Abstract

Is squatting a feasible alternative to the housing problems within the capitalist system? Is squatting only a marginal activity undertaken by people in need who are motivated against the rule of capitalism? Is squatting no more than a temporary reaction, to the unsolved “housing question” in the current crisis due to the malfunctioning of the capitalist mechanisms? In spite of several decades of social and political squatting, most of these questions remain very controversial nowadays. In this article we argue that there are evidences in both the practice and the discourse of political squatters, that various forms of alternatives, interferences and challenges to the capitalist system are actually developed. In addition, squatting not only satisfies housing needs, but also other social needs within a context of political experiments of self-management and autonomous mobilisation against many facets of capitalism and urban speculation. However, we also raise the question of the limits and contradictions of such an alternative. These can occur when the squatting experiences are isolated, when they carry on internal reproduction of capitalist relationships or when the capitalist and urban growth machine is not really affected by occasional cases of squatting. This ambivalence may explain the usually opposed approaches that squatting receives in the political arena. Therefore, it is not just a matter of turning every form of squatting into a political anti-capitalist collective what can contribute to enhance its anti-capitalist struggle, but the depth of the contentious interactions with the capitalist processes, and contradictions as well, in which the squatters movements engage. By claiming the right to squat and by spreading the practice of squatting it is not only the homeless or the anti-capitalist activists who benefit, but the society at large or, at least, those groups who could enjoy a greater social justice if capitalism were not ruling. Nevertheless, the political potentials of squatting are also constrained by its movement building capacity and the contexts in which neoliberal and urban capitalists can exert their power.

Key words

Political Squatting, Alternatives to Capitalism, Housing Question, Contexts, Contradictions

Introduction

The squatting, occupation or take over buildings and houses with different purposes of making use of them, has a long lasting trajectory all over Europe as well as all over the world. It is mainly in Europe, nevertheless, where we will focus in this article, although it is evident that direct solutions to the housing needs and radical citizen initiatives in order to appropriate urban spaces cannot be restricted to the European cities at all. Anyhow it is in Europe, above all, where we have squatted, visited squats and debated with fellow activists about the implications of this political practice. And one of the most frequent issues under debate was, in particular, to what extent is squatting an alternative to capitalism. Therefore, in this article we want to summarise our own reflections
Capitalism is a broad phenomenon, so that, given its hegemonic nature and its apprehension of totality, the squatters’ alternative must be understood at the local level first. Given the multiple scales where the interactions between the global and the local take place, a starting point of analysis refers to how and to what extent the practices of squatting scale up from its local attachment. This implies the necessity of understanding whether the formal and substantial features of the squatters’ movement are reproduced and expanded at a wider level or, otherwise, how do they change and adapt to a broader social reality.

Sometimes, the actions of squatting appear as immediate reactions to certain needs, without many concerns about their further implications for most of the participants –at least at the outset. The power of squatters seems to increase when the squats are connected to other similar anti-capitalist practices and are consciously promoted as part of broader anti-capitalist movements. Since the capitalist system is narrowly supported by most of the State agencies, the radical orientation of squatting may be also distinguished in any oppositional action against those public policies which are deemed to fuel the reproduction of capitalism and social inequalities. The different forms of squatting –either urban or rural, either social or political- are also relevant to the anti-capitalist struggles because they offer positive means for the development of many other alternative initiatives beyond squatting itself –be they communal house projects, self-managed social centres or the defence of different common goods.

Going a step forward, we may ask: Is squatting a feasible alternative to the housing problems within the capitalist system? Is squatting only a marginal activity undertaken by people in need who are motivated against the rule of capitalism? Is squatting no more than a temporary reaction, to the unsolved “housing question” in the current crisis due to the malfunctioning of the capitalist mechanisms? These questions deserve a careful analysis. The capitalist system has experienced crucial shifts all over the world. Neoliberal policies and increasing global flows have been pervasive since the 1970s. The global elites and corporations enjoyed new privileged and flexible ways to accumulate capital. In the meanwhile, the poor, the underpaid, the occasional worker, the undocumented migrants and the working classes suffered new forms of dispossession. For instance: cuts in public services and subsidies, loose regulations of the working conditions, rising costs of living in urban settings, police surveillance and repression in order to keep the wealthiest segregated from the deprived. Housing needs and other kinds of urban dwellers’ social needs fall under this general umbrella. Therefore, the practice of squatting empty properties should not be dissociated from such an overall context.

In particular, we are now interested in the understanding of how different expressions of squatting are closely interconnected due to the constraints of the capitalist context where they occur, although sometimes individual squatters or groups of squatters do not form an organised movement. The squatters’ class position, the political ties between squatters and the urban value of the occupied buildings may be highlighted as three substantial aspects in order to distinguish the relationship between capitalism and types of squatting. Although we pay more attention to the so called 'political squatting', as we argue in the next section, we also sustain that the distinction between "social" and "political" squatting is an extremely simple one that obscures how social needs in general, and housing needs specifically, are determined by contentious interactions between those who rule the principal capitalist mechanisms of accumulation and those who are excluded from them. Any form of squatting, thus, is both "social" and "political". What makes the difference, in our view, is why squatting is undertaken, what are its different goals and how can they be understood in relation to prevailing capitalist ways of managing and allocating urban goods. In particular, we analyse how the different types of squats, squatters, and owners of the squatted estates, on the one hand, and the ways that squatters take in order to satisfy their own and other...
social groups' needs, on the other hand, can contribute to understand the most relevant reasons behind squatting.

Given the housing shortages, the lack of affordable and decent housing compared to the available income, the stock of vacant buildings and the practices of real-estate speculation, it is evident that squatting is a direct response to these failures of both capitalism and the Welfare State. The key question is to know if squatting is a sufficient and efficient response. If we consider the imaginary situation in which all the empty buildings are occupied, then the question would be: are there still housing and social needs to be satisfied? If so, squatting would not be the answer since all the built places were in use. The whole set would be divided into the conventional ways of occupation (State or private owner, private tenant, housing cooperative, etc.) and the unconventional ones such as squatting -that is to say, the occupation of a property without the owner's permission. However, the size of the unconventional sector might be so limited that squatters and homeless would not represent a threat to the whole real-estate system. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the homeless and squatters may be self-housed, unacceptable social inequalities may remain within the conventional housing system, so these are not necessarily challenged by the persistence of squatting. Consequently, the mere fact of occupying empty properties does not entail a change in the rules of the game but a partial transgression of some of them.

Squatters may solve their own housing dilemmas by exploring alternative or illegal practices, and they can also spread their example to others with similar concerns. Notwithstanding, the core of the real-estate market, whether under the rule of private agents or State managers, may end without being essentially touched by those who promote alternative ways of solving housing needs for a minority of the population. Squatting, lastly, cannot be a useful alternative for the large society unless all the housing stock were empty or all the tenants stopped paying rents -in the case that tenancy were the dominant mode of access to a home.

A different approach to our initial questions needs to take into account the specific historical periods and political-spatial opportunities. We observe that the numbers of squatters keep a narrow relationship with the most critical moments of the economic cycles in terms of unemployment rates, housing prices, privatisation, gentrification, urban renovation and industrial restructuring. There are also significant variations from one city and country to another. Squatters develop their own skills to explore these opportunities and to perform tactical means of action. Obviously, many of them are also encouraged by strategic views and anti-capitalist prospects coming from the sources of previous and contemporary social movements. Every local squatters movement, then, covers a particular section of urban conflicts according to both the political coalitions in which it is embedded and the expressions of the capitalist crisis in the everyday life.

Tradition states that where there is a need, there is a right. Each word -'need' and 'right'- holds very controversial meanings and to disentangle them will bring us too far from our present goals. In a rough manner we can conceive that housing needs are not restricted to have a roof and to have the money for paying the acquisition, the rent, the maintenance, the taxes and/or the regular costs of external supplies. A good life at home is connected with a good life at a social, urban and natural environment. It involves the spatial location of the house but also the available social resources at hand, beyond the domestic space. If squatting constitutes an essential claim to satisfy the housing need as a right to housing, at the same time it is also a claim to satisfy the social needs linked to the former as a broad 'right to the city'.

Most squatters do not aspire to own the property of the building they occupy. Neither do they define the practice of squatting as a theft or usurpation since they emphasise the right to use, occupy and keep in liveable conditions the abandoned properties. If anything, according to the old anarchist statement, it is property which is based on a primal theft. Squatting, at its best, supposes a sort of
symbolic and eventual expropriation applied to illegitimate owners due to their excessive wealth compared to the dispossessed. It is not the right to private property which is reclaimed by most squatters, but the right to more just and equal distribution of the resources that allow a decent life. Expropriation or re-appropriation, thus, involves an exercise of turning private goods into common goods. Housing needs, therefore, are accomplished along social needs. Squatting becomes, in the end, a form of class struggle where the housing question is a crucial one, but not an exclusive one. As a matter of fact, squatting is more than just living under a roof because it is a collective process of self-organisation to get access to an affordable space, a cooperative way of repairing and preserving the building, alternative ways of living in the margins of the capitalist patterns, and a political experience of protesting and mobilising through direct action.

Above all, we need to clarify what we mean when we refer to 'squatting', 'capitalism' and 'anti-capitalist alternatives'. This is the aim of the two following sections. The third one is devoted to argue why squatting claims go beyond the housing needs and private real estate property. The fourth part deals with the role of urban speculation within the current financial crisis, and the fifth focuses in the paradigmatic case of Spain and the reactions of squatters to the financialisation of the economy. In order to illustrate the pitfalls of the increasing homeownership rates within the neoliberal capitalism and its connection with squatting, the next section presents some data from New York, UK and Japan. Finally, we summarise the discussion and ask how the anti-capitalist alternatives brought about by squatting can scale-up from their local settings.

**Why to focus on political squatting?**

Generally speaking, squatting is about the illegal occupation of alien property, used without the previous consent of its owner -be it any public institution, any particular individual, a private corporation or any sort of organisation. Although there are many forms of squatting worldwide (Neuwirth 2004), here we do not deal with all of them. We stay put in Europe and North-America, post-industrial and widely urbanised countries. In such a context, most cities are experiencing radical transformations in the use of space. In particular, in the last four decades the implementation of neo-liberal policies, gentrification and other processes of social displacement and segregation, the shrinking stock of social housing, the privatisation of public services and spaces, and the commodification of larger aspects of our lives, are seriously threatening any aspiration to a just city (Harvey 1973, Fainstein 2010) and to fulfil the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1968).

