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The outcomes of residential squatting activism in the context of municipalism and capitalism in Madrid and Barcelona (2015–2019)

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the impact of the Spanish housing movement on policies regarding residential squatting of municipalist coalitions in Madrid and Barcelona. Combining literatures on social movement outcomes, new municipalism, and the importance of capitalism for social movement studies, we address the following research questions: How has the Spanish housing movement framed its claims regarding residential squatting? How have these claims impacted policies in Madrid and Barcelona between 2015 and 2019? What explains the differences—if any—in these outcomes? We conclude that—following the 2008 global financial crisis—activists have reframed squatting as a legitimate response to unjust evictions and foreclosures in neoliberal political economies. While this has prompted support from municipalist councilors in both cities, gains have been more substantial in Barcelona. We explain this from variations in political alliances and urban political economies. Our analysis underscores the importance of capitalism in urban and housing movement studies.

Introduction

As is by now well-documented, the 2008 global financial crisis and ensuing austerity politics have functioned as dramatic catalysts for the already steadily rising socioeconomic inequalities and related precarities produced by decades of neoliberal restructuring (Theodore, 2020). Not surprisingly, therefore, this crisis has triggered recurrent episodes of popular activism in countries as diverse as Tunisia, Greece, the United States and Brazil (Castells, 2012; Della Porta, 2015; Giugni & Grasso, 2015). Hard hit economically by the global financial crisis, as we will see Spain has been one of the countries where these popular protests have also had significant electoral effects. The 15M movement here provided a platform to bring “municipalist” councilors in office in seven cities, including Madrid and Barcelona (Martínez & Wissink, 2021; Mota & Janoschka, 2022). Reflecting the central role of housing activism in the 15M movement, housing issues were amongst the core concerns of activist-councilors, who were part of the governing municipalist coalitions between 2015 and 2019.

As highlighted by various scholars, the popular movements that have emerged in response to the global financial crisis have prompted calls for renewed attention for the role of capitalism in social movement studies (Barker et al., 2013; Della Porta, 2015; Hetland & Goodwin, 2013). However, the number of studies that have addressed the different ways in which capitalism influences the outcomes of social movements is relatively limited. An analysis of the outcomes of housing activism in a setting of Spanish municipalist coalitions can help to show that capitalism is not only an important driver behind the initial emergence of urban movements—for instance, in response to the financially-led housing and austerity crisis—but also that it structures ways in which their demands are framed, and—as will become clear from the different outcomes in Madrid and Barcelona—the extent to which these...
demands were accommodated by municipalist coalitions, and by differences in urban political economies.

With this paper we aim to reflect on these issues. We do so by bringing three literatures implicated in this discussion—on social movement outcomes, new municipalism, and the importance of capitalism in social movement studies—in conversation with each other. Through the resulting framework, we will analyze one practice that has played a significant role in Spanish housing activism and that has also been a recurrent and often controversial issue for the municipalist coalitions: residential squatting activism. Especially, we will focus on the Obra Social campaign, which reintroduced squatting in municipal policy debates, focusing on the occupation of empty buildings owned by banks that had been bailed out by the government (Di Feliciantonio, 2017; García-Lamarca, 2016; Gonick, 2015; González, 2019). This campaign was one of the protest repertoires of the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH)—an organization established in 2009 that eventually had more than 200 local branches across Spain (Casellas & Sala, 2017; Flesher, 2020; García, 2015; Martínez, 2019). So far, the outcomes of this campaign in settings of municipalist coalitions have not been researched in-depth. We aim to help fill that empirical gap through the following research questions: How has the Spanish housing movement framed its claims regarding residential squatting? How have these claims impacted policies in Madrid and Barcelona between 2015 and 2019? What explains the differences—if any—in these outcomes?

We address these questions in six sections. First, we introduce the Spanish municipalist coalitions, which emerged in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent 15M protest movement, and which formed the setting in which the housing movement re-affirmed squatting as a protest tactic. Next, we discuss our framework for analyzing the outcomes of squatting activism, combining literatures on social movement outcomes, new municipalism, and the importance of capitalism in social movement studies. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological choices at the basis of our empirical research. The two subsequent sections present our empirical analysis. First, we discuss the framing of the legitimacy of squatting by the housing movement. Next, we compare the outcomes of the Obra Social campaigns in response to that framing in Madrid and Barcelona. The final section then answers our research questions, reflects on our objective outlined above and explores consequences for future research.

