The Squatters' Movement in Europe

Commons and Autonomy as Alternatives to Capitalism

Squatting Europe Kollective

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Squatting as an Alternative to Capitalism: An Introduction

Claudio Cattaneo and Miguel A. Martínez

This book is about how the squatters' movement has emerged and how it represents a comprehensive alternative to capitalism. Capitalism is a broad phenomenon, so given its hegemonic nature, the squatters' alternative must be understood at the local level first. Given the multiple scales upon which the interactions between the global and the local take place, a starting point of analysis refers to how and to what extent the practices of squatting scale up from a local attachment. This implies the necessity of understanding whether the formal and substantial features of the squatters' movement are reproduced and expanded at a wider level, or to put it another way, how they change and adapt to a broader social reality.

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

Above all, we need to clarify what we mean when we refer to 'squatting', 'capitalism' and 'anti-capitalist alternatives'.

What Kind of Squatting?

Generally speaking, squatting is about the illegal occupation of property, used without the previous consent of its owner, which could be a public institution, a particular individual, a private corporation or any sort of organisation. Although there are many forms of squatting worldwide, in this book we do not deal with all of them. It is said that one billion people are squatting in houses or on land worldwide (Neuwirth, 2004). This is an amazing figure, accounting for one person out of seven. But we do not focus on such a broad dimension, and we stay put in Europe and North-America, in post-industrial and widely urbanised countries. In such a context, most cities are experiencing radical transformations in the use of space. In particular, in the last four decades the implementation of neoliberal policies, gentrification and other processes of social displacement and segregation, the shrinking stock of social housing, the privatisation of public services and spaces, and the commodification of larger aspects of our lives, seriously threaten any aspiration to a just city (Fainstein, 2010; Harvey, 1973) or to fulfil the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1968).

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

In Western European cities many squats are inhabited by immigrants, ethnic minorities such as the Roma, people homeless as a result of different social and personal conditions and so on. As long as these people do not pay rent, they are excluded from the housing market, and therefore their actions in squatting represent a practical and direct way to satisfy their housing need. This is an overtly alternative means of being housed apart from the options offered by capitalist markets or state supply, if any. However, their actions are almost exclusively intended to satisfy an immediate need in response to a desperate situation. The squat is considered as a temporary lodging solution, and if possible, the occupants aim for better conditions of dwelling – more permanent and legal. Moreover, they

tend to squat in isolation and not as part of any political movement, either spontaneously self-organised or in relation to self-help and pro-housing rights activism. Behind this type of squatting there is often no other motivation than to remedy a desperate situation, secretly and in silence. Such a reason for action has little to do with what is usually called 'political squatting'.

Certainly, the principal argument which emerges from the heart of the political squatters' movement is the practical defence of the right to decent and affordable housing. This is in line with the practice of direct illegal occupation which nonpolitical squatters adopt to satisfy their immediate needs, although they are not always able to express such a justification. The striking point is that political squatting offers a broader rationale for going beyond material housing need. First of all, political squatters criticise the dominant relationship between existing need and the way this can be satisfied in present Western European societies. The usual targets of their critique are the neoliberal forces of the late capitalistic stages: financial speculators, real estate developers, and the policy makers that favour them and exclude the worst-off from access to affordable housing.

Criminalisation and repression of squatting is considered as an abuse of the penal laws, since the right to a shelter is a fundamental one. Thus, the 'political' here also refers to the pretended public visibility of both the practice of squatting and the aforementioned criticisms. The aim of political squatters is to prefigure ways of living beyond capitalist society, implying the need loudly to express this message. On the one hand, political squatters address economic, social and political elites in order to let them know the desperate and precarious economic situation of those who cannot enjoy the right to housing. On the other hand, political squatters critique the society at large and make manifest with practical examples the kinds of problems, arguments and prospects that squatting suggests. In the end, it is basically about sustaining the legitimation of an act of social disobedience confronting the housing question.

Furthermore, as the emergence of social centres attests, the issue of housing is not the only one to be embraced by political squatters. Self-produced and creative commons culture opposing intellectual property rights; space required for holding political meetings and campaigns; alternative exchanges of goods, foods and beverages; social interactions and debates without the pressure of paying with money, and similar phenomena are possible thanks to the availability, accessibility and openness of many buildings which have previously been occupied illegally. Regardless of the kind of social needs behind squatting, political squatters argue that is not legitimate to leave private property abandoned. The right

of use should be prior to the defence of absolute private property. Making profit from private property does not justify social inequalities regarding access to housing or social spaces. As a consequence, such an explicit criticism becomes manifest through direct action, public campaigns, the production of visual and written documents, political debates, press releases, confrontation with institutional powers and other forms of active or passive resistance. This book provides diverse accounts of the political squatters' movement, although other expressions of squatting are frequently intertwined with it.

