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Protest in Turbulent Times

Edited by
Cristina Flesher Fominaya and Ramón A. Feenstra
European squatters’ movements and the right to the city

Miguel A. Martínez

Introduction

I first entered a squat in 1989 while I began my university studies in Madrid (Spain). The building comprised both a former printing house and the apartments where some workers used to live. A strike against the closure of the factory and claims of unpaid salaries were the spark for taking over the premises. Young autonomist activists with a few previous experiences in squatting moved in, shared the living spaces with the remaining workers, and set up a self-managed social centre, Minuesa. Initially, it was simply called *casa okupa* (squatted house) but activists adopted the name ‘social centre’ after they travelled to Italy and Germany and got in touch with a broader movement of occupations there. Occasionally, I attended concerts, film screenings—such as activist footage about the eviction of squats on Mainzer Strasse (Berlin) with armoured tanks (Azozoinox & Kuhn, 2018: 153)—meals, anti-militarist meetings, and parties organised by the free radio station in which I participated at that time or I just visited friends. Debates on housing, state repression, drugs, racism, the urban renewal of the area, and autonomist movements all over Europe provided a vibrant source of grassroots knowledge for many people who approached the space.

Minuesa was evicted in 1994. Five and a half years of duration was a pretty long period, allowing for multiple projects to develop (remarkably, around 30% of the squatted social centres in Madrid between 1977 and 2015 lasted from 1 to 5 years: Martínez, 2018b: 29). It also paved the way for new generations of local squatters by recruiting, training, and reinvigorating activist networks, and in a very informal fashion since they opposed hierarchical and authoritarian forms of organisation.

This experience prompted me to identify a number of puzzles I have since aimed to address: 1) What kind of politics, in terms of both identities and practices, defined squatting movements all over Europe? 2) How have political, economic, and urban conditions constrained this long-lasting urban activism over several decades? And 3) to what extent are the local circumstances of squatting and the squatters themselves connected to more global issues and transnational movements? The present chapter is an updated—and necessarily condensed—response to these queries. In particular, I use here the notion of the right to the city as a driver of my analysis. Given the purpose of this book, the chapter reviews a great portion of the available literature as well as some exemplary cases. My main argument is that there are both strengths and
weaknesses in the association between squatting movements and the right to the city approach. On the one hand, Lefebvre’s anti-capitalist call for the appropriation of the city centre and the self-management of our lives holds a clear affinity with squatting movements as they were developed in Northern, Southern, and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the occupation of buildings was not explicitly endorsed by Lefebvre and has not necessarily been the central activist practice in right to the city coalitions.

In the next section, I first introduce the major academic findings about squatting movements in Europe. In particular, the types of squatting activism, the issue of legalisation, and the social diversity within the movement are presented. Secondly, I discuss its implications according to the right to the city approach by focusing on two key aspects: self-management and appropriation of the city centre. Thirdly, I widen the previous analysis by scrutinising the limitations of such a viewpoint; that is, squatters as right to the city activists. I conclude with some remarks about under-researched topics and possibilities for future inquiry.

Squatting movements across European cities

Squatting is conventionally defined as the occupation of empty buildings and land without the owner’s consent, although here I only pay attention to activism around the occupation of buildings and, in particular, across European urban regions.

The most cited article about squatting distinguished five configurations or ideal-types of squatting: deprivation-based (usually performed by housing movements), alternative housing strategy (especially practised as communal living), entrepreneurial (social centres for cultural and political purposes), conservational (when squats focus on heritage and site preservation), and political (squats as the headquarters of specific political organisations) (Pruijt, 2013). It has been widely applied as well as criticised by many researchers. In particular, the ‘deprivation’ and ‘political’ categories are the target of most criticism. On the one hand, poor squatters can work in tight connection with housing activists which, in turn, politicises their actions and claims. On the other hand, most configurations of squatting entail political features without necessarily representing a specific political organisation or party. Nevertheless, Pruijt’s work stems from a pioneering investigation of squatting movements across different contexts (mostly, Northern Europe and New York) paying attention to crucial economic, political, social, and cultural contexts that shaped their development. In addition to a thorough engagement with scholarship from both social movements and urban studies, Pruijt’s insights became very influential because they paved the way for further discussions on opportunity structures for squatters (Piazza & Genovese, 2016; Polanka & Piotrowski, 2015), gentrification in highly squatted urban areas (Holm & Kuhn, 2017; Moore & Smart, 2015), and prefigurative politics (Yates, 2014).

