Citizens against Austerity: a Comparative Reflection on Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) and Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern (BZV)[1]

Ciudadanos contra la austeridad: una reflexión comparativa entre la Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) y Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern (BZV)

Vicente Ordóñez[2]
Universidad Carlos III (España)
Ramón A. Feenstra[3]
Universidad Jaime I (España)
Simon Tormey[4]
University of Sydney (Australia)

Abstract

Despite significant socioeconomic differences between Spain and Germany, the two countries have witnessed the growing presence of activist initiatives addressing housing problems. *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH)*

in Spain and Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern (BZV) in Berlin are struggling to stop evictions and defend citizens' housing rights. The goal of this paper is to reflect on how politics are developing in relation to austerity and the lack of basic goods for parts of the population. This paper adopts a qualitative methodology based on a comparative case study of PAH and BZV to study the similarities and differences between the two platforms. The paper focuses especially on PAH and BZV ideological and sociological backgrounds, political repertories and political logics.

Key-words: activism, evictions, housing rights, anti-austerity protests, political repertoire.

Resumen

A pesar de las significativas diferencias socioeconómicas entre España y Alemania, ambos países han sido testigos de la creciente presencia de las iniciativas activistas que abordan los problemas de acceso a la vivienda. Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) en España y Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern (BZV) en Berlín luchan para detener los desahucios y defender los derechos de vivienda de la ciudadanía. El objetivo de este trabajo consiste en reflexionar sobre cómo se está desarrollando la política en relación con la austeridad y la falta de bienes de primera necesidad para sectores de la población. En este trabajo se adopta una metodología cualitativa basada en un estudio de caso comparativo entre PAH y BZV con la finalidad de estudiar las similitudes y diferencias entre ambas plataformas. El artículo se centra sobre todo en los orígenes ideológicos y sociológicos, los repertorios y las lógicas políticas de PAH y BZV.

Palabras-clave: activismo, desahucios, derecho a la vivienda, protestas contra la austeridad, repertorio político.

In the midst of economic and political crisis in Spain, Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform of Those Affected by Mortgages, PAH) has initiated a variety of actions, such as stopping evictions, occupying banks and vacant apartment blocks, *escraches* or public denunciations against politicians, online petitions, and proposals for better laws to regulate housing. The aim of these tactics is to fight against austerity measures and to help citizens with severe mortgage problems. Given the centrality of mortgage debt to the expansion of finance capitalism in Spain, PAH has thus come into direct conflict with the banking sector as well as the government, which prioritises this sector above others. In Berlin, a similar set of initiatives was launched

in 2012 to confront Germany's housing issues. Despite socioeconomic differences between the two countries, PAH's style of housing-focused actions has resonated with the Berlin group Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern (Platform Impeding Evictions, BZV).

Tellingly, both platforms emerged during a period of social democratic administration in Spain and Berlin. PAH was born in 2009 during Zapatero's PSOE government, while BZV arose in 2012 with the SPD-CDU coalition led by social democrat Wowereit. Activists of both platforms complain about the alignment of social democratic parties with austerity measures and neoliberal policies. This has created a vacuum in the field of organised politics, leaving many ordinary citizens with the choice of either giving up on politics altogether or defending their own interests using the tools available. PAH and BZV have gathered momentum from the perception that far away politicians have become complicit in their precarious situation. What informs their political stance? What are the key similarities and differences in the two platforms (PAH and BZV)? How do these platforms mobilise new actors, tactics, discourses and forms of organisation? Finally, in a larger sense, what is the significance of such groups for democracy?

Methodology

The methodology is based on a comparative case study of the PAH and BZV. We aim to explore and reflect on the dynamics of these specific groups and the similarities and differences in their struggles against austerity using qualitative methods: first, in-depth interviews, and second, content analysis of books, official statistical information, journalistic materials, websites, Facebook pages, YouTube and Bambuser videos. The interviews were held in Spain and Germany. In Spain, where PAH has chapters in more than 145 towns and cities, the interviews were held with activists from small, medium and large cities, such as Castellón, Valencia and Barcelona. In Germany, the interviews were held only in Berlin due to BZV's local character. Interviews were held in different phases: Barcelona (17 March through 21 March 2013), Valencia and Castellón (14 June through 21 June 2013), Berlin (7 July through 11 July 2014), and Barcelona and Castellón (28 July through 31 July 2014). In total, 26 PAH and BZV members were interviewed.[5] We held one-on-one interviews and small group interviews to permit a free flow of opinions. In addition, we observed collective actions organised by both platforms.

---

[5] Members of PAH and BZV include activists, people threatened by evictions, people who have been evicted or people whose eviction was stopped.

Additionally, we have analysed multiple sources and inputs from various origins, which are grouped into five main types:

1) Eight activists' websites.
2) Twenty-three journalistic and media materials.
3) Eleven key Facebook pages, dozens of YouTube and Bambuser videos.
4) Documentaries, notably *Mietrebellen* (2014), directed by Gertrud Schulte Westenberg and Matthias Coers, on tenants' struggles in Berlin, and *#LaPlataforma, un documental sobre la PAH* [#LaPlataforma, a documentary about the PAH] filmed by SICOM and Namuss Films in 2012.
5) Several books published by activists or theorists of both platforms. Especially significant are Colau & Alemany (2013 and 2014), and Nowak (2014).

A common problem with respect to both countries is a scarcity of official statistics on the number and nature of evictions.[6] Nevertheless, we have been able to find some relevant data on evictions in Spain and Berlin. According to the Banco de España, there were 32,490 family home evictions in Spain in 2012.[7] In addition, this same source suggested an increase in the evictions number for the year 2013, which increased the total to over 39,000 evictions (Romero, 2014). More recently, in August 2014, the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (National Statistical Institute) suggested a 19,5 per cent increase in the number of evictions compared with the first trimester of 2013.[8] Meanwhile, in Berlin, replying to a question of the Berlin parliamentarian Andreas Otto, *Grüne* (The Greens), district courts reported 9,072 actions for eviction to the social welfare offices in Berlin in 2009 and 9,934 in 2010.[9] However, the number of evictions that actually occurred in Berlin is unknown. BZV estimates a number of "20 evictions per day" in 2014 (Living in the Crisis, 2014, p. 17).

