BOOK REVIEWS

Martínez López, Miguel Angel (Eds.) The Urban Politics of Squatters' Movements: The Contemporary City, Palgrave McMillan, 2018

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How and why do squatting movements rise, fall, and rise again all over the Europe? *The Urban Politics of Squatters' Movements* is the systematic attempt to answer these crucial questions, providing rich insight into squatting practices within a geographically broad and historically deep perspective. The authors of this collection, all involved in the Squatting Europe Kollective network (SqEK), explore nine European cities that have been sites of enduring squatting movements from 1960 until today, shedding light on cycles of protests, waves of mobilizations, and processes of institutionalization. Big metropolitan areas scattered in all Europe (Rome, Berlin, Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, and Copenhagen) are analyzed along with smaller urban areas (Seville, Rotterdam, and Brighton); this allows authors to retrace common features between northern and southern towns as well as between cities with different size. With variegated empirical materials and comparative perspective that seeks to gather different cases together, the volume edited by Martínez is a challenging, stimulating contribution to the field of urban and social movements studies.

In all the cases squatting implies the use of a building (for living or for performing activities) without the consent of the owner (Pruijt, 2013) but it occurs through different rhythms, forms of expressions, goals, and performances. The book accounts for all these specificities without renouncing to inscribe them into

general paths. Each author explores deeply specific squatting movements in specific urban contexts, putting them in relation to broad, epochal changes and mobilizations. Even though squatting movements basically react to the same broad critical junctures (as with the neo-liberal politics of 1990s and the economic crisis of 2008), they do it following different paths. In my opinion, this insight is very important in the state of urban and squatting studies. Indeed, because of the rich variations that these mobilizations offer, scholars tend to investigate them on a case-by-case basis, not always paying sufficient attention to the resulting whole picture. To the contrary, looking at the general features of different mobilizations is useful in adapting conceptualization to new forms of mobilizations, and in updating the analytical tools we use to interpret the current challenges of squatting practice (Mayer, 2013).

The fifteen authors deal with different issues: one focuses on the contextual factors (structure) that have influenced squatting movement across history, while others concentrate on the construction of squatters' identity and internal dynamics (agency). Thus, the chapters cover varied topics: the repression of movements (chapter 3), the relationship between squatting practices and the process of urban transformation (chapter 9), internal divisions between squatters (chapter 6), the factors triggering mobilizations (chapter 2, 4, 5), and the characteristics of the institutionalization processes (chapter 7, 8, 10). This complexity is enhanced by the fact that authors rely on different methodologies and databases, created through different criteria.

As stated by Martínez in the introduction, homogeneity is not a feature of the volume. The contributors, even when they use the same notions of "cycle of protest," "waves," and "institutionalization," do not share the same ideas about concepts (Piazza and Martínez, p. 229) and they offer different interpretations of these terms. Despite this, remarkably, the volume appears to be a choral work. A *fil rouge* gathers all the case studies together into a complete picture: the attempt to enlighten the dynamics that make, or do not make, squatting practices a "squatting movement." This makes of the volume a broad analysis able to "investigate the articulation of socio-spatial and political opportunities and the squatters' strategic choices" (Martínez, p. 6). The book's perspective on socio-spatial structure (Soja, 1980) becomes a concrete lens of analysis, together with the attention on squatters' strategies. This double approach reveals that movements are not about mechanical reactions but rather a sum of choices, decisions and evaluations that are dependent on circumstances and boundaries. In other

terms, the many researches contained in this collection shows that we should not assume a trade-off perspective considering movements completely determined, set by the structure of the context, and neither as actors completely free to act.

Even if unclear, some peculiarities are revealed that distinguish the dynamics of squatting movements in the southern and central-northern cities. In Spain and Italy, urban restructuring (and the gentrification process), combined with specific socio-spatial and political changes in the structure, helped the movement to grow. Moreover, in this area squatted social centers are prevalent. In the central-northern cities examined (Paris, Brighton, Berlin, and Copenhagen) squatting is widely used by housing movements. In some of these cases squatted social centers (SSCs) entered the scene because squatting practice has been adopted also by autonomist and anarchist activists. It is interesting to note that in this area the state authorities use to have strong reactions, forcing squatters to apply for legalization or to be evicted from the occupied buildings. Therefore, more nuanced relationships between institutions and movements seem to be more difficult in this geographical area. However, according to what emerges from the researches, the pioneering movements of 1960s and 1970s have largely influenced squatting practices in all Europe (Piazza and Martínez, p. 244).

