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Conclusions

Miguel A. Martínez and Claudio Cattaneo

For the social and environmental sustainability of our planet, capitalism is a serious menace. The exploitation of labour and the exploitation of nature have limits which blind capitalists simply dismiss. Continuous economic growth affects the carrying capacity of societies and ecosystems. Unsurprisingly, once the boundary limits are reached, there are reactions, crises and reverse effects for all those engaged in the growth machine, although those at the bottom of the social hierarchies experience the worst consequences.

One of the numerous initiatives of resistance against capitalism is political squatting. In this book, we have focused in particular on the squatters' movements in Europe and North America. Our perspective consists of a combination of activist knowledge and social science research. We encouraged different theoretical interpretations and their grounding in specific cities and countries, which are compared whenever possible. We believe this is a fruitful way to provide arguments that sustain squatting as an alternative practice to capitalism. The evidence collected in the previous chapters indicates that squatters also face internal contradictions and difficult obstacles in order to overcome powerful capitalist forces. Political squatting is rooted in a history several decades long, and although geographically it is spread across continents, it is still a marginal activity compared with the size of global capitalist flows and commands. Our argument, then, must be clearly contextualised: to what extent is squatting an alternative to the hegemony of capitalism?

First of all, political squatting refers to both the *illegal occupation of property* without permission and the diverse *types of activities performed* by activists and participants within squats and even closely in relation to them. Squatters oppose capitalism when they refuse the rule of private property and reject paying rent for the satisfaction of a fundamental human right such as housing. But squatters' alternatives to capitalism also include all the activities that are performed typically, although not exclusively, in and around the squatted house projects, communes and social centres.

Means and Ends

Both the practice of trespassing itself and the activities brought about by the squatters give answers to our initial questions. Furthermore, many of the contributors of this book have made visible the multiple motivations behind squatting, although the classic distinction between means and ends remains as an underlying framework. In short, for some squatters illegal occupation is not the main anti-capitalist action, so they just trespass a private property in order to develop a genuine or tentative anti-capitalist project. Squatting, then, is only a means. The end, for them, is to set up a housing project, a commune, a cooperative initiative or a social centre open to arts, politics and socialisation in a milieu of freedom, self-management and protest. To have an available, cheap or free space is crucial, but it is mostly conceived as a mere resource. Thus, should they later agree to pay rent or attain a legal agreement of tenancy, no contradiction with their other anti-capitalist struggles is observed.

Obviously, for some squatters the occupation itself is sufficiently anti-capitalist, because it challenges the plans and actions of capitalists over the built environment. Squatting, then, is an end itself. It serves for confronting urban speculation and, at least, to make visible how the elites manage vacancy for their profit while both homelessness and precarious access to housing are causing enormous suffering. Every case of squatting is able to display a hidden urban conflict, and this is valuable in itself. Of course, apart from living in a squat, the public activities hosted by the squat should be coherent with the kind of antagonist attitudes that squatting involves. But in the end, the latter are less important than the radical gesture of disobedience against the law of property.

In practice, most squatters combine the claims of both these sides – or they just do not care too much about the distinction. It would very simplistic to classify squats according to these general drivers, but it is evident that this shapes a basic level of legitimacy which obliges squatters to keep a balance between the two conceptions or to be consciously inclined towards one of them. The distinction between means and ends provides, in addition, different emphases on the anti-capitalist dimensions of squatting.