---

[6] PAH has repeatedly condemned the dearth of reliable statistical information: "the poor quality of statistical data is a political decision based on making invisible the evictions problem". PAH also complains that once such data finally become available, it is confusing and misleading. In similar terms, BZV complains about exactly the same aspect: "there is no official statistic on forced evictions".
PAH complaints available at:
http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/2014/07/09/los-nuevos-datos-del-ine-vuelven-a-mostrar-el-fracaso-de-ley-criminal-del-pp-y-la-vulneracion-del-derecho-a-la-vivienda/
BZV complaints available at:
https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=367088200073552&story_fbid=399498620165843
[7] Information available at: http://www.bde.es/f/webbde/GAP/Secciones/SalaPrensa/NotasInformativas/Briefing_notes/es/notabe10-05-13.pdf
[8] See INE http://www.ine.es/daco/daco42/eh/eh0114.pdf. According to PAH calculations, there have been a total of 547,966 evictions since 2007. See http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/2014/07/09/los-nuevos-datos-del-ine-vuelven-a-mostrar-el-fracaso-de-ley-criminal-del-pp-y-la-vulneracion-del-derecho-a-la-vivienda/
[9] Source: Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin - Drucksache 17/10 269

The content analysis was developed between 2013 and 2014. During that period, we have studied PAH's and BZV's reactions to austerity, evictions and the lack of respect for the right to adequate housing, focusing especially on their:

(1) Ideological and sociological backgrounds
(2) Political repertories
(3) Political logics

PAH and BZV: the context

PAH is the most important organisation involved in the struggle for change in the Spanish mortgage law and the most important platform against evictions (Romanos, 2014). This network emerged in Barcelona in 2009, at the moment of economic crisis, and today is consolidated in all major cities across Spain. In 2011, after the 15 May 2011 call-out and the eruption of massive citizen protests (Castañeda, 2012; Castells, 2012; Fuster, 2012; Della Porta, 2013; Romanos, 2013; Feenstra, 2015), PAH attracted many activists in what became a reciprocal relation between PAH and 15M. As Romanos notes, "the period of intense mobilisation initiated in May 2011 has facilitated the recruitment of a large number of people into the activities and organizational structure of previously active social movement organizations such as PAH" (2014, p. 297). At the same time, 15M held protests against the mortgage law and against the evictions as part of its own concerns (Romanos, 2014; Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Ordóñez Roig, 2015).

Many ordinary people in Spain have been angered by the lack of attention to housing problems; as Human Rights Watch research has revealed, "neither the central government nor parliament has conducted any in-depth inquiry into banking practices with respect to mortgages, or into the role of intermediaries such as real estate agencies" (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 55). PAH has been successful in raising awareness among Spanish society with regard to the exploitative clauses in many bank mortgages and the ability of banks to take possession of assets in lieu of payment (Colau & Alemany, 2013). Many of the demands, slogans, and political actions promoted by PAH can be found in citizens' initiatives in Berlin. In this city, even though accommodation is meant to be social housing, it is becoming increasingly unaffordable, in particular for pensioners, migrants and the working class, and workers in general, who have suffered excessive rental increases. Several platforms, groups and neighbourhood assemblies have emerged in Berlin to promote solidarity networks of those affected by housing problems. One of the organisations that has had considerable impact and has the ability to mobilise large numbers is BZV. This is because it has focused on the housing issue providing a basis for activists concerned about this particular issue to mobilise (Nowak, 2014).

BZV emerged in the Berlin districts of Neukölln and Kreuzberg after the attempted eviction of Nuriye Cengiz, a disabled pensioner of Turkish origin (Nowak, 2014). The roots of the platform can be found in groups and initiatives against rent increases, gentrification or forced displacement of tenants as "Kampagne gegen Zwangsumzüge" [the struggle against evictions], "Cafe Reiche" or "stadtvernetzt" (Baumert, 2014, p. 29). BZV members acknowledge the importance of PAH in providing the impetus for their own group, noting that "in any case, a source of inspiration was the anti-eviction movement in Spain. We have personal contacts there. We have also adopted the symbol with the stop sign from the Spanish movement" (Nowak, 2014, p. 50).

The problem of housing in Berlin has a long history, but has intensified in recent years due to speculation, low interest rates, urban population growth, gentrification and the euro crisis. "The rents [in Berlin] increased over 2011:6-2012:2 by 7.0%" (Kholodilin and Mense, 2012, p. 16). In the past few years, increasing rental prices have caused not only the displacement, ghettoisation, impoverishment and destitution of thousands of families but also the transformation of 30,000 rental apartments into condominiums (Ein Recht auf Stadt für alle, 2011). The city is no longer a living space or a system of active relationships; as one BZV activist noted, "the rental market has transformed the city beyond recognition in ten years" (BZV member 5).

PAH and BZV, despite their different spatial definition (the first, at a national level, and the second, at a local one), have a relevant component in common: the importance of the city as their *natural* territory. This is not a minor point because the city is the front line for austerity politics, given the juxtaposition of the social fault lines that define politics after financialisation. The city is home to the wealthiest elements of the population and increasingly is the site for inflows of speculative capital and elites seeking safe harbour for funds in countries threatened by intervention from the ECB or IMF (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer, 2012; Harvey, 2012). At the same time, cities are sites of inward migration by those seeking a better life and by those unable to find work in small towns and villages. Thus, cities are marked by huge inequalities that exacerbate the sense of entitlement, on the one hand, and inequality, on the other. PAH and BZV come out of this urban context, a context in which ordinary people and the working classes become agents of the transformation of what Lefebvre called the "right to the city" (1995). This could be understood as the effort of ordinary citizens to defend and protect their own housing rights through participatory processes and everyday practices. In this respect, PAH and BZV are in the vanguard of efforts to confront the social, political, cultural and economic relations of the city. This is primarily because the two platforms are working in three directions: activism (stopping evictions, squat supporting, and so on), monitoring processes (gentrification, forced displacements, commodification

of housing, difficulty surviving in more and more expensive, inaccessible and exclusive cities), and political actions (promoting the acceptance of assets in lieu of payment, social rent, and so on).

