CONVERGING MOVEMENTS: OCCUPATIONS OF SQUARES AND BUILDINGS

Miguel A. Martínez López
Ángela García Bernardos

Introduction

To celebrate the first anniversary of the Spanish 15M movement, a new international call to take over the streets and demonstrate against neoliberal policies was launched some months before. The transnational nature of the May 12 and 15 (2012) call (#12M15M or Global May) was a continuation of the O15 (October 15, 2011) one. According to the Real Democracy Now (DRY, Democracia Real Ya) and Sol Camp (#AcampadaSol) web pages, more than 1,000 cities in 90 countries (most of them in Europe and all over the American continent) hosted demonstrations following the O15 call, with Rome, along with the Spanish cities, among the most well-attended. Although there were no so accurate records of the #12M15M mobilisation, the streets were filled again. This indicates how protests facing the capitalist crisis took place continuously in different cities during those years. The 15M was clearly inspired by the Arab uprisings against their authoritarian governments the same year. Simultaneously, the 15M served as an inspiration for the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement that started in New York on September 17, 2011. Due to the notoriety of the latter, all of these transnational, global or alter-globalisation networks and coordinated actions, have become known simply as Occupy movements. The previous transnational protest wave against the global summits and the war in Iraq, and through campaigns such as Reclaim The Streets (Adell 2011: 130; Shepard and Smithsimon 2011) dates back one decade before.

Beyond the well-developed technological capabilities of these rooted cosmopolitans (Tarrow 2005) to mobilise activists and supporters through diverse Internet tools and bring them into the streets and squares, there are other relevant features within the 15M that deserve attention in order to understand its social and political significance as an anti-neoliberal movement. In particular, we will focus here on the connections the 15M had with local and spatial struggles. By doing so, we will
show that specific actions, such as camping in the squares and squatting buildings, allow us to identify the links between socio-political impacts, movement strategies and the evolution of political conflict. Furthermore, we argue that a convergence between two different movements occurred: the 15M and the squatters' movement (Adell and Martínez 2004; Martínez 2007; Domínguez et al. 2010). Our aim here is to explain why this convergence occurred and what consequences it brought about. Hence, our analysis of movements' convergence adds to the literature on social movements that has focused more exclusively on diffusion, spill-over and coevolution phenomena (Minkoff 1997, Oliver and Myers. 2003).

The protests against politicians' corruption and financial aid to the banks, which paved the way for the wave of protests from the spring of 2011 onwards\(^1\), were still, and even much more strongly, guiding the movement one year later and at least until the beginning of 2014. However, the 2012 Global May stressed much more specific claims to fight back the deeper neoliberal turn adopted by the Spanish governments during the global financial crisis\(^2\): cuts and privatisation measures in public education and health services, labour reforms which -among other aggressive aspects- made cheaper and easier to fire employees, and a dramatic absence of public policies to provide access to adequate dwelling\(^3\). In addition, the issue of housing gained visibility and recognition in the media agenda as a consequence of increasing actions and campaigns carried out by the 15M and PAH (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) activists. Squatting buildings became one of the most prominent political practices and was highly unexpected months before the outburst of the 15M, although the squatters' movement had been active for almost three decades. This move to squatting and the subsequent wave of new squats evolved in parallel, and also as a response, to the widespread wave of evictions of foreclosed homes. In Madrid, the 15M also expanded to or merged with other anti-neoliberal struggles such as the protests against cuts in education and privatisations of health and water services, solidarity with non-documentated immigrants and the institutional and economic support given to the Pope's visit (May 2011). The main difference here is that the squatters' movement had the longest experience among all of the new struggles.

In the first section of this article we describe both the transnational and local scope of the 15M as an anti-neoliberal contestation. Afterwards, we explain how and why squatters joined the 15M and, viceversa, how 15M activists approached squatting. We also provide evidence about the utilitarian role that existing squatted social centres
played in the 15M. Finally, we show how an explosion of new squats took place once the occupied squares were cleared and 15M activists participated in squatting actions. Our explanation of this process of convergence rests in what we designate as 'cumulative chains of activist exchanges'. The structural equivalence of the occupied camps and the squatted social centres lies in their shared embracement of assemblies, self-management and social disobedience. This sparked their mutual collaboration from the very beginning. Camps within the occupied squares turned into strategic ends, examples of direct democracy (Graeber 2011; Taibo 2011) and identity symbols of the 15M beyond their original function as a powerful repertoire of protest (Marcuse 2011). Similarly squatted social centres tended to be performed and defended as political expressions beyond their spatial functions as shelter or public fracity. Last, but not least, squatting gained legitimacy within the 15M due to this unexpected collaboration. The increasing success of the Stop Evictions campaign run by the PAH reinforced the public support to squats. 15M activists encouraged new activists to self-organise in many different groups. Some of them went to work in pre-existing squatted social centres while others started to squat houses and social centres on their own. On the one hand, this mixture slightly modified the radical and anti-systemic discourse of squatting. On the other, the specific anti-speculation discourse of squatters was incorporated into the anti-crisis one where squatting was justified by the extreme needs of increasing numbers of the population⁴.

The 15M challenging the neoliberal crisis and fighting for a self-managed public sphere

The 15M was a sudden but also late mobilisation given the rapid downward spiral of general economic indicators and widespread political scandals since 2008 (Naredo and Montiel 2010). The State at large and specific policies implemented by central, regional and local governments framed the principal grievances. The quality of the democratic regime was subject to overt and generalised complaints, for the first time since the Transition times after Franco's Dictatorship came to an end in the period 1975-78. New political passions arose all over the country. New slogans acquired immediate popularity: They call it democracy and it isn't (Lo llaman democracia y no lo es), They do not represent us (No nos representan), Our dreams do not fit into your ballot boxes (Nuestros sueños no caben en vuestras urnas), Error 404. Democracy not found”
(originally in English), We won't pay your crisis (Vuestro crisis no la pagamos), Violence is when you cannot pay the bills (Violencia es no llegar a fin de mes), Politicians, bankers and capitalists: you are organised crime (Políticos, banqueros y capitalistas: sois el crimen organizado).

