

Urban emptiness, ghost owners and squatters' challenges to private property

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This chapter explores the legitimisation strategies that political squatters use to justify their occupation of property they do not own and how those strategies often 'soften' what could otherwise have been a more radical anti-capitalist stance. Taking a starting point in empirical work done on Spanish squatting and focusing in the latter half on the housing struggles after the financial crisis and the emergence of strong housing movements, the chapter discusses the ambivalences and strategies of squatters both needing a place to live and trying to translate that need into a broader political and economic critique not only of housing but of the capitalist system. The chapter contributes to the squatter literature and to the discussion of the legitimisation strategies of peoples and groups challenging the prevailing property regimes.

Introduction

Squatters occupy vacant properties without asking for permission. This practice dates back to long before the inception of capitalism (Ward, 2002). Legal regulations regarding squatting vary from place to place, although they are usually set at the state level in each country. According to various legal codes, the acts of trespassing, breaking in and remaining in a previously owned or rented house and occupying empty premises may be determined and dealt with in different manners by the authorities. Nevertheless, policies on squatting seldom pay attention to the owners' behaviours. It is increasingly assumed that owners are legitimately managing their vacancy regardless of the context of social needs and urban dynamics. According to this prevailing policy narrative, the squatters are the main party at fault. Making a profit from vacant property is rarely criticised.

Vacancy is caused by abandonment, ruin, substandard conditions and owners' decisions to postpone any action aimed at the redevelopment or sale of their property. Most squatters claim that occupying empty properties is a legitimate action. This means, first, that they cannot afford to buy or rent an adequate space for living or organising collective activities. Second, they argue that the satisfaction of their needs is morally superior to the legal rights that enable private owners to keep their properties vacant. As previously stated, legislation differs

from country to country, and the absolute principle of private property is usually constrained by minor rules (Persdotter, this volume). No owner can set his or her building on fire, for instance. Damage to other residents and the commission of crimes are also prosecuted. Unjustified delays with licensed renovations may be subject to sanctions if the norms are effectively enforced by the authorities. More importantly, the legal doctrine of ‘adverse possession’ that serves to grant property rights to squatters if specific conditions are met, such as continuous occupation for a certain number of years, was regarded in some countries as juridical grounds for countering the criminalisation of squatting (O’Mahony, O’Mahony & Hickey, 2015).

Not all squatters are outspoken about their claims and right to squat. I designate here those who take a public role as ‘political squatters’ – whether or not they speak on behalf of all squatters. In so doing, they often explicitly contest the liberal regulation of private property at large. An overall critique of the capitalist system may even be conveyed through squatters’ movements (SqEK, 2013). According to Cobb (2015, p. 16), ‘the squatter remains a symbol of [the high levels of] precariousness [in the housing market] and so constitutes an on-going challenge to neoliberal hegemony’. However, neither activists nor academics have investigated the deeper implications of such an anti-property statement. For example, major contributions to the analysis of squatting (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014; Pruijt, 2013; Van Der Steen, Katzeef, & Van Hoogenhuijze, 2014) do not usually delve into the nuances of this question and the types of properties and proprietors involved. In the following sections, I argue that, over the past four decades, political squatters across Europe have challenged the capitalist notion of private property, albeit through very broad statements. In many cases, as I will show, it is not the abolition of private property that is demanded.

How can the ‘urban voids’ that are targeted by squatters be classified? Is the social identity of their ‘ghost owners’ a significant dimension of squatting? What are the roles of both buildings and owners in the legitimisation of squatting? To answer these questions, I examine first how private property is dealt with given the class and classification struggles in which squatting is embedded. This section provides a full scope of the main arguments used to justify squatting as a limited intervention into the cracks opened up by capitalism in urban spaces. Second, I distinguish the types of squatted properties in a specific city (Madrid) to provide an understanding of the shifts in squatting practices and legitimisation strategies in a specific historical context. I finally summarise my interpretations by arguing that (a) in practice, squatters question more the social functions, policies and effects of private property than its role as a founding tenet of capitalism and (b) squatting, when generalised, politicised or self-organised as an urban movement, defies the key dynamics of urban capitalism, such as real estate speculation, but rarely threatens capitalism as a whole because of its exclusive focus on vacant properties.

Property and legitimization strategies

Political squatters who take an anti-capitalist and left-libertarian stance tend to justify squatting by expressing an idealistic appeal to the abolition of private property in all forms. However, there is little evidence that this claim is at the core of their legitimization strategies. Rather, squatters actually challenge the specific aspects of capitalism at work in cities, particularly the management of empty property. To clarify this point, I distinguish two main types of arguments: (a) those based on the criteria of necessity, affordability and nonprofitability and (b) those stressing the contribution of squatting to the common good (or, more precisely, to the *urban commons*). The first type of argument points to the various aspects of the social groups who may legitimately squat empty properties from an anti-capitalist perspective. The second type introduces three broader dimensions of urban life in capitalist cities that are affected by the squatting of urban vacancies, namely anti-fascist politics, interactions with neighbours and housing policies.