**Global financial crisis, municipalist governments and squatting in Spain**

Like in so many countries, in Spain the 2008 global financial crisis has had enormous repercussions (Royo, 2020). Up until this crisis, on the back of low interest rates and immigration, the country had been one of the EU’s most successful economies, as an extended 14-year period of impressive economic growth narrowed the per capita GDP gap with the richest European countries dramatically. Meanwhile, 772,000 new jobs were created between 1997 and 2007, accounting for an astonishing 33% of all employment created in the EU15 in this period (Royo, 2020, p. 123). However, with low productivity growth, this economic “miracle” was largely based on a real estate and construction boom, helped by years of over-lending to property developers and mortgages by banks that were allowed to circumvent regulations. Thus, in 2006, the construction and housing sectors accounted for 18.5% of GDP, or twice the Eurozone average, and new jobs had been mainly created in low-productivity sectors like construction, housing services, tourism and domestic services (Royo, 2020, p. 128).

Not surprisingly, in this setting the consequences of the global financial crisis have been dramatic. Instigating the implosion of the housing bubble, it fueled corruption and bad banking practices that would further impede a financial system already under strain. Meanwhile, the debt-financed economy went in recession. By 2012, unemployment had reached a dramatic 27%, while public deficit reached a record 11.4% of GDP (Royo, 2020, p. 130). The developments left many mortgages under water, sparking a wave of primary home evictions (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2018; Díaz-Parra et al., 2017), and leaving banks exposed. By 2012, the Spanish central government had nationalized eight banks at risk of
collapse, for a total of 115 billion euros (Royo, 2020, p. 177). In turn, this forced an EU bailout, which came with restrictions that translated into austerity policies. Severe cutbacks at the regional government level especially affected health and education. The central government also imposed strict financial oversight on municipalities through the so-called Montoro law, while threatening to override local autonomy in case of noncompliance (Ávarez, 2020). These measures exacerbated existing neoliberal policies such as the privatization of public assets, including housing, the precarization of the labor market, and a rampant financialization of the economic base (by global outsourcing of industrial production, boosting debt-financed local consumption and deregulating and attracting REIT’s—Real Estate Investment Trusts; Gil & Martínez, 2021).

In 2011, grievances about this capitalist restructuring triggered widespread public protests. The 15M movement started to occupy public squares in cities around Spain, where protesters called out for true democracy, while criticizing austerity policies (Flesher, 2020; Martínez & Wissink, 2021; Mota & Janoschka, 2022). While these mobilizations died down after 2014, its spirit lived on in various local electoral platforms that were created by former 15M activists in the run-up to the 2015 municipal elections. In several cities these self-named “municipalists” came to electoral agreements with the new left-populist Podemos party (Díaz-Parra et al., 2017; Rodríguez, 2016, p. 110–120; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). Eventually, in seven medium and large-sized cities—including Madrid and Barcelona—“municipalist” candidates entered local councils. In office, often in coalition with, or supported by, the traditional social-democratic party (PSOE), they advocated a progressive political agenda, centered on citizen participation, re-municipalization of public services, social assistance, feminist and gender issues, sustainable tourism and environmentally friendly transport (Petithomme, 2019; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017; Russell, 2019).

As housing issues had played an important role in the social mobilizations against austerity policies, it is not surprising that these issues also featured on the agenda of municipalist coalitions. Since the global financial crisis, the PAH had been at the core of the emerging housing activism. Initially, it mainly tried to prevent home evictions of individuals and families unable to pay their mortgages. However, in 2011, the PAH launched the Obra Social campaign, which centered on the unauthorized occupation of empty buildings owned by bailed-out banks. Despite periods of decline and sometimes harsh repression—especially after the formal criminalization of squatting in 1995—in Spain squatting had been a standard repertoire of protest at least since the mid-1980s (Martínez, 2020). With the Obra Social campaign, it now received renewed impetus (Obra Social BCN, 2018). However, as we will see, many new residential squatters emphasized their differences with earlier squatting activists (González, 2019). Furthermore, in contrast to earlier squatting movements, residential squatting was not the only form of protest action of the PAH, as it also engaged in other institutional (e.g., legislative change and litigation in courts) and non-institutional forms of protest (e.g., blockades of home evictions due to foreclosure; D’Adda et al., 2021; Flesher, 2020; Martínez, 2019). Meanwhile, in contrast to many other groups, campaigns, and movements associated to the 15M, the PAH remained active beyond 2014, when street protests diminished substantially (Rodríguez, 2016), and it continued its activities when the municipalist coalitions came into office in 2015.

Against the background of our objective outlined above, in this paper we aim to describe and explain the reactions of municipalist coalitions to the squatting initiatives of the Obra Social campaign. Admittedly, in Spain housing policies mostly fall under the authority of regional and central governments. However—as we will further discuss in the methodology section—there is no prohibition for municipalities to develop their own housing policies, and the responses of municipalist coalitions to squatting initiatives have proven to vary significantly. The topic of squatting therefore represents a great opportunity to find explanations for possible differences between cities, in which—as we will see—capitalism also plays an important role.