Our approach has little to do with the illegal character of squatting. In spite of the central role that legal issues and processes can play in order to explain the life of a squat, we rather prefer to focus on the context in which squatting emerges and its impacts. Therefore, our second remark about the definition of squatting leads us to the political features of squatting as an urban movement. Although 'political squatting' is a very fuzzy category because there are different political dimensions involved in each configuration of squatting (Martinez 2012, Prujit 2012), a specific typology may help to distinguish the most significant diversity within the movement -notwithstanding the fact that some squatters may remain isolated from any sort of political coordination and mutual aid.

In Western cities many squats are inhabited by immigrants, ethnic minorities such as the Roma people, homeless due to different social and personal conditions, etc. As long as these people do not pay for rent, they are excluded from the housing market and, therefore, their actions of squatting represent a practical and direct way to satisfy their housing need. This is an overtly alternative means of being housed apart from the options offered by the capitalist markets or State supply, if any. However, their actions are prompted almost exclusively by the attempt to satisfy an immediate need in response to a desperate situation. The squat is considered as a temporary lodging solution
and, if possible, the occupants aim for better conditions of dwelling—more permanent and legal. Moreover, they tend to do it in isolation and not as part of any political movement, be it spontaneously self-organized by themselves, or in relation to the self-help and pro-housing rights activism. Behind this type of squatting there is often no other motivation than the one of solving, secretly and in silence, a desperate situation. Such a reason for action little has to do with what is usually called 'political squatting'.

Certainly, the principal argument which emerges from the heart of political squatting is the public and practical defence of the right to a decent and affordable housing. This is in line with the practice of direct illegal occupation that non-political squatters adopt to satisfy their immediate needs, although the latter are not always able to express such a justification. The striking point is that political squatting offers a broader rationale for going beyond the material housing need. First of all, political squatters criticize the dominant relationship between the existing need and the way this can be satisfied in present Western societies. The usual targets of their critique are the neoliberal forces of the late capitalist stages; either the financial speculators, the real estate developers or the policy makers that favour them and exclude the worst-off from access to decent and affordable housing. Criminalisation and repression of squatting is considered, then, an abuse of the penal laws since the right to a shelter is a fundamental one. Thus, the 'political' here also refers to the pretended public visibility of both the practice of squatting and the mentioned criticisms. The aim of political squatters is to prefigure ways of living beyond the capitalist society implying the need to loudly express this message. On the one hand, political squatters address economic, social and political elites in order to let them know the desperate and precarious economic situation of those who cannot enjoy the right to housing. On the other hand, political squatters critique the society at large and manifest with practical examples, the kinds of problems, arguments and prospects that squatting suggests. In the end, it is basically about the use of antagonistic and agonistic means to sustain the legitimation of an act of social disobedience confronting the dramatic housing question (Mouffe 1993).

Furthermore, as the emergence of Social Centres attests, the issue of housing is not the only one to be embraced by political squatters. Self-produced and copy-left culture; the space required for holding political meetings and campaigns; alternative exchanges of goods, foods and beverages; social interactions and debates without the pressure of paying with money, etc. are possible thanks to the availability, accessibility and openness of many buildings which have been previously occupied illegally. Regardless of the multiple kinds of social needs behind squatting, the political squatters argue that is not legitimate to leave private property abandoned. The right of use should be prior to the defense of absolute private property. Making profits of private property would not justify the social inequalities regarding the access to housing or social spaces. As a consequence, such an explicit criticism becomes manifest through direct actions, public campaigns, the production of visual and written documents, political debates, press releases, the confrontation with institutional powers and other forms of active or passive resistance.

In the recent years we have also witnessed the cases of fascist squatted Social Centres, like Casa Pound in Rome, for instance (Kington 2011). This is a quite controversial issue. Although somehow ambiguously anti-capitalist, far right political squatting is not part of our analysis, while left-wing or left-libertarian squatting is here considered as an alternative to the capitalist society at large when a wide social diversity and different cultural minorities are also included in squats. On the contrary, far right squatters, for example, violently oppose migrants, ethnic minorities and LGTB-Q individuals and organisations. Leftist squatters, however, are very active in the provision of many resources to deprived people, and apart from the help in housing them, are generally involved in campaigns resisting the restrictive and repressive migration policies, or the persecution of unconventional gender identities. Again, from a political leftist perspective of squatting, rallying for these issues and doing so in squats, is felt to be more legitimate than obeying the laws that protect
the right to maintain vacant private property.

A final form of squatting that is not directly incorporated in the present research refers to the occasional and temporary occupations of places as tactical protests, without claiming them for housing or Social Centre purposes. Sit ins, the occupations of open squares and parks, the "reclaim the streets" festivals, or workplace occupations during a strike, may be ideologically connected and also incorporate squatters, but do not necessarily share most of the claims, practices and forms of self-organisation that the squatters movement develops (Bey 1991, Notes from Nowhere 2003, Shepard and Smithsimon 2011).

In sum, we approach squatting as a very heterogeneous phenomenon, specific to the local urban context in which it is formed and developed. For us, squatting can be intended either as a tool to get something else –i.e. the institution of a right, through for instance, the legalisation of a squatted house, or the cancellation of an urban plan that may cause irreversible social and environmental damages- or as an end; the maintaining of a threatening space against capitalist dynamics from positions of the radical autonomist and libertarian left (Mudu 2012). Decades ago, prior to the current systemic crises, squatting was related mainly and almost uniquely -at least, in the eyes of mass media- to a sort of counter-cultural critique of the consumerist city. However, nowadays squatting may be a significant movement within the local context, criticising the financial crisis and, to some extent, the environmental devastation.

**Capitalism: discontents and alternatives**

It is far beyond our present goal to define what capitalism is, but it is unavoidable to highlight a few of its crucial aspects tightly connected to the illegal occupation of empty buildings. Having expanded throughout the world with increasingly less barriers, de-regulated capitalist modes of production, exchange and consumption, and the liberal assumptions underlying their hegemony (Polanyi 1944, Harvey 2005, De Angelis 2007), have provoked an enormous earthquake. Very briefly, capitalism starts with the social contract between unequal individuals that allows the exploitation of labour and the accumulation of surplus value in the pockets of capitalists. But this was not historically possible without the help of different legal regulations and the massive mobilisation of peasants who were obliged to move to the industrial settlements. Capitalism means the domination of a particular economic system over the whole society, including both its political and cultural frameworks. Exchange value replaces use value and every single social relationship and natural resource becomes commodified, subject to be bought and sold. The private property of the means of production (i.e. land, minerals, energy supply, machinery, capital, etc.) and reproduction (i.e. shelter, food, leisure, education, culture, etc.) are parts of the whole complex of social relationships which are colonised by capitalism. Economic inequalities and, in particular, the existence of an 'underclass' who threaten workers' wages and conditions of work, are equally necessary to the continuation of such a system. Furthermore, workers' organisations and struggles may challenge and change some of those conditions while operating within the limits of liberal (or even authoritarian) political regimes and without modifying the whole system in a revolutionary way. And non-capitalist forms of making profits such as rent extractions and slavery may also coexist relatively peacefully if the tensions with the dominant ideology do not overflow leading to uprisings out of the elites' control.

Hence, we need to ask what is the relationship of capitalism and squatting. In principle, squatters take over spaces that are abandoned by their wealthy owners because they are rich enough and have no urgent need for them, or because they are waiting for better opportunities to make use of them. Proprietors, thus, are fully capitalists if they dispose of these vacant spaces for productive (under exploitative relationships) or speculative purposes. In either case, squatters can stop, partially and
not in an absolute way, the process of making profit by the estates' private owners. But this is not always the case. Some proprietors may be part of the working and middle classes who followed an individual-family strategy of saving and investing in the real estate sector. Some capitalists do not have any plan in the short run for their empty properties so, in the meantime, they do not really care about their occupation by squatters. At most, the act of squatting is an interference of the capitalist and non-capitalist operations of economic accumulation given the prevailing rules of the housing and urban markets. However, squatters strive for the de-commodification of houses and buildings while embracing the use value of any urban good. The vacant spaces serve, then, to secure housing needs, to create housing communes of mutual sharing and, sometimes, to open Social Centres where a manifold of creative, political and even productive initiatives are unleashed. The interference turns into an anti-capitalist experiment. The experiment may be replicated somewhere else and, subsequently, many more can escape from the capitalist logic.

Political squatters are not driven to seek profit. This is to say, they do not seek financial returns from monetary investments -such as the landlord's income resulting from his or her property. Low or high level speculative business with housing stock is considered one of the worst legal behaviours within a capitalist society since is the origin of the housing exclusion and other social inequalities. Social relationships based on paid labour or economic exploitation are also normally absent in squats. Surely there is a circulation of money, but this comes from self-organised activities, co-operative work and individual jobs outside the squat. Money never results from lending money at an interest rate. Nevertheless, these anti-capitalist islands are, to a certain extent, contaminated by the salaried jobs of the squatters out of the squats and their individual income, investments and financial resources apart from their fellow squatters -if any, of course.

Capitalism is a perverse system guided by the capitalists' addiction to profits with disregard to the needs of the rest of humankind. People no less than spaces are taken into account according to their capacity to produce profits. They can be employed or discarded depending on the capitalists' calculations and aspirations. Empty houses and unemployed people are both dismissed until a good business can be done with them. Otherwise, it is the rest of the society who have to deal with the problems that they can cause. For the capitalists' sake, the abandonment and destruction of the built environment does not entail any social or environmental trouble if the foreseen economic benefits are good enough. Private ownership of land and buildings provides a higher direct control of the process compared to the relationship of capitalists and the workforce. Although there are legal restrictions to the possible degree of urban speculation at every city, they are ineffective and cannot constrain the whole process of urban development based on the predominance of exchange values. Given such a context, real estate developers and speculators may also fail. Rational calculations also face the general cycles of economic decline and properties are not easily sold or rented out despite their owners' will. That is to say, vacancy is both a tool and a side consequence of urban capitalism. Squatters are never completely sure if they are interrupting the speculative engine or just taking advantage of the malfunctioning of the urban growth machine.