Along with empirical data, the volume offers contributions at the analytical level in two main directions. First, in these pages the usual distinctions between social centers and squats for housing purposes are narrowed, and the two configurations are analyzed as part of the same social practice. (However, the most part of the work focuses on SSCs.) Indeed, the research collected in the book corroborates the fact that even if the two types of squats respond to different political and cultural traditions, they have similar traits (Piazza, 2012). Secondly, the category of "squatting movement" (Martínez, 2013) is constructed and challenged at the same time. According to Martínez, squatting movement is more than the sum of squatting practices: "we conceive the existence of squatting movements beyond the mere aggregation of squatting practices, when continuous challenges to the status quo are performed by all who squat" (p. 15). Nevertheless, Martínez also points out that "squatting practice may shape squatting movements […] but it is not always straightforward" (p. 14). This practice can hold different meanings, and squatters may have a shared identity just for a short time. So, Martínez advises that this category is at risk of becoming an academic construction from without, (p. 14). So, the editor pushes the readers to use this category while pay-

ing attention to the contingencies to which it applies, reducing the risk of projecting an instrument of analysis on the reality being studied.

An Overview of the Book's Content

After an introduction by Martínez (*chapter 1*), the book is divided into two parts. The first collects the case studies and the second discuss and compare them. Therefore, the first part is to be considered a sum of descriptive and in-depth research, and the second part is a conclusive section.

Chapter two is dedicated to Madrid. Here Martínez examines the circumstances that shape the squatting movement in this city, in particular the Squatted Social Centers. He describes the trajectories of SSCs in relation to the rise and decline of other notable movements (Indignados, for example). He describes squatting practices within a broad set of urban changes, distinguishing protest cycles and identifying the spatial resources that are behind the different waves of squatting.

In *Chapter three*, Cattaneo, Gonzales, Barranco, and Llobet account for the process of institutionalization of squats in Barcelona. Authors analyze how SSCs change strategies in reaction to the political opportunity structure of the context in which they operate, revealing prominent features from the beginning of movement until today. They also address the role of squatters' identity in the process of institutionalization or refusal of negotiation with authorities.

Chapter four deals with a smaller Spanish city: Seville. The authors (Diaz Parra and Martínez) analyze the evolution of squatting practice in order to test to what extent change in the socio-spatial structure constrains or enables the squatter movement's spatiality. Their work aims to understand to what extent urban configuration is relevant in explaining changes in squatters' movements.

Mudu and Rossini, in *chapter five,* write about squatting in Rome, not identifying specific cycles of squatting but different waves of occupations of empty buildings, retracing distinguishing paths for SSCs and housing squats. They relate squatting practice to the complex geography of the city, revealing a composite scenario. For historical reasons, squatted spaces in Rome have provided services that are neglected by institutions. This opens opportunities and problems (for example the opportunity to be legalized but the risk to be silenced in the protest of political claims) that the two authors explore in depth.

In *chapter six*, Aguilera problematizes in time and space the relationship between institutions and squatters in Paris. Besides the two options of "negotiations" or "refusal to cooperate," Aguilera identifies more nuanced forms of interactions that have characterized squatting cycles. This makes of squatting movement a complex reality, composed of many squatters' identities and internal divisions. Nevertheless, according to the author, all configurations contribute to the evolvement of urban society.

In *chapter seven*, Azozomox and Kuhn retrace the history of squatting in Berlin, identifying major waves and cycles. Their analysis addresses the important issue of legalization of squatted space not just as an achievement for movement but also as a strategy through which the State tries to split up movements, criminalizing the most radical branch. Therefore, legalization demonstrates itself as an instrument to affirm the social function of squatting, denying its political relevance.

In *chapter eight* Steiger discusses cycles of squatting in Copenhagen. She basically argues that changes in squatting practice must be ascribed to changes in spatial structure, and she identifies five cycles of squatting in the city. She focuses on a long-lasting example of squatting in Copenhagen, *FreeTown Christiana,* the largest inner-city squat in northern Europe. This example is important because it shows how contingencies and specific experiences count for the success or failure of squatting in a town.

Dee, author of *chapter nine*, concentrates on the political squatters' movement and social centers in Rotterdam, addressing explicitly the relationship between gentrification and squatting practices. The chapter underlines how, even if underestimated by authorities, and even if not always connected in a whole organic movement, the phenomenon of squatting exists and it is relevant in setting the geographies of this urban space. The author provides overall perspective on the kinds of squats in Rotterdam, classifying them through types of space (residential, offices, municipal offices, and so on).