The municipal elections of May 22, 2011, offered the main opportunity window for the 15M's starting challenge to the institutional system. This window had the advantage of global media coverage of the electoral process. Both politicians and street activists were the international journalists' main focus. Hence, national media had to compete with the international outlets such as the coverage of the Sol encampment by The New York Times on its front page. The protest camps effectively challenged the prohibition to remain in the days before the municipal elections. More than 30,000 people attended and peacefully supported the Sol Camp on the eve of the elections, although the authorities repeatedly threatened that act of civil disobedience. The occupation of the most central square in Madrid triggered similar occupations in other Spanish cities and also an intense political debate all over the country. After the election day, the media coverage shifted from attention to the 15M's anti-neoliberal discourse, toward the increasingly repressive contentious dynamics with the authorities (McAdam et al. 2001, Meyer 2004). The eviction of Plaza Cataluña (Barcelona) on May 27, 2011, resulting in 120 injured activists (Boyero 2011) represented that turning point..

However, the various 15M groups stayed alive over the following three years and continued mobilising against the privatisation of water services, the cuts in the public health and education systems, and the worsening of labour conditions due to the job market reforms.

Another controversial and usually hidden dimension of the 15M is its social composition. While hegemonic media and some surveys stressed the predominance of young people with a middle class origin (Calvo et al. 2011), our observations of the Sol Camp, assemblies and working groups in Madrid return a very heterogeneous composition of different ages, social class and political background. At the core of this composition was an experienced or feared precariousness of life (Política en el borde de la cornisa 2011). The category of “precariat” encompasses all those who rarely enjoy a safe and well paid job, those dependent on the uncertain support of welfare policies, and those who are not entitled with full citizenship rights. Women and internet users contributed to more inclusive and novel forms of political language within the movement. For the first time ever the weak ties of this heterogeneous precariat or
multitude (Mudu 2009) became politically active in Spain and were able to challenge the social fragmentation and stigmas of marginalisation generated by the elites. According to Pastor (2011) the strong autonomy of this movement from the political parties and workers' unions appealed to a wide range of newcomers to the political arena as a means to oppose political and economic elites, and their neoliberal policies. Simultaneously, no single political programme fuelled the movement.

How, then, did the 15M turn to local public spaces and squatting buildings as relevant matters of its activity? Apparently, the initial scale outlined by this protest was the arena of national politics. As we have seen, the transnational origins and resonances were also immediately at play. The interesting thing is that the local scale of the Sol Camp offers an important perspective to understanding both the 15M evolution and its identity configuration. During the protest camp's month of life, general assemblies occurred regularly and became the privileged locus of sovereignty and deliberation. Around 23 committees and 18 working groups formed the political structure of internal organisation, keeping continuous and close albeit occasionally conflictive contact with the general assemblies. During the first week of existence, apart from bringing thousands of visitors to the camp and participants into the assemblies and small groups, one of the key initiatives was the organisation of neighbourhood popular assemblies. This move was aimed at preventing a decline in the mobilisation in case the camp were suddenly evicted. Although the camp resisted all threats until June 12, 2011 (even after that date, some installations and protesters remained on site), around 116 popular/citizen assemblies started to gather weekly, from May 28, in the neighbourhoods and municipalities of the Madrid metropolitan region. These 15M assemblies worked as new SMO (social movement organisations), side by side the working groups who remained active after the self-dismantling of the camp. Without setting up tents and other physical structures, the 15M popular assemblies reproduced the spirit of the occupation of Puerta del Sol and provided new breadth and strength to the whole movement. In addition to the celebration of weekly assemblies in Sol (although much less well attended in comparison to the first five months), 15M assemblies adopted their own subdivision into committees and working groups, created new events and structures of coordination, and, above all, were the meeting point for dealing with local affairs. These assemblies kept alive the bonds with the 15M's original concerns. Even an independent journal was published since 2012 as an expression of the activities run by the 15M popular assemblies.
What we see here is the emergence of a new urban movement (Castells 1983, Mayer 1998, Nicholls 2010) which replicated several features of the “citizen movement” during the transition to democracy (Pérez and Sánchez 2008) - decentralised grassroots structures, demands of basic infrastructures and public services, and broad proposals of political change aiming for the creation of new democratic institutions and social justice. Indeed, the 15M aspired to preserve the legacy of those past struggles in terms of welfare policies and facilities. However, the citizen movement of the late 1970s was much more influenced by leftist political parties than the 15M. Self-management and assemblies are considered by the 15M as improved forms of direct and participatory democracy, rather than simple means to manage local affairs. Furthermore, the 15M agenda was also concerned about new issues such as immigration, financial flows, the real-estate bubble, the electoral system and non-violent civil disobedience. The use of new technologies of communication also entailed an increased capacity for recording, producing and disseminating events in real time. Compared to activists of the late 1970s, the 15M seems more quickly mobilised, while facing lesser degrees of repression when occupying public spaces. Coincidentally, both urban movements arose during the declining stage of a previous period of economic growth and both oscillated between different scales of concerns (Rodríguez Villasante 2011).

A particular feature of the 15M movement is the crucial role that the Sol Camp particular and the occupation of public space played in the movement’s identity. Squares and streets were the spatial means for channelling public discontent, but the temporary and self-built city of Sol turned means into an end – a political sign of identity. Encampments had been tried before as a protest repertoire (Calle 2005: 118; Adell 2011), but they never took place at the known as zero kilometre of Spain, the city's most commercial and emblematic place. The Sol Camp became a symbol of the free appropriation of public space, the right to public deliberation without mediators, and the practice of direct democracy through assemblies, committees and working groups. For both activists and sympathisers, the Sol Camp represented the ultimate exercise of the right to the city from which many felt excluded (Lopes 2010; Marcuse 2010). This space represented the initial manifestation of the 15M as a kind of counter-power where heterogeneous and self-organised life develops (Negri 2001). Therefore, a spontaneous tactic rapidly acquired the category of strategic end to pursue and defend, regardless its expected finite duration.
An additional new development was the close tie that the occupation of the square established with the occupations of buildings. Some of the Sol-friendly squats had already paved the way for self-management experiments over various decades (Pruijt 2003; Adell and Martínez 2004; Domínguez et al. 2010) while others were newly promoted by 15M activists. Left-libertarian squatters also embraced the open-air form of occupation and self-management that the Sol Camp manifested. Furthermore, its location at the core of the city contributed to a greater echo and acceptance by society at large compared to the limited and marginal reach of most squats up to then.

