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Occupying the #Hotelmadrid: A Laboratory for Urban Resistance

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ABSTRACT *Occupied the night after the worldwide mobilisation of 15 October 2011, the #hotelmadrid was an intensive, 50-day-long political experiment that turned an abandoned hotel in the heart of the Spanish capital into a radical political space and the perceived node of the indignados movement. The squatting of the hotel accomplishes key demands related to 'real democracy' and the re-appropriation of public space as a political space with claims for the right to housing, providing an excellent example for the discussion of the shifting dimensions of emancipatory struggles that emerged in the course of the Spanish 15-M Movement. In this regard, squatters engage actively against neoliberalism, promote the right to housing and convert such mobilisation into a forward-looking project that not only reclaims but also takes, socialising private properties through common repossession. Referring to strategic disobedience we discuss how protest camps, public political assemblies and squatting create spaces of citizenship and intend to crack naturalised facets of capitalism such as the powerful discourse about property rights.*

KEY WORDS: Squatting, occupation, 15-M Movement, indignados, right to housing, Spain, Madrid

Introduction

Following the global action day of 15 October 2011 that united more than half a million protesters in an innovative and inspiring demonstration in Madrid, several thousand activists of the Spanish 15-M Movement debated future actions to spread and intensify protest in a huge assembly. At that moment, many participants had already heard about the occupation of a vacant building in Barcelona that occurred the same day—a squat that aimed at helping evicted families to find a new temporary place to live.¹ After intensive and polemical discussions, a group composed of *indignados* and 'traditional' squatters decided to take the opportunity to occupy a building in Madrid and to introduce new claims into the movement. The selected property was the 'Hotel Madrid', an abandoned hotel with more than 100 rooms on five floors, located only 200 m away from the emblematic *Puerta del Sol*, the seat of the Presidency of the regional government, epicentre of the extended protest camp and birthplace of the #Spanishrevolution earlier that year.

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Within the 15-M Movement, the occupation of the #hotelmadrid provided a significant shift in many respects. It created a series of new organisational challenges such as the management of a huge building in an exposed location in the city or structuring the common use of open spaces in the hotel. At the same time, a visible ‘home base’ was established. This occurred in a season when public assemblies and other activities, which had typically been conducted in public spaces since May 2011, became increasingly unpleasant because of the weather conditions. The occupation of the hotel empowered the *indignados* to broaden their repertoire of civil disobedience towards questions of urban politics and property rights, a core institutional framework of contemporary capitalist societies. However, we argue here that the occupation of the hotel, similar to many earlier incidences such as the establishment of protest camps and the reconversion of neoliberalised ‘public’ space into political space, can be considered a success story on a number of levels. For instance, the activists were able to advance new coalitions and defend a common use of the hotel by accommodating evicted families and other highly vulnerable groups, publicly claiming the right to housing and related aspects of the contradictions of the Spanish model of urban capital accumulation. These questions provided a symbolic and discursive resource for the legitimisation of the occupation of the #hotelmadrid even in the mainstream media, at once shifting and re-articulating the discursive meaning of squatting throughout the country.

Although the squatters were evicted by the police on 5 December 2011, the hotel still remains as a powerful symbol in the movements’ collective memory, as a laboratory for urban resistance and node of counter-hegemonic struggles as it was during its 50 days of occupation. But its principal achievement was the politicisation of non-activists such as evicted families, serving literally as a ‘school’ for subsequent squats that spread throughout the city, the city region, the country and even the world. Activists set up working groups, for example the ‘offices’ for housing and squatting, that have subsequently served to help people to get into political action—a practical solution for some of the economic problems a growing number of middle class households are suffering both in the city and statewide. In this regard, the #hotelmadrid stands for the establishment of new forms of collective action during the course of an economic crisis that intensifies and reinforces itself through reciprocal austerity measures, as applied by both the former socialist and current conservative state administration.

Here, we aim to embed the occupation of the hotel within broader struggles that have emerged out of the 15-M Movement. Our analysis will focus exclusively on the relationships between squatting and the demands for the right to housing as expressed by the #hotelmadrid. Generally speaking, these claims became increasingly popular during the consolidation of the movement, i.e. after the end of the protest camps and the transfer of activities into the neighbourhoods.