Urban and political squatting has lasted for more than three decades in Europe. Over this long period of time abundant evidence about the practical achievements and the potentialities of squatting as an anti-capitalist struggle has emerged. Beyond the apparent image of islands that every specific squat can spread, there was a large network of mutual learning, connections and mutual help -that is, a transnational urban movement. Squatters resisted the commodification of housing, cities and their own lives. They embraced cooperation and social justice while satisfying basic human needs. Squatting was the most salient symbol of opposition against the damages caused by an unjust distribution of wealth and the rampant urban speculation out of any rational citizen control. Living with others without exploitation and being efficient about the preservation of collective needs by making use the dark holes of urban capitalism (the vacant spaces) without hurting anyone, offered a political example easy to imitate. If the actual circumstances of vacancy
and squatting cannot always define a frontal and decisive alternative to capitalism, in most of the cases political squatters, their multiple practices and their critical discourses, represent a valuable symptom and indication of how to overcome the capitalist society.

Like any other anti-capitalist movement, a thorough analysis should also take into account the contradictions and failures that squatters experienced. An excessive generalisation may ignore, for example, the punctual cases of squatters who sub-let rooms. If squatting becomes just a way of saving the rent when you are a student while preparing yourself to compete in the market, to participate in the exploitative relations of labour or to buy a home, then the anticapitalist effects of squatting are just limited to the existence of your every particular squat, and not always to all the social processes taking place inside and beyond. Living in a squat does not entail necessarily an anticapitalist attitude or work out if no other personal transformations and political involvements occur. Superfluous consumption, individualism and the reproduction of hierarchies do not work in favour of broader changes of the capitalism system. Blind tactics regarding the salvation of one specific squat without considering the effects of repression over the rest of the squatters, erode the movement's consistence and capability to spread out. The same could be said about the ties, or its absence, which are built up with other urban and environmental struggles. No capitalist regime has been destroyed by one social group alone.

The current crisis is founded upon a huge financial speculation which includes housing, the built environment and natural resources as fields of investment. Public services, food and knowledge come next. No matter the devastating effects of these processes over millions of people and a limited Earth, global and imperial capitalism follows a never-ending path of accumulation. From this perspective, squatting defines a field of urban contention with one of the dimensions of capitalism. However, many squatters and activists of related social movements also try to look forward into wider ways of autonomous and sustainable living. Their criticisms on the urban ground of the present economic crisis have shown that common people have sufficient power to resist the most adverse situations such as the lack of affordable housing and accessible social spaces.

In the third section we develop the conception of squatting as responding to more need than the housing ones. So that, we argue that is just a very simple approach to consider squatting as a challenge to private (real estate) property.

**Squatters strive for both housing needs and social justice**

Every human need involves subjective aspirations and a lack of material resources according to conventional or underlying social agreements about the basic conditions for enjoying a decent life (Leal and Cortés 1995: 4-12). Homeless people, for example, need a home, above all. Home-seekers, however, are those who need a new or a better home, such as young people, residents in sub-standard houses, families that grow in size, divorced couples, those who demand space for working at home, as well as migrants newcomers to any settlement (Leal 2010; Bouillon 2009). People who aspire to live in communes or in co-housing initiatives, for instance, may also contribute to the expression of housing needs in the form of a demand. Homes are not exactly the primary needs, but the way to satisfy many basic human needs such as protection, shelter, identity, affection and subsistence (Max-Neef 1994: 58-59). There are other means to satisfy basic human needs, but without the satisfaction of, at least, the need of physical health and personal autonomy, it is quite difficult to participate in the social life and to pursue your own goals (Doyal and Gough 1991; Gough 2004). Adequate shelter may be conceived, then, as an 'intermediate need' or a 'cultural satisfier' that helps other needs to be fulfilled.

As has been frequently noted, these processes addressing the satisfaction of needs involve an
exercise of social power (capabilities) because there are observable and implicit conflicts between individuals and groups in order to influence, shape and determine others' needs and desires (Lukes 1974: 23). This opens the door to political action in the field of housing and social needs. Squatters exercise their power to, their capabilities, aiming at satisfying their own needs and also support the struggles of those who are excluded from the dominant housing system. Solidarity with the homeless, the substandard housed, the poor and the young people who cannot afford a decent and well serviced house, is also a political content and aim of all kinds of squatters -those who self-house themselves and those who run squatted social centres. This is another substantial reason for not separating housing and social needs, on the one hand, and pro-housing and pro-social centres squatters, on the other.

The satisfaction of human needs depends on many factors. Squatters, for example, only can represent -although they often deny the politics of representation and do prefer the politics of autonomy, direct democracy and self-representation- the interests of the excluded from the capitalist housing system. However there are environmental limits to the volume of population to be housed and the materials and energy employed by the construction of houses (Riechmann 1998: 310). Squatters can only play within the already built stock, regardless its inherent environmental sustainability. They leave aside the claims for housing of all the excluded in case they demand new constructions. In both cases, there are also social, political and normative principles to deal with. Who has the priority to be housed? What are the criteria used in practice to produce an equal and just access to a squatted place? How to overcome the barriers faced by particular social groups regarding their gender, class, ethnicity or abilities? (Nussbaum 2001)

These aspects have received some criticism from outside the squatters movement since the very beginning (Lowe 1986). Priemus (1983), for example, argued that only 'bona fide squatters' would contribute to add the empty dwellings to the housing stock by improving their premises. They also "place the housing shortage on the political agenda, expose abuse of ownership and increase the pressure on the authorities to tackle speculation in real estate effectively, to gear the programming of housebuilding better to the demand and to improve housing distribution policy" (Priemus 1983: 418). These squatters practice self-help, help others to find accommodation and use squatting as a means of protest against housing shortages, vacancy, speculation and housing policies. However, there would be many squatters who occupy social housing at the expense of the social groups who have priority of access according to the official regulations -for instance, squatters are able to house young people, single persons and Dutch nationals, in the author's figures, compared to the deprived social categories like families with children that are supposedly favoured by the State agencies. Among the responses to this criticism, some argued that "the largest part of the houses occupied were taken from private owners who preferred, for motives of profit, to speculate with empty dwellings, or to turn houses into offices." (Draaisma and Hoogstraten 1983: 410) Also, "squatters rarely prevented people in greater need from being housed because most squatted houses were not intended for immediate use." (Wates et al. 1980: 61)

There are many autonomous groups that deliberate, fix norms and take their own decisions about where to squat according to the location, the type of building and the knowledge about the owner. They also recruit members or back other potential squatters by relying on trust, political affinity, needs, opportunity, capacities, skills, information, etc. (Bailey 1973; Corr 1999; Adell et al. 2004; Thörn et al. 2011; SQUASH 2011; Sabaté 2012) Therefore, the controversy about the squatters' awareness of the social, urban and environmental context, leads to the internal diversity of the movement and the single initiatives that any group takes. The issue of social justice, then, needs to be debated according to each autonomous group of squatters since there is no central organisation that can impose general normative criteria. Nonetheless, it cannot be skipped because it affects the core argument about the legitimation of squatting to satisfy housing and social needs.
Another source of legitimation of squatting has to do with the type of owners and the features of the empty properties that are taken over. The final decision to occupy a specific building depends on a limited amount of information. If the owner is a large corporation, a small company or a private proprietor, the major issue at stake is his/her class condition, economic power and the speculative operations undergoing. The major are the distances with the squatters' class conditions, income and ideological principles, the greater is the legitimation of the conflict as a class struggle. However, this does not mean an immediate confrontation because the owner's reaction after the occupation may respond to different strategies, being a temporary absence and voluntary passivity among them. If the legal owner belongs to the middle classes (or, in some exceptional cases, to the working class) and this estate is a crucial one for his or her own economic survival in terms of simple class reproduction, the conflict with the squatters tends to be more direct, open and, usually, quickly channelled through the courts. The class dimension of the conflict, thus, plays a secondary role compared to the rest of the dimensions concerning the value given to the eventual speculative actions and the specific condition of the building. The same applies to the State-owned properties with the addition of the squatters' assessment of the policies carried on by political authorities and State officials. The squatted building is considered as a public resource and the justification of its occupation must address the particular sector of public policy in which that building is managed. Less clear is the case of private associations, foundations, religious and political organisations, etc. The legitimacy of these groups may vary a lot to the squatters' eyes, so a combination of the previous arguments and new ones according to every particular organisation, can be used to justify the occupation.

The last classification we can introduce here relates to the vacant stock. Following Leal and Cortés (1995: 16-17) we can distinguish three general cases:

1) Empty properties subjected to an active exercise ("with an actual project") of rehabilitation, sale, rent, change of use or prompt occupation. The main problem with these "active" purposes is that they can be delayed for a very long time and in the meanwhile the property remains vacant. Dutch legislation, before the full criminalisation of squatting in 2010, required that particular aspect of owners' "active plans" for the building in order to facilitate the eviction of squatters.

2) Empty properties which are completely abandoned, closed and kept out of the market or from the public sector. There are many reasons to explain these cases "without any actual plan" for the property ranging from the intentions of obtaining a legal change in the planning regulation and the speculative goals waiting for a future profit, to the absence of any decision about the management of the property and the existence of conflicts between different owners / managers.

3) Vacant properties considered as a "long run family project" that can pertain to individuals of any social class. In this case, the acquisition of the house or building was made in order to transfer it to the sons and daughters in future, to use it later when the owner is retired, or to keep it as an investment that can compensate possible situations of unemployment, low pensions or financial crisis. These owners do not sell nor rent these properties because they do not need urgently those revenues or because they expect an upcoming change of their personal situations that will oblige them to transform this asset into money or into their primary home.

Given all the above elements at play, we argue that squatting is more than just a simple challenge to private property.

Sometimes squatting consists simply of unconventional forms of getting accommodation, but more frequently squatting may challenge capitalism as a whole -the uneven distribution of private property, the labour exploitation, the commodification of housing and urban life, the functional service of the State powers to favour the elites' and capitalists' accumulation, and so on. The legal
preservation, inheritance and reproduction of private property is only one of the foundations of capitalism and social injustice, but capitalism works thanks to many other mechanisms and social relations changing from time to time. Speculation in the housing market, for example, may develop through expensive, scarce and expanded forms of tenancy instead of the access to home ownership. Socio-spatial displacement of the poor may also contribute to open new business opportunities for the elites at the city centre. In spite of the limited impacts of the squatters in altering these capitalist mechanisms and the urban growth machine, the squatters movements are able to put them on the foreground and make them visible.