Publicly claimed squatting is an illegal action that implies a clear confrontation with the state, an attack somehow aimed at reverting the established order of a system which is considered undesirable. From the perspective of the dominant ideology it is only an infringement to the civil or the criminal code. However, it holds its own peculiarities. The taking over of abandoned properties is part of a wider struggle against private

property – one of the fundamental rights in liberal democracies – its uneven distribution and the resulting social inequalities. However, as it has been argued in previous chapters, squatting goes beyond the privileging of private property before the needs of a whole population. It is also a challenge to urban speculation, to managerial and authoritarian top-down policies on housing provision, to neoliberalism and the financial colonisation of life, to the consumerist way of living, to the individualisation of social problems and, last but not least, the political alienation engendered by representative democracy. Primarily, squatting is a negation of already existing domination. But this negation is a global one, including capitalism and many other forms of domination, although the practices of autonomy and resistance are confined to the specific sites and singular conditions where we live. This idea would match what Holloway argues:

> The core of autonomies is a negation and an alternative doing. The very idea of an autonomous space or moment indicates a rupture with the dominant logic, a break or a reversal in the flow of social determination. 'We shall not accept an alien, external determination of our activity, we shall determine ourselves what we shall do.' We negate, we refuse to accept the alien determination; and we oppose to that externally imposed activity an activity of our own choice, an alternative doing. The activity that we reject is usually seen as being part of a system, part of a more or less coherent pattern of imposed activity, a system of domination. Many, not all, autonomous movements refer to the rejected pattern of activity as capitalism: they see themselves as being anti-capitalist. The distinctive feature of the autonomist approach, however, is that it involves not just hostility to capital in general, but to the specific life activity imposed by capitalism here and now and an attempt to oppose capital by acting in a different way.
>
> (Holloway, 2010: 909)

Occupied spaces in the neoliberal city stand as visible breaches of the capitalist engine. The more squatters embrace squatting as an end, the less there is room for any negotiation or co-optation with the capitalist/neoliberal counterpart. From this point of view, the ultimate goal is to delay the eviction as long as possible. While alive and kicking, every squat remains as a threat to capitalism, although not often a very dangerous one. The main shortcoming of this approach comes out when the occupation is defended from a mere ideological opposition to both capitalism and the state, apart from a concrete criticism to the urban speculation at play and from the specific activities and people who need to use the space.

However, it needs to be acknowledged that the negative approach towards capitalist institutions, even within the most radical squats (those

giving priority to squatting as an end) is usually reinforced by keeping the space open for the positive creation of real alternatives to capitalism, although on a similarly small scale. The intensity of such alternatives can be pretty high when it is matched with the strong political ideals of radical squatters such as mutualism, lack of external control, absence of labour specialisation, flexibility, self-responsibility and common sense instead of clearly defined norms, spontaneous voluntarism both in performing tasks and in offering a pay-as-you-can possibility (for example for a concert fee, the price of a drink or a meal). Nevertheless, this general statement varies a lot from city to city and from squat to squat, so again, it just shows an approximation to an underlying pattern.

When squatting is considered as an instrumental tool or just a forced step given the unaffordability of urban space, the political priority resides more in the activities performed than in the anti-capitalist meaning of trespassing itself. The aim is to attack capitalism from the cultural and social side, more than from the economic and legal one. Instead of emphasising the challenge to private property, squatters focus on building up social networks of solidarity, political campaigns of protest, countercultural artistic expressions, a democratic social economy. The right to housing for the most needed is often included here, although it tends to be enhanced with the virtues of sharing with others the experience of living rather than just providing an individual or family shelter. Although gaining time and delaying the eviction are also important concerns in these cases, we can presume it is the political project and the activities that it catalyses that are considered, above all, to hold an anti-capitalist capacity. There is a high likelihood, then, that these squatters would easily accept an agreement with the owners in order to get the squat legalised. In the cases of homeless people or while facing the absence of affordable social spaces in the city centre, the legalisation of a previous squatting action tends to be claimed as a political victory in terms of a more just distribution of resources. The aftermath of legalisation entails new battles regarding the challenge to pay rents, bills and taxes, and to conform with other legal regulations, while keeping an eye open to strengthening the alternative project.