Many squatters of houses keep their unauthorised practice secret and do not join political campaigns, networks, or organisations. For some scholars this represents a diffused, persistent, and low-key form of contentious challenge to the rule of private property rights and housing allocation by the state. But others have argued that a sustained politicisation over time, more explicit claims, and the constraints of available vacancy set the boundaries for identifying squatting as a specific urban movement (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014; Martínez, 2018c; Mayer, 2013; Milligan, 2016; Polanska, 2017). This debate is traversed by the many forms of coexistence and overlaps between overt and stealth squatting, and also between different types of squats.

When broader housing movements embrace squatting as a repertoire of action, they are more prone to demand affordable accommodation from state authorities without necessarily
opposing the exclusionary principle of private property (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014; Di Feliciantonio, 2017; García–Lamarca, 2017; Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018). Their squats are equally politicised and visible, but their stance is more limited to the housing exclusion they confront than to a manifold agenda of anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, and anti-fascist issues, to name just a few, that permeates more left-libertarian squatters (Seminario, 2015; Van der Steen et al., 2014; Wennerhag et al., 2018). Droit Au Logement (DAL) in France, Coordinamento Citadino di Lotta per la Casa (CCLC) in Italy, or the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) in Spain (Martínez, 2018b) are outstanding representatives of housing movements who also foster the occupation of buildings.

Cooperation between different squatting and housing movements has, in recent decades, increasingly taken place. Accordingly, the participation of immigrants in squats or their autonomous initiatives to occupy living spaces have also substantially changed the social composition of the squatting movements (Bouillon, 2009; Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018; Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2017; SqEK, 2018). Two significant cases that bridged some of the usual divides within the squatting movements are: 1) Metropoliz in Rome (Italy), which comprises a community of residents with different ethnic and national backgrounds, artists running the Museum of the Other and the Elsewhere, and activists from the Blocchi Precari Metropolitani (Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018); and 2) the self-managed former hotel City Plaza in Athens (Greece), which became an international reference for solidarity and refugee struggles after the European borders crisis in 2015 (García & Jørgensen, 2019).

**Repression and criminalisation of squatting**

One key area of concern for scholars of the squatting movement has been the varying effects of the legal prosecution of squatting across different countries (Dadusc, 2017; Fox O’Mahony et al., 2015; Manjikian, 2013). These authors also heeded more flexible legislation and ‘adverse possession’ rights in the past.

For example, the Berliner Linie, introduced in 1981, and the criminalisation of squatting in Spain (1995), the Netherlands (2010) and England-Wales (2012) led to remarkable shifts in the repression of squatters, although this kind of activism did not fade away and continued with different capacities and strategies in the coming decades. In Spain, surprisingly, a noticeable increase in the number of squats was experienced in the years after the criminal offence came into force and, especially, in response to the 2008 global financial crisis (Martínez & García, 2018). Academics have also explored the various circumstances in the legalisation of squats which have occurred less frequently in Southern and Central-East European countries than in Northern European ones (Aguilera, 2018; Martínez, 2014; Pruijt, 2003; Rossini et al., 2018). Legal agreements for short or long-term lease, requisition, relocation, provision of social housing, and aid for the rehabilitation of buildings are some of the policy tools used during the processes of negotiation and legalisation, although the debate has mainly focused on the consequences of these ‘concessions’ for the squatting movements in terms of co-optation, institutionalisation, and neutralisation of their subversive threats.