The 15-M Movement: Characterising the Claims of a Non-Conventional Political ‘Actor’

Far from representing homogeneous claims, the discursive and practical logics of the Spanish *indignados* movement are composed of a variety of interrelated but divergent collective subjects, necessities, structures, strategies and conducts. In many respects, the external appearance of the 15-M mobilisation as a single movement depends precisely on

the inherent power of its nodes, the networks of contestation that commonly share not only space but also communication, knowledge and ways of collective action.

We can identify two distinct discursive strands during this cycle of mobilisation: an engagement against the superstructure and the attempt to break some of the naturalised everyday experiences in capitalist societies. In the first strand lie demands for a fair electoral system, campaigns against de-regulated financial markets and speculation, against political corruption and disinformation and against the institutionalised and corruption-inducing interdependence of political and financial elites. In the second lie the struggle against the hegemonic discourses that (re)produce structural inequalities, and the question of how to develop incipient social change through collective action.

This second strand was made visible by the collective appropriation of the Hotel Madrid and the different uses developed inside and outside the building: it was simultaneously a place for the 15-M assemblies and for the relocation of evicted families, as well as for developing different civil disobedience practices in and through the appropriation of space and place. Such constitutive processes can be considered ‘ruptures of quotidianity’ (Holloway, 2010), a mobilisation laboratory for reclaiming the commons. By conceiving prefiguration as a practice that assumes the ends and means to be intimately linked, protest acts which seek to reconfigure urban space may challenge even deeply entrenched rights such as those safeguarding private property. In other words, the 15-M Movement embodies a new mobilisation cycle and recognises that demonstrations alone cannot be the pivotal acts in bringing about collective social change. Together with the quest for specific places, it is rather space itself that is at stake and must be obtained, because claiming consists of ‘taking’.

Against and Beyond Urban Neoliberalism in Madrid: Claiming the Right for Housing

The 15-M Movement is far from homogeneous, and the decentralisation of neighbourhood activities from June 2011 implies the increasing prominence of local demands, as well as the existence of different coalitions between movements active in similar fields and whose existence precedes the appearance of the *indignados*. One important debate concerns the urban impacts of neoliberalism, especially housing and the rapidly rising number of evictions. Movement claims disrupt the hegemonic discourses, practices and policies which have manipulated housing into a speculative and increasingly overpriced good (the so-called ‘Spanish Model’; López & Rodríguez, 2011); empty housing stock now accounts for between 4 and 5 million units. The 45 state-owned savings banks were central to this model, providing finance to both the real estate companies and those in need of housing. However, one of the many dark sides of the current economic crisis in Spain is the increasing problem that individuals face in paying back their loans. Backed by legislation, banks can easily begin legal proceedings against defaulting debtors, expropriate properties and evict former owners. The number of evictions has been rising by ~50% annually since the beginning of the crisis, peaking at 58,250 in 2011 (CGPJ, 2012)—in other words, 160 expropriations and evictions every day. In addition, in many cases the current legislation locks people into debt with the banks even after they have lost their property, pushing them into further economic and social exclusion.

Given this structural mismatch, between untamed and state-assisted neoliberal market forces in the real estate sector, on the one hand, and the constitutionally anchored ‘right to

use of decent and adequate housing' (Art. 47 of the Spanish Constitution) on the other, the current crisis exacerbates all previous crises of accessibility to the basic commodity of 'housing'. Broader parts of the population, whether young people, economic migrants, blue-collar workers, single women households or the unemployed, are experiencing exclusion from housing, suffering structural eviction from the market mechanisms of residential supply. Since 2006, this situation has led to significant mobilisations against abusive housing and rental prices. These mobilisations have mainly been organised by the 'platform for dignified housing' and *V de vivienda* (*vivienda* means housing), who have invaded the political sphere beyond the influence of political parties and trade unions (Sequera, 2011).

