Abstract:

The Squatters’ Movement in Spain has been developing along more than twenty years. Beyond the figures of involved buildings and activists, evictions, demonstrations and so on, a rich experience in terms of political struggle at the municipal level was accumulated. How can be explained this “success”? Part is due to structural conditions according to laws, repression, bonds between social movements, etc. Another part depends on the capacities of the movement for recreating, in practice, a counterculture that stems from the libertarian and utopian ideals from the 1960s and even from previous anarchist ideological frames. What is interesting to note is that, simultaneously, this is a post-leftist movement (and, for some, a post-modern and just life-style one) with no clear appeal neither to immediate revolution, to political parties, labour unions nor to the power of State. Therefore, I will argue that Spanish Squatters were fed by utopian and neo-anarchist ideas and they could put them in practice in very everyday life and communal terms, but, on the other hand, they broke up with the very idea of utopia in terms of its application to the whole society, political system or even the city and municipalities. Work instability, spatial nomadism and fast replacement of activists are some of the evidences that support the latter statement. The former is mainly proven by the experience of collective self-management of squatted buildings, and the opposition to institutional ways of political action. Documents, observant participation and interviews are the sources of the information used for this aim. Finally, we sustain that the social and political creativity of this minority urban movement, its persistence along the years and the flow of messages disseminated within society and the alter-globalisation movement, require a careful attention to the utopian frames of meaning that feed back the movement once and again.

Key words: Squatters, Neo-anarchism, Paradoxes
Introduction

In Spain, since the first eighties of the last century, hundreds of young activists began to live and transform empty buildings in the main cities of the country, frequently at their city centres. They followed similar and previous movements in Europe (Wates et al., 1980; Koopmans, 1995; Moroni et al., 1998; Mikkelsen and Karpantschof, 2001; Pruijt, 2003), but the spread of the challenge to authorities and private owners kept in a very small and contended dimension all along the continent. In Spain this urban movement has kept itself alive, squatting, protesting, gathering and creating ways of expression and social relations for more than two decades. Where the movement remained quite close to its original form and image, such it happened in cities like Barcelona and Bilbao, the members are now observed as an inherent part of the urban landscape, part of the cultural diversity—a controversial so called urban tribe—that sometimes constitutes even a proud for the political authorities that repress them. Wherever the experiences of squatting took place—Madrid, Seville, Valencia, Palma de Mallorca, Vitoria, Saragossa, etc.—, they renewed the styles of the influential urban movements of the seventies (during the transition to democracy) and influenced the political attitudes of new generations. For instance, squatters protested not only against the social housing cuts and the real state speculation, but also in favour of illegal immigrants, criticising media censorship and organizing party & political demonstrations in the streets. As any observer could conclude, the micro-ethics of urban squatters gained a more relevant role in these whirlwinds than their reduced size would suggest. Trespassing the condition of illegality and minority, in Spain squatters reached recognition as active social actors in cities, although this does not mean to be in equal conditions to other institutionalised urban actors (Martínez, 2002; Adell et al., 2004).

In this text I will argue that Spanish squatters’ movement expresses a ‘paradoxical utopianism’ through its specific urban counterculture. Firstly, I should ask why Spanish squatters should be identified as “countercultural”. This is not an exclusive feature of Spanish squatters but an inherent experience of all European squatters. Instead, urban squatting in United States, for example (Corr, 1999; and a similar pioneering experience in England: Bailey, 1973), was mostly promoted by organizations trying to host homeless people (there are exceptions like the one showed ironically in the film The Anarchist Cookbook, directed by Jordan Susman, 2002). Land squatting along poor countries of Latin America, Africa or Asia,
on the other hand, has been a really hard and sadly violent experience for thousands of peasants fighting for their basic survival (Notes, 2003). Anyhow, every resistance to the oppressive conditions of life and every social group with its own social borders, produce a particular culture: ways of talking and wearing, norms of loyalty and courage, shared values and identities, shared friends and sentimental partners. In the case of all kind of squatters, we could also add that they settled up truly universities of life since the moment squatting compromise the whole everyday life of people involved.