Necessity, affordability and nonprofitability

Squatting empty properties is usually considered legitimate by political squatters, anti-capitalist activists and some scholars whenever it is practised according to a specific agenda. Squatting is widely accepted when it is practised by homeless people and anyone who cannot access social housing or affordable shelter (Reeve, 2011). To buy or rent an expensive dwelling may imply the serious erosion of other aspects of buyers' and tenants' well-being. Squatting can thus mitigate these undesirable effects. People with low or unstable income, such as unemployed people, students and the elderly, may resort to squatting as a solution to their urgent economic needs, especially in the absence of any state measures that suit them in terms of quality and timeliness. Hence, the abolition of private property is not the main goal underlying their claim to the empty property. They rather criticise their exclusion from the private property system. Even political squatters who are not necessarily subject to economic or resource scarcity refuse to pay high rents or selling prices that could undermine other aspects of their lives. This is especially justified when the targets of squatting are spaces left unused in convenient locations for collective gatherings and activities supplied by squatters at no or low cost. The more unaffordable rental or selling prices are compared with squatters' incomes, the more squatters claim rightful use of the occupied place.

Based on the rampant speculation of urban properties and the functional contribution of vacant state-owned properties to that dynamic, some municipal governments have even agreed to grant temporary lease contracts to activists who are former or potential squatters (Colomb, 2012; Martínez, 2014). By calling on the arguments of necessity, affordability and nonprofitability rather than challenging capitalism and private property regimes, squatters are mainly questioning the failures of that system to properly accommodate everyone. Many squatters who squat

solely for housing purposes usually try to claim private ownership for themselves or, at least, to legally secure occupancy for as long as possible. Therefore, this demand of tenure does not entail a struggle against the private property regime either.

Nonetheless, some well-off political squatters (from the middle or well-paid working classes) may, remarkably, reject the argument of necessity in their own case by stating that wealthier owners cannot legitimately profit from their empty properties. The homeless population living in substandard dwellings or slums would eventually benefit from an overall legitimization of squatting. Regardless of the squatters' reasons for occupancy, to actively question the existence of empty properties is a direct attack on the real estate business. Market speculation involving land, houses and other urban assets is the main target of squatting because it deepens wealth gaps, which inevitably cause residential exclusion. A continuous reproduction of a 'reserve army' in demand of affordable urban space in the form of the homeless population is a basic condition for the competitive housing market. Therefore, the act of squatting, regardless of the needs of those involved, releases manufactured market pressure.

This reasoning leads to an additional question: what is illegitimate squatting with regard to the intersection of necessity, affordability and profitability? The more affluent individuals are, the less legitimate it may be perceived for them to occupy another's property. In particular, those who own one or more homes; possess available commercial, office, factory, leisure and land spaces; and, in general, those whose income and wealth enables them to either participate successfully in the real estate market or be eligible for (and effectively granted) public housing benefits are in a weak position to claim that their squatting is legitimate if they are the ones who enjoy the benefits of that action. Again, they improve their reputation if others in need are the main beneficiaries – which tends to occur, for example, in squatted social centres when they are open to the broader public and also in activists' provision and management of squatted shelters for undocumented migrants (Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2016).

These arguments incite controversy because all parties engaged in a specific squat must demonstrate how individuals' assets match the conventionally accepted circumstances of necessity and affordability in a particular urban and economic context. From an anti-capitalist point of view, affluent people and for-profit businesses may practice extreme forms of illegitimate squatting. These for-profit businesses may take the form of mafia- or gang-like criminal organisations by violently harassing tenants and neighbours. In general, renting, subletting, or selling occupied property to others is viewed as illegitimate by anti-capitalist squatters. Other economic activities within squats that reproduce capitalist practices of labour exploitation and private accumulation of wealth are also subjected to anti-capitalist criticism. Selling food, beverages, books, clothes or handicrafts is deemed legitimate when it is not for profit and democratically managed among the squatters. Informal self-employment in the squats is more problematic because the satisfaction of spatial needs for housing and collective self-organisation must also accommodate the urgent need to make a living among the few self-employed.

As Ward (1980, p. 104) highlighted, capitalists and private owners were the first squatters – squatting is ‘the oldest mode of tenure in the world’. Indeed, unlawful occupations are at the origins of the establishment of private property and thus of primitive capital accumulation. Along with land requisitions and legal dispossession in the forms of enclosures and privatisation (Harvey, 2006, pp. 90–115), far from questioning property as such, capitalists may effectively pursue their interests by occupying vacant properties. Therefore, real estate developers and agents, banks, or factory owners might participate in squatting. It is this extreme – though unusual – practice of squatting which is fully opposed from an anti-capitalist standpoint in a sort of Möbius strip. Anti-capitalist squatting thus claims legitimacy while opposing pro-capitalist squatting because this is seen as a source of private property and social inequality.