**Housing deprivation at the core of the financial crisis**

The 'housing question' recalls Engels' seminal contributions in 1872 and 1887 to the analysis of urban problems from the point of view of the working class interests (the "social question") and by imagining a post-revolutionary society. Engels (1975: 587) disputed Proudhon's embrace of the right to home ownership once we all live in a more egalitarian society. On the contrary, Engels advocated State control over the whole built stock and a just distribution according to everyone's needs. The practice of squatting is situated in an intermediate territory. Although most of the squatters reject private property as it is now because it is considered an obstacle to the satisfaction of the housing needs of large numbers of people, once a building is occupied, only some people have the right to use and manage the space. The latter does not usually mean that squatters reclaim the right to hold a legal title as private owners (as sometimes happens), but only the right to take care of the building and of the life inside according to their own collectively agreed upon rules (Martínez 2002: 189-192). This can be called a right to *partially private possession*, rather than to private property. The interesting lesson about these analyses is that they urge us to focus on the major shifts within the history of capitalism and the role played by the housing question. This endeavour exceeds our present purposes, although a few illustrations may help to understand how squatting emerges as a reaction against this overall context, and not only fuelled by the exclusion of access to a home.

More than just focus on the issue of private property, the squatting of empty buildings means a public critique of capitalist speculation. Profit rates have been falling down since the 1970s and the capitalist reconversion from industrial production to financial markets has been the way to keep profits alive. In particular, financial markets have been increasingly oriented towards the housing sector. Urban speculation, thus, is only one of the expressions of broad speculative operations within capitalism. These consists of credits, debts, mortgages, pension funds, patents and all sort of financial deals with legal titles and money that fuel the capacity of capital accumulation no matter the commodities, services, work, natural resources and information that lay behind (López and Rodríguez 2010: 76-81).

After the expansive period of capital accumulation through the central role played by the heavy Fordist industries (1945-1973), during the following years of crisis there was a combination of different means in order to recover the rates of profit for the global elites. Neoliberal policies, for example, involved the retrenchment of the State in most areas from national industries and the delivering of services and subsidies for all who needed (Harvey 2007). Monetary policies were dissociated from the amount of gold actually held and direct foreign investments were allowed to move worldwide almost without national controls. The privatisation of common goods, lands, natural resources (minerals, oil, water, fisheries, etc.), public services (health, education, transport, planning, etc.), software and knowledge, created new forms of scarcity and appealing markets for investors. The new technologies of communication, computing and transport were able to provide tools for the quick moves of capital and goods, although the flows of people remained strongly restricted.
Fordist and Post-Fordist industries as well as the increasingly more industrialised and mechanised food production, became displaced to new emerging regions of the world such as Asia and Latin America, while the wide sector of services concentrated the workforce of the richest countries. Financial institutions like the banks, the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the WB (World Bank) and hedge funds were able to rule the policies of indebted countries, but also to control our present and future lives through student loans, housing mortgages, consumption credits, retirement funds, etc. (Harvey 2007) These new forms of financial speculation are not completely new since they are based on old forms of tributes, enjoying rents and the primitive destruction of commons, but the novelty is the accelerated rhythm of expansion and colonisation of all the spheres of life including, in particular, over the most recent times, the domain of housing. This highly developed and sophisticated means of capital accumulation through financial instruments has provoked severe economic crisis such the one in 1998 and the most recent and serious one that started in 2008.

Empty apartments and office buildings, abandoned factories or schools, the destruction of public parks and arable lands, the commodification of music and theatre spectacles, or the renovation of old urban areas, are some of the material aspects resulting from the pressure of speculative forces in tight connection with the political institutions that favour them. Real-estate speculation, then, is part of a wider engine of a mobile capitalist speculation that can jump from the promotion of urban mega-events to the hoarding of cereal crops and can intervene in the foreign exchanges of national currencies and debts. No squatter movement was strong enough to stop these ongoing and spreading financial processes, but the occupation of some empty spaces, at least, made them visible.

In spite of the material and economic benefits that squatters can hold by keeping themselves apart from the pervasive flows of economic speculation with most the dimensions of our personal and social life, their struggle is mostly symbolic and political -calling for others to join the cause against urban speculation. The real-estate sector also suffers internal contradictions: while some agents want to accelerate the cycle of construction, others tend to decrease the velocity of putting their assets in the market (López and Rodríguez 2010: 118). State policies may oscillate from favouring some real-estate developers in the housing sector to launch the building of roads and other infrastructures, or to freeze the State support to private urban projects. These contradictions and variations open different opportunities for squatting from time to time, and from place to place. Urban speculation is quite variable and may be affected by the interest rates, the wages paid to employees and the duration and costs of the education -and not least by strikes, fair-trade movements and campaigns to preserve social commons.

Squatters, therefore, take advantage of the available spots that those contradictory economic flows are producing. Obviously, this implies that their struggle goes beyond the opposition to the concentration of private property in few hands. Rather, squatters question how private property is managed by either the financial speculators or the State authorities. Secondly, squatters try to stop the artificial circulation of money by placing themselves as (temporary) obstacles to the chains of making profit through the built environment.

Finally, squatters open opportunities and offer practical examples to those who wish to extract themselves, at least partially, from growth and the speculative urban machine. There is no mechanical adaptation to the economic crisis because the squatters movement follows their own social and political logics of self-reproduction that has to do with their achievements, organisation, media representation and the interactions they experience with the State authorities. However, the empty holes left behind by the urban speculation are a crucial source and motivation for settle the squatting practices in particular places. The squatters movements did not by chance start to develop in Europe and the United States in the 1970s, at the same time that the previous wave of capitalist expansion was reaching an end.
Urban speculation and financial crisis: lessons from Spain

The Spanish case is quite significant to understand these processes. In the last four decades there were phases of economic expansion and recession. The major economic indicators such as GNP changed sharply. The first economic crisis began during the transition times from the Dictatorship to the Liberal Democracy, from 1975 onwards. The heyday of the social movements -the citizens and the workers ones, above all- at that time were not able to transform the power of the elites, the crisis persisted and a profound industrial restructuring gave rise to a high percentage of unemployment (Castells 1983, Pérez et al. 2008). After the decline of those movements, the squatters as followers of similar European practices, appeared around 1984 -although there were some singular cases since 1977 (Martínez 2002). The incorporation of Spain into the EU (European Union) occurred in 1986. This inaugurated a new wave of urban speculation that lasted until 1992. In 1995, squatting became a criminal offence due to a substantive change of the Penal Code. However, the squatters movement was experiencing a strong expansion, wide media coverage and an increasing public attention.

After a few several critical years again and along the emergence of many more movements of protest, another phase of economic prosperity for the elites was initiated around 1996. Apart from the traditional tourist industry and the economic concentration of power in a few group of large corporations taking advantage of the liberalisation of strategic sectors, the economic boom until 2008 was based on the construction of houses, big infrastructures and superfluous venues (López and Rodríguez 2010; Naredo 2011). Intensive flows of incoming migrants and several reforms of the regulations about employment, contributed to keep salaries very low, temporary and precarious. Housing prices, however, rose continuously. Alter-globalisation movements and squatters (Martínez 2007) remained very active and critical against these massive mobilisations of workforce, land and oil -with the authoritarian involvement of Spain in the Iraq war too- but their voices were not loud enough to warn the society at large about the greatest urban process of speculation and political corruption ever. Among the tentative uprisings of those years, it is worth to note the Movement for a Decent Housing, between 2006 and 2009, in which some squatters also participated (Blanco 2011).

The following indicators related to finance and housing shifted sharply from before the bubble (up to the 1990s) to the time of the bubble (until 2007) (Cattaneo 2008):

(1) the availability of homes for rent decreased dramatically, from 40% in 1960 to 10% in 2005;

(2) the construction of social housing (VPO in Spanish, private-owned houses enjoying different State subsidies) reduced from 34% in 1973 to 4% in 2005;

(3) the banks conceded more credit for private consumption than for industrial production. 3.3 times more in 2005 than in 1997;

(4) the increasing indebtedness of homes, ranging from 45% in 1990 to 60% in 2004;

(5) the inflation of housing prices in terms of average working-time, from 14 months in 1980 to 14 years in 2005;

and (6) the increasing speculation over the value of housing plots with a variation of the cost of land over the final home price from 25% in 1985 to 55% in 2005.

The burst of the financial bubble brought about the highest historical rates of unemployment (up to 27% at the midst of 2013) and foreclosures of people who could not pay their housing mortgages.
(with an average of almost 100,000 foreclosures per year between 2008 and 2012 -although this figure includes houses as well as commercial properties- according to the CGPJ 2012). The fall, this time, was also the worst ever. In May, 15, 2011 a popular autonomous movement occupied the squares of many cities. A few weeks later, local assemblies started to meet everywhere. A huge grass-roots mobilisation aiming to stop the foreclosures followed next (PAH, meaning Platform of People Affected by Mortgages: Colau and Alemany 2012, 2013). Squatters also took part in these movements and new squats, unexpectedly, were launched by some of the activists recently involved in these new types of autonomous politics (Martínez and García 2013). In August 2011, the two principal political parties, PP (conservatives-and-neoliberals) and PSOE (socialdemocrats-and-liberals), agreed upon the change of the Constitution in order to concede supreme priority to the payment of the State debt. Any other public expenses, then, should be subjected to the interests claimed by the creditors. Cuts in salaries, subsidies, pensions and public services, the privatisation of State services and properties, the discovery of immense cases of corruption and a fierce repression over the social movements, became the regular agenda of the final years of this long neoliberal turn, which was well prepared over the previous decades (López and Rodríguez 2011).

Concerning the housing question, some data may clarify this evolution. First of all, over the periods of both economic growth and decline, the number of home-ownership rose. In 1950, a 46% of the housing stock had private owners and 54% was occupied by tenants (94% in the city of Madrid and 95% in Barcelona: Naredo 2011: 30). In 1970 the proportion reversed: 64% private property; 32% renting houses. This linear evolution ends up in 2001 with 82% of home-ownership and 11% of renting (Pareja 2010: 112). The State-owned social housing for renting varied from 3% to 1% between 1950 and 2001. These proportions were unknown in Europe with the exception of some Eastern European countries such as Hungary (Naredo 2011: 22).

Ownership meant stability, quality and also financial investment. Compared to the European countries, the Spanish State hardly offered affordable alternatives. On the contrary, most of the housing policies removed some of the obstacles impeding the access to home-ownership: direct aid to families who bought a house by reduction of the interest rates when signing a mortgage; tax relief on mortgage interest payments; subsidies to the purchase of standard houses for the middle and working classes with a very flexible regime of control (Pareja 2010: 119-120). There were almost no alternatives to access a home but to become a home-owner in the private market. Then, more and more social groups entered the bank offices and asked for credit. A whole society was obliged to be client of the financial agencies under the threat of being homeless.