C*hapter ten,* once again by Dee, analyzes the social center in Brighton, retracing its development from 1970 until 2013. Even if small, the squatting movement in Brighton turned out to be persistent and clustered around long-lasting projects. Indeed, squatters gravitating around these projects have affected urban policy in different ways, protesting and taking affirmative action on the use of space.

With *chapter eleven*, Piazza and Martínez open the comparative section, providing an overall perspective on these European cities. On the basis of the case studies analyzed above, they discuss similarities and peculiarities of southern cities and central-northern urban spaces, retracing the various stages of autonomous urban politics. After the complexity of the methods authors use to illustrate the concept of squatting movements, cycles, and waves, Piazza and Martínez make attempt to recompose all the chapters in a complete picture.

In *chapter twelve*, Rossini and Debelle provide a comparison between the various cities on the basis of the process of institutionalization, co-aptation, and repression that the squats have been subjected to. Models of interrelation with authorities are part of broader attempt at an "inclusion" or "exclusion" paradigm. At the same time, they problematize these two trends, showing how vibrant creative spaces can be transformed into attractive commodities (Shaw, 2005).

Chapter *thirteen*, by Gonzales, Diaz-Parra, and Martínez explicitly relates the squatted social centres with the housing question, underlining how relevant housing shortage and policies are in shaping the squatters' claims and practices. Thus, this chapter shows up how many relations exists, *ipso facto*, between squats for housing purposes and squats for social and cultural activities. The authors argue that housing issues have not always been related to the squatting movement and they retrace genesis and implications. In line with this, they identify four configurations of SSCs in relation to the models of housing purposes.

A Textbook for Researchers and Activists: Embodying Analysis in the Field

Getting to a conclusion, *The Urban Politics of Squatters' Movements* is an important contribution from an empirical perspective. It does not just provide a variegated description of the main features of squatting in the nine cities under analysis; it also looks at the past decades of squatting with a demystifying lens, revealing the constraints and repression to which squatter movements are always subjected. Moreover, it points out that squatting dynamics are not defined only by political, alternative projects but also by internal contradictions, divisions, and rival strands among some groups of squatters. This book, importantly, is a warning for all scholars working in the field: not all forms of squatting contest the reproduction of the capitalistic city (Martínez, p. 3). Squatting is a practice that re-

quires specific conditions to develop its contentious power, to achieve results, and to work as a model of broader social transformations.

At first sight, with a narrow perspective on "squatting," the book could appear a useful instrument only for scholars who study urban mobilizations. To the contrary; from these pages the power of squatting as prefigurative politics emerges (Piazza, 2013; Yates, 2015). This means that, looking at the strategies and performances of activists and squatters, we can understand and imagine alternative ways of constructing cities and societies. Therefore, the book is an important instrument also for all those engaged in studying the urban processes and alternatives to capitalism.

Moreover, with its accurate historical perspective, the collection shows clearly that history is not about the past: it always has a role in setting the present dynamics of collective action, in conditioning the strategies of movements and the spatial, social, and political structure in which they act. However, it does not mean contemporary movements are mere copies of the old ones. Even if new waves of squatting are not *ex novo*, they produce new dynamics, opening new cleavages. So they have a role in shaping urban scenarios because, as Martínez writes in the introduction, "squatting always has political implications" (p. 2).

In addition, the richness of data offers insights for testing the lens we use to approach urban mobilizations and, in case, to put them in doubt. The notable notion of the "right to the city," which scholars use to interpret the practice of squatting, appears just few times in the book. I think this is an added value. Indeed, the concept, which has become often a fuzzy and puzzling notion (Purcell, 2006), could be reworked on the basis of what results from specific cases under analysis. In this sense, we have the chance to rethink this concept based on the evidence coming from the case studies rather than moving from a theoretical, academic reconsideration. The "right to the city" is deduced from specific squatting practices; it is rooted in the contingencies of each urban area. For this reason, it shows up as a transformative concept that can vary according to the cycle of the protests and specific contexts.

Last but not least, the importance of this collection relies on the mission of SqEK network, which is to conduct research, analyze, and discuss not just urban movements but *within* and *for* urban movements. So, also in this new production, SqEK proves to be a crucial bridge between academic works and the vibrant reality on which scholars aim to shed light. Therefore, it represents the attempt to

reconnect the always questionable trade-off between analysis and social struggles.

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