Common good

The theory of the commons has been revived recently (Dardot & Laval, 2016; Stavrides, 2016) and forms a fundamental basis for squatting as a potential emancipatory movement (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014). The urban commons, in particular, do not encompass only public spaces but comprehend every collectively self-managed practice, institution, good, infrastructure and struggle able to overcome the duality of state-owned and privately owned modes of tenure, government and judgement. However, there is little evidence of the social contributions of squatting to the urban commons (Martínez, 2013). To fill the gap of this line of analysis in urban studies, I suggest focusing on three key dimensions in which both legitimate and illegitimate squatting interacts with a political economy of the commons.

For the first dimension, the question to reflect upon is, what are anti-capitalist politics in the context of squatting? Consider, for instance, the phenomenon of neo-Nazi/neo-fascist squats in major European cities (such as Rome, Madrid and Frankfurt), which also define themselves as anti-capitalist groups (Birdwell, 2012). Should their anti-capitalist stance be articulated, it remains rather low on their political agenda. This calls for a more precise qualification of ‘political squatting’. Far-right squatters systematically, and often violently, attack left-libertarian squatters as well as homeless people and many social groups viewed by them as ‘inferior’, including people with disabilities, migrants, ethnic minorities and gay and transgender people. Hence, no matter how much in need far-right squatters are, their politics against other people who are needy, oppressed, excluded, dispossessed and anti-capitalist takes priority over any squatting actions. Fascist squatters destroy the very basis of any democratic sphere of political dissent by explicitly aiming to suppress or expel people who take direct action to help themselves.

Furthermore, fascist squatters do not usually question private property as a pillar of capitalism. If so, it is questioned in a rhetorical fashion, without any mention of the class structures that capitalism created. For fascist squatters, the nationalistic – xenophobic *struggle* takes priority above all, and class struggle may

be considered subsequently, if at all. Eventual self-management of fascist squats is also subordinate to strict authoritarian hierarchies intended to undermine any bottom-up democratic reconstruction of the urban commons.

Conversely, long-lasting anti-fascist and inclusive traditions characterise squatting across Europe (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014; Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2016). At best, the emergence of far-right squats helps designate a bottom line of what is not anti-capitalist squatting. Left-libertarian political squatters in turn may find it difficult to define in positive terms what true anti-capitalist politics is, given the diverse ideological and cultural milieu in which they are engaged and the internal contradictions they live with. By opposing or preventing fascism, anti-capitalist squatters contribute to the invigoration of local democracy as well. In addition to the denunciation of labour exploitation and class inequalities, Holloway noted that the creation of cracks and the struggle for dignity can help break the logic of a capitalist society. ‘Dignity consists in setting our own agenda (. . .): we take the initiative, we make it clear that it is capitalism struggling against us, our lives, our projects, our humanity. Dignity is to refuse-and-create: to refuse to make capitalism and to create a new world’ (Holloway, 2010, p. 50). As a corollary, fascism neglects human dignity in general and creative dignity as a breeding ground for anti-capitalist societies in particular. Therefore, fascist squats represent the most illegitimate form of squatting, one that erodes the potential of the urban commons.

The second dimension to consider is how open squatters are to cooperating with the dispossessed locals. A crucial aspect of squatting is the relationships between squatters, neighbouring residents and local-metropolitan social groups. Stereotypes about good and bad squatters play an important role when the groups approach each other to create potential bonds of cooperation. Squatting practices may either confirm or contradict the established stereotypes. When a squat is a source of trouble, noise or disturbance or involves the abusive occupation of public spaces, the surrounding community will not perceive the squat as beneficial in any sense. Squatters are often newcomers to the area, so they face inquiry and inspection by local residents if they are to be made welcome.

Furthermore, squats that include almost no working-class residents and are instead made up almost exclusively of middle-class native-born students and artists, tend to be the utmost expression of a *ghetto*. This stigma may also fall on working-class or *underclass* squatters if they are unable to cooperate with other social groups in the neighbourhood. Some so-called ‘crusty’ squatters who trash the buildings they occupy and maintain socially sealed-off groups reinforce this isolation from the local community and subsequent illegitimacy. The more the ghettoised image of the squat is spread, the harsher the rejection by other local residents. For example, the location of a squat next to newly built blocks can clash with other residents’ fear of the market devaluation of their properties (Di Felicianantonio, 2016, p. 190). When strong processes of real estate speculation are involved, developers put more pressure on squatters to force them to leave (Seminario, 2015).

This is why developers and others with vested interests in a given territory attribute all the real and imagined evils of a neighbourhood (such as dirtiness, thefts, drug trafficking and loitering) to the squatters. By contrast, squatters may be highly resourceful and valuable to the local community when they disclose the speculative processes underway. It is this struggle that makes them essential echelons of the urban commons and accentuates their capacity of legitimisation.