The youth were among those who suffered the consequences of the housing exclusion due to their financial uncertainties, the high rates of precariousness and unemployment, and the lack of public and affordable alternatives to access a home. This delayed extraordinarily the age of family independence. For example, in 1997, more of 80% of the Spanish population between 18 and 29 year-old still lived with their parents, while in Denmark the proportion was less than 30% and in the Netherlands less than 40% (Leal 2010: 25). Of course, they were the first victims of the rising prices of housing, while the previous owners and the new investors made profits of their privileged situation. The first important housing bubble between 1986 and 1992 was mainly due to the incoming flows of foreign speculative capital (Naredo 2011: 49). Tourism, international exhibitions and the Olympics, the so called modernisation of infrastructures (high speed trains, for instance) and the explicit public policies and urban plans fuelling the construction of housing, paved the way for causing all kinds of speculative moves.

The almost 5 million migrants that came to live in Spain after 1996 also participated in the same already established and very expensive housing market. For them and for any new home buyer, the interest rates had been diminishing considerably compared to one decade before. In 1990, the average rate of interest when signing a mortgage was over 16%. In 2006 was around 4% (Rodríguez
2010: 59). However, this source of profit was not sufficient for the financial companies and they tried to incorporate immigrants and young people into the dream of home-ownership by extending the time range of years to pay, and by rising the prices artificially. This reached an average of more than 28 years in 2007, but recent foreclosures have shown cases up to 40 years of debt with a bank. On the other side, the prices never stopped growing: at a yearly rate of 11%, the accumulated elevation of the housing prices was of 183.8% between 1997 and 2007 (Rodríguez 2010: 67). The major consequence was an extreme transfer of rents from the individuals and families to the financial sector. While the average effort of home-owners for paying the credit was below 30% of their income until 2000, in 2008 the average effort scaled up until 51% (Rodríguez 2010: 71).

This huge amount of financial debt, thus, generated a lot of vulnerability, instability and hidden poverty for those following the mainstream way for accessing a house - the majority of the population. Local authorities and the central State fed this machine and presented it as a new source of wealth and revenues for the State administration - the municipal one, in particular. However, there were natural and social limits to the never ending construction that the authorities did not even attempt to foresee. The number of empty houses, for example, was unbelievable high: more than 3 million were officially registered in 2001 (around 15% of the total) - this figure has increased to 3.5 million in 2011, but it represents 14% according to the National Institute of Statistics (INE: www.ine.es). Once banks, developers and constructors could not sell all the new built houses, the vicious circle of recession, unemployment and unpaid debts, contaminated the whole economic life.

The credit crunch started primarily at the real-estate sector, but immediately the global financial corporations put a pressure on the government in order to aid the banks who had acquired debts with other international banks and financial agents. The public budget, finally, ended paying the private game of debt and drove the whole State services into a cul-de-sac which was the perfect location for the implementation of additional neoliberal policies of privatisation.

Two salient aspects of this exemplary case of urban speculation are the overproduction of houses (and heavy infrastructures) and the discipline applied to the workforce. On the one hand, the 7 million units of houses that were created in the decade 1997-2007 did not respond at all to the social needs. The demographic growth was much lower (with an absolute increase of 5.3 million of inhabitants according to the INE). Wages and income did not grow substantially (from an average of 15,000 €/year in 1997 to 18,700 €/year in 2007: INE, see also a more detailed analysis in López and Rodríguez 2010: 229-236). As López and Rodríguez (2011: 8) noted "after nearly 900,000 housing starts in 2006—exceeding those of France, Germany and Italy put together—sales began to fall away. By the end of 2008 there was a million unsold homes on the market, while Spanish household indebtedness had risen to 84 per cent of GDP." The highest rate in Europe of houses per inhabitant coexisted, paradoxically, with the worst rate of housing affordability. Simultaneously, the construction industry also left behind the highest European rates in terms of empty, secondary-touristic and substandard houses (Naredo 2011: 52). This had serious urban, environmental and political consequences. Urban sprawl, territorial polarisation (leaving abandoned immense rural areas) and the fast demolition of buildings that deserved rehabilitation, showed how urban planning was reduced just to a legal tool that backed new real-estate developments. The local and regional banks, closely tied to the rich elites who started the first wave of vast urban development in the 1960s, contributed to the municipal corruption and reached unsustainable risks after selling millions of subprime loans to the indebted home owners (Naredo 2011: 55-56).

On the other hand, it is worth to recall that home-ownership was the envisioned solution to maintain public order according to the Dictatorship elites. The more people were indebted and attached to their property, the less they were prone to challenge the social order. The same disciplinary project continued over the democratic years with the additional impulse of the destruction of social housing. The rising prices of houses in the period 1986-1992 created an enormous social polarisation between those with access to a house and those excluded. The 1997-2007 boom turned
that social cleavage into a new and overlapped one: indebted households versus financial investors. The submission to the debt was even a stronger discipline than that associated to the immobility of having a house. Moreover, the heyday of urban speculation was implemented along many micro-instruments of "housing and urban violence" (VV AA 2007) such as forced displacements, frauds in the financial or buying agreements, mobbing to undesirable tenants and squatters who delayed the plans for prompt demolitions and reconstructions, the lack of public control on the rising rents, and the absence of public help to those who live in overcrowded households. Once the constructors were not able to build any more, and the banks were not able to get back the interests of their loans, and the construction workers could not keep their jobs, and unemployment and debts were transmitted to other economic sectors, the collapse was unavoidable. The socialdemocratic government of Zapatero, first, and the conservative one of Rajoy, later, decided that middle and lower classes should pay the bill of the elites' losses. According to the European Commission (2012), between 2007 and 2011 the Spanish State aided the financial companies with a total of 90,000 millions of Euros which represents 8.4% of the Spanish GDP in 2010. It is already planned to increase the aid up to 32% of the GDP (equals to 337,000 millions of Euros). If this was not enough, the so called 'austerity measures' imposed by the Troika (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) resulted in budget cuts, wage freezes and the dismantling of social programmes. External financial institutions and agents, then, obliged a whole population to pay privates debts of a few. The mirage of prosperity has disappeared. Social exclusion has become more visible once the veil of the financial mode of accumulation has been torn. Personal freedom and national sovereignty, in the end, are just fictions within the domination of financial capital and the neoliberal policies that support their power.

As we mentioned above, the squatters movement in many Spanish cities did not stop protesting against the vacancy and the whole speculative games behind the housing sector that caused great damages in all the public spheres. They just used one of the elements of that game, a few vacant properties, to call for the social attention about urban speculation in particular, and financial speculation at large. Vacancy, rising prices and housing deprivation were just symptoms of more intensive forms of job exploitation, rents extraction and capital accumulation. Squatting, therefore, represented an oblique way of challenging the final stages and complex mechanisms of the capitalist society. Only when the Movement for a Decent Housing and the M15 movement tackled the political consciousness of broader parts of the society -once found itself deeply inside the crisis- squatters' claims were considered more acceptable and useful to counterbalance the underlying crisis before the crash, already ongoing and explicit at the end of the decade.

Why do squatters oppose home ownership?

Some years ago there was a passionate debate about the relationship of home ownership, social class positions and political action. Saunders (1984), for example, argued that the class position in the sphere of production imposes limits to the social position in the sphere of consumption, but not an absolute determination. Thus, some crucial aspects of consumption such as housing, open relevant lines of social cleavage and stratification that can overlap class relationships while keeping a certain degree of independence. The specific forms of capital accumulation that home ownership provides, the shared social interests of home buyers and their preferences regarding some State policies on urban planning and fiscal subsidies, for instance, are suggested as the basis of this type of social division. For Saunders, then, private property entails "exclusivity in rights of control, benefit and disposal" (1984: 208) plus the rights of sale and inheritance which grant a great power to the holder, although there are always specific legal regulations that constrain those rights to some extent.

Furthermore, in a context of continuous privatisation, he argues that the excluded from ownership
first, and from the State provision (or 'collective consumption') later, will behave "from relatively coherent communal self-help strategies on the part of those who enjoy cohesive social networks to sporadic and relatively unorganized outbreaks of civil unrest and attacks on private property on the part of those who lack either the patience or the resources necessary for the development of such a compensatory strategy." (Saunders 1984: 215) In the end, Saunders claims that individual rights to property or private consumption should be preserved in a socialist society, but the State should avoid any possible market "exploitation" (that is to say, rent extraction and speculation) exerted by the holders over the rest.

From this perspective, we could consider squatters as either those who develop self-help strategies in order to both counterbalance the dominant tendency to privatisation and the social exclusion which that engenders, either those who just attack private property as a desperate gesture against the icon of their social exclusion. However, Saunders did not distinguish clearly between property (the legal title) and possession (the effective use). Individual and collective rights to use private property do not necessarily imply neither a claim of the right of private property, nor its extension to the whole society. In addition, the kind of collective possession that squatters practice can be considered a useful measure to exert a social control over the actual and potential real-estate speculative deals, at least for a while. This would agree with both Saunders' proposals and Proudhon's endorsement of the right of workers to be small owners if there is equality and mutual cooperation - a sort of market under the workers' control. If this argument is true, squatters would not be exactly against private property but against social inequality caused by the exclusive accumulation and the capitalist mechanisms of speculation. Squatters distrust both the unique alternative of a solid State provision of housing to hinder the trend of privatisation, and the rule of the wealthiest within a free market. Given the starting point of already vacant and occupied homes in different forms, squatters add their specific claim of autonomous housing tenure to that diversity while, at the same time, they criticise the bureaucratic modes of social housing, try to discourage the workers' wish to buy, and spread the call for the abolition of private property as a radical approach to oppose urban speculation.

Hodkinson (2012: 4) has classified squatting as a type of 'alternative-oppositional' to the mainstream market provision of "individual home ownership or private renting backed up by some form of state-regulated or funded safety net for those unable to access private market". Squatting, then, is conceived as a 'rival praxis' to the mainstream, an "overly politicised act of defying private property and creating (temporary) autonomous living spaces outside of market and state control as part of a squatting movement" (ibid.). Housing-cooperatives, for example, will fall under the type of 'alternative-additional' because would not be able to contest the dominant housing system as squatters do. Instead, housing co-ops and collective ownership would tend to just add a choice to the private property system by reducing the costs of purchasing. However, the collective ownership may be seen by squatters as a more feasible alternative to capitalism than squatting itself once they have been evicted several times. As Pruijt (2003: 135) notes, squatting combines a political opposition and an economic demand, and these two dimensions may diverge. The satisfaction of the housing need may prevails over the opposition to private property if squatting is the last resort to be adequately housed. Once this option disappears and the resistance is broken, squatters may accept other less oppositional forms of housing such as co-ops, self-construction and rental.