Another way of reconceptualising these dilemmas is by distinguishing 'formal' and 'substantive' drivers behind squatting. Formal alternatives to capitalism are valued according to their juridical form. If a law is unjust because of the constraints imposed by capitalism, then open disobedience to that specific law is a clear opposition to capitalism, especially if the opposition and living illegally can be sustained for a long time. Substantive alternatives to capitalism are those that emphasise the creation of

authentic and powerful ways of living, countercultural activities, cooperative housing and work, horizontal organisation and the like. In this sense, it is the practice and the way things are done that are claimed as an alternative, no matter the legal status that they take. Again, there is blurred space in between the two ideal types, and reality is often placed at that intermediate level. Squatters' discourses and practices regarding these two approaches (either separated or combined) may also differ significantly. Therefore, self-critical analysis about the anti-capitalist value of concrete practices, means and outcomes is always welcome.

Scaling Up the Alternatives to Capitalism?

Although they have been often debated, at one of our last SqEK meetings we asked for new contributions to the following questions: *To what extent does squatting represent an alternative to capitalism? Can it be scaled up from the small-scale phenomenon it is now, and how could it – if possible – overcome capitalism?* Let us summarise here some of the answers we have collected.

Squatting can be seen as a window of opportunities open just after the phase of occupation, as Luca Pattaroni shows in his chapter. The renovating phase of the built environment is done in accordance with the ideals and desires to live in common, with no limitations imposed by regulations or landlords. When people – rather than market enterprises – are free to express their creativity and fantasy, without any commercial interest, then some real alternatives to capitalism can emerge.

There are several issues at play. Squatting in general is a creative reaction against capitalism. As Pierpaolo Mudu synthesises, 'currently squatting represents one of the few (if not the only) forms of partial "social compensation" that has been actuated against the dispossession of entire cities and environments by capitalism'. This is performed without the participation of a third agent, the state, whose role should be the redistribution of society's wealth. On the contrary 'the state is very much involved in the production of squattable empty spaces' because it is responsible for leading urban renewal planning, other planned changes in land use and even the accumulation of abandoned municipal buildings, as Pruijt remarks. Thus, it would be impossible to consider squatting in relation to capitalism but not in relation to state authorities. Modern democratic states play the biggest role in the defence of private property and in the repression of different lifestyles that challenge capitalist dynamics.

Lucrezia Lennert claims that, as long as they exist, squats represent an alternative and a threat to capitalism insomuch as they overcome, in the

use of their spaces, the relations of private property and insomuch as they internally create commons as the positive expression of this overcoming, in the form of self-organisation, horizontality, communal sharing and mutual practices:

> Using the term commune can help for critically discerning the extent to which different kinds of squats are radical spaces or not, on the basis of whether or not they are creating commons as the positive expression of this overcoming. The idea of commune may also be useful for discussing squatting in relation to a wider revolutionary anti-capitalist politics.

For her, legalisation is not necessarily a 'successful' result for radical squatters whose goals are to smash the capitalist system. Thus, an argument against the legalisation of squats is that their illegal conditions provoke illegitimacy in the face of the state and capital, but not necessarily in the face of the society. If the squats are co-opted and become legal and legitimate for the elites, they lose their social legitimation as a threatening potential to the existing capitalism. Between the repressive elite and the antagonist squatters is situated the majority of civil society. Therefore, with disregard of the elites' will, the dilemma should be solved according to whether and how the social legitimation of squatting occurs in the eyes of the society at large.

Furthermore, the interpretation of legitimacy or illegitimacy depends on the nature of the 'judge' with the power to spread an interested discourse, be it the owner, the users or the court. As Miguel Martínez, Azozomox and Javier Gil argue in their chapter, squatters gain legitimacy through their practices, their social networks and the particular balance of local power relationships. In a similar line is Frank Morales's argument that connects squatters' breaking of the law with a redefinition of lawfulness:

> the 'breaking of the law' in the process of squatters' delegitimisation of the exclusivity of private property is really the primary sign of the alternative (negating) character of squatting, positing the essential break with capitalist structures while aiming to redefine what is truly lawful.