The third angle of this debate asks the following: what has squatting to do with housing policies? When squatters take over apartments in social housing estates, they are immediately accused of jumping the queue because other home seekers in need might be waiting for those apartments. Anti-capitalist squatters tend to argue that it is the inefficient state bureaucracy that should receive the blame – it is too slow to assign the available social housing and has not built sufficient social housing stock to accommodate all who are registered on the waiting list. In fact, many squatters do not jump the queue, because they never apply for social housing. They are reluctant to do so, either because they cannot meet the selection criteria set by the housing authorities or because they want to criticise how these departments operate.

Social housing policies run by the state (let alone those run independently by grassroots organisations, such as housing cooperatives or syndicates) may fill the void left by the failures of the market when they provide affordable, decent and well-located homes for all residentially excluded people. However, capitalist private developers are usually in charge of building the social housing stock. Furthermore, in urban development plans, this stock tends to be subordinate to non-social housing and designed and built in lower proportions. Social housing may also be granted either as private property or as a social rental, and social rental housing may be subject to further arbitrary privatisation by housing managers. This was the case, for instance, when the former conservative government of Madrid sold 1,860 units of social housing to the ‘vulture fund’ Blackstone.

Some social housing beneficiaries become squatters once the authorities threaten them with eviction because they have failed to pay their rent or bills on time as a result of impoverishment. In capitalist societies, people rely on social housing as a last resort when they cannot access the property market instead of being motivated by strong beliefs in state property as the preferred mode of tenure. In general, housing policies in liberal democracies protect and subsidise homeownership. Squatting in social housing may then entail a sort of war among the poor over the scant resources provided by the state. This type of squatting becomes legitimate only as a powerful source of criticism of the insufficient and inefficient welfare allocated by the state. In addition to the aforementioned critiques, some scholars indicate grievances such as long-term vacancies in the social housing stock and the unfair means employed by management agencies to prolong the suffering of applicants and deteriorate the living conditions of current residents (Reeve, 2011, p. 14).

In sum, anti-capitalist squatters legitimise each occupation according to certain conditions – who squats and what social benefits squatting entails. As previously

argued, most of these conditions do not pose a direct challenge to private property as a basis of capitalism. Rather, they challenge the specific and perverse consequences of the uneven distribution of urban property and the management of vacancies. This discussion often omits a detailed analysis of the types of properties and owners targeted by squatters. The following section engages with this and presents an analysis of how effective these legitimisation strategies are. Different sources of data and the examination of crucial historical shifts further illustrate the nuances of my argument.

Urban voids, ghost owners and squatted social centres

When examining empirical information about squatting, one must acknowledge, above all, the blind spot in which most illegal occupations of buildings lie. I came across many activists and neighbours who were squatting but decided not to go public because of various concerns, their main conviction being that stealth squatting has greater long-term prospects. In particular, in Spain until 2011, the number of housing squatters might have been in the thousands, but reliable information about this phenomenon is lacking. The main source of trustworthy data is records on ‘political squatting’ (i.e. when squats are overtly claimed and publicised). This applies to squatted social centres (SSCs) and also to the recent wave of housing squats promoted by the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) and other groups since 2011. My research on both in the city of Madrid unveils how squatters interfere in the capitalist dynamics of urban emptiness by distinguishing the patterns of occupied buildings, their ownership and the eventual legitimisation of squatting practices in varying contexts.

The timeframe of data collection on SSCs was 1977 to 2015. Three main periods or cycles were distinguished according to the major events that influenced squatting before and after 1995–1996 when squatting became a criminal offence, and the cycle opened up in 2011 when the 15M/Indignados movement erupted and the number of squats increased substantially. The database comprises a total of 155 cases. Inspired by the *Ateneos Libertarios*, which the anarchist union National Confederation of Labour (CNT) established at many occupied venues in the late 1970s, and by the numerous examples of autonomist squats that have bloomed across Europe since the late 1960s, SSCs sprang up all over Spain, mainly after 1984. The geographical location of my analysis is the Autonomous Community of Madrid (6.5 million inhabitants in 2013), including the main municipality of Madrid (3.2 million residents in 2013). Quantitative data were collected from secondary sources (such as academic publications, mass media news, websites, blogs, activist leaflets and documents and mapping projects) and supplemented with my direct accounts as a participant and activist observer (occasionally since 1988 and on a more regular basis from 2007 and 2013), 23 in-depth interviews conducted between 2008 and 2016, and the organisation

and facilitation of a series of 14 public debates held between 2008 and 2010, involving squatters active in different historical periods (Seminario, 2015).