The systematic violation of the constitutional right to housing thus became politically visible and received increasing attention. For example, the Zapatero administration granted public rental subsidies to younger generations from the mid-2008. Although the movements discussed above suffered significant demobilisation at that time, they had already prepared the ground in organisational and discursive terms for claims that became key structural issues and the main political battleground for the 15-M Movement. For this purpose, a second actor, the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, translation: Loan affected platform), established in Barcelona in February 2009, is a further important movement node. The platform had already been developing a coherent discourse about the right to housing and had been focusing on the fight against evictions for more than 2 years when the 15-M mobilisations occurred. However, it was not until the 15-M Movement exploded that this struggle gained major visibility.

The #Hotelmadrid: An Analysis

The occupation of the Hotel Madrid took place after the massive demonstration of 15 October 2011, raising extraordinary public interest. On the one hand, it provided the first occupation of a building since the 15-M Movement erupted onto the political scene. Hence, the interest among activists in discussing and deciding the future uses of the building was huge, and over the subsequent days, several hundred people participated in public assemblies. The assemblies rapidly highlighted that the #hotelmadrid should be imagined and perceived as different from any other existing 'traditional' squat in Madrid, most of which consist of alternative social centres bringing together left-wing activists around a shared political project. Such squatted social centres are widely marginalised, disregarded and discursively criminalised² by broader parts of mainstream society, conservative media and public administration—partially because of active manipulation strategies but also because of the failures of the movement to communicate with broader parts of society.

The occupation of the hotel was thus imagined as a response to this political context, and to build bridges to broader sectors of society, creating solidarity and sympathy with the activists involved. This is why the hotel was rapidly denominated as *liberated and recovered space*, rejecting references to terms such as squatting.³ As part of this communication strategy, the building was considered not only an autonomous and self-organised space, but also a meeting place for everyone, including neighbours and visitors. This conceptualisation stimulated interest in knowing the hotel, and for several days, crowds walked in to gather around and see the interior of a building that had been closed to the public for many years. One side effect of the liberation of the hotel was the unexpected media interest in the participatory processes, as well as in the prospective use of the rooms.

Through a series of statements released by different 15-M neighbourhood assemblies, the PAH and other social movement actors effectively converted the decision about the use of the hotel into a matter of public interest. Media coverage was unexpectedly extensive and increasingly positive, a phenomenon directly derived from the presence of activists unrelated to the traditional squatters' movement. In the socio-economic context of increasing evictions, the debate over whether the occupation of an abandoned but fully functional building could provide housing was especially influential in persuading sceptics. A key factor here was the unconditional backing of the PAH, an association considered to be moderate and which played a key role in this shift in public opinion.

The assembly of the hotel decided on two main uses: two floors were given over to temporary residences for evicted families, and two floors were appropriated as space for the different working groups and assemblies, most of them constituted in the aftermath of the protest camps. In addition, the hotel administration and several newly created working groups were also given space for their activities. On 31 October 2011, the hotel opened its doors for the first resident, a 75-year-old woman who had been evicted the week before. Again, media coverage was significant and very positive, creating sympathy with and compassion for those relocated to the hotel. The following day, 16 new residents arrived, and in little more than a week, the hotel was fully occupied with more than 100 inhabitants, although in fact only some of them had previously been evicted. In addition, the hotel emerged as a neuralgic and visible centre of the 15-M Movement, in a way similar to the protest camp in May and June. Beyond bringing together working groups of the movement to a common and increasingly symbolically important place, the specific dynamics of the hotel also created a new series of groups and projects. Amongst these were working groups concentrating on empowering the residents themselves, based on the idea that the hotel should only serve as a temporary residence. Activists also created a housing office and an office for occupation, in line with the aim of establishing a laboratory for urban resistance and for the politicisation of the population more broadly. Both offices were designed to establish deeper contact with people suffering negative impacts of the crisis, and they aimed at empowering residents and anyone else interested to occupy other vacant properties owned by banks and public institutions. Although the realisation of such an idea was not as easy as imagined and posed a variety of problems, it took only 3 weeks for the first of these planned occupations to take place in Madrid, on 19 November 2011. And within the following days and weeks, five different squats were established—by those involved in the #hotelmadrid and by other groups. In Barcelona, where a building had been occupied during the 15 October 2011 mobilisation, five residential buildings were squatted in November. In addition, different groups of activists on the outskirts of Madrid and a dozen other cities across Spain occupied vacant buildings following aims similar to those developed in the #hotelmadrid in November and December 2011 (6 were located in the Madrid metropolitan area, and another 15 in other Spanish cities). In line with the innovation initiated by the #hotelmadrid, all these new spaces were imagined in the name of the new terms of recovery and liberation. Such a discursive transformation makes it clear that a recovered space rescues the city from the negative impacts of the real estate market, filling abandoned places with life, contrary to the notion of 'attacking' and 'stealing' a property which was associated with traditional squats. This strategy was key to changing the meaning of the occupation of buildings among broader parts of the population.