Therefore, in political terms squatting may be defined as "an act of refusal and autonomy, a countercultural prefigurative alternative to the everyday dictates of state and capital" (Hodkinson 2012: 4) while in economic and social terms squatting requires to put in practice a "sustainable way to repair, heat and maintain buildings, and deal with owners, authorities and the community. Effective squatting also entails contributing to the push for a lively, low-income people friendly city." (Pruijt 2003: 134) Although most squatters reject capitalism, they also reject statist solutions for the housing shortage because "state housing within capitalism has been a disempowering and alienating
experience for tenants through the top-down and paternalistic welfare relationship it has created between provider and client." (Hodkinson 2012: 13) Obviously, State housing no less than squatting may be the unique available options for the most deprived social groups. The key question is which one is most efficient in setting up an alternative to the capitalist exchange-value of housing as a commodity and a financial investment. The answer resides in several aspects all mutually intertwined: the size and volume of the public and squatted stocks compared to the dominant home ownership, long-term sustainability in terms of financing the maintenance of the buildings and basic services around, the autonomous ways of collective management and regulations that impede a complete reversal of the form of tenure, etc. Other collective housing alternatives may contribute to erect barriers to the tide of capitalism and neoliberal policies, but, on the one hand, sometimes they are not affordable for the lowest-income groups, and, on the other, they may be trapped into the financial and speculative serfdoms as well as private home ownership usually is.

The pitfalls of home ownership in the UK, Japan and the US

Recent analysis have emphasised the different context, timing and pace at play when neoliberal policies apply to the promotion of home ownership. The cases of UK and Japan, for example, show how political authorities implement liberalism and push speculative dynamics according to those key aspects (Forrest and Hirayama 2009). In the 1980s, Thatcher attacked a widespread Welfare State and, in particular, council housing, in order to get it dismantled and to favour owner-occupied dwellings. Then, Britain had around a third of households living in the State housing sector while by 2000 this figure had shrunk to 12% (Forrest and Hirayama 2009: 1002-1003). A big part of the State-owned housing was sold out (i.e. privatised) to their tenants. Deregulation of the financial market also fuelled competition between mortgages. In contrast, Japan followed a slower pace in the implementation of neoliberal policies. The previous situation consists of a relatively small public rental sector targeted on the poor and special needs groups (Forrest and Hirayama 2009: 1003). Similar to the US case, these groups were not able to purchase their homes if they were offered to. Thus, the level of home ownership in Japan was rarely high even since the 1960s (64%) compared to other industrialised countries. The explanation was a financial policy of subsidising low-interest mortgages up to 49% of the loan in the 1990s. Once home ownership was the dominant pattern, those subsidies disappeared, around the late 1990s. The neoliberal dogma of leaving apart the State intervention from the social and economic affairs, was applied after the State intervention to favour market forces. On the one hand, the financial agents found a new bulk of clients for their loans and, on the other, the low interest rates encouraged the mortgage business.

However, after periods of housing inflation, the prices went downward -between 1989 and 1993 in Britain, and between 1990 and around 2005 in Japan. "This implied the end of the era when home ownership was reliable in terms of property asset accumulation and, instead, the beginning of the new era in which property ownership is higher risk and less sustainable." (Forrest and Hirayama 2009: 1004) The policy responses, then, differed. In Britain some programmes attempted to incorporate low-income groups in the access to ownership. Whilst, in Japan the subsidies to the mortgage interests were implemented again and mass construction was also favoured. Therefore, when the market did not work, the neoliberal policies used the public budget to feed the pursuit of private profit. The promotion of ownership dwelling was, thus, one of the key flagships of such policies intertwined with other measures of privatisation and deregulation. In the periods of rising prices it was the younger households who could not afford to enter the home ownership market. They had to opt for renting to private landlords who also took advantage of the 'buy-to-let' market. First-home seekers, whether young or immigrants, as it happened in Spain, are the first losers of this dominant housing system.

As a consequence, it is evident that the waves of inflation and decline ('mortgage defaults'), backed
by neoliberal policies, created instability, uncertainty and severe social divisions: for example, "the current situation in the British housing market is a potent and toxic mix of sharply increased borrowing costs, a shortage of loan finance, rising numbers of empty and unsaleable properties, a rising number of bad loans and waning confidence in the entire financial system. (...) Growing job insecurity, rising debt and a generally less supportive social security system have also been key ingredients in delaying departure from the parental home and restricting access to home ownership. Here, however, there are differences. In the UK, education-related debt is an important new factor. The growing costs of higher education mean that more students choose to stay at home during university years and also that more young people leave university or college with a large debt. In Japan, however, the key factor is the growth of irregular employment among a younger generation." (Forrest and Hirayama 2009: 1009-1010) In addition, the housing deflation was also at the core of the periods of economic recession which means that the housing bubbles within the institutional context of neoliberalism, form a greater threat to the rest of social and economic life.

As for the US, a recent report about the housing system in New York City pointed out that there is a housing shortage and a housing surplus at the same time (Butler 2012). In this city, around 70% of the population live in rental housing. However, the rents scale to extremely high prices all over the boroughs and, above all, at the core of Manhattan. The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) did not build public housing since the mid 1990s (Shwartz 1999) and around 161,000 home seekers who cannot afford the market prices are still registered in its waiting lists. Official data said that the total estimated vacancy in NYC, 2011, was around 8% of the housing stock although 165,500 vacant units (5% of the total stock) were not available for rent or sale because were dilapidated, under renovation or used for recreational purposes (HVS 2011: 11). On the other hand, the median contract rent-income ratio was 31 percent in 2011, but three in ten of renter households in the City (30 percent) paid 50 percent or more of their household’s income for contract rent, excluding the costs of fuel and utilities (HVS 2011: 7).

Butler (2012: 2) provides two arguments. First, the public housing stock was not affordable for the working classes, although it was built thanks to the State subsidies and, thus, to the contributions of taxpayers. Second, construction workers were among those who could not afford to pay for a decent housing because in the residential projects the wages were below the current union scales. These sharp social cleavages occurred in a context of neoliberal policies. Since 1947 a Rent Control Law ruled the prices and allowed affordable houses for most of the residents. The NYCHA also provided affordable dwellings all over the city, Manhattan included. Many labour unions also developed their own housing projects. In those decades, black people and latinos were the most excluded social groups of the access to a home. Nevertheless, small landlords and real estate lobbies such as the Realty Advisory Board, the Real Estate Board of New York and the New York Building Congress, fought for the abolition of the Rent Control Law in order to "either force out poor, working class or lower middle class tenants and replace them with upper middle class or wealthy tenants that could pay higher rents, or outright destroy their units " (Butler 2012: 5).

The first battle was won by the elites' lobbies and a new Rent Stabilization Law in 1971 substituted the Rent Control Law and rents increase every one or two years came into force. Afterwards, private landlords started a second battle: "In Manhattan’s Lower East Side, West Side and Upper West Side and in the downtown areas of Brooklyn, many landlords tried to force tenants out by denial of services like heat, hot water, repairs and locked exterior doors. Some even encouraged criminals to come into their buildings and prey on tenants or even hired them for that purpose. Those areas were predominantly White neighborhoods that were close to Manhattan’s two main business districts, Midtown and Downtown. The goal was to “gentrify” those areas – to drive out working class tenants and replace them with upper middle class and rich folks who could pay higher rents. In some cases, this meant driving tenants out of existing buildings, doing modest renovations, collecting a J51 Major Capital Improvement tax credit and then renting out the building at the new
higher Rent Stabilization Law rents. In other cases, it meant driving out the tenants, tearing down the existing building and using that city low interest loan and tax credit program to build luxury high-rise apartment buildings in the place of the older buildings. ” (Butler 2012: 7) In other areas that were not so attractive for being gentrified, landlords used the strategy of burning their buildings down to collect the insurance money (Marcuse 1985).

Subsidies to private companies in order to renovate the housing stock, increasing precarious work and irregular low wages, plus the raising of rents every year, contributed to housing inflation. Home ownership was even promoted by landlords who turned their properties into co-operatives and condominiums where the new owners had to pay high "maintenance fees" in addition to the mortgages. This was an easy way to avoid the constraints of the Rent Stabilization Law. Since the early 1980s, the building boom caused rents to soar. The numbers of homeless or bad housed people also went up rapidly. After the decline of 1989, authorities, developers, landlords and workers agreed upon new investments, subsidies and regulations to recover the construction sector. In 1994, for example, the landlords' and constructors' lobbies won a new battle. Rents over $ 2,000 per month were made exempt of the Rent Stabilization. This deregulation had a side effect: "This so-called “luxury decontrol” encouraged landlords to raise up rents as much as possible to get them over the $ 2,000 a month limit. The new rules also encouraged “churning” apartments – encouraging rapid tenant turnover because every time a landlord gets a new tenant, that’s a new lease and a new chance to raise the rent." (Butler 2012: 13) In parallel, the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development [HPD] launched by the Koch administration, had implemented the policy of allowing not for profit housing associations (Community Based Organizations) to deal with the renovation of the most ruined stock (Gould et al. 2001: 188). In other words, a neoliberal policy was fully developed. Deregulation in favour of elites' interests, reduced State intervention, public subsidies to mega-developments (Fainstein 2008), and privatisation of the few "public housing" initiatives paved the way for generating one of the biggest housing bubbles in the world throughout the 2000s. While employment conditions worsened for the working classes and ethnic discrimination overlapped with the housing exclusion, the flows of public funds aimed at helping the construction industry just built dwellings for the affluent upper and global classes.

The most significant squatters' movement in New York took place from the early 1980s in the area of Lower East Side (Manhattan). This neighbourhood was under the pressure of gentrification, demolition and renovations. Initially, around 500 squatters lived in 20 buildings, some of the most dilapidated ones in the area (Pruijt 2003: 139), but the figures grew up to around 3,000 squatters or people involved in the movement, and 25-30 buildings occupied at the mid 1990s. The occupation of vacant lands in order to promote community gardens was also linked to the squatters' activities since the very beginning. Solidarity with homeless organisations and campaigns was also a central claim of this squatters' movement. Most of the squatted properties belonged to the City and 200 squatters living in 11 buildings were able to sign an agreement with the Giuliani's administration (through the mediation of a Federal agency: Pruijt 2003: 142), between 1998 and 2002, in order to get their legalisation. Although most of the squatters opposed the housing policy of the HPD, finally they faced the dilemma of being immediately evicted or entering in the plans for privatising the public housing with the help of community organisations. The legalisation obliged squatters to borrow money from the banks, but some of them still are ineligible for signing mortgages. After the burst of the housing bubble in 2007, new organisations such as O4O (Organize4Occupation) and Picture the Homeless launched new squats and helped people to take over empty buildings (Martínez 2012b).