How did Occupy activists and squatters merge?

Before the Sol Camp, some DRY members had meetings in a squatted social centre (Patio Maravillas) in order to organise the demonstration of May 15, 2011. Activists from other squats across the city, autonomists and anarchists also joined that demonstration but as a distinctive block of around one thousand people out of more than twenty five thousand demonstrators. In fact, the occupation of Sol on the same day was proposed as a response to the clashes and riots that occurred once the demonstration finished. These involved some members of DRY and some participants in the autonomist block, among others. Twenty-four people were arrested and, as a quick protest, a group of 40 decided to sleep at Puerta del Sol.

I returned to Sol, injured by the police blows, and there the last rubber bullet impacted my body. I guess it happened that I felt too angry and just found people as angry as me, or even more. I remember that someone took a speaker and said we were going to stay there until all the arrested people were freed. I have to admit that it looked crazy because none of us, from the social movements, ever thought to propose that in this central place, in such a vulnerable place (A, 32 year-old woman).

Certainly it was a very spontaneous group. (…) Those with flags were people of Anonymous, but also people who were enthusiastic and politically conscious, squatters, people linked to ReS\textsuperscript{10}. These were those who saw the [political] opportunity to stay. (…) Nothing to do with the media image of the squatters as hippies (B, 23 year-old woman).
The first night I did not know anyone. Some people of ages between 20 and 30 were familiar to me because we had seen each other in [squatting] social centres like Casablanca or Tabacalera (C, 28 year-old woman).

According to our enquiry, half of the people who pioneered the occupation of Sol had previous connection to squatted social centres due to occasional or frequent visits, but not as full time engaged squatters. On the following day some tents and more solid structures were erected. The initial plan was to camp until the Election Day, on May 22nd. By the second night in Sol the police evicted the camp and activists went to the nearby squatted social centre Casablanca (at a distance of around 500 metres from Sol) to rest, hold an urgent meeting and call for support for the occupation planned for the next day. This call succeeded and thousands of people attended the general assembly by covering half the plaza with tents. The official prohibition even increased the number of people who gathered to defend the camp. Not only well experienced activists decided to disobey the authorities’ instructions to clear the square, but also different social groups joined the

The camp was more than a utopian micro-city. Rather, it could be defined as an experiment in self-management able to break up the normal operations at an emblematic public space (VV.AA. 2011). This “anomalous institution” (Toret et al. 2008) implied an autonomous form of everyday life politics in terms of living, sleeping, eating, meeting, deliberating, taking decisions, protesting, creating and expressing one's self in an accessible, welcoming and also overexposed public space. The previous commercial, tourist and transit-oriented functions of Sol were temporarily replaced by residential, political and rooted (a-place-where-to-stay) ones (Requena 2011: 14-18). Hence many squatters applauded Sol as if it were a sort of outdoor squatted social centre where non-commercial culture and alternative politics were able to develop -a culture of gift, cooperation, and openness to everyone interested in the creation, maintenance and defence of the space. The priority was given to grassroots politics, direct democracy and issues censored by the mass media. Contrary to most of the squats, however, the Sol Camp simultaneously occupied the virtual territory of Internet and was more accessible to anyone due to the online availability of all kinds of communicative records (Kaejane 2011).
There is enough coffee and food. A lot is brought by the neighbours. Cleaning occurs regularly and everybody reminds you that this is not a gathering to drink alcohol. Last Thursday there was a pair of spaces for kids to play and paint. Everyone is listening to everyone. (…) The collective effort of taking care of the space results in the creation of a little liveable world where all are welcome. (Fernández-Savater 2011).

Therefore, squatters found the model of self-management and direct democracy practised in Sol extremely appealing. Initially, the closest squatted (Patio Maravillas and Casablanca) and non-squatted (Tabacalera) social centres gave support to the camp, stored construction materials and hosted meetings of particular working groups. Many experienced squatters joined several of these groups on feminism, politics, communication, conduction of assemblies, cleaning and cooking, among those we could directly observe and, especially, those in charge of organising the neighbourhood assemblies. As a consequence, a lot of political insight from the squatting scene was introduced into the newly recruited 15M activists, mainly youngsters with precarious lives and without previous political experience, apart from a few particular events and Internet campaigns.

The squatters' movement contributed to the structure of the 15M and the context in which it emerged by avoiding vicious manipulations in the key assemblies, by trying to decentralise the structure of power, always backing arrested people and being very cautious about mass media (E, 30 year-old woman).

We saw how the messages we [squatters] tried to spread throughout the years without any success, such as self-organisation and disobedience, suddenly reached all kinds of people who did not fit the profile of revolutionary militant we were used to (F, 28 year-old man).

It must be noticed that different conflicts also arose. For example, some squatters interviewed occasionally by journalists criticised 15M activists who tended to appear too often in front of the cameras, using their own names and expressing their own opinions instead of just informing about the collective decisions made by the assembly. Many women with squatting experience were also very active in the feminist
They faced a lot of initial resistance to the recognition of discrimination against women, so that they promoted the use of inclusive language and denounced specific aggressions women suffered during the camp. Squatters and alike activists tended to concentrate into the so called long-term politics committee which criticised and vetoed some proposals from the parallel short-term politics committee. While the former supported a more revolutionary programme and a general strike, the latter suggested a viable agenda of political reforms to be implemented immediately. In general, squatters opposed political parties and institutionalised labour unions, resulting in a permanent critique of any flag, symbol or explicit link to those organisations. This stance permeated some decisions of the assembly in Sol. Notwithstanding, the anarchist symbol (a circled A) was also a matter of conflict because it was considered a coherent symbol with the spirit of the 15M by some squatters, while it still meant to be a partisan symbol for the majority of people at the camp. After various weeks of intense dedication, most of the squatters supported the self-dismantling of the camp. They opted for moving the camp to the neighbourhood assemblies. This sort of self-eviction might be regarded either as a contradiction to the previous ethics of squat and resist, or as a new political lesson for the squatters after their involvement in Sol.