In the recent years we have also witnessed cases of fascist squatted social centres, like Casa Pound in Rome, for instance (Kington, 2011). The name is inspired by the figure of Ezra Pound, an American poet and essayist who lived in Italy and embraced fascism. He was strongly anti-capitalist, condemning finance as the driver of the economy, seeing usury as evil and pointing at corporate banks as responsible for the First World War. Casa Pound was the name of a building squatted in 2003 for housing citizens of Italian nationality. Although the inhabitants were evicted, it gave space to the birth of Casa Pound Italia, an active political organisation, now present throughout the Italian territory. There is a neo-Fascist inspiration behind some of those who – against speculative corporate interests – are engaged in squatting actions. Their squats are part of a wider political programme which aims at the reconstitution of a strong central state, is strongly anti-global and anti-capitalist, and promotes social mortgages for home property, birth policies favouring Italians but not immigrants living in Italy, and strict public control of strategic economic sectors such as finance, energy, transport and primary resources. Other aims are to promote social and economic autocracy, a revision of the Schengen Agreement in an even more strict manner, a nationalist-based defence of the Italian identity and a clear-cut separation from minority identities. Casa Pound Italia uses squatting as a tool to implement some ideas from its very controversial programme.

This is a quite delicate issue. Although it is somehow ambiguously anti-capitalist, far-right political squatting is not part of our analysis, while left-wing or left-libertarian squatting is here considered as an alternative to the capitalist society at large. In these forms of squatting, a wide social diversity and different cultural minorities are included. In contrast, far-right squatters violently oppose migrants, ethnic minorities and lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender and questioning (LBGTQ) individuals and organisations. Leftist squatters, however, are active in the provision of resources for deprived people, and apart from help in housing them, are generally involved in campaigns opposing restrictive and repressive

migration policies, or the persecution of unconventional gender identities. Again, from a political leftist perspective of squatting, rallying around these issues, and doing so in squats, is felt to be more legitimate than obeying the laws that protect the right to maintain vacant private property.

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

Thus, this book aims at a deeper understanding of the political squatters' movement as a direct answer to housing deprivation and other social problems inherent to the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism in Europe and North America. The scholarly literature on the topic of squatting is highly fragmented and not easily accessible. The intention of this book is to contribute to the knowledge of squatting across Europe and North America, and not only in one country or city. By collecting research made through different scholarly perspectives, we seek to analyse squatting beyond the sole issue of housing. The cultural dimension of living in common, the historical emergence of the movement, the bonds and connection with society at large, the inclusion of social diversity, the regular dilemmas concerning legalisation and criminalisation processes, the critique of consumerism, the alternative ways of life, the environmental dimension and the rural squatting phenomenon fall within the scope of our gaze.

In sum, we approach squatting as a heterogeneous phenomenon, specific to the local urban context in which it is formed and developed. While prior to the current systemic crises squatting was related mainly and almost uniquely – at least, in the eyes of mass media – to a sort of counter-cultural critique of the consumerist city, for us squatting is now more heterogeneous than ever. It can be intended either as a means towards something else – the institution of a right, through for instance the legalisation of a squatted house, or the cancellation of an urban plan that could cause irreversible social and environmental damage – or as an end: the maintenance of a threatening space against capitalist dynamics from positions of the radical autonomist and libertarian left (Mudu, 2012). The diverse cases of squatting dealt with by the authors offer original reactions against the commodification of housing and urban spaces for

the sake of their exchange value. When possible, the analysis takes in a historical examination of particular squatters' movements, and also a reflection of how significant squatting is within the local context, and the wider contexts of the financial crisis and, to some extent, environmental devastation.

Capitalism: Discontents and Alternatives

It is far beyond our present goal to define what capitalism is, but we cannot avoid highlighting a few crucial aspects tightly connected to the illegal occupation of empty buildings. Having expanded throughout the world with increasingly diminished barriers, deregulated capitalist modes of production, exchange and consumption, and the liberal assumptions underlying their hegemony (De Angelis, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Polanyi 1944), have provoked an enormous earthquake.

Very briefly, capitalism starts with a social contract between unequal individuals that allows the exploitation of labour and the accumulation of surplus value in the pockets of capitalists. But this was not historically possible without the help of different legal regulations and the massive mobilisation of peasants who were obliged to move to industrial settlements. Capitalism means the domination of a particular economic system over the whole society, including both its political and cultural frameworks. Exchange value replaces use value, and every single social relationship and natural resource becomes commodified, subject to being bought and sold. Private ownership of the means of production (land, minerals, energy supply, machinery, capital and so on) and reproduction (shelter, food, leisure, education, culture and so on) is a part of the whole complex of social relationships which is colonised by capitalism. Economic inequalities and, in particular, the existence of an 'underclass' which threatens workers' wages and conditions of work, are equally necessary to the continuation of such a system.

Workers' organisations and struggles may change some of those conditions if they operate within the limits of liberal (or even authoritarian) political regimes. And noncapitalist forms of making profits such as rent extraction and slavery may also coexist relatively peacefully if the tensions with the dominant ideology do not overflow, leading to uprisings out of the elites' control.

Hence, we need to ask what is the relationship between capitalism and squatting.