More than one-third (36 per cent) of the squats took place in formerly inhabited buildings, suggesting that some SSCs also hosted squatters as residents, although they usually kept this activity secret. The SSCs mainly functioned as cultural and political venues, which obliged squatters to adapt some of their residential spaces. Because dozens or hundreds of visitors could gather for certain events, squatters were often compelled to perform some minor renovations in the building to accommodate them. This was the leading category of building use throughout the evolution of the movement, with no significant differences across the periods (28 per cent in the first period, 41 per cent in the second and 37 per cent in the third). A few of the buildings were never completed by developers and were not officially licensed to be used as dwellings. Most of the squatted buildings remained abandoned because they were old and required serious renovations; sometimes they were almost in ruins. According to my informants and my own observations, the owners were frequently waiting for a convenient deal that could bring them immediate and substantial profits after selling or for the legal right to build a newer or taller building instead (which would, in turn, also increase their revenue in the long run).

A simple correlation of residential category with property type shows that 33 buildings were privately owned, and only 13 cases were owned by different state agencies. When a correlation is made with urban location, we find that most were in the city centre (33 cases); an even distribution occurred in the city periphery (10 cases) and the metropolitan area beyond the municipality of Madrid (12 cases). This evidence corresponds with the general pattern of legal ownership of the premises upon which SSCs were established – namely, 61 per cent were privately owned and 24 per cent were state owned. The prevailing pattern of central location in almost half of the SSCs also roughly matches the predominance of residential buildings among the targets of squatting.

Industrial buildings were the second type subject to squatting (21 per cent). Variation across the periods of evolution was more significant in this category. In particular, during the final cycle, after 2011, the occupation of industrial buildings represented only 11 per cent of the total, which was slightly below the 13 per cent each for commercial buildings and schools (including an incomplete public library). Therefore, we can assume that the restructuring processes that shut down factories were more intense before the 2000s (Alguacil, De La Fuente, Martínez López, Ubrich, & Velasco, 2011, p. 114), with fewer buildings of this type remaining vacant in the final period. According to spatial correlation, this phenomenon is not dependent on an urban location because, again, centrally placed buildings (21) were the main targets of squatters, regardless of the number of opportunities available in the periphery (eight effective occupations) and metropolitan areas (only four squats of this type).

Although former factories suitable for use as SSCs are not only found in the city centre, squatters prefer central locations in order to attract local residents.

Although industrial buildings are being increasingly displaced to the urban and metropolitan periphery, and despite their higher rates of vacancy during periods of economic crisis (the early 1980s and after 2008), SSCs were rarely established there or were comparatively short lived. In addition, as expected, properties that include industrial buildings were almost always held by private owners (27 cases out of 33).

In terms of ownership, these cases might be closely associated with the 14 per cent that incorporated 'commercial buildings' and 'ground-floor businesses', among which only 4 buildings out of 22 were state owned. Thus, it can be inferred that squatters do not much alter the real estate market in the realm of small companies and buildings designated for commercial purposes despite their abundance. Either these vacant buildings are not abandoned for long, or squatters do not consider them suitably accommodating for activities involving large numbers of visitors.

By contrast, schools were more popular and politically significant for squatters in Madrid, especially in Cycles 1 (23 per cent of all SSCs of that period) and 3 (13 per cent). These buildings are usually well equipped and designed, which simplifies the renovations needed, if any, to convert them into SSCs. They may also be claimed as social facilities that neighbourhoods should preserve. In the 1980s and 1990s, many schools closed because of new legal requirements for size, safety and facilities. This primarily affected small private companies unable to further invest or who preferred to sell the land if it was centrally located, moving the school to the periphery if land was more affordable (Alguacil et al., 2011, p. 126).

In sum, the available records indicate that SSCs in Madrid were more often located on privately owned properties (61 per cent) than state-owned properties (24 per cent). Consequently, this form of squatting directly interfered with the real estate market. This might be interpreted as a straightforward challenge to urban capitalism, especially if we bear in mind that most private owners are companies (33 per cent) rather than individual proprietors (17 per cent). Notwithstanding, state-owned stock is also subject to a substantial amount of grassroots direct action through squatting. In particular, state-owned targets mainly include houses (13 cases), although other public assets such as wet markets, offices or factories (11 cases) and schools (7) provided spatial opportunities that squatters made effective use of.

According to these figures, squatting on private property is more likely to be interpreted as an action against capitalist dynamics of urban speculation, whereas squatting on state property is more of a protest against bureaucratic and inefficient methods of managing public resources. State inaction related to its own assets has varying effects on real estate speculation. For example, if these assets are scheduled for privatisation, squatters are directly addressing state involvement in urban speculation. Conversely, if state properties are abandoned and decaying, the area is less attractive for private investments but residents' discontent is increased, especially if the buildings are landmarks because of their large size or special significance for the urban commons. Examples include former schools,

university buildings (when squatted in for the long term, not as a temporary protest), libraries, train stations and theatres.