Hence the perspective changes sharply: it is private property and 'anti-life capitalism' that fall under a judgment of illegitimacy.

We are facing a power struggle with different languages of valuation expressed by different actors, which have a lot to do with legality, legitimacy and morality. For example, social centres are willing to show the provision of public services in order to gain social legitimacy against

their supposed illegality and against the moral and economic issues of leaving properties abandoned for speculation, deterioration and destruction. Fighting capitalism is more than an ideological or moral slogan: it is based on the positive character of squatting, namely the activities, social networks and fellow struggles that are created and carried on around a social centre, in addition to the ideals, practices and processes of living in common developed within a commune, a house project or a workers' cooperative. This is how squats gain social legitimacy.

In a game where there is no black or white, but only a series of shades of grey, the extent to which squatting becomes an alternative to capitalism contributes to redefine the balance of power in the struggle. When people who until few years ago were dreaming of becoming private owners now turn into squatters – even though only temporarily, as a step towards the legalisation of their housing situation – we can observe that squatting ends up winning a battle and capitalism partially losing ground.

Three forces are determining the balance of power: squatters – who might be considered as uncivil actors (D'Alisa, Demaria and Cattaneo, 2013) – the civil society and the state/capitalist elites. The capability of squatters to engage with civil society is crucial. For instance in the Spanish case, where cities have experienced a sort of tsunami regarding the recent changes in land use, empty buildings were abundant and squatting has increasingly been recognised as the symbol of radical and pragmatic approaches to counter these processes. In that context, almost no political authorities explored the option of legalising squats, so that most types of squats fell under a broad range of social reactions and movements against an irrational and unsustainable capitalism.

Squatting as a Local Alternative

In Chapter 2 we have seen how home ownership can be a means for social control among other unintended effects. Once you have to pay a mortgage or rent, you cannot exit from capitalist labour markets unless the amount you have to pay is low enough. Carlsson and Manning (2010), for example, suggest a strategic exodus to a Nowtopia, which implies liberation from paid work. Considering that the whole capitalist system is rooted on the exploitation of labour as a commodity, and that the sale of people's time to the market is necessary to earn the money to pay for housing, then time becomes the central *oikonomic* element for understanding how squatting emerges as a local alternative to capitalism. In other words, squats are rich in time when time is preserved from commodification and turns into a

creative labour process, without distinction between productive and reproductive work, and while improving the role of the household as a place for the production of use values.

In doing this under the veil of illegality, squatters need to be capable and self-responsible. Do-it-yourself (or do-it-ourselves) practices in self-help housing, and cooperative activities by those without any professional qualification, may cause accidents. But a decentralised self-organisation may also save diverse social and economic costs. Provided that there are plenty of abandoned places to squat, the sufficient condition for self-compliant responsible squatting to scale up is to have capable and skilled persons who undertake the role of doing things safely and without central control.

If this condition is observed, then, as Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro observes, the squatters' movement contributes to the creation of an alternative to the capitalist city which is socially and ecologically sound. This connects basic issues such as shelter, transport and food, although many global problems of capitalism cannot be addressed by localised urban struggles alone. Far from representing only an alternative in terms of housing, he remarks that the functions of squats are much more comprehensive as they 'develop radical forms of autonomy, with self-management in the reproduction of life as the primary exit strategy from the capitalist mode of production'.

If the combination of squatting with an environmentalist approach sets the ground for the emergence of powerful alternatives, the combination of squatting with feminist claims, which Azozomox presents, is one of the most far-reaching alternatives. Contrary to the pretended depoliticisation logic of capitalism, 'the personal is political'. Patriarchal domination and the social exclusion of different gender and sexual identities are intertwined with capitalist domination, and squats where only the latter is rejected tend to fail in providing a safe, inclusive and egalitarian household.

Thomas Aguilera claims that 'the answer of squatting is to demonstrate that people are able to collectively organise spaces and societies in an autonomous, ecological and non-capitalist perspective'. Squatters thus prove that people can manage their own lives without representative politics for decision making. Other 'ordinary citizens' might follow their example and not delegate their sovereignty or fit the pattern of salaried working time in order to pay for housing.