Some of the above authors (Aguilera, 2018; Martínez, 2014; Rossini et al., 2018) also discuss the divisive effects that legalisation processes have and how the radical branches facilitate the aspirations for legal agreements of the more moderate wings of the movement. The most popular—and also touristic—squatted settlement in Europe, the Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen (Denmark) had been a very resilient case against legalisation since its inception in 1971. However, they lost a lawsuit between 2008 and 2011 that forced them to become private owners (Steiger, 2018; Thörm et al., 2011). Squats for both housing and artistic
purposes, which eventually achieved legalisation, were also evicted years later due to different circumstances, as attested to by cases such as Liebig14 and Tacheles in Berlin (Rossini et al., 2018). Legalised artistic squats like 59 Rivoli in Paris achieved a very stable status but they were also instrumental in the electoral campaign of the social-democratic party. A more community-based squatted social centre, Kukutza Gaztetxea in Bilbao (Spain), was evicted in 2011, despite their calls to negotiate with the local authorities and while enjoying strong social support, even transnationally. A recent approach to the conflictual ties between squatters and state institutions, especially emerging in Italy, pays attention to the recognition of squats as ‘urban commons’ which would imply a singular autonomous status without state or market interference. This is a claim made by both activists and scholars, which even evolved into legal initiatives to recognise collectively self-managed goods, such as squats or theatre venues, at municipal, regional, and state levels (Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018; Rossini et al., 2018).

**Historical trajectories and influential contexts**

Although most research has focused on squatting movements in specific cities or countries, (Aguilera, 2018; Finchett-Maddock, 2016; Holm & Kühn, 2011; Mudu, 2004; Owens, 2009), there is a growing tendency to investigate historical cycles and compare them within a wider European scope (Anders & Sedlmaier, 2017; Martínez, 2018a; Pixová & Novák, 2016; Polanska & Piotrowski, 2015; Van der Steen et al., 2014; Vasudevan, 2017). These studies show how squatters crucially interact with other social movements, and how significant political or economic circumstances correlate with the peaks and valleys of the squatting waves. Students’ and workers’ movements, the reunification of Germany, the rise of global justice and anti-austerity protests (Zamponi, and Lobera, this volume), or the turning point determined by criminalisation policies have been highlighted as significant contextual conditions to understand the historical waves of squatters’ movements. Contradictory interpretations about the declining trends experienced by prior strong squatting movements have also been carefully examined—for instance, in the case of Amsterdam (Owens, 2009). Squatting practices as silent but also partially tolerated and politically critical in former East Berlin (Grashoff, 2019); in cooperative relationship between squatters and tenants’ associations in Poland (Polanska & Piotrowski, 2015); in explanation of the uneven development of the anarchist squatting scene in Prague (Pixová & Novák, 2016); and in a critical examination of AKC Metelkova Mesto, the major social centre in Slovenia (Babic, 2015) are salient examples of the attention paid by some scholars to the Central and Eastern parts of Europe.

The above body of research shows a great diversity of squatting practices and movements. Moreover, their contentious relations with owners and authorities differ according to distinct political contexts, economic cycles, the social features of activists, and ties with other social movements. Historical, geographical, and ethnographic accounts are populating this field of study, but an increasing interest in the political economy and global financialisation of housing that shape squatting movements is also manifest (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014; Martínez, 2018a; Mayer, 2016). Despite the difficulties of generalising these findings beyond the European context, most research indicates that continuous flows of communication, travelling, and mutual influence have occurred among European squatters, which could be interpreted as a very durable and unique transnational urban movement (Owens et al., 2013). In the following section, I question whether these solid legacies of activism can be interpreted in relation to Lefebvre’s right to the city approach, which has been notably revived in urban and social movements studies over the last two decades (Marcuse, 2012; Mayer, 2012; Mitchell, 2003).
Squatting and the right to the city: an intimate but open relationship

Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city was formulated in the late 1960s when squatting movements started to rise in the European cities of Italy, the Netherlands, England, and Germany. There is a reciprocal resonance between both but only from a retrospective view. Lefebvre’s ideas were highly speculative and fragmented, aiming at criticising capitalist cities and modern urban planning through Marxist concepts (use value versus exchange value, class struggles, historical materialism, etc.) while also proposing a normative theory for bringing forward an urban reform or revolution—a ‘utopia controlled by dialectical reason’ (Lefebvre, 1968: 156). The normative side of the right to the city was defined by a number of tenets: 1) access for all (but, especially, the working class) to a renewed city centre according to the social needs and use values; 2) appropriation of urban spaces in order to foster the full development of ‘everyday life’ and human creativity; 3) deep democratisation, citizen participation, empowerment of excluded social groups, and self-management of the urban (both the built fabric or habitat, and the associated social activities to inhabit it); and 4) opposition to bureaucratic governance, alienated consumption, real estate speculation, commodification of all the components of cities, and socio-spatial segregation.