An illustration of these trends is the *Squatters' Handbook*, written by anti-capitalist squatters in Madrid (Manual, 2014, p. 20). They do not prioritise a specific type of building or owner. Rather, they focus solely on the buildings' emptiness and the squatters' political projects. Vacant state-owned properties are also welcomed as a means of gaining legitimacy in the eyes of neighbours (Manual, 2014, p. 94). However, their principal aim is simply to make use of empty spaces to criticise urban injustice, housing unaffordability and the right to private property. Squatting is thus framed as a political tool to fight capitalism through direct action, community support and self-management, but not as a practice that can abolish private property or even satisfy all housing needs (Manual, 2014, p. 16). Even temporary stays are considered partial victories:

An eviction is just part of the game. 'You squat, you are evicted' is the inevitable essence of this cycle and struggle. We should not fall down at this bump in the road – that would mean true defeat. Mutual aid and solidarity must not be empty slogans. Every blow makes us stronger, more experienced, and more professional. Thus, we can enhance our noble art and keep eroding the pillars of private property that hold up this system, a system that suffocates us and squeezes the sweet juice out of our lives.

(Manual, 2014, p. 116)

The politicisation of housing squatting

A different story emerged when two not-yet-mentioned conditions were met in a specific wave of occupations: (1) a strong, organised social movement began to practise squatting actively; and (2) politicised (publicly claimed) housing squatting was incorporated in SSCs. This happened after the upheavals of 2011, known as the 15M/Indignados movement. By then, the PAH had been already active for two years (slightly less in Madrid) and started opposing the evictions of people subject to foreclosures. This campaign was soon supplemented with another called Obra Social (literally, 'Social Work'; Martínez & Cattaneo, 2014; García, 2015; Di Felicianantonio, 2016). Thus, the PAH supported occupations of houses by those who had joined the organisation and had been evicted from their own dwellings (a similar politicisation is narrated by Kolling, this volume). Some of these occupations still followed the trend of secrecy and involved the selection of individual apartments instead of whole residential buildings. However, most of the PAH occupations were publicly presented, claimed and fought for – as opposed to most of the squatted houses, which remained hidden. Housing groups other than the PAH also imitated their procedures and political discourse.

What is significant here is the explicit targets of owners and types of buildings set by the PAH: banks and houses. Squatters that could potentially be helped by the PAH were those evicted from their own homes because of an inability

to meet the deadlines for mortgage loan payments. Rather than using the term 'squatting', the PAH opted for 'recuperation' as a means of distinguishing themselves from other squatters with more diffuse or radically anti-capitalist stances. Furthermore, the intention of these takeovers was to obtain an affordable rent for the residents, not just to live for free for as long as possible. 'Usually we will search for newly constructed buildings that are owned by financial companies and are fully empty. We will prioritise the properties of bailed-out banks'. My interviewees in Madrid informed me, nonetheless, that they had also occupied individual apartments, and PAH groups had hosted people who were previously tenants rather than homeowners. A branch of PAH activists was even established to unite people evicted from social housing estates.

As for the ownership of residential squats, the rule of thumb was to focus on banks while assuming they must be held responsible for the home evictions, abuses and legal tricks that have harmed thousands since the global financial crisis. Yet many of the banks set up their own real estate agencies or development companies to manage their portfolios, which widened the scope of the targets. These included both new buildings unable to be sold at regular market prices and many scattered housing units resulting from foreclosures. Once again, the material opportunities within a particular context intersected with the urgent housing needs of an increasingly impoverished population. As a result of the PAH's public discourse, emptiness was not considered a mere market failure but instead the result of a massive fraud orchestrated by banks and the government (García, 2015, p. 161). Squatting thus was embraced and legitimised in order to support the victims of that fraud, which is far from a substantial critique of the capitalist system, let alone an examination of the principle of private property.

Across Spain, the PAH groups occupied 43 buildings and hosted 3,500 people. In Madrid, the PAH and other housing groups started the aforementioned Obra Social campaign in 2013, although a wide wave of occupations had already spread since 2011 (Martínez & García, 2015). The campaign had recovered 14 buildings by September 2016. One (Sierra de Llerena) had been previously squatted in 2012, but activists and residents adhered to the campaign once they learned the property had been transferred from the developer to a bank rescued by the government. In another case (La Leona), there was so much internal strife that housing activists eventually withdrew their support for the squatters. Notably, three of the buildings belonged to developers or estate agencies, whereas all the other cases were straightforward, involving bank-owned buildings. Interviewees told me that they followed the directions of the PAH but interpreted them in a broad sense. Large owners and developers in general could be singled out as potential speculators whose properties were legitimate to occupy.

