

## COUNTERCULTURAL SQUATTERS IN SPAIN

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For a better understanding of the contemporary cities all around the world we can adopt sociological views from above or from below. Global metropolis and big amounts of goods, services, information and money, are only one face of the coin –usually, the lens we use from above, the focus on *macro*. These dynamics share the power to influence our lives and ideas, even while living in the least urbanized places, with other apparently less important processes and apparently affecting to less people: migrants, informal economy, alterglobalization movements, cultural hybrids, etc. However, the focus on *micro* could lead to think again in simple terms of dominant and dominated groups, ignoring that social domination is always a sort of hurricane where all are involved. Some small particles and movements in the *windy* and accelerated jungle of cities can change their direction, their pace, even without the total inversion of the power relationships embedded in urban spaces. The question is how to perceive the relevance of those groups within the social and cultural diversity that feed those *micro* processes.

This is the case of squatters in Spain. From the first eighties of the last century, hundreds of young activists began to live in and transform empty buildings in the main cities of the country, frequently at the city centres. They followed similar and previous movements in Europe, but it must be acknowledged that the spread of the challenge to authorities and private owners was kept in a very small and contended dimension all along the continent. In Spain this urban movement has survived, squatting, protesting, gathering and creating ways of expression and social relations for more than two decades. Where the movement has remained quite close to its original form and image, as in Barcelona and Bilbao, squatters are now regarded as an inherent part of the urban landscape, even becoming, in some cases, the pride and joy of those political authorities that try to repress them. Wherever the experiences of squatting took place –Madrid, Seville, Valencia, Palma de Mallorca, Vitoria, Zaragoza, etc.-, they *modernized* the styles of the strong urban movements of the seventies and influenced the political attitudes of new generations. For instance, squatters protested not only against the social housing cuts and the real state speculation, but also in favour of illegal immigrants, criticising media censorship and organizing party & political demonstrations in the streets. As any observer could conclude, the *micro*-ethics of urban squatters gained a more relevant role in these whirlwinds than their reduced size might suggest. Trespassing the conditions of illegality and minority, Spanish squatters reached recognition as active social actors in cities, although this does not mean to be in equal conditions to other institutionalised urban actors.

Why are Spanish squatters “countercultural”? This is not an exclusive feature of Spanish squatters but an inherent experience shared by all European squatters. Urban squatting in the United States, for example, was mostly promoted by organizations trying to host homeless people (there are exceptions like the one shown ironically in the

film *The Anarchist Cookbook*, directed by Jordan Susman, 2002). Land squatting in poor countries of Latin America, Africa or Asia, by contrast, has been a really hard and sadly violent experience for thousands of peasants fighting for the basics to survive. Anyhow, any act of resistance to the oppressive conditions of life and any social group with its own social borders generate a particular culture: ways of talking and dressing, norms of loyalty and courage, shared values and identities, common friends and love partners. For any squatter, we could also add that they settled up real universities of life given that squatting compromise the whole everyday life of the people involved. When we refer to countercultural worlds of meaning, it is not easy to be free from the “spirit of an epoch” –May 1968, *hippy* communities, escape from the alienation of abundance through music and drugs, etc. But everything has changed after three decades. Squatted social centres in Europe have become platforms for the expansion of and support to the Zapatist rebellion (from 1994 to the present) and the indigenous rights in Mexico, settlements for *indymedia* infrastructures of communication by means of internet, spaces for a huge circuit of underground music and artistic performances. In the film *The Constant Gardener* (Fernando Meirelles, 2005) we can appreciate a supposedly squatted building in Amsterdam dedicated to the surveillance of pharmaceutical companies; quite similarly, in Spain, some squats are also specialized libraries and documentation centres. Drugs are frequently used, but not the so called hard drugs (heroin, for example), at least not in all the squatted buildings, and not more frequently than among the rest of the youth. Communitarian proposals are launched thanks to specific co-operativist initiatives rather than to sectarian ones or share-all-you-have / islands of primitive communism. Nonetheless, the rapid replacement of activists and the constant evictions have the practical and cultural effect of nomadism, not always accepted by all squatters. Using a inverted strategy of nomadism, metamorphosis in relation to defined ideologies, a wide do-it-yourself culture, recycling of any stuff considered as “trash” (even food), and austerity reducing the levels of consumption, squatters oppose the dominant culture with mixed practices and behaviours, confused within the urban crowds –do not confuse it with postmodernism!

So, are these squatters part of wealthy families, classes and societies? If they are not post-modern, what is their utopia? Do they have any project, beyond their marked identity (clothes, piercing, hair-dressing, slogans, graffiti...) and oppositional practices (party & protest)? Are there any material and social conditions behind these new urban movements? Too many questions for such a short essay. Thus, let's turn to a set of facts that some scholars have highlighted during the last years and which are further supported by evidence obtained through research within the movement itself.. 1) Cooptation of activists and legalization of squatted building is quite odd (this was easier for Germans and Dutch; most of the Italians and Spanish were against any negotiation with local, regional or state governments, and with most of private developers). 2) This is a clear example of a transnational network of experiences and one of the material-spatial infrastructures of new urban and youth movements but, even adding the global character of cities where squatting has placed, political conflict is usually manifested at the local level, involving confrontations between municipal authorities and squatters. 3) Historical centres of big cities and other urban areas under rapid restructuring processes (ex-industrial districts, harbours, old public facilities, etc.) offered the ideal spaces for the aspirations and forces of young people who wanted to do things at the margin of mainstream culture, politics and social organization. 4) This is, basically, a 24-hour political commitment, for it implies self-protection against police, extreme-right gangs (neo-fascists) and intimidators paid by private developers, and, at the same time, a

whole involvement in domestic and social activities, and this strong application of the feminist claim that “personal is political” makes the difference in comparison to many other social movements. 5) The Spanish squatters movement has very flexible limits and is formed by thousands of different types of sympathisers, activists, residents and “users” of the social and cultural activities launched from the self-managed and squatted social centres, a more powerful engine of the movement if we compare them with the squatted buildings used for residential purposes only.