In principle, squatters take over spaces that have been abandoned by

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

Political squatters are anti-capitalist: speculation using housing stock is considered one of the worst legal behaviours within a capitalist society, since it is the origin of housing exclusion and other social inequalities. Monetary speculation is considered to be an even worse business. Social relationships based on labour exploitation under economic compensation are also normally absent in squats. But being anti-capitalist does not mean rejecting the use of money and of free markets. In fact many squats are established informal businesses – see for instance Pruijt's (2012) typology of entrepreneurial squatting – that, although freely playing in the market arena, are internally constituted as horizontal and self-organised entities and run through cooperative and often voluntary work. All this makes them radically different from other market players like capitalist corporations. For their individual income some squatters also participate in small economic projects outside the squats (often in cooperatives, sometimes in the informal economy) while others cannot avoid participating in the labour market, and work in salaried jobs for capitalist enterprises.

Capitalism is a perverse system guided by an addiction to profit with disregard to the needs of the rest of humanity. People no less than spaces are judged by their capacity to produce profits. They can be employed or discarded depending on the capitalists' calculations and aspirations. Empty houses and unemployed people are both dismissed until a use can

be found for them. Otherwise, it is the rest of the society that has to deal with the problems that capitalists can cause. On the capitalists' side, abandonment and destruction of the built environment does not entail any social or environmental trouble if the foreseen economic benefits are good enough. Private ownership of land and buildings provides a higher degree of direct control than is found in the relationship between capitalists and their workforce. Although there are legal restrictions to the degree of urban speculation, they are ineffective and cannot constrain the whole process of urban development based on the predominance of exchange values. Given such a context, real estate developers and speculators may also fail. Rational calculations also have to take into account the general cycles of economic boom and bust, and properties are not always easily sold or rented when and how the owners wish them to be. That is to say, vacancy is both a tool and a side-consequence of urban capitalism. Squatters are never completely sure whether they are interrupting the speculative engine or just taking advantage of the malfunctioning of the urban growth machine.

In this book we want to emphasise that urban and political squatting has lasted for more than three decades in Europe and North America. Over this long period of time an abundance of evidence has emerged about the practical achievements and the potentialities of squatting as an anti-capitalist struggle. Beyond the influence of every specific squat, there is a large network of mutual learning, connections and mutual help: that is, squatting has become a transnational urban movement. Squatters resist the commodification of housing, cities and their own lives. They embrace cooperation and social justice while satisfying basic human needs. Squatting is the most salient symbol of opposition against the damages caused by an unjust distribution of wealth and rampant urban speculation. Living with others without exploitation and being efficient about the preservation of collective needs by making use of the dark holes in urban capitalism (the vacant spaces), squatters offer a political example which is easy to imitate. If the actual circumstances of vacancy and squatting cannot always define a frontal and decisive alternative to capitalism, in most of the cases political squatters, their multiple practices and their critical discourses represent a valuable symptom and indication of how to overcome capitalist society.

Our perspective also takes into account the contradictions and failures that squatters have experienced. An excessive generalisation might ignore, for example, the cases of squatters who sublet rooms. If squatting becomes just a way of saving the rent when you are a student while preparing yourself to compete in the market, to participate in the exploitative relations of labour or to buy a home, then the anti-capitalist effects of

squatting are just limited to the existence of every particular squat, and not always to all the processes taking place inside. Living in a squat does not necessarily entail an anti-capitalist attitude, or work out if no other personal transformations and political involvements occur. Meant in such a narrow sense, squatting risks being of no use for overcoming capitalism: no capitalist regime has been destroyed by one social group alone, and even less so by individualistic dynamics such as living rent-free. Within sectors of the squatters' movement, blind tactics regarding the salvation of one particular squat without considering the effects of repression on the rest erode the movement's consistency and capability to spread. Beyond the movement, it would be a failure to miss out on the opportunity to tie in with other urban and environmental struggles.

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

The Authors

SqEK (Squatting Europe Kollective) is the name of an activist-research network that was born in 2009. Since then, more than 100 people have joined the electronic mailing list and many regular events have been held in different cities. All the contributions to this book are authored by SqEK members who decided to join this process through the email list and the latest SqEK meeting. For us – the coordinators and individual authors of the book – this collective project has been a source of reflection, dialogue and cooperation. The texts we have produced aim at in-depth analysis of a diverse range of issues about squatting, as well as providing activists with systematic data and original interpretations. Most of us are based in different universities across Europe and North America,

but some are more involved in their local squatters' movement than in research institutions. In addition to our different academic backgrounds, one of the strengths of this group of authors, and of SqEK in general, is the gathering of committed scholars who are actively participating in and researching into the squatters' movement. We seek to provide first-hand information rarely made visible by mass media and external social scientists.

The relationship between SqEK, the present group of authors – which constitutes a collective within SqEK – and each individual is a nested one. The context in which the book emerged as an idea is the broad one of the SqEK network, its meetings and the SqEK email list; within it, the group of contributors has been formed and evolved, and worked and cooperated in the realisation of the book. At the individual level, several people have put their activist or scholarly expertise into each of the chapters and boxes, and two editors have coordinated the entire work. However SqEK has also been involved as a whole, via the list or in meetings, in the completion of the book. More details of this process are given in the Appendix, which clarifies how this book is a production of SqEK with explicit authors, some of whom have proven expertise in their field.