Social and ideological background

Our observation of regular meetings and assemblies of PAH and BZV activists reveals many common elements in their social composition. The meetings and assemblies are composed of a range of people, from students to retirees, unemployed workers and academics. Both groups are composed of activists, those threatened by evictions, those who have been evicted or people whose eviction was stopped (Colau and Alemany, 2012; Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern, 2013). In both platforms, there is a significant presence of women and, to a lesser extent, immigrants. This is noteworthy because the problem of evictions is intertwined with the poverty, marginalisation and displacement of migrants in Spain and Berlin.

BZV members remain concerned about the continuing shortage of social housing units for low-income households and other disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups and about the continuing increase in rents in the private rental sector. As a BZV member explained, "we are all tenants, so we don't have problems with the banks, but with the real estate companies. These companies theoretically are supposed to offer housing for low rents, but they are also structured just like private companies and are obliged to make profit" (BZV member 2). By contrast, the animating concern of PAH members is the inability of many to pay their mortgages. As a member made clear in the interviews, "many of the people who attend our meetings tell us about their situation, explaining that they have to choose between paying their mortgages and eating" (PAH member Castellón 5).

As far as the values and beliefs of PAH and BZV are concerned, both are pragmatic as far as ideology is concerned. Despite both platforms having clear leftist affinities, they see themselves as addressing a very concrete or non-ideological issue: affordable housing. Both platforms are more interested in intervening through direct action than investing time discussing their ideological components. In fact, PAH and BZV do not identify with any particular ideology or political party, and their attitude towards political parties is critical. The new type of politics appeals to those who seek greater involvement and participation in decision-making than is possible in traditional political parties.

BZV activists come mostly from the left and the tradition of the German autonomous groups (Ely, 1993; Katsiaficas, 1997; Schwarzmeier, 2000). All the BZV members interviewed expressed criticism of the current Berlin

Government coalition of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) as well as the former SPD and PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) left coalition. Although the SPD has held office in Berlin since 2001, it has proved incapable of solving the evictions problem. As was emphasised by BZV activists in the 2014 meeting *Living in the Crisis: European and Mediterranean Housing and City Rights Movements Network*, "we're suffering on this neoliberal understanding of society, which was brought to us by the social-democratic party, and means the replacement of solidarity with self-responsibility" (Living in the Crisis, 2014, p. 18). BZV is not defined as an anti-capitalist platform, but the activists stressed that "the background of the activists is clearly anti-capitalist" (BZV member 2). In any case, the members of BZV reported that the platform is *Außerparlamentarische* (extra-parliamentary): they are sceptical that the mechanisms of representative politics can help deliver the type of society they want.

PAH activists expressed anger towards the two major parties (PP and PSOE), which are considered to be "guilty of bringing Spain to the current situation of crisis and corruption" (PAH member Barcelona 3). PAH activists showed their preference for practising a form of activism that was immediate, non-ideological and which spared them the excesses of politicians and political parties of all types. It is a type of activism that "perhaps may not change the complete system, but will achieve little victories" (PAH member Barcelona 5). Activists display a deep desire to directly make a difference in the lives of those affected by the crisis. They also expressed great pride and satisfaction in the work of their respective groups, particularly as regards the role they play in demonstrating support and solidarity for those affected. This immediate and non-ideological character of PAH is clearly part of the reason for its success. Its most important predecessor, *V de Vivienda*, is regarded as unsuccessful due to its radicalism, its exclusiveness and its lack of organisational clarity (Aguilar and Fernández, 2010). By contrast, PAH has managed to consolidate its initiative, attracting the support of a variety of individuals and groups due its inclusive and focused agenda.

A final aspect is PAH's and BZV's interpretation of the role played by austerity in their political struggle. For four of the six BZV members interviewed, European austerity policies are not perceived as a determining factor in the evictions that have been taking place in Berlin. Two of them, however, expressed the belief that there is a close relationship between austerity and eviction. One activist was clear on this point: "the problems [in Spain and in Germany] are totally different, but the effects on the neighbourhoods are the same" (BZV member 6). In any case, the severe economic and financial crisis that Berlin has endured since the 1990s has been used by the social democratic city government to justify budget cuts and austerity policies (Patton, 2011). In

the present case, this has given rise to particularly deleterious consequences in the rental market. For instance, GSW Immobilien, originally a company founded by the Federal State of Berlin that owed most of the apartments of the city, was sold to the financial investors Whitehall and Cerberus in 2004. In this respect, BZV claimed that "the housing market has been comparatively relaxed until the late 1990s—a lot of vacancies, affordable rents. The situation changed in the 2000s. The government at the time, a coalition of social democrats and so-called socialists, privatised loads of state owned flats".[10]

Spanish PAH activists were very critical in their comments against austerity measures. Of those who were interviewed, there was no one who did not blame austerity measures as a cause of the crisis or as an element that helped to deepen the crisis. As one activist from Valencia asked, "without economic growth and incentive policies, how could we possibly get out of the crisis?" (PAH member Valencia 1). There was also criticism of the "politics of speculative activity promoted by the last Spanish governments, which caused the huge housing bubble in Spain" (PAH member Castellón 2). We observed that many of the activists as well as those affected by mortgages in Spain had the feeling that the austerity measures inflicted suffering on the weak for the benefit of the rich. Colau and Alemany express this clearly when noting that "the irresponsibility of a few has resulted in austerity for many" (2014, p. 68). More concretely, crisis and austerity measures are viewed as a dangerous combination that fosters, on one hand, exclusion and precariousness, and on the other, a radicalisation of citizen activism. In the words of José Coy, a member of PAH Murcia:

> The recession we are immersed in and the policy of cuts applied by the government to get out of it—policies that deepen our wounds and slow down economic recovery—drive us into a situation of social deterioration without precedent. The recipe for austerity imposed on us by the market dictatorship makes the PAH a useful and powerful tool for fighting. This becomes a cause for hope for the hundreds of thousands of families condemned to a life of social exclusion and precarity (Colau and Alemany, 2014, p. 21).

