large focusing particularly on their spatialization, and the cultural expression and understanding of these through the measures taken.