Secondly, this is a new, alternative and post-leftist urban movement (Kitschelt, 1990) and, for many, just a sort of life-style way of insurrectionalism (Bookchin, 1998). Thus, recent literature on the subject has argued convincingly on the specificities of this movement. 1) Cooptation of activists and legalization of squatted building is quite odd (this was easier in many cases of Germany and Netherlands, but most of the Italian and Spanish ones were extremely opposed to any negotiation with local, regional or state governments, or with most of private developers) (Pruijt, 2003). 2) This is a clear example of a transnational network of experiences and one of the material-spatial infrastructures of new urban and youth movements, but, even adding the global character of cities where squatting has placed, political conflict is usually manifested at the local level, involving confronted and repeated encounters between municipal authorities and squatters (Martínez, 2007). 3) Historical centres of big cities and other urban areas under rapid restructuring processes (ex-industrial districts, harbours, old public facilities, etc.) offered the spaces that fit with the aspirations and forces of young people who wanted to do things at the margin of mainstream culture, politics and social organization (Adell et al., 2004). 4) This is an almost 24-hour political commitment for there is a necessity of self-protection against police, extreme-right gangs (neo-fascists) and intimidators paid by private developers, and, at the same time, a whole involvement in domestic and social activities, and this strong application of the feminist claim about “personal is political” makes the difference in comparison to many other social movements. 5) The Spanish squatters movement has very flexible limits and is formed by different types (and thousands) of sympathisers, activists, residents and “users” of the social and cultural activities launched from the self-managed and squatted social centres, a more powerful engine of the movement if we compare them with the squatted buildings only used for residential purposes.
The Spanish squatters were increasing the number of groups and initiatives during the eighties and nineties. Legal and police repression came over the movement since the last nineties, but there was not homogeneity applying laws and some intellectuals, lawyers, associative leaders and judges supported its demands and projects. At some cities the crisis of the movement just implied a change in the strategy, turning many squatted social centres into rented ones, but many times combining public activism with individual strategies squatting houses. The project was always beyond the walls. Or, expressed in squatters’ discourse, “you can destroy our houses, but not our ideas”. In too many occasions, squatted buildings were demolished after the eviction of dwellers or, worse, kept empty with bricks covering windows and doors. Speculative practices in urban and housing issues are forbidden in Spanish Constitution, but are a common and profitable ground for the private investment, both national and from abroad. Prizes of houses were growing at average rates of 18% and more (depending on the city: standard deviation from the average is high) each year since the last eighties and reached high peaks every time so young population and not-owner population in general, can not afford a reasonable access to accommodation. Renting market and state housing stock are also too narrow. Squatters used to say: “when living is a luxury, squatting is a right”. In this sense, their protests gave visibility to such economic scandals, opening publicly urban conflict. The point, however, is that this kind of countercultural squatting does not limit the claims to one unique theme, such as the scarcity of social and affordable housing. This movement mixes macroeconomic criticisms with microeconomic management of houses, knowledge, politics, personal relations and arts. Like many anarchists and autonomous communists, squatters think that utopias must be practiced right now and here. Utopias projected to the future are seen by squatters as an invention of the urban growth machine for selling people dreams of the best city, the best way of life, the just wealth for everybody; peacefully, without any claim or protest. Another angle for judging such a paradoxical utopianism is the way Engels’ criticisms on housing market and Proudhon’s solutions came together to merge in the squatter movement.
1. Urban counterculture

“The right to the city is not merely a right to access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart’s desire. The right to remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban sociality is one of the most precious of all human rights.”

(Harvey, 2003)

According to Harvey’s quotation, Spanish squatters clearly challenged the concrete and standardized ways of urban participation, and defended urban rights to place and to freedom that the privatisation of public and domestic space is reducing. Let’s introduce to some features of their urban counterculture and, next, to the aforementioned question of paradoxical utopianism.

Squatters’ counterculture is about fantasy, integrity and dignity, not only about being against the System. We have mentioned above the integral exigency of squatting affecting the whole time of everyday life, body and soul, economics and oikonomics (that is to say, ecology in general, urban ecology in particular), politics and privacy. Moreover, when someone arrives a squatted social centre, s/he can enter a world of cheap food and drink, a sort of alternative restaurants, unusual books, journals and flyers that can shake your mind, paintings decorating inside and outside walls, flags, T-shirts, old bicycles, workshops, recycled beds, concerts, theatre, pictures, film exhibitions and talks about uncomfortable issues at any country, like the rights of prisoners or the international traffic of weapons. Many times it seems a surrealist view.

There is Colombian movie, The Snail’s Strategy (Sergio Cabrera, 1994), where fantasy and dignity are combined in a sort of anti-fairy telling: tenants faced the threat of bulldozers and landlord intending to evacuate their house, by means of imaging the incredible project of moving all the stuff, bricks and windows included, to a new plot in the suburbs, finally enjoying the pleasure themselves of putting dynamite to the building, their ex-home. Spanish squatters were not, mostly, working together with poor families with children, or along with ethnic minorities, who also occupy illegally empty houses. Both appeal to dignity and denounce the shades and limits of the Welfare State. However, squatters avoid asking for their
right; they rather opted for direct action and to expose the urban conflicts open to public debate, risking them to go to jail.