Once the occupation of Sol ended, Occupy activists and squatters continued to converge. The most salient way of doing so was the integration of some working groups into the regular life of squatted social centres such as Casablanca and Patio Maravillas. In practice, this meant the recruitment of new squatting activists who had to learn many things slightly different from what they learned at the Sol Camp -activities aimed at obtaining money, the physical works in the building, new legal issues and involvement in court trials, adaptation to the formal and informal rules at play in the squats. Their reward was the availability of free and central urban space where to meet, organise, store their belongings and continue their political engagement with the 15M. This enabled them with the capacity to connect with other working groups and with the general assembly that was still celebrated every Sunday in Sol. In addition, they continued participating in demonstrations and in the neighbourhood assemblies. A downside of their integration in the squats was the additional time and energies they had to dedicate to the self-management of the building and the groups who used it.

I did not know any squats before the 15M. I had a very distorted and old image of the squatters' movement, anchored on punk and ignorance... I like punk. When we
[the Archive working group] started to participate in Casablanca is when I saw the real functioning of a squatted centre and how people organise themselves to bring about different projects with different motivations and common work. My perception changed sharply -from knowing nothing to feeling interested in collaborating and knowing the squatting scene (G, 40 year-old woman).

My knowledge about the squatters' movement was very superficial. Since the 15M I have come to know the movement more in depth (…) Before, I occasionally visited the Laboratorio [a squatted social centre of 2003 located in the same neighbourhood as Casablanca]. Now I have a very positive view about the squats, less based on prejudices (H, 45 year-old woman).

Before BiblioSol [the Library working group] became integrated into Casablanca, I admired the squatters' movement. The 15M did not change that perception, rather it enhanced it. I know much more now about how it works and the methodology of conducting assemblies (J, 19 year-old woman).

The interviews confirmed that 15M activists had sympathies and affinities with the squatters, but these were not based on many previous interactions. Therefore, activists in the occupation of the square were not very familiar with squatting. Only some of them had just visited squats to attend parties, talks or workshops. Once the Sol camp vanished, each working group / committee was free to decide where to meet on a regular basis. Thus some working groups decided to move to squats. Casablanca, for example, hosted four of those groups -archive, library, arts and general strike. In addition, other 15M activists such as the libertarian assembly, the Lavapiés neighbourhood assembly, the legal committee and the anti-repressive assemblybooked rooms at the social centre for specific meetings without a full integration in the self-management of the squat. As the following interviewee notes, the full integration in the squat did not occur without internal disagreements in the working groups. The process was also slow and not easy for all.

The relationships within the social centre were not very easy. It is not due to any refusal or aggression but because of the indifference shown towards the new people. It is something complex and understandable, and it has a solution.
Moreover, the participation of BiblioSol members into the social centre is not evenly distributed (J, 19 year-old woman).

Regarding the social composition, in the case of Casablanca we observed that the age range and predominant university qualification were similar between 15M activists and squatters. However, according to our analysis of interviews and observed expressions, their discourses differed slightly. Squatters emphasised their opposition to urban speculation, the social housing shortage and the lack of access to affordable spaces where to develop social activities able to get rid of state control and market laws. Occupy activists stressed a more general anti-crisis and anti-neoliberal discourse. Both shared a focus on autonomy and direct democracy, which, in turn, evolved into solidarity and campaigns against the repression suffered by the 15M and akin mobilisations.

A new wave of squatting after the 15M: Why?

Many squatters were influential and active during the Sol Camp and, later on, as members of the popular assemblies. This mutual collaboration seems fruitful compared to other activist exchanges. For example, the so called green tide (Marea Verde) that mobilises teachers and secondary school students against the austerity measures in public education since September 2011. This movement was organised in very autonomous ways and through extensive assemblies, what could be interpreted as a direct influence of the. However, traditional labour unions tried to hegemonise these mobilisations (Álvarez and Saleh 2011) Conversely, squatters and 15M activists shared principles of autonomy and self-management in which traditional organisations such as labour unions could not easily take any lead. Therefore, an unforeseen but more solid convergence was silently developed over time13. The main evidence of this convergence is both the increasing number of new squats in 2011-12 and the 15M activists' increasing support for squatting. In Madrid, the first attempt to squat a nearby residential building by some former occupiers of Sol was in August 2011. This was a failed initiative quickly aborted by the police, but helped to bring about narrow ties with other experienced squatters. Previously and outside of Madrid, in June 19, 2011, two other squatting initiatives by 15M activists took place in Zaragoza (Paraguas, evicted eleven days later: Diagonal 2011a) and Cádiz (Valcárcel
Recuperado, evicted in January 10, 2012: Diagonal 2011b). Significantly, both groups of activists tried to avoid the term squatting (okupación): “This is not a squat, but a recuperation of a public space” (Ramos 2011), “This is a different occupation, a process of transformation” (leaflet of Valcárcel Recuperado). At the end of the summer, a group of 15M activists in the popular assembly of a working class district of the South of Madrid, took over a building with the purpose of setting up a self-managed social centre (La Osera, squatted in September 24, 2011). The various 15M initiatives of squatting that followed in different Spanish cities became noticeable news with a national scope, contrary to the more usual local coverage of squatting. After the international demonstration of October 15, 2011, the wave of publicly known squats rose continuously. For instance, one occupation of a residential building in Barcelona (the 15O, which soon obtained judicial support: Mir-García 2011), another in Madrid (the Hotel Madrid, evicted in December 5, 2011) and others in Seville, Oviedo, León, Vigo, Burgos, Granada and San Sebastián all had different fortunes in terms of duration, and also differing degrees of connection with the 15M.