The right to the city was thus seen as an ‘emerging’ right along other more established liberal or ‘civilised’ ones such as the right to housing, health, education, etc. (Lefebvre, 1968: 179). According to my observations and the literature about urban occupations, I argue that most squatting activists and autonomist movements all over Europe expressed similar concerns during the last four decades, despite often using a slightly different vocabulary. Without necessarily noticing it, squatters’ practices and discourses, limited in scope as they may be, matched very well Lefebvre’s plea for a post-capitalist city or ‘urban society’. However, the identity of squatting movements in Europe has always been difficult to grasp and relate to a diverse range of experiences and organisations, so the label of the right to the city had few chances to articulate and unify the movement—even the earlier notion of ‘autonomy’ experienced similar troubles.

Urban studies scholars from English-speaking academia have revived attention to the right to the city since the 2000s, although there were occasional discussions in various contexts before. Mitchell (2003: 17–36), for example, put forward a compelling argument about the importance of public space in the realisation of the right to the city. Empirically, he identified homeless people and migrant workers as two of the most excluded social groups from the right to the city. Despite their exclusion, they strive for occupying public spaces and staying put. They protest in the streets, parks, and squares, but also in courts where they and their advocates contest the regulations that restrict their rights to assembly, to be represented, and to speak out. In doing so, those with no owned property show they are able to produce public space as a common good for all and, at the same time, to partially realise their right to the city according to Lefebvre’s terms. Furthermore, the struggles of the dispossessed to appropriate some spots of the urban space reveal the violence of police forces—backed by state institutions and laws—and the interests of property owners.

Likewise, squatters expose the same primary contradiction ‘in a world where some members of society are not covered by any property right and so must find a way to inhabit the city despite the exclusivity of property’ (Mitchell, 2003: 20). Children, women, prostitutes, street vendors, demonstrators, and other ‘undesirable users’ can also be subject to exclusions from specific public spaces and, as a consequence, deprived of their political empowerment and expression. According to Mitchell, the practice of appropriating public spaces and scaling
up contention about policies, policing, and properties sheds light on the actual advancement or retreat of the right to the city.

Critical scholars also engaged in determining ‘whose right is it about’ and ‘to what city’. Outstandingly, Marcuse (2012: 30–34) identified two crucial groups: the deprived and the discontented. The former refers to the ‘most marginalized and the most underpaid and insecure members of the working class’, with a special focus on

those directly in want, directly oppressed, those for whom even the most immediate needs are not fulfilled: the homeless, the hungry, the imprisoned, the persecuted on gender, religious, racial grounds … those whose work injures their health, those whose income is below subsistence, those excluded from the benefits of urban life.

(Marcuse, 2012: 32, 30)

Squatters who demand decent and affordable housing provision definitely are key members of that group.

Marcuse’s discontented group comprises people from all social classes who are alienated, deprived from direct political participation, and also from a meaningful social life in order to express their creative potential. Students, cultural workers, and all sorts of counter-hegemonic dissidents represent this mixed group. Although this is a very loose category, it is applicable to the broad social composition of squatted social centres. Public squats congregate youth, left-libertarian activists, participants in various social movements, migrants, LGBTI-Q people, precarious workers, artists, and many others who have no say in urban planning and policies, who cannot afford commodified leisure, or who are simply displaced from quality urban facilities. Moreover, the city reclaimed is not just a physical space, but a whole urban society in the making. The aspiration to occupy the city centre also means the centrality of workers’ power to determine production and enjoy its outcomes, including everything that urban life offers. Accordingly, squatters target specific built spaces, recreate community life within prior emptiness, and may desperately defend these spaces as extremely valuable strongholds for enjoying true citizenship. However, it is social justice within a liveable city for which they eventually strive, above all. Direct democracy practices, anti-capitalist lifestyles, and feminist relationships, for instance, are some of the principal drivers of the prefigurative ‘real utopias’ that many squats promote in addition to meeting the housing and spatial needs of its participants.