PAH activists offered occasional support to those who occupied social housing estates when the cases quite obviously involved institutional abuse (for example, that of Lanjarón), although they never planned to occupy state-owned houses. Various housing groups in Madrid, especially before they became associated with the PAH, also launched campaigns to help people who already had squatted in

their own houses, which were at risk of repossession for nonpayment of rent or bills or as a result of renovations (the *corralas* of Lavapiés, for instance). Every local group of activists had to assist in dozens of individual cases when a bank was designated as the main culprit, although some squatting actions remained silent. Despite the broad impact of the Obra Social campaign across Spain, in Madrid only two local branches were continuously active (Vallecas and Centro, responsible for 10 collective buildings), while other PAH groups were more reluctant to squat.

Compared with the established patterns of squatting followed by SSCs, the patterns of squats affiliated with the Obra Social campaign were not so different in practice – privately owned residential buildings were the primary targets. The striking difference between them lies in the PAH being more specific about the types of private owners (banks and wealthy developers above all) and the complete exclusion of other types of owners and buildings. The rationale behind this most explicit option was that squatting was now motivated by an exceptional housing crisis, the extraordinarily high number of empty dwellings and the massive numbers of unemployed and poor people who had become homeless or faced the threat of it. Squatting was then a tool to both obtain temporary accommodation and force owners to offer affordable tenancy contracts. Therefore, squatting was not seen necessarily as the most favoured means of struggle against emptiness, real estate speculation or private property.

This legitimisation discourse was thus more easily accepted and digested by sympathetic journalists and a large part of society. In addition, it facilitated the legal defence of the housing squats, which were at risk of harsher sentences than those for SSCs once in court. Notwithstanding, in parallel to the political campaign, all forms of squatting are still performed by current practitioners, and the PAH's prevailing narrative is not uniformly embraced among activists and supporters. The main consequence of this strategy is that the combination of existing structural opportunities of vacancy, ghost owners (clearly identified with banks) and a conscious collective self-organisation that advocates civil disobedience to overcome the hardships of the economic crisis makes squatting appear as an effective interference in capital accumulation in cities.

The PAH's discursive strategy has enjoyed wider public backing than the hard-core justification of anti-capitalist squatting. The recent wave of housing occupations extends beyond the reach of the PAH, although this movement organisation has been highly influential in public debates and the policies aimed at squatters. SSCs have lasted for more than three decades. They have hosted various generations of activists, sympathisers and visitors. However, the much more limited number of that type of political squat means that their method has not been able to spread to broader social circles beyond anti-capitalist ones. Notwithstanding, in the city of Madrid, many former political squatters have merged with new PAH activists. The prevailing discourse of the Obra Social was also used as a tactic by anti-capitalist squatters in the context of a lingering economic crisis. In addition, identity symbols, experiences and arguments coming from the SSC tradition have occasionally drawn various newcomers to squatting, as I noticed in my interviews

with members of the Obra Social–PAH committee and in some of the documents they have written.

Squatters guided by the PAH have arrived at a similar point to that of many SSCs – in a capitalist society, there are numerous marginalised people who are forced to resort to squatting to live a decent life. However, these groups have different rationales and political approaches. As discussed previously, this is reflected in the empirical manifestations of both types of squatting. Although residential buildings are preferred by all, SSCs are more often located in city centres, whereas housing squats tend to be located in peripheral working-class areas where some PAH groups are more active. Private owners, in addition to various types of private firms, are the main targets of SSCs, whereas housing activists mostly target financial corporations. Although most squatters might be willing to accept trade-offs with owners in order to be granted temporary but durable possession, only housing activists have sought from the beginning to forge agreements by which they manifest their will to pay rent to the owners (this was successfully achieved by three groups of squatters in Madrid: La Manuela, Argente and Lanjarón). This is seldom sought or accepted by most anti-capitalist squatters, although negotiations may be held occasionally.

Conclusions

Here, I return to the initial research questions: How is private property contested by squatters? What are the roles of buildings and owners in the legitimacy of squatting?

The preceding analysis indicates that there are prevailing trends in the types of buildings and ownership subjects to take over and convert into SSCs, at least in the city of Madrid. In the interviews and discussions I attended, the squatters' agency was always at stake when a suitable building was being identified, investigated, preliminarily explored, and finally occupied. This meant that the history of the building, its former use and significance in the area, knowledge about the owner, the existence of private security or guards and the convenience of the space for the pursued activities were carefully assessed in advance by the squatters. As I verified in the squats in which I participated more actively, these decisions were also intended to unmask the speculative operations of some owners, although this was not the only motivation. Contrasting this with data collected over the past few decades, I conclude that squatters adjusted or limited their preferences to four major types of buildings (residential buildings, industrial buildings, schools and commercial offices), and mostly to privately owned properties located in central metropolitan areas. Remarkably, however, one-third of the cases were state-owned properties.