As we see from this quote, the economic crisis and the politics of austerity have led to the impoverishment of a significant part of the working classes. It has also resulted in the deterioration of social conditions, exclusion and precariousness. In the European context, this especially affects southern countries. In sum, we can see the following common elements in the stances of both PAH and BZV: 1) disaffection with political institutions, elections and traditional politics; 2) disappointment with social democratic parties; and 3) a preference for a non-ideological, pragmatic and immediate form of activism.

---

[10] See BZV statement, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=367088200073552&story_fbid=399498620165843

What remains to be seen is how this new style of politics translates in terms of a concrete political strategy.

Political repertoires

PAH's and BZV's political repertoires are many and varied. Both platforms share two premises: the non-violent nature of the protest and an approach favouring experimentation in the use of different political tools. The type of political actions developed by both platforms are similar and include periodic assemblies, direct actions (blockades of evictions, sit-ins, demonstrations) and deliberative exchanges to create dialogue (with bankers or homeowners). Additionally, PAH has developed some specific actions in 2013, including the *escraches* and the popular legislative initiative. Recently, PAH activists have been at the forefront in the formation of the anti-elite political party *Guanyem Barcelona* (Let's win Barcelona), a confluence platform of leftist groups seeking to contest local and regional elections.

Among the forms of direct action conducted by PAH and BZV, the blockade of evictions is the most significant. These actions are discussed via regular assemblies where working groups are formed. In both platforms, notices are posted using different digital tools (blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and so forth), calling for street mobilisations, and subsequently hundreds of activists create human shields outside threatened houses (Feenstra and Keane, 2014). Such actions have existed in Spain since 2009, although their proliferation began in 2011, and in Berlin since 2010, although they expanded in 2012. Today more than 1,135 evictions have been blocked by PAH activists.[11] BZV has been able to avoid "twenty evictions" in Berlin so far (BZV member 1).

Promoting confrontation to make relevant elites listen is another key element of BZV and PAH strategy. The difference between BZV and PAH is that whilst the former seeks to confront property owners, PAH seeks to confront the banks. Landlords have been characterised by BZV, and several tenants' initiatives have been mounted to protest against the overcharging of tenants for remedial work that is never carried out. As noted by a BZV activist, "the landlords, who are mainly private owners, look for tricks to force tenants out of the house by saying they will make home improvements that ultimately were not carried out" (BZV member 6). BZV thus seeks to blockade the houses of landlords and owners to make a stand against abusive housing practices. As shown in the documentary *Mietrebellen*, pamphlets and letters explaining these practices are regularly distributed and, when possible, BZV members

---

[11] See PAH website, http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/ (Last updated: 10 September 2014)

meet with landlords. Efforts are thus being made to make explicit and visible the process of resistance and thereby demonstrate discontent with rent rises, seeking to alert the mass media and civil society.

A similar pattern is observable in PAH's actions. Occupying banks is a prevalent action developed to promote and force the banks to (re)negotiate mortgage debts. The occupation of banks (which can last for a few hours or for days) is carried out by dozens of those threatened with eviction as well as by activists. Some of the latter occupy the financial institution, while dozens or hundreds of activists give them support from outside. This type of action seeks to promote social awareness of the mortgage problem. It also forces banks to renegotiate the debt or to accept assets in lieu of payment. Activists protest during these actions, claiming that "while the government invests in a rescue bank package of millions of euros, there is no support for ordinary people who can't afford their mortgage" (PAH member Castellón 6).

Confrontations are organised not only against banks (PAH) and owners (BZV) but also against political parties and institutions. Despite their distrust of these institutions, both groups have developed strategies to negotiate with and put pressure on politicians. All BZV activists interviewed agreed that political parties were too passive with regard to the evictions problem. The same activists explained that "the platform contacted local politicians believing those politicians could help stop an eviction" (BZV members 1, 2 and 3). Similarly, one PAH activist told us of the need "to talk to politicians across the political spectrum to bring them to reality and force them to solve the problems of those affected by mortgages" (PAH member Castellón 3).

Notwithstanding the similarity of the political repertoire developed by PAH and BZV, there are also actions specific to PAH: the popular legislative initiative, the *escraches* and the formation of a new political party featuring well-known PAH activists. The popular legislative initiative has proved PAH's organisational skills and strength because it managed to take the debate on mortgages and payment to the Spanish Parliament in February 2013. To achieve this, the organisation led a popular legislative initiative that obtained 1.4 million signatures from supporters. This initiative underlined PAH's commitment to pursuing political change through representative channels and mechanisms.

The *Escraches*, as Romanos explains, "consisted of the visit of a group of activists to the homes of politicians with the intention of better informing them about the social problems created by evictions and of inviting them to PAH's assemblies and activities" (2013, p. 299). During the course of the visits, activists put up stickers, chant and make noise to attract attention. These actions began in March 2013 with PAH activists who sought to pressure politicians to approve the popular legislative initiative. There was some debate as to the legality of protesting outside the homes of public figures; however, this has been considered (even in

relevant court cases) to be a non-violent act of civil disobedience in which activists seek to raise awareness about the lack of attention paid to certain human rights.[12] As stated in the *escraches* web campaign, the goal of this type of political action is to start an "information campaign that targets those politicians who have expressed their intention to vote against measures included in the popular legislative initiative, such as the retrospective acceptance of assets in lieu of payment (...), to make them (politicians) aware of the consequences of their votes and the reality of thousands of people affected by mortgages".[13] PAH considers its long-term objective to be forcing a change in the Spanish mortgage law. As expressed in their own words, "PAH promotes the public denunciation of unjust laws and acts of civil disobedience designed to pressure authorities into revoking them".[14] The idea that representative institutions are key to the improvement of social conditions necessary for the improvement of social conditions is inherent in *escraches*.