Concerning this vibrant atmosphere of new squats, two central distinctions must be made: 1) Some squats were mainly dedicated to social, cultural and political activities (self-managed social centres) while others were mainly used for residential purposes, although some combinations of both functions were also frequent; 2) All the squatted social centres are explicitly claimed and defended while in the case of squats used as homes, most of them are carefully kept invisible (although the cases promoted by the PAH since 2012 modified this pattern by overtly politicising occupations for housing too). Only through informal communication and interviews with members of three organised groups of Madrid (the Squatting Office -Oficina de Okupación-, the Housing Office -Oficina de Vivienda- and the working groups on housing within the popular assemblies -Grupos de Vivienda de las Asambleas Populares) were we aware of the huge number of residential occupations after the summer of 2011 in Madrid although no exact figures can be given. For example, two of those activists declared:

There has been a lot of stealth squatting made by individuals for living, people who are in the street, who have been left in the streets. (...) People in the neighbourhoods tell you about too many cases every week. (...) Dozens, dozens. I wouldn't say hundreds but, at least, dozens, especially here in Lavapiés (L and N, women, 25 and 26 years old).
Regarding the squats mainly used as dwellings, these can be divided into those which were promoted by 15M activists (former occupiers of Sol and members of the popular assemblies or working groups) and those promoted by left-libertarian squatters (many of them also actively engaged in 15M actions, groups and assemblies). Additionally, there are two other categories remaining in a status of partial public visibility: squatted houses for undocumented immigrants who were helped by former squatters and 15M activists (at least, one whole block in Madrid); and squatted houses for foreclosed families and individuals who were helped by their own neighbours and by PAH activists. Another category should include those homeless people, foreclosed individuals and unemployed youngsters who asked for temporary shelter in houses and social centres already squatted before May 15, 2011. Finally, according to the high numbers of people asking for information every Thursday at the Squatting Office (located at Casablanca) and the successful circulation of the squatting handbook since November, 2011 *(Okupatutambien 2011), we may estimate that hundreds of houses were also taken over based on their own self-help.

According to Table 7.1, we have counted seventeen overtly public and collective squats after May 15, 2011. Out of this figure, fourteen functioned as social centres and three exclusively as dwellings. At least three cases combined both aspects. We have not included all the individual squatted houses (some of them received media coverage) that occurred simultaneously. All the evictions were forced, except one case of self-eviction (Centro de Convergencia) decided by activists who organised the Week of Pro-Housing Direct Actions after a fierce media campaign against the occupation. In terms of ownership, eleven buildings belonged to private owners or companies, while six were state-owned. This particular condition did not affect, in a conclusive manner, the duration of the squats since each case faced different court trials, owners’ plans, media pressures and social support. However, it is clear that only two of the six state-owned buildings were evicted over the observation period, while this happened in almost half of the private-owned ones. Furthermore, those state-owned buildings were also the ones which lasted less (two and 43 days, respectively) in contrast to the privately-owned ones whose duration oscillated between 51 days and nine months (the
latter, Templo del Sol, was a rare case of semi-public squat ruled by former occupiers of Sol who were not interested in social and political activities, only in *personal* workshops, yoga and so on). These seventeen cases of public and collective squats differ substantially from the previous patterns: only six squats were opened in 2009 and five more in 2010. Therefore, given the addition to the already existing squatted social centres in Madrid, the volume (May 2012) comprises twenty which is the highest ever since the squatters’ movement began in the mid 1980s.

Three relevant features of this novel situation may be pointed out:

a) Instead of the word squatting (okupación), the words liberation or recuperation of spaces were generally preferred in order to attract a broader spectrum of people to the buildings who were not familiar with the squatters' experiences. The chosen labels could prevent from seeing squats as too radical and marginal. Nonetheless, sooner or later it was necessary to deal with the legal issues related to squatting (technically, in legal terms: usurpación) so the word squatting was increasingly used again. Hence, the anti-speculation discourse entered into the usual political anti-crisis language of the 15M. Squatting of empty buildings added to the occupation of the squares a a relevant component of the 15M identity.

b) Secondly, most of the new squatting initiatives stemmed from groups of activists involved in the 15M but only in a few cases a whole popular assembly (Carabanchel) decided to squat. In most cases, the preparation and execution of entering a vacant building was launched as an independent action. However, once the social centre was opened, the popular assembly of the area would give support, meet there and organise things together. This cautionary separation was required, according to some interviewees, by the necessary secret process of preparing the action of squatting. To express the intention of squatting in a popular assembly might increase the security measures in the building and also alert the police. On the one hand, new squatters behave independently because of the open and transparent decision-making processes within the 15M popular assemblies. On the other, it was not easy to reach a consensus about the squatting actions within those popular assemblies.

c) Squatting became more and more legitimised by 15M activists and supporters. Social centres achieved an image as practical means for fighting back against cuts and privatisations while providing free, accessible and self-managed social services for locals. Squatted houses, on the other hand, were conceived as an urgent though unpleasant solution to the lack of social housing and the increasing amount of homeless
and foreclosed people. This dramatic situation for thousands of families and individuals was increasingly treated by mass media as an unbearable problem to which only few organisations and movements were protesting. Thus, squatting entered the public discourse as one of the possible alternatives to deal with this extended social problem.

Concerning squatting, I believe that the 15M has achieved what we [squatters and autonomists] were not able to do during several decades: to turn squatting into a natural discourse and repertoire, as a valid alternative for broader audiences without scandalous prejudices which were so frequent before. Nowadays there are many more people involved in these processes [of squatting] who never would have approached a squatted social centre before. Now squatting is seen as the temporary residential alternative and response to the housing question and the eviction of people from their homes. This is an enormous qualitative shift (A, women, 32 years old).

Worth to note within this process is the role played by the PAH. This formal organisation launched a campaign called Stop Evictions in November 2010. Many PAH activists had previous political experience in both squatting and housing movements (V de Vivienda) (Blanco 2011). The PAH campaign was developed mainly in Catalonia and Murcia but was extended to Madrid after the irruption of the 15M. When evicted people (or people in risk of being evicted) went to the Sol Camp and, later, to the popular assemblies asking for help, the PAH activists offered their skills as mediators and their active solidarity attempting to avoid the evictions. Peaceful blockades to prevent house evictions found a favourable echo with the peaceful social disobedience usually preferred by the 15M activists. More than 100 evictions were stopped between November 2010 and November 2011 in different cities and the campaign became even more intense afterwards. The help of the 15M was crucial to enhance the campaign and to recruit activists for specific calls. Immigrants and working class people were the most frequent targets of evictions so they also joined the pro-housing activists, the 15M precariat, squatters and the traditional neighbourhood activists. On top of this, mass media coverage was very positive from the beginning, although police repression was also increasingly more violent.