The right to the city approach inspired some activist coalitions not only in Europe but also in North America and Latin America from the 2000s onwards. It became an explicit motto for broad campaigns in which squatting was only one of the branches, if included at all. This was the case, for example, of the Hamburg network who occupied Gängeviertel in 2009 (without using the term ‘squat’: Fraeser, 2015). The area that hosted harbour workers in the past had been sold to Dutch investors (Hansevast) in line with other corporate buildings erected nearby. Activists created a cultural organisation, promoted public events, and ran art studios (Fraeser, 2015). ‘The tactics of emphasizing the architectural heritage and applying artistic playfulness to the process resulted in broad support from local elites and media’ (Fraeser, 2015: 174). This unexpected success—in a context where most squatting attempts are immediately suppressed—prompted local authorities to buy back the property and to legalise the occupation. The investor, indeed, had gone bankrupt during the global financial crisis (Birke, 2016: 222). The Hamburg coalition Right to the City mobilised artists and precarious workers, but also leftist activists, urban gardeners, tenants, and even fractions of the middle classes (professionals, small retailers, civil servants, employees with secured jobs) because the effects of
gentrification, privatisation, and peaking housing prices had disturbing economic, political, and spatial impacts on them as well. The coalition supported the protests against the eviction threat of the Rote Flora squatted social centre, the solidarity campaign with the Lampedusa refugees, the demolition of affordable housing, and the anti-austerity campaigns questioning cuts in the local budget (Birke, 2016: 219–228).

Other activist groups using the same slogan did not consider squatting a key issue in their political agenda. However, most right to the city coalitions shared a diverse social composition and focused their criticisms on neoliberal urban policies. As Mayer (2012: 68) pointed out: ‘investments in glitzy new city centers, mega-projects for sports and entertainment, the commercialization of public space, and the concomitant intensification of surveillance and policing are all integral parts of the dominant pattern of corporate urban development’. In particular, Mayer argues that the cry for the right to the city has evolved since the 1970s according to political and economic contexts. Surprisingly, squatting in Europe as a protest repertoire can be found in all periods, despite its ups and downs (see, for a more detailed analysis: Martinez, 2018a).

**Legacies of fruitful associations**

During the ‘crisis of Fordism’ (1970s) urban activists questioned the quality, efficiency, and service provision of welfare states, notwithstanding their generous nature. Squatters usually joined forces with various housing struggles and grassroots initiatives resisting urban renewal (recall, for example, the opposition to the ‘upgrade’ of the Nieuwmarkt area in Amsterdam: Uitermark, 2012). New squatting waves also occurred when neoliberalism unfolded in the 1980s, although environmental issues, poverty, unemployment, and the revival of community life took the lead of the urban agenda. In this and the following decades, urban movements became more fragmented and some of their branches even turned to more cooperative relations with local governments, despite the cooptation and neutralisation of activism that these deals entailed. The global justice movement from the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s (Daphi, this volume) shifted priorities in a more interconnected European space for social movements, but squatters were still visible among these networks—for instance, in the alternative summits of the global powerholders, in Reclaim the Streets actions, and in anti-gentrification protests. The last offensive of hegemonic neoliberalism (2000s and 2010s) continued to shape opportunities for urban squatting, given the rising rates of housing shortage, vacancy, indebtedness, commodified urban tourism, and the financialisation that guided urban development. Precarious jobs, workfare regimes, home insecurity, increasing socio-spatial polarisation, and the privatisation of urban amenities and basic services, such as health and education, motivated the revival of squatting movements for both housing and social centres—again, in coalition with other forms of urban activism.

The 2008 economic crisis represented a specific turning point for the upsurge of squatting in countries such as Spain, Italy, France, and Greece (Martínez & García, 2018; SqEK, 2018), which became even deeper with the increase of impoverished mortgaged families going through foreclosures, both working and middle classes facing rent increases without state regulation, and the violent border controls that endangered the lives of migrants and refugees moving into Europe (Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2017). The housing needs of all these social groups came to the frontstage of the European political agendas and, as a consequence, squatting was increasingly recognised as a local response to severe macro-structural turbulences.