The “alternative scene” to which squatters belong tries to go beyond necessity: it is more about desire, collective desires. Independent media, rejection to conventional aesthetics and the strength of solidarity ties, even without the rigidity of being part of a formal organization and including different personal and ideological cleavages inside the movement, contribute to materialize those desires. The external image is usually a marginal one (see, for example, one of the few times that squatters appear in Spanish films: Leo, directed by José Luis Borau, 2000), but squatters themselves also produce dvd, books and documents that portray a different narration of their actions (more active, constructive and positive) and their enemies (accusing police of abuse of power and arbitrary repression to social and political activists). Walking on the edge of life, of course, implies a strong sense of creativity, resistance and temporality. Everything could end tomorrow.

The fact is that the movement remained active after more than two decades confronting dozens of trials and hundreds of evictions, but, at the same time, showing a great capacity to resist (more than ten buildings were squatted for more than fifteen years, at many courts squatters were free of charges) and to introduce us into new fields of political and social disobedience, not only civil disobedience to the laws that protect private and dead property – also, for instance, free software and hacklabs, or demonstrations against mega projects involved in urban speculation and justified with the benevolence of Olympics Games (Barcelona, 1992) or the Forum of Cultures (Barcelona, 2004), for example.

When we refer to countercultural worlds of sense, it is not easy to be free of the “spirit of an epoch” –May 1968, hippy communities, escape from alienation of abundance through music and drugs, etc. But everything has changed after three decades. Squatted social centres in Europe have become platforms for the expansion and support to the Zapatist rebellion (from 1994 to the present) and the indigenous rights in Mexico, settlements for indymedia infrastructures of communication by means of internet, spaces for a huge circuit of underground music and artistic performances. In the film The Constant Gardener (Fernando Meirelles, 2005) we can appreciate a supposedly squatted building in Amsterdam dedicated to the surveillance of pharmaceutical companies; quite similar, in Spain, some squats constitute also specialized libraries and documentation centres. Drugs are used frequently, but not the so
called hard drugs (heroine, for example), not in all the squatted buildings, and not less frequently than among the rest of youth. Communitarian proposals are established thanks to specific co-operativist initiatives, rather than to sectarian ones or share-all-you-have / islands of primitive communism. Nonetheless, the rapid replacement of activists and the constant evictions have the practical and cultural effect of nomadism, not all the times well accepted by all the squatters. Using a reverted strategy of nomadism, metamorphosis in relation to defined ideologies, a wide do-it-yourself culture (McKay, 1998), recycling of any stuff considered as “trash” (even food), and austerity reducing the levels of consumption, squatters oppose the dominant culture with mixing practices and behaviours, confused within the urban crowds.

2. Utopia and anti-utopia

“Utopian speculations can help free us from the habit of taking the status quo for granted, get us thinking about what we really want and what might be possible. What makes them “utopian” in the pejorative sense that Marx and Engels criticized is the failure to take present conditions into consideration. There is usually no serious notion of how we might get from here to there. Ignoring the system’s repressive and cooptive powers, utopian authors generally envision some simplistic cumulative change, imagining that, with the spread of utopian communities or utopian ideas, more and more people will be inspired to join in and the old system will simply collapse.”

(Ken Knabb, 1997)

Foucault (1982) called ‘immediatist’ movements to those that criticize the immediate sources and impacts of power whilst rejecting utopias and ideologies which project liberation from the existing forms of domination onto a distant future. This applies accurately to the squatters’ movement. Squatters openly rejected classical revolutionary projects and parties, especially when these included new forms of State. This is a way of rejecting progressive utopias. Nonetheless, many of them used to call themselves ‘revolutionaries’ and emphasized their commitment to their ideas and utopias even beyond the places squatted. That is to say, they stressed short-run utopias, specific projects of urban transformation and, especially, a whole change of their own lives. This is a way of thinking very close to the political left paradigms of situationism (the so called ‘policy of desire’) and autonomy (the so called ‘communism
Squatters have been often identified as part of aesthetic or lifestyle anarchism. “Homelessness can in a sense be a virtue, an adventure. At least, this is what the huge international movement of squatters, our modern wanderers, thinks.” (Bey, 1985: 182) However, nomadism as a lifestyle does not seem to accomplish the desires of most oppressed population: “Alas, homelessness can be an 'adventure' when one has a comfortable home to return to, while nomadism is the distinct luxury of those who can afford to live without earning their livelihood. Most of the 'nomadic' hoboes I recall so vividly from the Great Depression era suffered desperate lives of hunger, disease, and indignity and usually died prematurely -as they still do, today, in the streets of urban America.” (Bookchin, 1998: part 3) For Bookchin, aesthetic anarchists are individualistic, irrationalist, hedonist, insurrectionalist and relativistic. They would not prepare any revolution nor do they defend any rational and explicit political programme. For ‘luxurious nomads’ occasional events of protest and egocentric satisfaction would be sufficient as their political expression. Squatters, thus, would not be real homelessness since they behind the support of their families’ capital and homes.