Contents of the Book

Having seen that not all typologies of squatting can be represented, we acknowledge that not all perspectives around squatting can be undertaken. Hence, we have emphasised case studies and empirical evidence about different aspects of the squatters' movement, while attempting to keep a balance with our theoretical foundations, the core topic of this book and also our real-life experience within the squatters scenes.

The question we as editors have suggested to all the authors is whether or not squatting has displayed specific alternatives to capitalism. Our aim is to contextualise the squatters' movements, to see to what extent squatting is either a local or a global alternative, to what degree squatters manage to do without, and survive at the margin of capitalism. We take on board the idea of a critique to capitalism, expressed in how squatters live in everyday communes and how they create spaces where the impossible becomes possible. Thus, we draw on both past experiences and recent events in order to assess the potential conditions under which squatting could be scaled up to provide a larger alternative to capitalism.

The chapters are organised as follows. Below are two boxes, one from Miguel A. Martínez, which offers a presentation of SqEK as a research

collective and of the methodological debates about being activist researchers, and one from Claudio Cattaneo, Baptiste Colin and Elisabeth Lorenzi, offering insights into how both our horizontal processes for decision making and the way our meetings take place constitute alternatives to capitalism. Then follows a chapter that sets the wider framework of this book, that of capitalist dynamics and the crisis, the housing question and the kind of reactions and resistance that squatters propose. The rest of the book is divided into two main parts where we further develop the guiding ideas we presented above, and in particular, provide more contextual insights about the historical, economic, political and environmental constraints within a capitalist society.

The first part, 'Case Studies' – Chapters 2 to 5 – comprises city case studies which engage in a historical presentation of how the squatters' movement has emerged, flourished and at times declined. Common to all experiences is the centrality of the housing issue. However, we learn that while in some cities and contexts more radical experiences around the squat as an alternative commune have flourished, in other situations or moments in time the squatting phenomenon has been more focused on reclaiming housing rights. The cases presented are samples of a complex spatial-temporal reality represented by the experiences of Amsterdam, New York, London, Brighton, Berlin, Geneva, Barcelona, Rome and Paris.

In particular, Part I begins presenting a case for fomenting a genuine alternative to capitalism, rooted in a criticism of the consumerist society. Here squatting is the justification for engaging in the lifestyles that such a counter-cultural alternative entails. This radical approach has characterised in many cities the emergence of what could be understood as the squatters' movement. This part further develops by presenting other city case studies which show the political approach of reclaiming housing rights. This movement, contextual to the present housing crisis, is best characterised in the last chapter of this series, with the cases of Rome and Paris, which are witnessing the emergence of large squatters' movements for housing. Extending beyond the traditional counter-cultural identity that emerges in the preceding chapters, these housing movements constitute another potential alternative to capitalism.

The second part of the book, 'Specific Issues' (Chapters 6 to 8) is structured across three specific themes: the relationship between the city, its environment and the movement's ecological dimension; the inclusion of diversity and gender minorities; and problems related to legalisation, criminalisation and institutionalisation of the movement. Beyond the housing issue, our experience tells that these are three facets of the phenomenon that better constitute challenging alternatives to the capitalist system.

These alternatives manifest themselves in very different ways, which are visible in the comparative nature of these chapters, in each of which information from at least two cities is presented. Far from being uniform blocks, environmentalism, consideration for minorities and institutionalisation processes have been presented in very different manners, so we can learn from these comparative case studies that the squatters' movement can at best constitute many alternatives to capitalism, which are local, context-specific and never hegemonic. In each city and context the movement emerges with its own characteristics.

Moreover, we find that these issues have a broader reach than the squatters' movement as a whole. Throughout Europe and North America they have been present in sociopolitical debates across local, regional and national contexts, and independently from the existence of a squatters' movement, society at large often acknowledges the importance of environmental, minorities and criminalisation problems. We argue that although they give marginal and very localised examples, the cases in these chapters deal with cutting-edge issues which show how the squatters' movement takes the ambivalent position of engaging in illegal experiences which have been introducing and promoting progressive sociopolitical practices which have often anticipated new legislation.

The book follows a structure where city case studies are presented in thematic chapters, so that particular characteristics of the squatters' movement of a city can appear across several chapters. Table 0.1 shows for each city that has been included in this work, the chapters that offer a particular analysis.[1]

Let us summarise each specific chapter.