As mentioned above, squatters in European cities, when visibly politicised, tend to emphasise the right to housing and other anti-systemic slogans in their banners, but the meanings and
even the expression of the right to the city flood their discourses too, as many observers and activists have noted (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014). Grazioli and Caciagli (2018), for example, applied these notions to interpret two housing movements in Rome, Coordinamento Citadino di Lotta per la Casa and Blocchi Precari Metropolitani. They argue that the housing squats they studied do not merely satisfy housing needs but, more precisely, create conditions for the urban poor and dispossessed to keep living in the city, and thus to resist patterns of segregation and expulsion … They re-appropriate the right to a central location that had been established as a prerogative of the well off and upper classes.

(Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018: 9)

However, the fact that precarious workers and undocumented migrants are the key social components of those movements suggests the need to consider more ‘intersectional differences’ (Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018: 12) beyond the exclusive focus on the working class. Grazioli and Caciagli also note the resemblance to Lefebvre’s revolutionary call for the self-management and self-organisation of squats as ‘urban commons’ that challenge the prevailing enclosures of neoliberal urbanism—welfare cuts, privatisation of social housing, and for-profit urban management.

This move to the urban commons was initiated by prior anti-neoliberal campaigns around the mottos ‘Cities for People, Not for Profit’, ‘Take Back the City’, and ‘The City is Not for Sale’ in Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, Ireland, and Switzerland. Evidence of this is the demonstrations promoted by squatted social centres such as La Ingobernable (and also non-squatted autonomous social centres such as EVA) in Madrid and various Spanish cities in May 2018 (La Ingobernable, 2018). A similar initiative took place in Rome one year before, with several housing squats and social centres (Corto Circuito, Spartaco, Scup, and Lucha y Siesta) as members of the organising platform (DecideRoma, 2017). The right to the city was also the driver of a critical architecture festival, BaBel2, that took place at Forte Prenestino in 2012 (BaBel2, 2013). On the website of Forte Prenestino—occupied since 1986 and one of the oldest and largest squats in Rome—virtual visitors can still read the manifesto circulated by the Diritto alla Città network calling to oppose privatisations, evictions of squats, and urban financialisation (Forte Prenestino, 2015). Another broad coalition of eighteen groups named Take Back the City was recently formed in Dublin and occupied several buildings in 2018 in order to raise awareness about homelessness and speculative vacancy. In their communiqués to the media, activists rejected the label of ‘squatters’ and rather preferred designations such as ‘concerned citizens’ and ‘political occupiers’ (O’Keeffe, 2018).

If we look at Eastern Europe, researchers have noted a parallel politicisation of squats such as Datscha in the city of Potsdam due to the housing struggles of 1993 and 1994, in a context where, in turn, more than sixty squats had mostly remained limited within a ‘subcultural, self-sufficient alternative scene’ (Holm & Kuhn, 2017: 292–293). In Warsaw squats such as Syrena and Przychodnia shared right to the city activism with tenants’ associations formed in 2006–2008 (Polanska & Piotrowski, 2015: 286–290). This cooperation was especially fostered by the iconic figure of one of the founders of a tenants’ organisation, Jolanta Brzeska, who was murdered because of her leading role in the movements of resistance to the reprivatisation of former ‘communal housing’, where they had been paying fixed and affordable rents until 1989.

**Squatting rights in contention with the existing capitalist city**

The normative nature of the right to the city approach has some benefits for conducting research on squatting movements. First, it provides key questions in order to interpret the political
framing of squatters’ claims and identity. Second, it suggests theoretical dimensions that further empirical analysis may test, elaborate, and expand. All the previous section has shown how fruitful these two paths are. However, I still see some problems too. In short, Lefebvrian speculations hardly indicate how to study actual activist practices, organisational resources and networks, strategic interactions, and broader relations with third parties and significant contexts.