This does not suggest a mechanistic adjustment of the proportion of urban vacancies and the practice of squatting. More precisely, these patterns show that when running SSCs, squatters held their own deliberations regarding both the spatial opportunities at hand and their political projects. As mentioned, they also tended to choose large residential and industrial buildings belonging to private owners. On the one hand, the corruption or wealth of the owners was beneficial

to the squatters' legitimisation discourse and legal self-defence in anti-capitalist terms (see, for instance, the squats of Malaya and Casablanca: Martínez, 2014). On the other hand, when the owner was a state agency or semi-state-run company, squatting was presented as a legitimate action in terms of a response to the unmet collective needs of both squatters and the local community.

In general, whenever their choices meshed well with state-owned properties (either empty schools or buildings serving various functions), squatters did not hesitate to use these properties. This implies that there was no single ideological plan or scheme underlying such actions (i.e. an orchestrated operation against the major real estate holders in highly desirable urban areas where speculation occurs). Political squatters intend to change capitalism, but in each of their attempts, they occupy what is available, feasible and convenient. Squatters' agency in SSCs is significant, although it is also diverse and flexible in setting their targets. It thus plays a limited role, as we have seen, as a result of the specific sociospatial opportunities in each historical and urban context.

The advantage of anti-capitalist discourse is that the occupation of urban emptiness unveils the processes of urban speculation in which most vacant properties and private owners are involved. The catch-all strategy of squatters, which targets state-owned properties as well, suggests that they likewise contest the role of state authorities in the satisfaction of social needs at large during urban planning and management. Public housing policies are incorporated into this critique, although it has greater breadth concerning the many types of buildings with a past or potential capability to provide social services for the local community. Additionally, the great diversity of existing squatters means that they cannot all be defined as anti-capitalist activists; some squatters and many infrequent participants in SSCs do not adhere to such a radical agenda. The high numbers of stealth squatters and the occasional agreements between squatters and owners (see, for example, the legalisations of SSCs where anti-capitalism was not the leading discourse, such as Montamarta or Seco) are clear indicators that the goal of guaranteeing a durable stay overshadows systematic opposition to private property and the capitalist system at large.

These patterns are slightly different when embedded in a wider context of economic crisis, dramatic shortages of affordable housing and massive occupations of dwellings that eventually have taken the form of a politicised housing movement. In particular, the Obra Social campaign signalled a turning point in the long tradition of urban squatting. Most of the literature has not paid attention to this contextual shift when examining squatters' challenges to private property or has not compared the two forms of political squatting.

In comparison with SSCs, the legitimisation discourse promoted by the PAH more explicitly targets owners (banks, preferably those that have been bailed out) and buildings (almost exclusively collective residential ones). This means that the traditional pattern of occupying privately owned residential buildings for SSCs is now exacerbated and polished by the purposive avoidance of state-owned properties and other types of buildings. The culprits of the housing crisis, evictions and rising homelessness are the financial corporations that manipulate markets,

social needs and the legal terms of mortgages. Governments are also responsible for their collusion with banks' interests, for not overseeing their operations and, finally, for the transfer of massive amounts of public monies in order to prevent their collapse. The lack of a sufficient social housing stock supplements the critique by pointing to the heart of the shrinking welfare state and the neoliberal policies under way. Although state-owned properties are not directly threatened by the PAH, these activists also put pressure on local governments and the state by demanding specific policies to address the dire housing emergency.

Therefore, the Obra Social campaign is demonstrably more restricted in the acceptable types of ownership for vacancies that activists occupy. As confirmed by observations and interviewees, the range may be widened by the inclusion of some real estate developers and wealthy owners. Even squatters in social housing estates have enjoyed support from the PAH and other housing activists from 2011 onwards. A key difference is that the strategy adopted by the PAH to both gain public favour and efficiently house people in need is distanced from the anti-capitalist discourse of former political squatters. Instead of addressing the subject of private property, the PAH focuses on the violation of rights experienced by homeowners. Financial, labour and housing markets are blamed on that account, in addition to the neoliberal state swallowed by the ruling economic elites in former markets. Consequently, it is assumed that housing property rights would be acceptable in a context of increased social protection by the state. Otherwise, dispossessed people are entitled to disobey the very legal basis of private property when it is disused. Squatting is thus considered legitimate when the markets erode the basic living conditions for a large part of the population and when the state does not compensate for this situation with sufficient welfare.

In short, squatting practices and discourses question private property in a capitalist society in different fashions and with varying consequences. Rather than private property as such, it is usually vacant property, urban speculation and housing unaffordability that is confronted in conflict with the rights of specific private owners. Political squatters may adopt either a loose or a tight approach when deciding on the types of buildings and owners to target, and this determines their social influence and support. However, their legitimisation discourse is constrained by the practical patterns of choices made, the availability of empty properties in specific urban contexts and the overall significance of the housing crisis for the surrounding society. As the evidence presented here shows, this unstable balance has proved sufficient to allow the transgressive action of squatting to continue over various decades in cities such as Madrid.

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