Finally, a striking recent trend has been the formation of a new political party, *Guanyem Barcelona*, promoted by PAH grassroots activists. Although PAH remains an anti-austerity movement, Ada Colau, PAH's spokesperson for several years (2009-2014), is now the leading figure of this political project created in Barcelona in 2014 for the purpose of winning the 2015 local elections. Some key activists from PAH are involved in this project, while many others support it from outside as a new tool for challenging the system and promoting a radical change in the mortgage law.

The key conclusion that can be observed from the analysis of political repertoires is the embrace of experimentation. The interviews showed a high level of reflexivity in relation to the struggle for the housing rights with a willingness to use "whatever tools available" (PAH members Barcelona 2 and 4). The goal is to reach political transformation and solve the housing problem. This can be achieved through "acts of civil disobedience to more institutional politics, or from both strategies at the same time" (PAH member Castellón 3). At the moment, PAH's political repertoire includes a broader range of actions than that of BZV. The fact that PAH has been in existence longer and that it operates at both the national and local level might be a factor in this regard. However, this same non-dogmatic and experimental way of practicing activism is present in BZV, even if BZV is more critical of using existing institutional means to achieve its ends. As one BZV activist

---

[12] A relevant *escrache* was held in front of the house of the Vice President, Soraya Sáenz de Santamaria (April 5, 2013). Despite complaints from relevant politicians in the government, the Court of Madrid (number 4) considered the *escrache* a "legal mechanism of democratic participation" and an "expression of citizens' pluralism". See the judgment,
   http://ep00.epimg.net/descargables/2013/05/10/cb072919fb0bac890565b82873b2f89e.pdf
   A few months latter, a judge from the 16th Section of the Provincial Court of Madrid ratified this judgment. See http://ep00.epimg.net/descargables/2014/02/04/9036e637be04ef9e3242f1fd78fc0c84.pdf
[13] See *escraches* web campaign, http://escrache.afectadosporlahipoteca.com/
[14] See http://escrache.afectadosporlahipoteca.com/

highlighted when questioned about the possibility of introducing institutional repertories (such as the popular legislative initiative), "there are different opinions on this possibility, and this is still open to debate" (BZV member 2). Only time will tell if BZV will adopt, as PAH has recently done, a political repertoire that includes the institutional path.

PAH and BZV political logics

Central to our conversations with PAH and BZV was the classical theoretical framework used to distinguish between autonomous movements and the institutional left, or among vertical and horizontal activists tendencies (Robinson and Tormey, 2005; Juris, 2005; Flesher Fomiyana, 2007; Flesher Fomiyana, 2013). This vertical/horizontal distinction has been used to denote the different strategies used by groups to pursue their aims. On the one hand, vertical approaches are informed by the idea of capturing state power to implement the vision or to reshape the environment from above. There is, thus, a "centre" of power that can be occupied and that, once occupied, provides the power holder with the basis for moulding society in a particular image (Robinson and Tormey, 2007). Key to this strategy has, in historical terms, been the creation of a political party to contest power (Flesher Fomiyana, 2007). This, in turn, implies the need for a distinct leadership of the party that is able to articulate the demands of the party and attract support without which its strategy would be impossible to deliver. Thus, the ability of a leader to inspire "the masses" has always been integral to the strategy.

Those defending horizontal strategies see the development of new and participatory forms of social, economic and political relationships in the present as intrinsic to the process of social transformation. Horizontal approaches seek to generate spaces in which people can interact for mutual benefit. It is the generalisation of the alternative practices that can put pressure on the system, compelling changes from "outside" of the system. Horizontals thus typically pursue change through actions such as demonstrations, assemblies, civil disobedience and the promotion of alternative collective projects. Horizontals are suspicious of identifying individuals as "leaders" or representatives, instead preferring forms of decision-making that include the whole group—via the assembly, for example. (Holloway, 2002; Juris, 2005; Flesher Fominaya, 2007; Hardcastle, Power and Wenocur, 2011; Graeber, 2011).

Given the relevance of this distinction, it is interesting at this point to analyse whether PAH and BZV are closer to vertical or horizontal understandings of how resistance and social change should proceed. In this sense, due to the previously analysed non-dogmatic and open style activism developed by

PAH and BZV, no easy or simplistic answers can be given. We have observed that the trajectory of both platforms show a strong influence of autonomous movements and their horizontal style of politics, as evidenced by the very prominent role played by assemblies (Katsiaficas, 1997; Flesher Fominaya, 2007; Elster, 2013). However, despite the horizontal and assembly based structure of both platforms, activists are aware of the difficulty of proceeding on the basis of an assembly model. First, it makes decision-making laborious and time-consuming. Second it does not prevent the emergence of leaders. The assemblies are nevertheless a central part of PAH and BZV activism. The assemblies are the place where decisions are made and where activists can gather in both a social and a decision-making capacity.

The assemblies of PAH and BZV are organised in similar ways. The two have developed language pragmatics based on argumentation, rationality and consensus. Their "communicative action" is thus oriented to consensus-based decision-making (Habermas, 1985). With the purpose of preventing hierarchical relations, some measures are normally introduced in the organisation of the assemblies, such as rotation of the assembly moderators, a common agreement of the assembly agenda and the predisposition to listen to different points of view. In both platforms, activists and those affected by evictions help to organise working groups and to hold meetings to resolve specific issues.

Notwithstanding the horizontality of PAH and BZV assemblies, this style of doing politics is not exempt of tensions and difficulties. Some activists complained about the investment of time needed to make the assemblies function. As a Berlin activist noted, "we have tried to organise like classical autonomous groups, which means five-hour assemblies. Sometimes those affected by housing problems cannot afford to spend so much time discussing" (BZV member 6). The same issue was expressed by PAH activists, who noted that it was "difficult to be present in all the assemblies while at the same time looking after the family, looking for a job, and so forth" (PAH member Castellón 5). Some activists in Spain remarked how they could not afford to participate in assemblies and thus felt excluded. Others recognised that "consensus decision-making can become an exhausting way of doing politics" (PAH member Castellón 2).