On the one hand, the capitalist city is always designated by Lefebvre as the main ground to consider when envisioning future workers’ forms of emancipation, but his emphasis on a ‘right’ to another city and urban society in the making blurs how neoliberal urbanism operates in relation to specific urban struggles, and vice versa, how grassroots movements respond to structural constraints. The loose definition of an abstract right could explain why the expression ‘the right to the city’ has been endorsed by very moderate political stances, international charters, and some legal statutes as a way to promote institutionally channelled citizen participation and a general access to the already existing capitalist city (Attoh, 2011). This circumvents a careful examination of global capitalism currently manifested in the ways in which governments and financial institutions work in close collusion, with devastating consequences for many urban inhabitants.

For example, when European and IMF authorities pressed national governments to bail out banks subject to economic difficulties after 2008, whole housing and urban landscapes changed dramatically. Vacancy rates soared, unemployment led to mortgages arrears and foreclosures of primary homes, banks and social housing stocks were rapidly privatised, urban developments and renewal operations were accelerated to attract volatile and predatory capital investments, and so on (Martínez & García, 2018; Mayer, 2016). Even more crucial for our purposes, impoverished and unemployed people did not enjoy the same benefits that states gave to the economic elites. On the contrary, many residents were evicted from their own homes, removed from the neighbourhoods to which they felt attached, or were forced to find affordable shelter in increasingly competitive and expensive housing markets. Housing exclusion and displacement to peripheral urban areas were the main consequences that urban struggles had to confront. Organisations such as the PAH in Spain framed these specific neoliberal policies as a massive scam and called for progressive social housing policies, emergency measures, and also squatting actions as self-help initiatives to remedy the most critical situations (Martínez, 2018c).

On the other hand, Lefebvre ignored squatting struggles as drivers of possible urban revolutions despite surely being acquainted with occupations during the 1968 uprisings and also with housing movements in the after-war period, which, for example, achieved the legal concession of a ‘winter truce’ in France (i.e. the winter period during which squatters cannot be evicted). More specifically, most squatters are urban inhabitants who claim not only for the revolutionary right to the city according to Lefebvre, but for ‘squatting rights’ as well. For example, some explicitly question the right of private owners to keep their properties empty when housing exclusion is rampant and public resources limited. Furthermore, the most politicised squatters argue that local infrastructures and services are public expenses that ghost owners enjoy and dilapidate too when they keep their properties unused. In addition, other squatters may urge authorities to be effective against all sorts of urban speculation. Otherwise, rent rises and inflation in housing prices will impact not only squatters-to-be but large swaths of the population as well. Even a liberal approach to squatting rights would agree that many human rights are usually violated when people are forcibly evicted from the place where they live (domicile) (Fox O’Mahony et al., 2015). The increasing criminalisation of squatting thus indicates their capacity to reveal crucial mechanisms of social injustice in the capitalist city.
Squatting movements across Europe are more decentralised than, for example, tenants’ and other non-governmental organisations devoted to housing issues (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014; Piazza & Genovese, 2016; Polanska & Piotrowski, 2015). Their anti-authoritarian views and a prevailing non-conventional repertoire of protest may, however, obscure their achievements in terms of the effective provision of housing and infrastructure for different social movements, refined methods of bottom-up and horizontal democracy, and legalisations. Take a look at, for instance, the work of specific activist collectives who advise how to squat and offer assistance, support, and militancy to those who initiate their squatting projects according to both the main traits of Lefebvre’s right to the city and the daily anti-systemic struggles in which they are engaged (which excludes squatting as a business or for-profit activity, far-right racist and patriarchal squats, etc.): the Kraakspreukuur resources in the Netherlands (Pruijt, 2013), the Advisory Service for Squatters in London (Finchett-Maddock, 2016), the Oficina de Okupación (squatting office) and the Obra Social linked to the PAH in Spain (Martínez, 2018c), and many others who promote squatting through textbooks, fanzines, art works, scholarship, and a myriad of affinity groups. They all have contributed to the steady persistence of squatting struggles over four decades, although variations in each context should not be overlooked.