In sum, the major advantages of squatting as a local alternative to capitalism are self-determination and direct action. These constitute a decolonisation from the collective imaginary which gives authority to the state and the market. Autonomy, then, is produced not only by recalling

individual freedom and independent communities, but above all through the practical experiences of collective action and decision making apart from the elites' dictates.

The second step which creates the material possibilities for setting up a local alternative to capitalism consists of a drastic reduction of the supply of paid labour, that is to say, the sale of people's life-time to capitalism. Thus, less money is put in circulation because no rent is paid and/or because most squatters typically engage in productive activities that do not account for labour time as a commodity. This is also an additional meaning of autonomy: to get rid of money as well as of the goods, services and informations that are only accessible with money. Squatters try to escape the empire of money by sharing collectively their resources, including the reclaimed urban spaces they live in. There are clear limitations to this since squatting requires, paradoxically, the existence of capitalism and its uneconomic processes for abandoned buildings to be occupied and plenty of waste and raw materials to be scrapped, elaborated and reinvented. Capitalism produces vacancy, trash and unemployable people, but these aspects are not at the core of the growth machine. Squatters take them in a positive manner in order to put in evidence the irrational and unjust functioning of capitalism. Then, there is no essential dependency of squatters on capitalism, but just squatters' tactics to reverse the capitalist dynamics by reaching for a material autonomy. This is more likely to occur in rurban squats, and even more in rural squats, because of the closeness to nature and to the sources of primary materials, not mediated by capitalism (Cattaneo, 2008). This is where the local alternative to capitalism reaches its greatest intensity, although it is not much visible or much applicable to society at large.

Squatting as a Global Alternative?

At a first glance, the present time does not look like as a rosy period for squatting: the historical perspective presented in the book shows that the movement has been decreasing in Amsterdam, repressed in Berlin, annihilated in Geneva, co-opted in NYC, less visible in Brighton and London, and so on. Although a more promising picture comes from the Mediterranean area (Rome, Madrid, Barcelona, Athens and other cities), recent criminalisation in the Netherlands and England and Wales cut many lines of growing and sustaining squatting where it proved to be very efficient and socially accepted. However, as E. T. C. Dee observes, as long as there are housing needs and empty buildings, squatting will continue to flourish.

As Miguel A. Martínez, Azozomox and Javier Gil claimed in their chapter, squatters may also continue with their radical politics through means other than squatting. The examples they describe in Berlin and Madrid suggest that squatting has a strong influence in anti-capitalist politics and struggles, so that squatting practices can be scaled up to other sectors of society. The moments of severe crisis of capitalism represent the best opportunity to appreciate that influence and the renewed interests in squatting as such.

Because of the limits to the amount of empty space, squatting cannot attack the whole capitalist housing stock. The opportunity to scale up this limitation occurs when people stop paying rents to landlords and mortgages to banks. Then, the dwellers lose their legal titles to reside in their homes, but they still have the chance to keep occupying them, or to reoccupy them should they be evicted. Since 2008, this has happened increasingly, at least in Spain and the United States. More and more people became squatters, even without any previous knowledge of the squatters' movement, even in spite of the stereotypes that the mass media spread about the squatters. This leaves room for scaling up, but it enters the realm of the 'if': if *most* empty spaces were occupied combined with *most* tenants ceasing to pay their rent/mortgage, *then* capitalism would enter a far deeper crisis, and along with it so would the state, which would lack legal control over the activities performed. Surely it can be an alternative, but it is difficult to imagine how robust or sustainable it would be in any given concrete situation.