Miguel A. Martinez and Claudio Cattaneo set out in Chapter 1 the context in which squatting practices take place today, in the midst of the deepest capitalist crisis in nearly a century. This context is important not only because housing is a reason for squatting, but also because this is a serious crisis of capitalism and alternatives are required. In this respect, the practice of squatting is well placed to provide an answer to such a stringent issue. The main argument of the chapter is that squatting represents an opposition not just to private property but to many facets of capitalism. It is more appropriate to say that squatting is a practical critique of urban speculation, but this would be to leave aside the fact that there are many other forms of economic speculation that are equally contested. Squatting is a multidimensional way of living that pursues the collective satisfaction of human needs through autonomous, participative and horizontal means of direct democracy. Otherwise, neoliberal policies,

Table 0.1 Structure of the book according to cities analysed

Part	Context	I Case studies					II Specific issues			
Chapter/City	1	2	3	4	5	6 Ecosystems	7 Minorities	8 Legalisation		
Geneva		X								
Berlin		X					X	X		
London	UK		X							
Brighton			X							
Amsterdam				X				X		
New York	USA			X		X				
Rome					X					
Paris					X					
Barcelona	Spain					X	X			
Madrid							X	X		

the rule of capitalist market, the housing bubbles and the exhausting oil transactions will reproduce existing social inequalities.

In Chapter 2 **Luca Pattaroni** presents the case of Geneva, a city with a powerful squatter movement which in the 1990s managed to get to the core of city politics. Not just campaigning for the right to housing, the Geneva squatters' movement represented a colourful diversity of attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles which flourished in opposition to the grey of the capitalist city. Pattaroni makes the case that since the idealistic surge of May 1968, a new-left political vision centred around self-management, solidarity, conviviality and creativity has emerged. People started to squat in order to live differently, not just to satisfy a 'need'. The chapter is a narration of an intimate journey into the stages that shape a squat's cycle: occupation, installation, habitation, eviction and perpetuation. It shows how the criticism of capitalism is applied in practice in the lifecycle of a squat. Also, it shows the power of the movement which stretched through the 1980s, growing a wide political consensus against housing speculation which favoured its existence and got sympathisers to adopt the squatters' festive conceptions of political struggle. In an intriguing manner, Pattaroni shows how squats are not only places of contestation, but also drivers of a rich and alternative life which eventually succumbed to the revenge of the market, the conception of the city as a commodity and zero-tolerance policies. The resurrection elsewhere proves how the phenomenon is mainly that of a network movement. **Lucrezia Lennert**'s comments (in Box 2.1) reinforce the sense that house projects, which are quite common in Berlin, promote alternative lifestyles and help people manage personal lives largely apart from the dominant capitalist ways of living.

In Chapter 3 **E. T. C. Dee** provides an account of the Brighton and London history of the squatters' movement, both how it originated and how it appears today, decades later. The issue of criminalisation pending upon illegal occupations in residential premises is a central one in that story. Although not much has been written about it, the criminalisation of squatting in England and Wales since 2012 is a crucial landmark which might seriously challenge the future existence of the movement in these countries. The author argues how important squatting was for housing during the 1970s and 1980s, an importance which is also related to the political activity undertaken by activist groups who reinforced the right to housing through their squatting actions. The amount of empty properties, a number always much larger than the number of homeless families, fostered a shared understanding of the existence of a housing crisis that resulted in a certain societal approval of squatting.

The concept of 'political squatting' is closely related to the refusal

to accept urban speculation in real estate – whether it leads to housing shortages, the construction of commercial superstores or the contested use of public urban space – but is also analysed in relation to the declarations that politicians and activists offer about the issue. These explain the shift in public opinion and perception of a once well-accepted phenomenon, although as the author notes, the combination of empty buildings and economic crisis will mean that squatting persists, despite its criminalisation. Box 3.1 by the **Needle Collective** explains how the squatting phenomenon has been evolving one year after criminalisation.

In Chapter 4 **Hans Pruijt** elaborates on the history of the squatters' movement in Amsterdam and New York City (NYC). In particular, he focuses on how it became large-scale, and how it had the power and the organisation to manage the adaptation of top-down public plans in Amsterdam – including the Olympic Games – while it did not succeed so much in NYC. Pruijt observes that the case of NYC verifies a prevailing notion of squatting as merely a means to be housed, instead of also being considered an end itself. This prevented the maintenance of the movement over long periods of time as part of a larger plan of political activism at the city scale, as occurred in Amsterdam, where more combinations of squatting types have occurred. On the contrary, NYC squatters mainly focused on squatting as a deprivation-based and alternative housing strategy. A few comments made by **Alan Smart** (in Box 4.1) introduce the contribution of the Provos as pioneers of the Dutch squatting movement. In addition, **Frank Morales** (Box 4.2) tells a brief personal story of the Lower East Side squatters' movement, which sheds new light on how a repressive institutional context made the survival of the movement extremely hard, a situation that did not occur in the Amsterdam context.

In Chapter 5 **Pierpaolo Mudu** explores the context of squatting for housing in Rome, as a political claim to the right to housing. The stronger the crisis of capitalism, the bigger the rescaling of the squatting phenomenon. Here we observe the capacity of its reach and its heterogeneity. The first part of the chapter begins with elements of a cultural critique present in the lifestyle of people who choose to live differently, under communitarian principles, and who find in squatting an open window to make the jump towards an alternative life. It ends by presenting an almost forced choice for people in need of decent housing who find a practical solution in the occupation of houses, given the cul de sac down which the present neoliberal capitalism is driving them. This does not occur only in Rome. Paris is an example of a large wave of political squatting for housing, as *Thomas Aguilera* reports (Box 5.1), with organisations that are active in providing shelter for those in most need. A similar typology of squatting

is spreading widely in Spain too, as an extension over the last two years of the direct actions and campaigns launched by the Platform of the People Affected by Mortgages (PAH).