Although the hotel was vacated early in December, demands regarding the right to housing still remain central to the movement, and squatting is now established as a tool for raising questions about the development of another urban model. In the late March 2012, during the ‘week to fight for the right to housing’, another building in the centre of Madrid was squatted, again stimulating public debate.

Concluding Remarks

Before the eruption of the 15-M Movement into the public consciousness, activism in Spain had been structured around three key phenomena. The first is a substantial increase in ‘participatory’ attitudes within the framework of existing democratic rights, usually organised and supervised by state actors. The second is the rise of non-institutional forms of political participation centring on moral or economic questions that are not strictly political. Such demands search for new ways of constituting politics outside the state and beyond any state-led alternative, as a structuring process that has to destroy structures to re-structure society. The third is the fragmentation of demands in minority groups lacking the discursive power to influence the political agenda. This latter aspect reduced the impact of many social movements before the emergence of the 15-M mobilisation. However, since 15 May, counter-hegemonic struggles have been widely reconfigured by the emergence of new networks with horizontal aspirations as facilitators and democratic spaces of association. Activists related to the 15-M Movement reject pre-configured debates and executive committees, and they create working groups and a reduced, rotating coordination structure that does not pretend to represent the movement as a whole. These basic assumptions are not negotiable, as they are the keys to the development of an inclusive movement capable of bringing together multiple demands and integrating different, and sometimes mutually antagonistic, ideas. In addition, the *indignados* aim to articulate the apparent manipulation of public discourses, offering different interpretations of social realities to prepare the ground for, and advance towards, social transformation.

In this regard, the #hotelmadrid symbolises the re-signification of the occupation in terms of legitimation for and with the citizenry. The affinity with the broader demands of the *indignados* has enabled the development of a wider consensus that squatting, initially a marginalised underground activity, is now a publicly celebrated practice constituting one potential response to exclusion and eviction in the contemporary socio-economic context. In addition, squatting presents *ad hoc* solutions for the right to housing. Such a new solidarity is embodied by the tool of occupying buildings for social use, literally reintroducing the question of housing into broader public debates. In conclusion, therefore, the mobilising cycle of the 15-M Movement has enabled a qualitative change with regard to the social meaning of occupations. Within a couple of weeks, squatting went from being a ‘taboo’ in Spanish society to part of the commonly accepted repertoire of collective action. The example shows how this kind of rupture of consensus can result in qualitative stimuli for the appropriation of the city and the rights integrated into it. Before the crisis, the right to housing was mainly supplied by banks, individualising a central problem of ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992). However, following the outbreak of an economic crisis which has emerged precisely from the economic policies of risk, both the problem and the possible solutions for the right to housing are now beginning to be collectivised, and occupation is one of the possible tools for this collectivisation.

Notes

1. In this article, we have adopted a pragmatic and neutral use of the terms ‘occupation’ and ‘squatting’, though are conscious of the variegated notions both terms may have in different debates.
2. A legislative reform in Spain has formally criminalised squatting since 1996, punishable by a maximum of 2 years in prison. However, this punishment has never so far been applied, and activists have developed a series of strategies to avoid punishment.
3. Spanish activists use the term ‘okupación’ for the politically motivated squatting of buildings, while aspects related to the ‘occupation’ of space are usually addressed as ‘taking’ (i.e. take the square). During the occupation of the Hotel Madrid the term ‘okupación’ was avoided.

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