The Spanish squatters were increasing the number of groups and initiatives during the eighties and nineties. Legal and police repression came over the movement since the last nineties, but there was not homogeneity applying laws and some intellectuals, lawyers, associative leaders and judges supported these demands and projects. In some cities the crisis of the movement implied just a change in the strategy, turning many squatted social centres into rented ones, but often combining public activism with individual strategies squatting houses. The project was always beyond the walls. Or, expressed in squatters’ discourse, “you can destroy our houses, but not our ideas”. In too many occasions, squatted buildings were demolished after the eviction of dwellers or, worse, kept empty with bricks covering windows and doors. Speculative practices in urban and housing issues are forbidden in the Spanish Constitution, but they are a common and profitable ground for the private investment, both national and from abroad. House price is growing at average rates of 18% and more (depending on the city) each year since the last eighties. It reaches high peaks and record prices every time young population, and not-owner population in general, want to access to affordable accommodation. Renting market and state housing stock are also too narrow. Squatters used to say: “when living is a luxury, squatting is a right”. In this sense, their protests gave visibility to such economic scandals, uncovering this urban conflict. The point, however, is that this kind of countercultural squatting does not restrict the claims to one unique theme such as the scarcity of social and affordable housing. This movement mixes macroeconomic criticisms with the microeconomic management of houses, knowledge, politics, personal relations and arts. Like many anarchists and autonomous communists, squatters think that utopias must be put into practice, right here and right now. The future is a great invention of the urban growth machine for selling us our own dreams of the best city, the best way of life, the just wealth for everybody. And, of course, squatters mistrust such a business. Engels’ criticisms on housing market and Proudhon’s solutions came together to merge in the squatter movement.

Counterculture is about fantasy, integrity and dignity, not only about being against the System. We have mentioned above the integral demand for a squatting activity that affects everyday life at all times, body and soul, economics and *oikonomics* (that is to say, ecology in general, urban ecology in particular), politics and privacy. Moreover, when arriving at a squatted social centre, one enters a world of cheap food and drink, a sort of alternative restaurants, unusual books, journals and flyers that can shake your mind, paintings decorating inside and outside walls, flags, T-shirts, old bicycles, workshops, recycled beds, concerts, theatre, pictures, film exhibitions and talks about uncomfortable issues at any country, like prisoner’ rights or the international traffic of weapons. Often evokes a surrealist view. There is Colombian movie, *The Snail’s Strategy* (Sergio Cabrera, 1994), where fantasy and dignity are combined in a sort of anti-fairy tale: tenants face the threat of bulldozers while the landlord tries to evacuate their house by incredible means such as moving all the stuff, bricks and windows to a new plot in the suburbs; the tenants, however, blust the building in a triumphant ending.

Spanish squatters were not working together with poor families with children, or along with ethnic minorities who also occupy empty houses illegally. Both appeal to dignity and denounce the shades and limits of the Welfare State. However, squatters avoid to ask for their rights; rather, they appeal to direct action and bring forward conflict to public debate, at the risk of going to jail. In the “alternative scene” to which squatters belong there is a claim for social activism beyond needs: it is more about desire, collective desires. Independent media, rejection to conventional aesthetics and the strength of solidarity ties, even without the rigidity of being part of a formal organization and including different personal and ideological cleavages inside the movement, contribute to materialize those desires. The external image is usually a marginal one (see, for example, one of the few times that squatters appear in Spanish films: *Leo*, directed by José Luis Borau, 2000), but squatters themselves also produce films, books and documents that portray a different narration of their actions and their enemies. Walking on the edge of life, of course, implies a strong sense of creativity, resistance and temporality. Everything could end tomorrow.

The fact is that the movement remains active after more than two decades confronting dozens of trials and hundreds of evictions. On the one hand, it showed a great capacity to resist -more than ten buildings were squatted for more than fifteen years, at many courts squatters were free of charges, etc. On the other hand, squatters introduced us into new fields of political and social disobedience, not only civil disobedience to the laws that protect private and dead property -free software and *hacklabs*, or demonstrations against mega projects involved in urban speculation and justified with the benevolence of Olympics Games or the Forum of Cultures, for example. Some argued that this a typical middle class movement hiding the fact that most of the young involved were only rich in cultural capital (usually with university education) and poor in working conditions, with unstable and badly paid jobs (usually, also without the support of their families). Squatters really constructed liberated places for living, communicating and criticising the global city. Remember what Machiavelli to the ruler said five centuries ago: “if you do not destroy a city used to enjoy freedom, be ready to suffer your own destruction by its citizens”. Recently, David Harvey has remarked: “The right to the city is not merely a right to access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart’s desire. The right to remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban sociality is one of the most precious of all human rights.” Squatters, without doubt, helped us challenge the *concrete* and standardized ways of urban participation, and defend the urban rights to *place* and to freedom that the privatisation of public and domestic space is reducing. Similar reactions are expected in other cities of the world.

#### Further readings:

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