At the start of Part II, in Chapter 6 Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro and Claudio Cattaneo see the city from the environmental perspective. Cities being both socially and environmentally unsustainable, the authors analyse local alternatives from Barcelona and NYC that, within the squatters' movement and in response to capitalist devastation, develop their ecological conversion through setting up urban gardens, bicycle workshops or rural-urban (rurban) communes. They claim that these examples form part of a more general process among the squatters' movement which has begun to recognise how anti-capitalist autonomy must be founded not only on issues of social justice, but also on the supply and production of sustainable resources, and access to the means of primary production. However, far from arguing a simple case for greening the city through more urban gardens and pro-bicycle policies, squatters criticise the (green) neoliberal city. In rurban communes a whole lifestyle is built around the principles of mutualism, ecologism and social justice.

In Chapter 7 Azozomox engages in a comparison between Berlin, Madrid and Barcelona, aiming at studying the issue of social diversity within the squatters' movement. In particular, the author deals with gender relationships. LBGTQ identities, the critical perspective of non-white and migrant women, everyday sexism and the division of labour in the reproduction of life are all controversial issues within the squats discussed. Although the relationship between capitalism and social domination in the field of gender relationships would deserve a larger discussion, the chapter provides evidence of the narrow connection – and sometimes clashes – between anti-capitalist and gender-emancipatory struggles. A strong self-criticism has arisen from inside the squatters' movement about the real contradictions and limits that political squatting has in terms of gender relations. Thus, Azozomox explains why some squats preferred to devote their political initiatives to those specific issues.

In Chapter 8 Miguel A. Martinez, Azozomox and Javier Gil propose a way of understanding the legal issues of squatting by reflecting on strategies of resistance, the challenge of criminalisation and the controversies around the options of squats converted into a legal status. The authors deal with the different legal regulations in some European countries, and the evolution of the legal and political treatments of squatting over the years and according to the state authorities concerned. They focus on the cities of Madrid and Berlin in order to understand how squatters face the overall criminalisation of squatting and particular threats of eviction.

Other European cases are also considered for comparative purposes, and in Box 8.2 Deanna Dadusc presents the case from Amsterdam, which has been affected by the new Dutch legislation that seeks to criminalise the movement. As the authors argue, squatters' resistance to the law may take place inside or outside legal institutions, so that the legalisation of some squats should not be regarded as the major outcome of the legal dilemmas faced by squatters. Various other strategies, benefits, side-effects and contextual explanations also need to be included in the analysis, as is shown by the examples mentioned in the chapter. Claudio Cattaneo (in Box 8.1) offers an explanation of squatters' illegal behaviour grounded on the pursuit of their moral principles independently from respect of the law and combined with the movement's capacity to resist oppression.

In the final chapter of this book we use the cases and arguments of the previous chapters in order to offer some answers to the original questions that motivated us. We also recall the ideas and remarks given by other SqEK members in the last debates we held in Paris (March, 2013).

Summing up, we claim that squatting does not represent a complete alternative to capitalism. Mainly, squatting provides a strong local alternative, with various branches of critical discourse, small-scale behaviours and autonomous practices directly connected with other anti-capitalist and emancipatory social movements. In addition, there are many hindrances and internal contradictions which squatters' movements need to face if they want to scale up to a level at which they become powerful enough to challenge the hegemony of capitalism.

Box 0.1 *Some Notes about SqEK's Activist-Research Perspective*

Miguel A. Martínez

We could define SqEK as an information and social network of activist-researchers. This should be distinguished from a formal organisation; it is neither an institutionalised research group nor a research institute. Instead of formal externally imposed regulation, SqEK members reach consensus decisions which are valid until the next face-to-face meeting. Decisions are usually based on previous debates which have arisen through the email list or during one of the regular encounters. Just as with squatting itself, no university, state agency, non-governmental organisation (NGO) or private company was behind the origin and development of SqEK, although members

may use the resources of the institutions to which they belong in the course of participating in this activist-research network.

Membership in the network is also quite open and flexible. The first call to meet in Madrid in 2009 was addressed to researchers all over Europe who had published books or academic articles about squatting (the members are mainly from Western Europe), but it was an open call that also appealed to students researching into this or related topics. Later meetings were even more public, with the aim of inviting activists and people interested in squatting and other researchers, like those from North America. New scholars, students, squatters and activists attended the presentations and discussions, although only a few remained involved in SqEK. Those who did joined the email list, or later wrote a short letter of introduction and motivation, and asked to join. Most of those who approached SqEK via the internet participated in the regular exchange of messages and in the upcoming meetings. Beyond the internal mailing list, there is also a website: sqek.squat.net

While the name chosen refers to the existence of a 'collective', this is a specific and variable outcome of the activities that all the members perform through the network. Every time we meet, gather in order to write a book (like we have done for this one in our last two meetings) or a special issue of a journal, or form a group in order to research a particular topic, we produce collectives. All are part of SqEK. The unitary name might be misleading. The way of working is as a 'collective of collectives', that is, as an active network producing research activities with a collective dimension. The general collective entity, then, has looser boundaries than the subgroups. However, these would not be possible without the general umbrella, and the flows of information which are constantly underway within the network.