Another possible option is the creation of an alternative legality or movement institutions in a post-capitalist context. This would imply the legalisation of all squats for housing or social purposes. However, legalisation would not come alone: more citizen control from the bottom should be required to impose limits to any economic speculation, to satisfy human needs apart from the motivation of profit and capital gains, and to regulate the housing market and urban planning according to just, environmental and distributive principles. This horizon would entail a higher stability and applicability to a wider scale compared with the contentious intensity of the waves of illegal occupations. The embryonic stage of such a process is what Pierpaolo Mudu shows in his chapter: the situation for housing occupations in Rome is scaling up, with an increasing number of homeless and home seekers squatting housing and getting politicised. In some cases their housing occupations are beginning to turn into social centres too. The practice of squatting expands beyond the non-capitalist satisfaction of the housing need to cover a wider variety of needs. Moreover, political institutions, although at the margin, are also called to

attend their demands and to change their policies of privatisation, and squatters amplify the housing conflict instead of staying isolated in their squats.

A third path is to consider 'entrepreneurial squatting' (Pruijt, 2012) which is generally based on a mix of professional and voluntary work, as it occurs in many autonomous squatted and nonsquatted social centres. In the context of crisis, selling-off and unemployment, this form of squatting and hybrid cooperation might spread, beginning from grassroots projects. The major reference is the transformation of factories which go bankrupt and then keep on working under workers' control and self-management. The same is attempted with some public spaces, vacant lands and former public services. There are issues of financing, economic inequalities and co-optation by the 'city branding' managers, which still deserve more careful attention in these experiments, but many squatting projects already indicate how things can be done.

As Thomas Aguilera observes:

> squatting is experimentation and innovation. These social innovations diffuse and contaminate outside the laboratory of the squatted building, outside the neighbourhood, outside the city. Thus, the relevant question is not any more whether an enlargement process to the large scale is possible, because squatters already show that it is. The question should be how to multiply places of occupation and conflicts where the daily political experiences are sources of alternative creation against capitalism.

Final Remarks

There are many different types of squatting. Their anti-capitalist outcomes depend on the interplay of their discourses and practices, but also on the specific context where they are located. We started this book based on the assumption that all forms of squatting point to some alternatives to capitalism. The thing is that the internal diversity is not always known or accepted. For example, it is usual to attend debates where some squatters accuse others of being reformist, while keeping for themselves the label of true radicals and revolutionaries. The opposite is also frequent: some squatters reject aesthetic radicalism uniquely based on slogans, attitudes, clothes and antagonistic resistance, instead of setting up long-term projects of fighting capitalism and simultaneously building up networks and movements. However, it is not so common to focus on the social class of origin of squatters, their sources of income, their styles of consumption,

their real practices and their actual social connections. And more strikingly, sometimes the most time-wasting conflicts are related to the internal division of labour, the reproduction of patriarchy, personal attitudes, how to manage money or the use of drugs.

Hans Pruijt (2003) argues that squatting done by a housing movement differs from the practices of the squatters' movement. While the first conceives squatting as a tactical move and is ready for co-optation, the latter embraces squatting as both a means and a primary goal in itself. As we have argued before, diverse positions may be incorporated into either of these stances. In addition, both types of squatting have a multiplying effect which is positive for attacking different aspects of capitalism.

At the local scale, squatting provides material resources and also a political experience of self-organisation. We have named this contribution material and practical autonomy. At a global scale, squatting may defy capitalism if it is diffused and expanded. Autonomy from capitalism would be obtained through a combination of struggles and an increasing social control over crucial economic sectors such as housing. This can also entail the possibility of new institutions and political regimes where the legalisation of squats is feasible, desirable and useful for clearing the empire of capitalism. As Pattaroni and Breviglieri (2011: 164) remark, 'compromise becomes a political art, both subversive and necessary'. Thus, squats may overcome capitalism if after-squats are really low-cost, affordable and prefigurative of a cooperative way of living. Squats are commons, and not only communes. They become socially legitimate when they are recognised as examples of disobedience to unjust situations, autonomous self-organisation and shared resources for the satisfactions of basic needs.

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