Means, ends and general discussion
For the social and environmental sustainability of our planet, capitalism is a serious menace. The exploitation of labour and the exploitation of nature have limits that blind capitalists simply dismiss. A continuous economic growth entails an increasing damage over the carrying capacity of societies and ecosystems. Unsurprisingly, once the boundary limits are reached, there are reactions, crisis and reverse effects for all engaged into the growth machine, although those at the bottom of the social hierarchies experience the worst consequences. One of the numerous initiatives of resistance against capitalism is political squatting. The evidence collected indicates that squatters also face internal contradictions and difficult obstacles in order to overcome the powerful capitalist forces currently ongoing. Political squatting is rooted in a history of various decades, and although geographically spread across continents, is still a marginal activity compared to the size of global capitalist flows and commands.

First of all, political squatting refers to both the illegal occupation of alien property without permission and the diverse types of activities performed by activists and participants within the squats and even closely in relation to them. Squatters oppose capitalism when they refuse the rule of private property and reject to pay rent for the satisfaction of a fundamental human right such as housing. But the squatters' alternatives to capitalism also include all the activities typically performed, although not exclusively, within and around the squatted house projects, communes and Social Centres.

Both the practice of trespassing itself and the activities brought about by the squatters contribute to shape an answer to our initial asking. There are multiple motivations behind squatting, although the classic distinction between means and ends remain as an underlying framework. In short, for some squatters the illegal occupation is not the main anti-capitalist action so they just trespass a private property in order to develop a genuine or tentative anti-capitalist project. Squatting, then, is only a means. The end, for them, is to set up a housing project, a commune, a cooperative initiative or a Social Centre open to arts, politics and socialisation in a milieu of freedom, self-management and protest. To have an available, cheap or free space is crucial, but it is mostly conceived as a mere resource. Thus, in case they can pay rent or attain a legal agreement of tenancy, no contradiction with their other anti-capitalist struggles is observed. Obviously, for some squatters the occupation per se is sufficiently anti-capitalist because it challenges the plans and actions of the capitalists over the built environment. Squatting, then, is an end itself. It serves for confronting urban speculation and, at least, to make visible how the elites manage vacancy for their profit while homelessness and precarious access to home are causing enormous suffering. No matter how long a squat can last. Every case of squatting is able to display a hidden urban conflict and this is valuable itself. Of course, apart from living in a squat, the public activities hosted by the squat should be coherent with the kind of antagonistic attitudes that squatting involves. But, in the end, the latter are less prior to the radical gesture of disobedience against the law of property.

In practice, most of the squatters combine claims of one and another extreme sides -or they just do not care too much about the distinction. It would very simplistic to classify squats according to those general drivers, but it is evident that this line shapes a basic level of legitimacy that obliges squatters to keep a balance between the two conceptions or to be consciously inclined towards any of them. The distinction between means and ends provides, in addition, different emphasis on the anti-capitalist dimensions of squatting.

Publicly claimed squatting is an illegal action that implies a clear confrontation with the State, an attack somehow aimed at reverting the established order of a system considered undesirable. From the perspective of the dominant ideology it is only an infringement to the civil or the criminal code. However, it holds its own peculiarities. The taking over abandoned properties is part of a wider struggle against private property -one of the fundamental rights in liberal democracies-, its uneven distribution and the resulting social inequalities. However, squatting goes beyond the impeachment
of private property before the needs of a whole population. It is also a contest to urban speculation, to managerial and authoritarian top-down policies on housing provision, to neoliberalism and the financial colonisation of life, to the consumerist way of living, to the individualisation of social problems and, last but not least, the political alienation engendered by representative democracy. Primarily, squatting is a negation of the already existing domination. But this negation is a global one, including capitalism and many other forms of domination, although the practices of autonomy and resistance are confined to the specific sites and singular conditions where we live. This idea would match what Holloway argues:

"The core of autonomies is a negation and an alternative doing. The very idea of an autonomous space or moment indicates a rupture with the dominant logic, a break or a reversal in the flow of social determination. “We shall not accept an alien, external determination of our activity, we shall determine ourselves what we shall do.” We negate, we refuse to accept the alien determination; and we oppose to that externally imposed activity an activity of our own choice, an alternative doing. The activity that we reject is usually seen as being part of a system, part of a more or less coherent pattern of imposed activity, a system of domination. Many, not all, autonomous movements refer to the rejected pattern of activity as capitalism: they see themselves as being anti-capitalist. The distinctive feature of the autonomist approach, however, is that it involves not just hostility to capital in general, but to the specific life activity imposed by capitalism here and now and an attempt to oppose capital by acting in a different way." (Holloway 2010: 909)

Occupied spaces in the neoliberal city stand as visible breaches of the capitalist engine. The more squatters embrace squatting as an end, the less there is room for any negotiation or cooptation with the capitalist/neoliberal counterpart. From this point of view, the ultimate goal is to delay the eviction as long as possible. While alive and kicking, every squat remains as a threat to capitalism, although not often a very dangerous one. The main shortcoming of this approach comes out when the occupation is defended from a mere ideological opposition to both capitalism and the State -apart from a concrete criticism to the urban speculation at play and from the specific activities and people who need to use the space. However, it needs to be acknowledged that the negative approach towards capitalist institutions, even within the most radical squats (those giving priority to squatting as an end) is usually reinforced with the space open for the positive creation of real alternatives to capitalism, although in a similar low scale. The intensity of such alternatives can be pretty high when matching the strong political ideals of radical squatters such as mutualism, lack of external control, absence of labour specialization, flexibility, self-responsibility and common sense (instead of clearly defined norms), spontaneous voluntarism both in performing tasks and in offering a pay-as-you-can possibility (be it for a concert fee, or for the price of a drink or a meal). Nevertheless, this general statement varies a lot from city to city and from squat to squat, so, again, it just shows an approximation to an underlying pattern.

When squatting is considered an instrumental tool or just a forced step given the unaffordability of urban estates, the political priority resides more in the activities performed than in the anti-capitalist meaning of trespassing itself. The aim is to attack capitalism from the cultural and social side, more than from the economic and legal one. Instead of emphasising the challenge to private property, squatters focus more on building up social networks of solidarity, political campaigns of protest, countercultural artistic expressions and a democratic social economy. The right to housing for the most needed is often included here, although it tends to be enhanced with the virtues of sharing with others the experience of living rather than just providing an individual or family shelter. Although gaining time and delaying the eviction are also important concerns in these cases, we can presume it is the political project and the activities that catalyse what is considered, above all, to hold an anti-capitalist capacity. There is a high likeliness, then, that these squatters would accept easily an
agreement with the owners in order to get the squat legalised. In the cases of homeless people or while facing the absence of affordable social spaces in the city centre, the legalisation of a previous squatting action tends to be claimed as a political victory in terms of a more just distribution of resources. The aftermath of legalisation entails new battles regarding the challenge to pay rents, bills and taxes, and to accomplish with other legal regulations, but without keeping an eye open to strengthen the alternative project.

Another way of re-conceptualising these dilemmas is by distinguishing “formal” and “substantive” drivers behind squatting. Formal alternatives to capitalism are valued according to their juridical form. If law is unjust due to the constraints imposed by capitalism, then open disobedience to that specific law is a clear opposition to the capitalism -especially if the opposition and living illegally can be kept for a long time. Substantive alternatives to capitalism are those that emphasise the creation of authentic and powerful ways of living, counter-cultural activities, cooperative housing and work, horizontal organisation, etc. In this sense, it is the practice and the way things are done what are claimed as an alternative, no matter the legal status that they take. Again, there is a blurred space in between the two ideal types -and reality is often placed at that intermediate level. Squatters’ discourses and practices regarding these two either separated or combined approaches, may also differ significantly. Therefore, self-critical analysis about the anti-capitalist value of concrete practices, means and outcomes are always welcome.

We are facing a power struggle with different languages of valuation expressed by different actors, that have a lot to do with legality, legitimacy and morality. For example Social Centres are willing to show the provision of public services in order to gain social legitimacy against their supposed illegality and against the moral and economic issues of leaving properties abandoned for speculation, deterioration and destruction. Fighting capitalism is more than an ideological or moral slogan: it is based on the positive character of squatting -namely, the activities, social networks and fellow struggles that are created and carried on around a Social Centre, in addition to the ideals, practices and processes of living-in-common developed within a commune, a house-project or a working cooperative. This is how squats gain social legitimacy.

In a game where there is no black or white, but only a series of grey shades, the extent to which squatting becomes an alternative to capitalism contributes to redefine the balance of power in the struggle. When people who until few years ago were dreaming of becoming private owners turn now into squatters -even though only temporarily towards the legalisation of their housing situation- we can observe that squatting ends up winning a battle and capitalism partially losing ground. Three forces are determining the balance of power: squatters -who might be considered as 'uncivil' actors (D'Alisa et al. 2013)-, the civil society and the State/capitalist elites. The capability of squatters to engage with civil society is crucial. For instance in the Spanish case, where cities have experienced a sort of "tsunami" regarding the recent changes in land-use, empty buildings were abundant and squatting has been increasingly recognised as the symbol of radical and pragmatic approaches to counter these processes. In that context, almost no political authorities explored the option of legalising squats, so that most types of squats fell under a broad range of social reactions and movements against an irrational and unsustainable capitalism.

Home ownership can be a means for social control among other unintended effects. Once you have to pay a mortgage or a rent, you cannot exit from the capitalist labour markets unless the amount to pay is low enough. Carlsson and Manning (2010), for example, suggest a strategic exodus to Nowtopia which implies the liberation from paid work. Considering that the whole capitalist system is rooted on the exploitation of labour as a commodity, and that the sale of life-time to the market is necessary to earn the money to pay for housing, then time becomes the central oikonomic element to understand how squatting emerges as a local alternative to capitalism. In other words, squats are rich in time when time is preserved from commodification and turns into a creative labour process,
without distinction between productive and reproductive work, and while improving the role of the household as a place for the production of use values.

In doing so under the veil of illegality squatters need to be capable and self-responsible. Do-it-yourself (or do-it-ourselves) practices within self-help housing and cooperative activities without any professional qualification may cause accidents. But a decentralized self-organisation may also save diverse social and economic costs. Provided that there are plenty of abandoned places to squat, the sufficient condition for self-compliant responsible squatting to scale up is to have capable and skilled persons that undertake the role of doing things safely and without a central control.