At the end of the second meeting SqEK held in Milan in 2009, a manifesto and research agenda was written collectively, and published soon after in *ACME* (an e-journal of critical geography) and the ISA-RC-21 (International Sociological Association-Research Committee) newsletter. This text emphasised that

> Critical engagement, transdisciplinarity and comparative approaches are the bases of our project .... Self-funded research in different countries, internal meetings of the research group and public events are, at the present, our main activities. Diverse methods of research and theoretical frames are also remarkable aspects of our methodology.

At first glance, this declaration does not suggest any exclusive method or theory within SqEK. Nonetheless, there are some approaches that are strongly endorsed within this network (and which could be described as the SqEK research agenda).

SqEK encourages methodological approaches in which the researcher is critically engaged in squatting. This is an open and not uncontroversial issue, but at least explicitly, invites self-reflection on the researcher's involvement with the practices and struggles carried on by squatters. There are different ways to express that engagement, from researchers who live as squatters themselves, to their availability to offer advice and information to squatters who request it. To make this commitment clear, we decided to hold public talks and debates with squatters in each of the cities where SqEK met. The same heterogeneity we observe within the squatters' scenes is also present within SqEK. There is no canonical model of the kind of activist-researcher that SqEK promotes, but the common ground is to consider this relationship crucial, and one which should be debated explicitly. We take it for granted that most who are affiliated with SqEK are sympathetic with squatting, or even joined this network due to their previous experiences as squatters. However this does not exclude critical perspectives regarding, for instance, squatters' contradictions, failures and unintended effects.

> SqEK will seek to critically analyse the squatters' movement in its relevant contexts (historical, cultural, spatial, political, and economic), trying to involve the activists in the research practices, and sharing the knowledge thus produced with them and society. ... Furthermore, in view of the diverse composition of our network we seek to challenge the traditional dichotomy between researchers and their subjects/objects of knowledge. Whenever possible, we would like to involve squatters and activists in our research practices, thus favouring a collaborative and dialogical approach to knowledge production in the belief that social movement activists, just as any other social actor, are themselves producers of knowledge
>
> (SqEK research agenda)

Therefore, SqEK is a means for researching *about* squatting, for making collaborative research *with* squatters, and advancing public understanding *of* squatting. Cooperation, horizontality and direct democracy within SqEK are procedures of self-organising that stem from our past [*or* that of many members'] experiences in squatting

groups. When possible, SqEK members have supported squats under threat of eviction, or disseminated information about different cases of squatting, autonomous social centres and other urban struggles. Activists' networks and squats have been important for hosting attendees to SqEK meetings, without restricting this mutual aid to the squatting scene.

In comparison with most conventional academic conferences, time limits for debates were more flexible in the SqEK meetings. It was familiarly assumed that the group would try to reach consensus concerning the organisational affairs of the network. Intellectual controversies were always welcome if they were able to shed light on the topics under examination. The depth of the discussions also varied according to the type of participants in each given situation. SqEK also learned from the activist style of do-it-yourself, launching research projects funded at a very low scale. Not least, it has been a relief for activist-researchers to discover that hundreds of European squatters are also 'shadow researchers'. Activists may not be entirely aware of their contributions to the public knowledge of squatting, but many are highly educated and involved in the kinds of debates, publications, talks, video making and campaigns which inform a research process. SqEK members feel themselves very tied to those kinds of self-research processes, although they also remain connected with academic debates, bibliographic references and theoretical discussions which may also interest activists. In addition, several proposals of publication in a nonacademic language, accessible to a wider audience, emerged within the SqEK meetings in order to popularise this collaborative production of knowledge about squatting.

Indeed, activist or militant research suggests that the boundaries between activists and researchers are blurred. This also means conflicts. Activists may consider some information secret, or sensitive for political reasons. Some activists do not want to help individuals in their academic careers. Some researchers only see activism as an academic subject from a distant point of view, and are heedless of activists' concerns. There is great diversity among activists, researchers and activists-researchers, so stereotypes tend to play a harmful role. In general, whether activist or researcher, nobody likes to be treated as an abstract, simplified and static research object. Thus, the main challenge for all the people involved in a project of activist research is to agree on the terms of the interactions, the means and goals of

the cooperation, and the specific combination of subjective and objective analysis. Whatever form of work is adopted, there is also an unavoidable political debate about public access to the knowledge produced, and about the intended and unintended effects of spreading the knowledge. Accordingly SqEK decided to promote, as much as possible, copy-left licences and practices (that is, following the open source /creative commons culture which opposes intellectual property rights) in our publications. Still, some arrangements and concessions need to be made when dealing with corporate journals, since these are the institutional requirements imposed on an individual engaged in an academic career. To ignore this would be detrimental to the stability of the institutional researcher.