On the other hand, PAH and BZV members highlighted how the assemblies were key to fostering solidarity between participants. One of the most important features of the approach of PAH and BZV is the promotion of collective awareness of and support for issues that affect individuals and which would otherwise lead to a sense of isolation. Both platforms directly address in their operation feelings of helplessness and shame, which would otherwise be disabling for those concerned. The feeling of shame was often expressed as a feeling of self-blame. PAH and BZV activists emphasised the

importance of creating networks of solidarity to overcome this limitation. PAH activists explained that "when someone new joins the platform, we work at a psychological level in the first few weeks to put an end to the feeling of shame" (PAH member Barcelona 1). Another commented that "in many situations, evictions happen because the individuals concerned feel completely powerless due to their own shame at the predicament they find themselves in" (PAH member Castellón 1). BZV members identified the same phenomenon. Those affected by evictions "feel ashamed for supposedly having failed to provide for themselves. It also makes them ashamed to seek solidarity and support. An emotionally paralysing discourse is at work, legitimating the on-going neoliberal restructuring of society and state" (Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern, 2013, p. 123). It is in the assemblies where activists can address the psychological effects of the suffering experienced by the victims. The work of empowering ordinary people in their political beliefs is thus a crucial part of the regular assemblies. As a PAH activist in Castellón explained, "the fact of discovering that my problem was shared by many others was a relief" (PAH member Castellón 7). In similar terms, Colau and Alemany explain:

> Families feel guilty for the situation in which they find themselves and attribute it to personal failure. [...] This process of self-blame is made worse if the individuals have children in their care. [...] In this situation, many families come to the PAH with an absolute need to speak and to be heard. [...] Therefore, the first objective of the PAH is to create a space of trust and community through meetings, which give them the opportunity to express themselves and to share their experience with others. Building this space and linking personal experiences is vital in order for those affected to realise the collective dimension of the problem and that there are structural elements that have influenced our decisions. This process of absolving oneself of blame is a necessary step towards empowerment (2014, p. 92).

More generally, it was easy to see the pride among PAH and BZV members in seeking to practice a democratic and inclusive style of politics. In this sense, assemblies represent much more than a decision-making mechanism; they also represent a style of practicing democracy (García-Marzá, 2008). This is why in the conversation with PAH and BZV the matter of leadership frequently arose. PAH and BZV see themselves as "leaderless" organisations; however, some of the members predictably acquire a more prominent role than others because of their dedication and selfless work on behalf of those affected. As some studies on horizontal organisations have shown, different levels of leadership, hierarchy or centralised processes often emerge in horizontal organisations (Juris, 2005). PAH and BZV are no exception.

We have also noted that despite their hostility to hierarchy, both PAH and BZV evinced forms of leadership in their operation. BZV does not have

an official leadership structure, nor does it have spokespeople. However, some members are clearly more articulate than others. Thus, differences in communication skills introduce a qualitative difference in the debates and discussions. In addition, individuals have emerged possessing the type of leadership attributes famously described by Weber as the *Gnadengabe*—the authority of grace or charisma (1994). BZV activists themselves highlighted the charismatic character of one of the affected, Ali Gülbol: "we were very lucky to find the Gülbols as a case (...). Ali Gülbol is a really charismatic guy who people can easily identify with".[15] Therefore, whilst the self-image of this organisation is firmly horizontal, implying a high degree of equality between participants, there is also acknowledgement of the key role played by certain individuals within it. Thus, there is an almost inevitably vertical element to even the most horizontal initiatives. In the context of the German autonomous groups, and especially in his reflections on Autonomen, Katsiaficas noted that their political terrain lies "somewhere between parliamentary participation and guerrilla struggle" (1996, p. 277). In spite of the obvious differences between BZV and the Autonomen, we have found in BZV this tension between horizontal logics and vertical structural aspects.

Despite activists' lack of enthusiasm towards the idea of being "led" in any formal sense, there was nonetheless a great enthusiasm for the role that Ada Colau played within the organisation and recognition that if PAH was going to make further progress, then she would have a key role in it. However, the type of leadership she displays is what we might call "exemplary" rather than the "positional" leadership of one who has been elected or chosen to be leader. Many of those we spoke with said that they perceived her as "a leader". However, she was a leader in the sense of being able to articulate in direct and emotive terms what many other activists both in and outside PAH perceived as key issues: the heartlessness of political elites, the injustice of evictions and the lack of responsiveness of the government to the needs and interests of ordinary people. Representative statements of the feelings about her include: "Ada brings to light a problem that affects Spanish citizens. She is articulate and passionate, and she is one of us. Thanks to her, the movement is stronger" (PAH member Castellón 2); "She has been able to address politicians and tell them the real problems of society" (PAH member Castellón 4). Similarly, in the academic and activist encounter *15MP2P* held at the Open University of Catalunya on 5 July 2012, Gala Pin, Social Media Manager of PAH, commented that "we are aware that the media context demands a public figure such as Ada (…). We consider her the most accurate representative of the movement to

---

[15] See BZV (Eviction Information Network) Facebook information, wttps://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=367088200073552&story_fbid=399498620165843

show our goals publicly (…). She gives visibility to the whole movement".[16] Activists trusted her because she remained in contact with her own activist base in Barcelona. She remained one of the people. She rolled her sleeves up and did the dirty, unseen work of advocacy as well as the high-profile and tele-media work that had made her name. In short, her leadership was perceived as quite different from that associated with leaders of political parties or traditional hierarchical organisations. As one PAH activist noted, "she is not a politician, but one of us" (PAH member Barcelona 2).

With the above in mind, should PAH and BZV be characterised as horizontal or vertical? To us, what is noteworthy is how these initiatives, based these designations, move in their mode of practice, combining elements of horizontality with a certain fearlessness about the vertical designation. For instance, the mortgage law matter is dealt with by PAH activists by lobbying for a new law, but it also entails pressuring and negotiating with representative institutions from the outside (Flesher Fominaya, 2014). That is, when following the vertical model, rules of the democratic game are followed to bring about a political change through Parliament. However, such political action performed through "traditional" channels is accompanied by actions such as occupying banks or *escraches,* characterised by acts of civil disobedience. Pressure-based acts, non-violence and defending universal rights, on the fringe of unlawfulness, are where participants accept the possibility of being submitted to punishment by law. We observe how a platform such as PAH employs elements of both vertical and horizontal logics, as long as its political demands are better heard and it accomplishes political change.