According to my own observations of Spanish squatters, I think Bookchin is right in two aspects: 1) countercultural life created in the squatted social centres (talks, concerts, meetings, workshops, etc.) requires more dedication than the promotion of explicit and complete political programmes; 2) consumption of counterculture may be another mechanism of individualization and alienation. As I have said before, many squatters believe they are revolutionaries not because of their efforts for catalysing or yearning a social revolution in the short run, but because they work for changing the present situation of alienation, individualization, bureaucratization and censorship. That is to say, they do a political work in many dimensions of their everyday life. This is particularly important in the way they occupy illegally the buildings where they live and promote counterculture. Squatting also implies a communication with the neighbourhoods and local population arguing for the legitimatization of the direct action involved and the solidarity with their claims for decent housing and self-managed spaces. The institutional and non institutional ways of defence of the squatted
buildings against evictions also constitutes a political learning and practices that diminishes the perils faced by simple insurrectionalist tendencies. In fact, what most of the squatters want to do is to create ‘communities’ that can last long in time, even acknowledging the attacks that authorities and owners will direct against them.

It is evident that squatters do not trust in the upcoming of a revolution or utopia within the current stage of global capitalism. The same applies to political parties, seen as professionals with their own interests, and to old political traditions that give privilege to a sacrificial style of activism. The unique utopia they see as possible right and now is that based on the combination of direct actions as squatting, learningship of self-organization, and enjoyment of life while protesting and partying as much as possible. This is clearly something else than hedonism and individualism. In fact, they have constructed strong examples for the rest of the society claiming against the individual benefits of real estate developers, and in favour of the common utilization of empty buildings. Tensions between creativity and protest, party and social criticism, does not produce individualism but new forms of collectivism and new forms to integrate different expressions of personal freedom (McKay, 1998: 27).

Finally, nomadism does not seem to be very well accepted by the squatters’ subjectivity. Most of the squatters I have known wanted a more stable life for developing their personal and political projects. Instability and nomadism is just the prize they must pay when authorities frustrate their efforts, but not the destiny they wish and promote in society. When they are young and do not have children, the consequences of evictions are easy to assume. Job instability is also frequent for many of them, so they have also learnt how to deal with uncertainty in life after they leave their family households behind.

In some countries, like Germany, squatting has been seen as an example of a counter-cultural movement committed to building a collective identity in strong opposition to other actors but with certain ambivalence with respect to power and material living conditions (Rucht 1990, Koopmans 1995: 17-37). This dimension is more easily understood by linking it to a constant collective creativity in all facets of daily life which are, in turn, questioned in relation to global constrictions, which originate from the different demands of society (Llobet 2005: 49, 95). This position can be summarized in the following premises.
a) Active participation in the squatter movement creates a lifestyle that affects forms of expression, socializing, social organization and a relatively austere material survival. Therefore, the cultural nature of the movement consists of all these aggregated forms.

Even though, it is very difficult to verify with precision, our sample of interviews shows that around half of the squatters are university graduates. Nevertheless, these squatters did not use their qualifications for related employment. Temporary jobs, self-employment in cooperatives, the informal economy and mutual aid were the more typical way of earning a leaving among squatters, irrespective of class origin. For those with a middle class background, material conditions diminish when they adopt a squatting lifestyle, regardless of the fact that they occasionally make use, more so than squatters with a working class background, of family resources. Nonetheless, it is estimated that approximately a third of squatters are of working class origins. Consequently, individual material necessities are largely resolved collectively or within those parameters of the aforementioned squatters’ lifestyle.

b) If one sees all the social practices associated with squatting as ‘countercultural’, this is mainly because on a more conscious or ideological level squatters seek to oppose and overcome the dominant culture. ‘Dominant culture’ refers to forms of production, consumption, social relationships and political decision making. Like any kind of search, these are processes without a specific end. At best they can be seen as experiments or laboratories but that does not imply wandering in a limbo of theories, discourses and debates. Instead, the opposite is true. The actual experience of civil disobedience exercised through the action of squatting enables other practices to take root and reveal the counter-cultural character of the movement.