Further, while transdisciplinarity has conventionally been claimed for the social sciences since the 1970s, it is not so often brought into practice. Since the beginning of SqEK there has been a common concern about how sociologists, political scientists, geographers, anthropologists, historians, economists and others with many different intellectual backgrounds can work together. The initial measures adopted consisted of a collective listing of research questions according to each member's ways of thinking. These questions were grouped into five general dimensions:

- long and medium-term structural factors that make squatting possible
- analysis of 'conflicts' and 'dynamics'
- networks of social centres/squats, their politics and culture
- empirical case studies
- squatting in comparative perspective.

Then two subgroups of SqEK members were formed in order to work on two research topics according to that general research agenda. These groups produced articles by combining the different disciplinary contributions of their members. Transdisciplinarity was also manifested in the critiques during the SqEK meetings, when research developed from a particular social science was subject to comments and criticisms coming from different social sciences. Therefore, these transdisciplinary debates had a relevant influence in the individual writings in spite of the authors apparently belonging to a single scientific domain.

Finally, the comparative approach has been strongly supported by all researchers involved since the network was first launched as a means of connecting people from different European cities and countries. Some of them had also sought to compare squatting in two or more cities. All of us sought to obtain and share a deeper knowledge of all European countries as a way of assessing the transnational urban movement. Systematic comparisons point a way to overcome both local and descriptive stories about squatting. Comparisons are therefore conceived as a means to discover cross-national patterns and similar phenomena in different urban settings. In addition, the comparative perspective obliged SqEK members to collect empirical data in each place according to the variables agreed upon by all the researchers involved. While these intentions framed the whole activity of the SqEK in the long run, some of the publications were only able to collect articles with a national or local scope, leaving readers with the task of attempting the comparison on their own.

Box 0.2 *SqEK Processes as an Alternative to Capitalism*

Claudio Cattaneo, Baptiste Colin and Elisabeth Lorenzi

The SqEK meetings have provided the opportunity for face-to-face interaction between researchers, most of them coming from established academic centres, but also many independent and freelance activist-researchers. This mix of participants already occurs in academic conferences but in the case of SqEK conferences, the main difference and novelty refers to the venues where they are held: not only university institutions, but autonomous social centres both legal and squatted.

The open and closed modalities of the different SqEK meetings imply that the group works as a research group – when doors are closed – and as a provider of a service from a social centre – when the doors are open. With reference to the first, we note that SqEK meetings use horizontal organising processes developed by contemporary social movements. This is also a heritage of some claims formulated during the 1968 students' movements, and is still present in some workshops organised in academic institutions. This is the way

a collaborative methodology is shaped. With reference to the second, an open door implies that, to the eyes of the external person, the event is not offered by an academic institution or by its research groups, but by a network within the squatters' movement, and in particular, one dedicated to scholarly research. In this way SqEK first appears to the public as part of a social movement, and only then it can be said that it contributes to the production of scientific knowledge. From a methodological perspective, it implies a step beyond 'participant observation', into 'participant observing', so that the main position shifts from that of observation to that of participation; from participatory research to activist research. As more than an external observer – albeit many members are engaged in participation – SqEK stands as a participant in the production of scholarly knowledge, as another activist within the movement. The research carried out in this book is original insomuch as it is participative, activist and collective.

In parallel with the meetings – which can be seen as catalysts of initiatives and collaborating projects – the SqEK email list offers a platform out of which proposals and agreements of the meetings are developed and more projects are proposed, such as the offer to publish this book, a process that is detailed in the Appendix, or to compete for EU or national grants.

Some unresolved contradictions still remain on the table, not only inside SqEK but also as a matter related to any activist research process. How do we combine academic meritocracy – which often seeks principal and leading authors – with the social and collective production of knowledge? In the Appendix we also explain how this contradiction forms part of a learning process, with its obvious limitations. And with reference to the relationship between squatted social centres and knowledge production, what do squatted and collective places have to offer for scholarship? What can be scientifically produced that stems out of their premises and processes? And what is there that academic and formal research centres cannot offer? How do we avoid the exclusive dichotomy of activist versus academic production of knowledge? We see that there are grounds for combined activities and processes between the academic/scholar sphere and the activist/social centre sphere, and SqEK contributes by promoting horizontality in decision making, by acknowledging the impossibility of truly independent and objective research, by adopting nonindividualistic values and engaging in self-organised social and

research processes. We see that as SqEK and through our meetings we are contributing to enhance this collaboration and to generate novel forms of scholar production.

Academic centres are increasingly becoming branches of the capitalist system through partnerships with the private corporate sector and similar processes of privatisation. But both the horizontal and consensus-based method that SqEK follows in the production of knowledge, and the practice of self-organising conferences within squatted social centres, are already enhancing an essential alternative to capitalism, and constitute a challenge to its hierarchical organisation.

Note

1 Given the high interconnectedness between the case studies and specific issues of the movement, each chapter relates to several other ones. As editors of the book we have inserted text in square brackets [like this] which explains the connection, continuity or divergence between arguments across chapters.

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