Despite the centrality that assemblies have in symbolic terms—less so in practical terms—PAH and BZV activists are less concerned about promoting a pure horizontal structure than in being successful in their political struggle. The pragmatic and non-ideological form of doing politics has led them to promote a wide range of political actions where horizontal and vertical elements are creatively combined.

Conclusions

The Spanish mortgage crisis and Berlin social cutbacks have led to the emergence of new forms of political resistance against austerity policies and budgetary cuts, thereby challenging the image of ordinary people as apathetic post-political citizens. Despite the political, economic and social differences between Spain and Germany, our analysis shows several common elements

---

[16] Gala Pin's reflection on Ada's figure at the 15MP2P get-together (minutes 44:00 through 58:30-62:00). Available at http://bambuser.com/v/3715363.

in ordinary citizens' responses to the issue of housing rights and evictions. As our research shows, PAH and BZV have been developing a non-doctrinal, pragmatic and engaging style of activism with the purpose of struggling for a basic material need: housing.

In this respect, PAH and BZV members challenge austerity and housing policies. Far from giving up on politics, these activists have developed a sophisticated and complex repertoire that permits a variety of forms of engagement by those affected and those who sympathise with them. Both platforms have focused on everyday practices, developing street-politics strategies with the intention of defending the interests of those affected. Disaffection with traditional parties, and especially with social-democratic parties, helps us to understand why this new style of politics is gaining ground and why those associated with it, such as Ada Colau, have been able to create an impact even beyond the national sphere.

The article leaves open some areas for fuller investigation in further research. Given that there are other platforms that address housing matters and problems across Europe and beyond (which include, among many others, Abitare nella crisi-Milan, AK-Athens, Bay Samsa-Istambul, Droit au logement-Paris), it is important to establish whether a more general pattern is emerging or whether this displacement of a traditional social democratic agenda by direct action is being replicated elsewhere. What we have learned in terms of our research on PAH and BZV is that new tactics, emerging discourses and forms of organisations are breaking down the distinction between horizontal and vertical styles of organising and putting them in creative tension. First, PAH and BZV are "leaderless", acephalous organisations that seek to downplay the role of leaders and the usual division of labour displayed in political parties and trade unions. However, as is clear, both embrace a certain type of leadership, albeit that of an exemplary as opposed to positional type. Second, their political strategies combine horizontal and vertical elements, especially in the Spanish case, demonstrating that ideology has less of a claim on today's activists than it once did—certainly in the sphere of street politics, where activists are seeking to make an immediate and practical difference to the lives of those affected by austerity policies.

The opportunity is likely to present itself for street politics to fill that vacuum through running candidates in select and strategic locations, such as Barcelona. This scenario is, of course, a demanding one given the tension between the demands of a horizontal movement to facilitate participation and the needs of a political party to seek power—one that Michels tells us concentrates power in an ever-narrowing circle of leadership elites (1998). The jury is out on whether and to what extent these two logics can be satisfactorily reconciled.

References

Aguilar, S., & Fernández, A. (2010). El movimiento por la vivienda digna en España o el porqué de un fracaso de una protesta con una amplia base social [The Movement for Decent Housing in Spain or the Reason for a Failure of a Protest with a Broad Social Base]. *Revista Internacional de Sociología*, *68*, 679–704. doi:10.3989/ris.2008.12.01

Baumert, K. (2014). Zur Geschichte des Widerstandes gegen Zwangsräumungen in Berlin [On the History of Resistance Against Forced Evictions in Berlin]. In P. Nowak (Ed.), *Zwangsräumungen verhindern. Ob Nuriye ob Kalle, wir bleiben alle* [Impeding Evictions. If Nuriye, if Kalle, we all Stay Here] (pp. 27-32). Münster: Edition Asemblage.

Brenner, N. & Theodore, N. (2002). Cities and the Geographies of "Actually Existing Neolibealism". *Antipode*, 34, 349-379.

Brenner, N., Marcuse, P. & Mayer, M. (2012). "Cities for People, not for Profit: An Introduction". In N. Brenner, P. Marcuse & M. Mayer (Eds.), *Cities for People, not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City* (pp. 1-11). Oxford: Routledge.

Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern (2013). Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern – Platform Impeding Evictions, Berlin. *Open Citizenship*, 4, 2, 122-125.

Castañeda, E. (2012) The *Indignados* of Spain: A Precedent to Occupy Wall Street. *Social Movement Studies, 11*, 309-19. doi:10.1080/14742837.20 12.708830

Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Colau, A., & Alemany, A. (2013). *¡Sí se puede! Crónica de una pequeña gran victoria* [It Can Be Done! Chronicle of a Small Big Victory]. Barcelona: Destino.

Colau, A., & Alemany, A. (2014). *Mortgaged Lives. From the housing bubble to the right to housing*. Translated by M. Teran and J. Fuquay. Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics & Protest.

Della Porta, D. (2013). *Can Democracy be Saved? Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements*. Cambridge: Polity.

Ein Recht auf Stadt für alle (2011). *Ein Mietenpolitisches Dossier* [A Rental Political Dossier]. Retrieved from http://mietenstopp.blogsport.de/images/Mietendossier2011.pdf

Elster, J. (2013). *Securities Against Misrule. Juries, Assemblies, Elections*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ely, J. D. (1993). The "Black-Brown Hazelnut" in a Bigger Germany: The Rise of a Radical Right as a Structural Feature. In M. G. Huelshoff, A. S.

Markovits, & S. Reich (Eds.), *From Bundesrepublik to Deutschland. German Politics after Unification* (pp. 235-268). Tennessee: University of Michigan Press.