If the combination of squatting with an environmentalist approach sets the ground for the emergence of powerful alternatives, the combination of squatting with feminist claims is one of the most far-reaching alternatives. Contrary to capitalistic pretended de-politisation logic, "the personal is political". Patriarchal domination and the social exclusion of different gender and sexual identities are intertwined with capitalist domination, and squats where only the latter is rejected tend to fail in providing a safe, inclusive and egalitarian household.

In sum, the major advantages of squatting as a local alternative to capitalism are self-determination and direct action. These constitute a mind decolonisation from the collective imaginary that gives authority to the State and the market. Autonomy, then, is produced not only by recalling individual freedom and independent communities, but, above all, due to the practical experiences of collective action and decision apart from the elites' dictates.

The second step which creates the material possibilities for setting up a local alternative to capitalism consists of a drastic reduction of the supply of salaried labour force - that is to say, one's sale of life-time to capitalism. Thus, less money is put in circulation because no rent is paid and/or because most squatters typically engage in productive activities that do not account for labour time as a commodity. This is also an additional meaning of autonomy: to get rid of money as well as of the goods, services and informations that are only accessible with money. Squatters try to escape the empire of money by sharing collectively their resources, including the reclaimed urban spaces they need for live in. There are clear limitations to this since squatting requires, paradoxically, the existence of capitalism and its uneconomic processes for abandoned buildings to be occupied and plenty of waste and raw materials to be scrapped, elaborated and reinvented. Capitalism produces vacancy, trash and unemployable people, but these aspects are not at the core of the growth machine. Squatters take them in a positive manner in order to put in evidence the irrational and unjust functioning of capitalism. Then, there is no essential dependency of squatters on capitalism, but just squatters' tactics to reverse the capitalist dynamics by reaching a material autonomy. This is more likely to occur in urban squats and, even more, in rural squats because the closeness to nature and to the sources of primary materials - not mediated by capitalism - are closer (Cattaneo 2008). This is where the local alternative to capitalism reaches its greatest intensity, although it is not much visible nor much applicable to the society at large.

At a first glance, present times do not look like as a rosy period for squatting. The strength of the movement has been decreasing in Amsterdam, strongly repressed in Berlin, annihilated in Geneva, co-opted in NYC, less visible in Brighton and London, etc. Although a more promising picture comes from the Mediterranean area (Rome, Madrid, Barcelona, Athens, etc.) the recent criminalisation in The Netherlands and Britain cut many lines of growing and sustaining squatting where it proved to be very efficient and socially accepted. However, as long as there are housing needs and empty buildings, squatting will probably continue to flourish. Squatters may also continue with their radical politics through means other than squatting. In Berlin and Madrid squatting had a strong influence in anti-capitalist politics and struggles so that squatting practices can scale-up to other sectors of society. The moments of severe crisis of capitalism represent the
The best opportunity to appreciate that influence and the renewed interest in squatting as such. Due to the limitation of empty spaces, squatting cannot attack the whole capitalist housing stock. The opportunity to scale-up this limitation occurs when people stop paying rents to landlords and mortgages to banks. Then, the dwellers lose their legal titles to reside in their homes, but they still have the chance to remain occupying them or to reoccupy them in case they are evicted. Since 2008, this has happened increasingly at least in Spain and the United States. More and more people became squatters, even without any previous knowledge of the squatters' movement -or in spite of the stereotypes that mass media spread about the squatters. This leaves room for scaling up, but entering in the realm of the “if”: if most empty spaces were occupied combined with most tenants stop paying their rent/mortgage, then capitalism would enter a far deeper crisis, and along with it, also the State, lacking the legal control over the activities performed within. Surely it can be an alternative, but it is difficult to imagine how robust or sustainable would be in a concrete given situation.

Another possible option is the creation of an alternative legality or movement institutions in a post-capitalist context. This would imply the legalisation of all the squats for housing or social purposes. However, legalisation would not come alone: more citizen control from the bottom should be required to impose limits to any economic speculation, to satisfy human needs apart from the motivation of profit and capital gains, and to regulate the housing market and urban planning according to just, environmental and distributive principles. This horizon would entail a higher stability and applicability to a wider scale compared to the contentious intensity of the waves of illegal occupations. This can be observed, for example, in the increasing number of housing occupations in Rome, with an increasing number of homeless and home seekers squatting for housing, getting politicised and, in some cases, their housing occupations beginning to turn into social centres too. The practice of squatting expands beyond the non-capitalist satisfaction of the housing need to cover a wider variety of needs. Moreover, political institutions, although at the margin, are also called to attend their demands and to change their policies of privatisation, and squatters amplify the housing conflict instead of a self-reclusion in the freed squats.

A third path is to consider “entrepreneurial squatting” (Prujt 2012) which is generally based on a mix of professional and voluntary work, as it occurs in many autonomous squatted and non-squatted Social Centres. In the context of crisis, sell-off and unemployment, this form of squatting and hybrid cooperation might spread beginning from grass-root projects. The major reference is the transformation of factories that go bankrupt and keep on working under workers' control and self-management. The same is attempted in some public spaces, vacant lands and former public services. There are issues of financing, economic inequalities and co-optation by the "city branding" managers, that still deserve more careful attention within these experiments, but many squatting projects already indicate how things can be done. As Thomas Aguilera (in a collective debate) observes “squatting is experimentation and innovation. These social innovations diffuse and contaminate outside the laboratory of the squatted building, outside the neighbourhood, outside the city. Thus, the relevant question is not any more whether an enlargement process to the large scale is possible because squatters already show that it is. The question should be how to multiply places of occupation and conflicts where the daily political experiences are sources of alternative creation against capitalism.”

There are many different types of squatting. Their anti-capitalist outcomes depend on the interplay of their discourses and practices, but also on the specific context where they are located. All forms of squatting point to some alternatives to the capitalism but the internal diversity is not always known nor accepted. For example, it is usual to attend debates where some squatters accuse others to be reformist, while keeping for themselves the label of true radical and revolutionaries. The opposite is also frequent: some squatters reject aesthetic radicalism uniquely based on slogans, attitudes, clothes and agonistic resistance, instead of setting up long term projects of fighting
capitalism and, simultaneously, building up networks and movements. However, it is not so often to focus on the social class of origin of squatters, their sources of income, their styles of consumption, their real practices and their actual social connections. And more strikingly, sometimes the most time wasting conflicts are related to the internal division of labour, the reproduction of patriarchy, personal attitudes, how to manage the money or the use of drugs.

Hans Prujit (2003) argues that squatting done by a housing movement differs from the practices of the squatters' movement. While the first conceives squatting as a tactical move and it is ready for cooptation, the latter embraces squatting as both a mean and a primary goal in itself. As we have argued before, diverse positions may be incorporated to any of the both. In addition, both types of squatting have a multiplying effect which is positive to attack different flanks of capitalism. At the local scale squatting provides material resources and also a political experience of self-organisation. We have named this contribution as material and practical autonomy. At a global scale, squatting may defy capitalism if it is diffused and expanded. Autonomy from capitalism would be obtained through a combination of struggles and an increasing social control over the crucial economic sectors such as the housing one. This can also entail the possibility of new institutions and political regimes where the legalisation of squats is feasible, desirable and useful for clearing the empire of capitalism. As Pattaroni and Breviglieri (2011: 164) remark, "compromise becomes a political art, both subversive and necessary". Thus, squats may overcome capitalism if after-squats are really low-cost, affordable and prefigurative of a cooperative way of living. Squats are commons, and not only communes. They become socially legitimate when recognised as examples of disobedience to unjust situations, autonomous self-organisations and shared resources for the satisfactions of basic needs.

Conclusions

Hodkinson suggests that anti-capitalist housing alternatives may adopt three strategic perspectives:
1) the prefigurative ones (or 'living-in-common') as those that "try to meet our housing needs and desires through the creation of non-hierarchical, small-scale, directly democratic, egalitarian and collective forms of housing in our everyday lives " (Hodkinson 2012: 16) while they express "life despite capitalism" and "the pragmatic anarchist approach of solving our housing conditions in the here and now through the extension of dweller control and mutual aid" (ibid.);
2) the defensive ones (or 'housing-as-commons') as the preservation of public housing from privatisation, and even the defence of home owners from repossessions, evictions, demolitions, commodification and displacement due to the speculative attacks against housing as a use-value and as the crucial bond with other social groups around;
3) the [counter-]hegemonic ones as a development of a 'common housing movement' where creation (prefigurative experiences) and resistance (defensive struggles) coexist, expand, proliferate and diversify.

Squatters work basically with the prefigurative forces of autonomous and self-help housing alternatives. However, the squatters will not get rid of capitalism if they just oppose home ownership and private property. Instead, Hodkinson proposes to join strengths with residents in public housing and with weak home owners threatened by foreclosures and gentrification, for example. Since home ownership and the State housing within the present capitalism are quite functional to the elites' interests, any anti-capitalist strategy should also focus on the viable ways to transform these regimes into more collectively-owned and self-managed ones.

Squatting opposes private property as one of the basis of the social inequalities within the dominant
capitalist system. In addition, as we have argued before, squatting also opposes other essential mechanisms of capitalism -mainly, commodification, urban speculation, unbearable financial debts and the inflation of housing prices. Most of the squats hold the virtue of combining a broad critique to the capitalist system as a whole and a practical solution to some of its major contradictions on the real estate sector. Squatters, thus, contribute with practical solutions to the housing needs for those involved in the squatters' movement and for those who self-house themselves taking advantage of the vacant stock of houses and buildings. Although these direct actions are often temporary and fragile, they offer an accessible, affordable and efficient alternative to the failures of both the housing market and the public policies on housing matters. These failures become evident with the burst of financial bubbles and the increasing poverty which entails.

Squatting cannot provide housing for all and is not able to challenge the whole capitalist system, but it can serve to some of those excluded by capitalism and to those who wish to change the system by their involvement in a broader way of living, political campaigns, other social movements, etc. This is the reason why we do not see a big gap between so-called 'social' and 'political' squatting -or between squatting just for housing and squatted Social Centres. Different types of squatting, along with other urban struggles ('defensive' ones, for example), may be combined in order to increase their anti-capitalist (or 'counter-hegemonic') effects, if this is the case. The local political, economic and environmental context suggests that the crises of capitalism vary significantly and so do the specific reactions against them, such as the squatters' movement.

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