We argue that the Stop Evictions campaign worked as a crucial mechanism in
order to advance quickly in the convergence between squatters and 15M activists. The housing question gained priority within the 15M agenda through personal cases presented in the Sol and local assemblies. The PAH was very influential in some of the working groups and in the Housing Office regarding two basic demands to the state: the provision of affordable rental housing and new legislation to cancel mortgage debts after a process leading to foreclosure. These demands were far far away from the squatters’ views but the solidarity with people affected by unemployment, lack of a regular income and the threat of eviction, mobilised squatters too. On the other hand, in September 2011, the PAH brought forth another public campaign called Obra Social in which it proposed the recuperation (in other words, the squatting) of empty properties owned by banks. This was a direct response to the escalated repression they were facing. The consequence was to embrace the tactics of squatting while preserving the pressure on the state and the banks (http://affectadosporlahipoteca.wordpress.com/obra-social-pah/). While keeping a different approach, this improved the relationship of the PAH with both squatters engaged in the 15M and squatters who remained relatively apart. In the case of Madrid the Obra Social campaign was supported by the Housing Office and some working groups within the popular assemblies.

A lot of PAH activists belong to the FRAVM [Federation of Residents’ Associations]. (...) Some very active people within the PAH definitely vetoed squatting as a solution. (...) Through PAH people who are in favour of squatting, we [the Housing Office] are in contact with families and people who are interested in squatting. Most of the support has been given to individual families. These have not been public squats because this is the strategy they decided to follow. If Corredera and Concepción Jerónima [two known squats for living run by participants in the Sol Camp] were public, it is because that group wanted to be so (N, 26 year-old woman).

The major public impact of the new wave of squats was the Hotel Madrid, located at 100 metres from Puerta del Sol. Activists occupied the abandoned hotel on the night right after the O15 demonstration. This replicated a similar squatting action in Barcelona. However, while the squatting of the Edificio 15O of Barcelona was carefully prepared in advance by a group of squatters (La Rimaia) and a pro-housing collective (500x200) with the same historical roots as the PAH (V de Vivienda - Plataforma per un
Habitatge Digne movement), the Hotel Madrid was a spontaneous action decided by a group of activists with also experience in squatting, V de Vivienda and the ReS. These activists began running the Housing Office on the following day albeit it was a project they were had been working on for months in advance. The PAH and the popular assemblies backed these occupations. The Housing Office was also comprised of activists who were, at the same time, members of PAH, the 15M working groups and the Squatting Office. The initial self-organisation seemed to produce an ordered process of allocation of rooms in the hotel. However, the central location of the squat soon attracted homeless people and poor immigrants who did not comply with the rules set by the assembly and the Housing Office. Thus, the hotel rooms were occupied on a first come, first serve basis which eventually resulted in a source of internal conflicts.

The purpose of the Housing Office activists was to redirect people to squat other places after temporarily living in the Hotel. At least two groups behaved in such a way (the occupations of Corredera and Concepción Jerónima streets). According to our informants, coexistence within the Hotel Madrid was difficult due to unbridgeable cleavages between Housing Office members and squatters reluctant to engage in a collective self-organisation of the occupied building. Some of these even used physical violence and threats to other fellows in order to preserve their right to stay. Despite the numerous conflicts experienced by this squat, it represented a success in terms of public and international outlook by playing the role of being a sort of continuation of the Sol Camp. This explains why thousands of interested people and activists visited the building every day and even some 15M working groups and the Popular Assembly of Madrid gathered at its premises.

Conclusions

The topic of the convergence between different social movements has been seldom explored by social movement scholars. In this chapter we argued that the 15M and the squatters' movements experienced such a convergence. A converging process does not mean a full integration of the involved movements turning into a new one. Neither does it entail punctual and isolated collaborations between them. Rather, we refer to a mutual approach and understanding, first of all, and a continuous and sustained collaboration, secondly.
In our view, while examining the evidence collected in this study, convergence of social movements implies also more than a tactical alliance. In particular, the exchange of mutual support evolved to mutual contamination of their repertoires of action and identities. Thus, both movements reinforced each other while keeping their respective autonomy, without any of them ruling the other. After a time of walking together, they may become separated and again take their own independent ways. In our case, the 15M and the squatters' movements in Madrid enjoy reciprocal and positive feedback between them for, at least, two years. In sum, squatters provided their occupied spaces as infrastructure for the 15M. They also contributed with their skills and knowledge concerning the housing question and urban speculation. This represented a valuable political experience in developing autonomous ways of self-organisation. On the other hand, 15M activists provided a more open connection to the claims of different social groups beyond the autonomist-libertarian left within the framework of anti-crisis and pro-Welfare State discourses. Self-organisation was thus practically combined with a decentralised network of coordinated assemblies and working groups. In addition, 15M activists were more eager to make use of all possible means of communication, conventional media included.

As shown, squatters were very active in the occupation of the square at Puerta del Sol. They were engaged in conducting assemblies and political debates. They facilitated the development and maintenance of the Sol Camp by sharing their own material and social resources. Squatted social centres had been also very influential for a lot of young people who entered grassroots politics for the first time deeply moved by the landmark occupation of Sol. Above all, squats served as places to become socialised with practical examples and theoretical principles of autonomous self-management. This happened both before and after the Sol Camp. In addition, nearby squatted and non-squatted social centres were intensively used by 15M activists during the month that the Sol Camp lasted.