In contrast to the utopian approach implicit in the right to the city, squatting represents concrete or immediatist responses to systemic oppressions. Concerns about the environmental, economic, and political implications of planetary urbanisation (Lefebvre’s ‘urban society’) find a fertile ground of deliberation and criticism in most squatted social centres, but they do not usually appeal to housing activists in the same manner. This raises attention to the internal strains between different branches and expressions of squatting movements. Nevertheless, the material and spatial circumstances of living in extant cities, their uneven geographies and damaging social segregation, and the leverage of political power for the urban dispossessed centrally motivate most squatters. In conclusion, the right to the city paradigm does not suffice to capture the socio-spatial practices and structures of constraints (and opportunities) involved in struggles that claim for squatting rights while taking over strategic urban vacancy.

Conclusions: autonomy, inter-dependence, and diversity in European urban politics

Besides rent strikes and alternative urban plans, the unauthorised occupation of buildings and land is a well-established repertoire of protest for European urban movements. It is widely used by tenants, organisations and broader housing movements, but, above all, it is the main socio-spatial practice—both as means and goal—performed by squatting movements that unfolded across European cities over the last four decades. Previous research has confirmed the lasting persistence and cyclical oscillations of squatting movements, especially in tight connection with other social movements, which has not been sufficiently acknowledged by the literature. A great portion of the available scholarship has focused on the contentious interactions between squatters, local authorities, and property owners, but many case studies, in particular, unveiled the radical milieu of activism around squats, their autonomist identity, and their prefigurative forms of self-organisation. The decommodification and affordability of housing are two fundamental targets of squatting for housing purposes that have politicised squatting movements beyond the widespread stealth nature of many occupations. An intense communication and cooperation between squatting activists all over Europe is also characteristic of this unique case of transnational urban movement.
As argued above, the celebrated framework coined by Lefebvre as ‘the right to the city’ resonates with many of the squatters’ discourses and politics, although there are only a few cases of explicit associations. Therefore, I contend that the right to the city approach illuminates the theoretical interpretation of squatting movements as far as: 1) these activists perform concrete appropriations of urban spaces; 2) squatted spaces are centrally located in relation to other urban facilities and social networks; and 3) beyond occupying empty properties for dwelling, squatters develop deep practices of self-management, self-help, direct democracy, the empowerment of the dispossessed and oppressed by capitalism, non-commercial services, social encounters, and infrastructures for political mobilisation. Furthermore, squatting struggles strive against the exclusion of various social groups not only from the existing city but also from the political right to participate in its transformation. However, the revolutionary impulse that animates many squatters and right to the city advocates needs to be tempered with the day-to-day struggles in which they are involved. In particular, squatters have shown to be excellent self-organised actors in monitoring urban vacancy and speculation, and to reveal processes of displacement, segregation, privatisation, and forced dispossession that have been increasingly boosted by neoliberal policies and the corporate powers of financialisation operating at both global and local scales. The right to housing and the right to a post-capitalist city are thus articulated in such a way that was hardly imagined by Lefebvre’s insights.

Finally, this analysis suggests some avenues for future research. On the one hand, the study of legalisation, institutionalisation, and contentious interactions with authorities and owners will benefit from a deeper investigation of squatters’ rights and how they are articulated according to urban commons. This would entail more progress in the institutional arenas of legality and parliamentary politics that not many squatters would be eager to enter. On the other hand, the issue of urban centrality overwhelms the standard geographical location of squatting actions. It should include discussions about multiple centralities within metropolitan regions, and the kind of services and urban life that squatters wish to access and enable. In so doing, the analysis of alternative practices, campaigns, and policies that squatting movements promote would assess its outcomes in terms of housing needs, true participatory democracy, and measures to tame the markets.

Lefebvre did not sufficiently insist either on combining class analysis with other sources of oppression and social divides such as gender, ethnicity, citizenship status, and housing situation. Feminist and refugee squats must be highlighted here. Systematic comparisons of case studies will also help to better understand the constraints and opportunities of relevant contexts for urban activism at large, especially given the recent shifts to more exploitative economies based on urban tourism, luxury enclaves, persecution of undocumented migrants, and austerity policies. In this respect, squatting struggles are rarely found in isolation but are rather intertwined with other grassroots initiatives—and non-squatted social centres, in particular, too—whose synergy has not been well investigated to date.

References


Miguel A. Martínez


Squatting and the right to the city