Low-priced tickets to music concerts and other spectacles and the money collected from such events are used to finance squats or other similar causes. The free promotion of training workshops on the use of new technologies or craftwork; the opening of squats to promote books or political campaigns, or the setting up of libraries, work cooperatives or language schools for immigrants, are just some of the facets that establish a high level of counter-cultural coherence between means and ends. It is true that such dynamics often distract activists from other political struggles (employment) and that the main social problem associated with squatting (urban speculation) here is only combated through the action of
squatting, which until recently lacked more far-reaching alliances and tactics. However, this should not prevent us from acknowledging the contributions of the squatting movement, the coherence of many of its practices and the establishment of free spaces for expression and criticism of the dominant culture.

Conclusions

We must consider that the global enthusiasm for opening up and allying with other non-squatter collectives, socializing as much as possible the ideas of autonomy and disobedience, was never a discourse that developed in all types of squats and squatted social centres (the so-called, in Spain and in Italy, CSOAs). From what we know about the general European experience, squatting environments have a strong proclivity for endogamy and towards protecting their signs of identity. Thus, should these utopian experiences of squatting be considered as utopias that could be spread to the whole society?

The most dynamic, durable, and politicised CSOAs in large cities, or in suburban areas (such as in the cases of Can Masdeu, near Barcelona, or La Casika, near Madrid), when compared with squats in residential buildings and more isolated squats, have been more effective in breaking down the barriers of prejudice and in embracing a plurality of actors and support in both the squats themselves and in their acts of protest. That attitude prompted them to participate in other local and global platforms in which they had to share demonstrations or manifestos with other organizations. The experiences of these different groups of squatters have, in turn, dragged along many of the most reticent members, although some have even been actively against that, as they considered being reformist. For instance, CSOAs which have focused exclusively on organizing concerts and, on the other extreme, some Italian CSOAs with groups more interested in promoting the model of disruptive actions of the Black Bloc (Famiglietti 2004). In any case, it would be a simplification to claim that this global enthusiasm was characteristic of all squatting experiences and squatter activists. ‘Squatting utopias’ were constrained within very specific spatial and social limits. However, it can be argued that some effects of its influence can be identified in the greater alter-globalizing implication of many squatting movements.
Secondly, we should also ask ourselves the following question: are squats in danger of drowning in the tide of the new (and, for many, ephemeral) ‘movement of movements’? Calle (2004) suggests that this problem affects both groups. Squats have not been perfect schools for self-management and direct democracy and the alter-globalization movement has yet to show its capacity for survival and consistency. In this sense, we must refer to the most genuine urban and constant qualities of the squatters’ movement, namely its local focus, roots and effectiveness.

A single CSOA may be the best platform for capturing persons and collectives with similar concerns in order to draw attention to themes and social struggles censored by the mass media and to introduce new activists to practices of civil and social disobedience already widely experimented with in the movement over two decades but its potential is even greater when linked to other CSOAs, to squats in residential buildings, and to a network of groups and organizations in districts and cities that help them to extend their public legitimacy and increase the chances of survival of the squats. The availability of accessible accommodation and spaces for nurturing counter-cultural creativity and forms of socialization, freed from the shackles of dominant morals, are the real ends of the squatting movement and also have the virtue of making the movement’s critique of real estate speculation and the falseness of civil participation pronounced by municipal governments all the more credible. ‘Squatting utopias’, as we have seen, are always projected beyond the limits of any squatted building.

Consequently, the squatter movement has faithfully adopted the slogans of the post-1968 new social movements, ‘the personal is political’ and ‘think globally, act locally’. This politicization of daily, reproductive and more spatially proximate environments, and the knowledge of these local dynamics and public acknowledgement obtained through such experience, has ensured that the strength of, and need for, squats has been maintained firmly as an integral part of the alter-globalization movement (Herreros 2004). The ambiguous reaction of judges to the challenges of squatting and the recent mobilizations in Spain for affordable housing have been additional elements in order to verify the social impact of the squatters’ movement. Therefore, the utopian and anti-utopian practices of squatters have achieved a substantial social legitimacy (local and global).
References