After the clearance of the Sol Camp, some working groups became stable projects within squatted social centres. Other groups closely linked to 15M popular assemblies or previously involved in the Sol Camp, started to squat by themselves. A new wave of squatted houses and social centres arose, and the flows of mutual aid between squatters and 15M activists increased the public legitimacy of squatting. This legitimacy was also fuelled by the PAH campaigns. Families and individuals who were evicted due to their inability to pay their mortgages attended the 15M popular
assemblies, the PAH meetings, the Squatting Office, and also the new 15M groups such as the Housing Office in search of support. The Stop Evictions events were the first meeting points for all of these new pro-housing activists. Their successful blockades paved the way for further and sustained collaboration that eventually led to more housing occupations. Therefore, we argue that this campaign first and the Obra Social later played a crucial mediating role in the already fluent chain of activists' exchanges that were at play since the occupation of the Sol Camp.

It is also worth noting the fundamental power of the Sol Camp to shape the 15M identity. The occupied encampment was a specific spatial-temporal practice for communing as well as a political structure of direct democracy made up of general assemblies, committees and working groups. As argued, it worked as an outdoor and massively attended squatted social centre. Squatters noticed and embraced that feature from the very beginning. They also participated actively in the Sol Camp in order to reinforce the autonomous ways of self-organisation. At the same time, this imbrication also implied that squatters accepted more inclusive and transparent modes of functioning compared to their more limited experienced in the squats. Already existing squatted social centres proved they could be useful tools for keeping the camp alive and for providing shelter to many of the initiatives that emerged in the Sol Camp. When this was not sufficient, 15M participants also decided to squat by themselves, being cautious about the different feelings and opinions about squatting within the 15M. The more experienced squatters also offered information, material resources and personal support to most of the new squats –either collective or individual ones.

In addition to these flows of practical exchanges, there were structural conditions that helped the convergence to take place. On the one hand, the predominant precarious social composition of both movements was quite similar, although the 15M included a broader range of the population affected by the crisis. Occupations, then, were easily accepted as forms of popular justice for all left behind by corrupt politicians and the flows and ebbs of economic growth. On the other hand, key elements of the political opportunity structure were very much favourable to the convergence during the first period of the 15M movement (between May 15 and November 20, 2011). The central government implemented a harsh neo-liberal turn and the parliamentary politics was highly fragmented in spite of the occasional alliance of the two major political parties. International and national media coverage of the 15M was unusually wide and detailed. The abundant flows of independent information produced by citizens through
the Internet added to that environment. State repression did not undermine these movements at the first stage of the 15M, although it escalated in the following months. Furthermore, each new squat took advantage of the specific conditions of the building and its ownership in order to prevent quick evictions. The convergence between squatters and 15M activists, finally, resulted in particular victories by the use of abandoned buildings, which were especially needed during the winter time.

**Secondary Data Sources**

Webpages

(http://madrid.tomalapla
za.net/2011/10/15/datos-de-participacion-15o-estatal-e-internacional/).

http://asambleaantirepresivaenmadrid.wordpress.com/

(http://www.democraciarealya.es/).

(http://barcelona.democraciarealya.es/12m15m/?lang=es).


La Osera de Usera. 2011, 2012. Continuous check
(http://laoseradeusera.wordpress.com/)

(http://www.madrid15m.org/quiosco.html)


(http://affectadosporlahipoteca.wordpress.com/)

(http://www.periodismohumano.com/)


References


Notes

1 Adell (2011: 135-137) has estimated that around 2,500,000 people attended the different 15M calls between May and November 2011, all over Spain. Within the same period, at least 67 demonstrations were directly called by the 15M in Madrid and around 500,000 people attended. This is a surprisingly huge mobilisation since summer time traditionally discourages intense political activity. Data from the years after 2011 are not included here because the first version of this chapter was finished by early 2012. However minor updates or remarks have been included before publication (2017).

2 During the last year of its mandate, the social democrat Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE, Partido Socialista Obrero Español) imposed a labour reform (contested by a general strike in September 29, 2010), reduced public employees’ salaries on average 10%, extended from 65 to 67 the retirement age and reached an agreement with the conservative Popular Party (PP, Partido Popular) in order to reform the Constitution and give absolute priority to paying the State debt, above any other public expenses. The PP won the national elections in November 20, 2011, although there was a slight increase of abstention and non-valid votes as an effect of the 15M. This movement did not support any political party, but many activists recommended voting for other parties apart from the PSOE and PP, or not to vote. With an ever increasing unemployment rate (close to five million people or 25% in May 2012) the PP went farther with the adoption of neoliberal policies: a new job market reform which was contested by a general strike in March 29, 2012, with much greater success than the previous one in 2010 due to the involvement of the 15M activists and all the labour unions, heavy cuts in public services, a fiscal reform with extraordinary tax exemptions for hidden fortunes, and new financial aid to banks. Indeed, the rise and fall of Spain’s so called economic miracle, under the rule of both social democrats and conservatives, was based on “a restoration of profit—and also of demand—through financial avenues, with the generous involvement of accumulation mechanisms operating through the built environment and residential production” (López and Rodríguez 2011: 10) instead of “a strategy of income from innovation” (ibid.).

3 The five demands agreed upon by DRY-Barcelona and several organisations and popular assemblies also added: social accountability for the State debt and no more money for the banks, a more just fiscal reform and implementation of a general basic income (DRY-Barcelona 2012).

4 Regarding our empirical approach, the data sources for this chapter are: 1) 23 questionnaires responded...
by squatters and 15M activists during November 2011; 2) the authors’ participant observation in the protest camps, squats, neighbourhood assemblies, working groups, e-lists and Facebook special groups of 15m activists and sympathisers (one of us was a regular activist in a squatted social centre and in a 15m popular assembly); 3) the collection of around 50,000 electronic documents made up of mass media news, activists’ web pages and weblogs, Facebook and Twitter messages, video recordings, and professional documents. Most of the information refers to Madrid, although news, personal conversations and visits to other Spanish cities were also taken into account.

Público, January 11, 2011.

This orientation has been also interpreted as a reactive and social-democratic tendency in terms of maintaining the basic structure of the Welfare State, which, above all, in Spain has clearly always been much worse than in most Central and Northern European countries (Pino 2007; Navarro 2002, Herreros and Rodríguez 2011, Lenore 2011).