Feenstra, R. (2015): Activist and Citizen Political Repertoire in Spain: A Reflection Based on Civil Society Theory and Different Logics of Political Participation, *Journal of Civil Society* (Online First). Doi 10.1080/17448689.2015.1060662

Feenstra, R. A. & Keane, J. (2014). Politics in Spain: A case of monitory democracy. *VOLUNTAS. International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 25*, 1262–1280.

Flesher Fominaya, C. (2007). Autonomous Movements and the Institutional Left: Two Approaches in Tension in Madrid's Anti-globalization Network. *South European Society and Politics*, *12*, 335 – 358. doi:10.1080/13608740701495202

Flesher Fominaya, C. (2013). Movement culture continuity: the British anti-roads movements as precursor to Global Justice Movement. In C. Flesher Fominaya & L. Cox (Eds.) *Understanding European Movement* (pp. 109-124). New York: Routledge.

Flesher Fominaya, C. (2014). Debunking Spontaneity: Spain's 15-M/Indignados as Autonomous Movement. *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social*, 1-22. doi: 10.1080/14742837.2014.945075

Fuster Morell, M. (2012). The Free Culture and 15M Movements in Spain: Composition, Social Networks and Synergies. *Social Movement Studies*, *11*, 386-391. doi:10.1080/14742837.2012.710323

García-Marzá, D. (2008). Sociedad civil: una concepción radical [Civil Society: A Radical Perspective]. *Recerca. Revista de Pensament i Anàlisi*, 8, 28-32.

Graeber, D. (2011). *Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Violence, Art and Imagination*. New York: Minor Compositions.

Habermas, J. (1985). *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalitation of Society* (vol. I). Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hardcastle, D.A., Power, P. R., & Wenocur, S. (2011). *Community Practice. Theories and Skills for Social Workers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. New York: Verso.

Holloway, J. (2002). *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*. London: Pluto Press.

Human Rights Watch (2014). *Shattered Dreams. Impact of Spain's Housing Crisis on Vulnerable Groups*. Retrieved from http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/spain0514_ForUpload.pdf

Juris, J. S. (2005). Social Forums and their Margins: Networking Logics

and the Cultutral Politics of Autonomous Spaces. *Ephemera. Theory & Politics in Organization*, 5, 253-272.

Katsiaficas, G. (1997). *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life*. New Jersey: Humanities Press.

Kholodilin, K. A. & Mense, A. (2012). *Internet-Based Hedonic Indices of Rent and Prices for Flats. Example of Berlin*. Retrieved from:
http://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.393836.de/dp1191.pdf

Lefebvre, H. (1995). *Writings on Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Living in the Crisis (2014). *Living in the Crisis. Euro-Meeting in Milan. Housing for All, Right to the City*. Retrieved from:
http://livinginthecrisis.noblogs.org/files/2014/08/Ebook_Living_In_The_Crisis.pdf.pdf

Michels, R. (1998). *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy.* New York: Transaction.

Nowak, P. (2014). Die neue Berliner Mieter_innenbewegung [Berlin's new Tenant Movement]. In P. Nowak (Ed.), *Zwangsräumungen verhindern. Ob Nuriye ob Kalle, wir bleiben alle* [Impeding Evictions. If Nuriye, if Kalle, we all Stay Here] (pp. 19-26). Münster: Edition Asemblage.

Nowak, P. (2014). Spanien war für uns auf jeden Fall eine Inspiration. Interview mit David Schuster [Spain was for us definitely an inspiration. Interview with David Schuster]. In P. Nowak (Ed.), *Zwangsräumungen verhindern. Ob Nuriye ob Kalle, wir bleiben alle* (pp. 49-50). Münster: Edition Asemblage.

Ordóñez Roig, Vicente (2015), Entre el parlamentarismo y la acracia: aproximación crítica a la praxis del 15-M (inédito).

PAH (2013). Hay vidas en juego. Campaña de escraches. Retrieved from: http://escrache.afectadosporlahipoteca.com/

PAH (2014). Los nuevos datos del INE vuelven a mostrar el fracaso de ley criminal del PP y la vulneración del derecho a la vivienda. Retrieved from:
http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/2014/07/09/los-nuevos-datos-del-ine-vuelven-a-m strar-el-fracaso-de-ley-criminal-del-pp-y-la-vulneracion-del-derecho-a-la-vivienda/

Patton, D. F. (2011). *Out of the East: From PDS to Left Party in Unified Germany*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Robinson, A. y Tormey, S. (2005). 'Horizontals', 'Verticals' and the Conflicting Logics of Transformative Politics. In Hayden, P. y el-Ojeili, C. (eds.) *Confronting Globalization* (pp. 209-226), London: Palgrave.

Robinson, A. y Tormey, S. (2007). Beyond Representation? A Rejoinder. *Parliamentary Affairs*, *60*, 1, 127–137.

Romanos, E. (2013). Collective learning processes within social movements: some insights into the Spanish 15-M/Indignados movement. In C. Flesher Fominaya & L. Cox (Eds), *Understanding European movements: new social movements, global justice struggles, anti-austerity protest* (pp. 203-219). New York: Routledge

Romanos, E. (2014). Evictions, Petitions and Escraches: Contentious Housing in Austerity Spain. *Social Movement Studies*, *13*, 296-302. doi:10.10 80/14742837.2013.830567

Romero, A. (2014, January 28). Los desahucios se aceleran en la primera mitad de 2013 pese a las protestas sociales. *El País*. Retrieved from http://economia.elpais.com/economia/2014/01/28/actualidad/1390909956_848206.html

Schwarzmeier, J. (2000). *Die Autonomen zwischen Subkultur und sozialer Bewegung* [Autonomen: Between Subculture and Social Movement]. Göttingen: Books on Demand.

Weber, M. (1994). *Wissenschaft als Beruf, 1917/1919; Politik als Beruf, 1919* [Science as a Vocation. Politics as a Vocation]. In *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* [Max Weber Complete Edition]. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

15MP2P (2013). Encuentro transdisciplinar del 15M. Retrieved from http://civilsc.net/15mp2p