However, DRY and other groups (see, for instance, www.madrilonia.org with a manifesto of fifteen social rights) obtained wide support for their positive proposals and claims. There were endless debates in general assemblies and within many working groups aimed at achieving a consensus about the 15M’s principal demands, but the entangled and decentralised structure of the movement did not allow for such a goal.

Currently (May 2012), around 50 popular assemblies are still active and mutually coordinated. The number of these assemblies declined over the following two years and a few of them were transformed into local branches of the new political party Podemos in early 2014.

The first big event of brutal repression faced by the 15M occurred during the eviction of the Plaza de Cataluña Camp (Barcelona) in May 27, 2011. In Madrid, the main episode of police brutality against the 15M appeared in August 2011, when a demonstration against the visit of the Pope ended with police beating peaceful demonstrators. Police violence escalated in the following months and in Madrid, during the first year of the 15M, more than 105 activists were arrested (along with 71 more during the last general strike, March 29, 2012), more than 75 people were sentenced to fines, more than 114 were identified by the police as squatters, eight people faced court trials, accused of different crimes (Asamblea Antirrepressiva en Madrid 2012) and some immigrants could have been deported to their home country (this is difficult information to verify, but there are some cases out of Madrid such as this one: http://www.kaosenlared.net/component/k2/item/1769-deportado-de-forma-poco-ética-un-integrante-del-15m-valencia.html). In Madrid, a working group called the anti-repressive assembly started to meet and react more intensively in 2012 as a response to that escalation. This increasing repression is partially due to the conservative governments’ less tolerant policies, but the socialists (and even the united left in Cataluña) have also maintained a hard line towards social movements in the past years (Fernández 2006).

ReS (Let’s Break the Silence, Rompamos el Silencio) is a yearly campaign (occasionally they call for attending other protest events during the year), naming the most active autonomist organisation in Madrid after an older one, LA (Autonomous Struggle, Lucha Autónoma), which disappeared by the late 1990s (Wilhelmi 2000). ReS started in 1998 and often launched actions of civil disobedience and temporal occupations of buildings (Roig 2010; Res 2009 and 2011).

More than 30,000 people gathered in Sol on the eve of the municipal elections. A similar event of massive social disobedience had occurred on March 13, 2004, with sit-ins in front of the PP venues and the Government buildings across Spain This precedent of large civil disobedience was estimated in 7,000 people in Madrid, and up to 23,000 all over the country (Sampedro 2005: 248, Iglesias 2011: 181).

It is worth noting that, during the first weeks of the Sol Camp, the term squatter (okupa) was not very well accepted by some newcomers to the 15M activism. For instance, the central government was accused of being squatters of the democratic institutions as a way of labelling their corruption. In that first stage of the movement, the word okupa still kept negative connotations of marginality and illegality, which were supposed to contradict the intended purpose of deepening the democratic system and preserving welfare services. Even after several months of mutual interaction, when the occupation of the Hotel Madrid started after the O15 demonstration, some people cried “We are not squatters! We are not squatters! This is not the 15M, the 15M does not do this!” (according to two interviewees who were present, L and N, women, 25 and 26 years old).

From the first days of the 15M, conservative media attempted to accuse squatters of being the behind-the-scenes organisers of the 15M. This contradicts the 15Mmore plural composition and its moderate demands compared to the squatters’ radicalism (Alsedo 2011). In practice, squatters provided material and political support, but they neither organised nor led the 15M. Furthermore, not even any other single organisation was capable of taking control of the 15M due to its prevailing decentralised nature.

Centro Social Recuperado Mercado Provisional (Seville); http://mercadoprovisional.blogspot.com/; Centro Social Recuperado Laboratorio Social (León):
Some cases gained media coverage due to police repression. For example, the same day that a family of five members (a 29 year-old mother, three little children of four, two and one, their grandmother of 52, and their great-grandmother of 87) was evicted, “the whole neighbourhood mobilised in order to get a shelter for the four generations of this family. (…) The unique solution was to occupy an empty apartment in a building” (Díaz 2011). Another case: “The group of squatters -comprised of precarious young people, students, unemployed, immigrants and a foreclosed family- declares that they couldn’t have remained [in the house] without the help of neighbours, 15M members and individuals” (Hervás 2012).

We have not included some cases such as the Social Centre La Piña (located at the El Escorial village and squatted in August 2011) because we could not find any link with the 15M. Three other cases of squatted houses (León, Tres Peces and Huertas) were not included because squatters could not remain in the buildings for more than a few hours after taking them over. According to our observations, in these three cases most of the squatters were active participants in the Sol Camp.

See, for example, how the three first issues of the 15M journal try to keep that ambiguity and oscillation between the terms liberación and okupación (Madrid15M 2012).

Between 2007 and 2010 more than 271,000 foreclosures were launched as judicial procedures in Spain. This includes four times the number of foreclosures during 2010 in comparison with 2007 (Proposición de Ley 2012). During 2011, more than 58,000 foreclosures were effectively executed in Spain (Muriel 2012).

The new legitimacy of squatting, especially for the 15M activists, can be seen through manifold expressions. For example, minutes and documents of popular assemblies: “The occupation of empty buildings is not an attack on the system, but self-defence against the continuous loss of rights. Squatting is not the ideal solution to the housing problem, but it is a valid option in our struggle if the goals are public” (http://acampada-adh.blogspot.com.es/2011/11/debate-derecho-la-vivienda-desahucios.html). Another example is the news media and the debates it produced, in particular, those published in the most progressive media: “The 15M is not behind all the cases of squatting and not even all the different people who participate in the 15M support these actions, but there is a high degree of acceptance” (Herrera 2011); “I consider as legitimate and even healthy in democratic terms, squatting buildings belonging to companies who obtained their wealth thanks to the sweat and hopes of thousands of people, who have destroyed the real economy, who had defrauded the money which is needed in health and education, and who had fed the endless chain of corruption” (Vidal 2011).

See, for example, the note published on the PAH website (http://afectadosporlahipoteca.wordpress.com/2011/10/16/reapropiaciones-de-verdhabitatge-y-hotelmadrid/) and the video where a PAH-Madrid member, and also part of the Housing Office, tells about the experience of the Hotel Madrid (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74_vixxHGoY).