A framework for analyzing the impacts of the Spanish housing movement

As observed above, these topics touch upon three literatures, discussing the outcomes of social movements, new municipalism and the role of capitalism in social movement studies, respectively.
The revival of this latter literature has been an indirect consequence of the global financial crisis. In response to this crisis, since the early 2010s social movement researchers started to pay attention to the anti-austerity movements, stressing the shortcomings of the global capitalist system emerging around the world (Castells, 2012; Della Porta, 2015; Giugni & Grasso, 2015). Within social movement studies, this attention for capitalism was striking, for—as Hetland and Goodwin (2013) observe—there had been a “strange disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies.” In their view, “[w]hile capitalism has spread to nearly every corner of the globe, scholars who specialize in the study of social movements, especially in the United States, have increasingly ignored the ways in which capitalism shapes social movements” (Hetland & Goodwin, 2013, p. 83). In the process, the original attention for long-term factors influencing movements development—including capitalism—of the “classic tradition” was replaced by an almost exclusive focus on short-term and proximate causes for collective action in research into contentious politics, and especially on changing political opportunities as well as strategic framing by movement leaders (Hetland & Goodwin, 2013, p. 102).

Obviously, with capitalism playing such a crucial role in recent social mobilizations, this was a problem. Not surprisingly, therefore, this has stimulated calls to bring capitalism back into social movement studies (Della Porta, 2015; Hetland & Goodwin, 2013), and “to connect the long-term rhythms of social change from the classical tradition to the shorter-term dynamics of contentious politics” (Tarrow, 2012, p. 7). In response to this challenge, Hetland and Goodwin (2013, p. 91) have explored the multiple ways in which capitalism and political-economic factors influence social movements, suggesting that there are at least four forms:

1. Capitalist dynamics structure collective class and non-class identities and solidarities, thereby shaping the conditions of existence of social movements. In other words, the emergence of social movements—like anti-austerity and anti-home evictions mobilizations—is structured by the realities and divisions produced by capitalism.
2. Class-relations structure the evolution of movements over time, and what they can win for their constituents. In other words, the changing political opportunities for social movements—and as we will see, for instance, also the differences of such opportunities in different cities—are structured by capitalism.
3. Class divisions within movements can shape movement goals and strategies, including the ways in which these are framed.
4. Ideologies and idioms linked to capitalist institutions and practices can influence movement strategies and goals, again including the ways in which these are framed.

These arguments help to understand the emergence of housing movements and new municipalism in Spain in recent years—the topic of the second literature relevant to our discussion. New municipalism, after all, results from the conviction that—given the characteristics of the late-capitalist system—it is unlikely that mobilizations instigated by neoliberal austerity politics will have significant effects at the national and regional scales. Instead, attention has switched to the potential to find responses to social movement demands at the local scale (Thompson, 2021). Martínez and Wissink (2021) observe that amongst recent municipalist approaches there are various initiatives that develop independent from one another; that these have high autonomy from national political organizing; that initiatives aim to open local institutions to citizen participation; and that this is supported by eco-feminist approaches that emphasize the roles and needs of women, horizontality, and cooperation (similarly: Petithomme, 2019; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017; Russell, 2019). Thompson (2021) argues that new municipalism supports increased attention to the importance of territorial scale in contemporary politics, reflecting a concern about the state-centrism of both social science and politics.

The Spanish housing movement—the topic of this paper—has operated within a setting of a late-capitalist—highly financialized—economy and municipalist coalitions during the 2015–2019 period (Gil & Martínez, 2021). Following our research questions, here we will especially focus on the outcomes of one of the protest practices—residential squatting—of this social movement; the topic
of the third literature relevant to our discussion. Within social movement studies, attention to the outcomes of social movements emerged remarkably late, especially given the fact that movements aim to instigate change. For a long time, attention mainly focused on the emergence and mobilization of social movements, and less on outcomes (Giugni, 1998). Meanwhile, the mere existence and persistence of movements was seen as a measure of success (Tilly, 1999, p. 257). However, if we add an instrumental angle to that “expressive” view, it is unavoidable to evaluate movement’s external outcomes as well (Kriesi et al., 1995, p. 209).

Following such observations as well as the two volumes exclusively dedicated to this topic (Giugni et al., 1998, 1999), the first decade of the new millennium has seen a dramatic growth of the subfield of social movement outcomes (Amenta et al., 2010). This scholarship has focused on three types of outcomes: personal outcomes, which relate to consequences for the biographies of participants to social movements; cultural outcomes, which concern consequences for social norms and behaviors; and political outcomes, which have to do with changes in the political environment (Bosi et al., 2016). These political outcomes—which are also central in this paper—have garnered by far the most attention.

Remarkably, the recurrent conclusion in the scholarship on political outcomes is that social movements seldom affect public policy (Amenta et al., 2019). Movements may lead to some concessions, but this might not result in new legislation or durable policies in their favor. Concessions can thus serve to placate movements at peaks of turmoil, or also to move the public eye away from structural issues that triggered social unrest, such as capitalist dynamics and class struggle (Barker et al., 2013). It is therefore not surprising that urban squatting movements in wealthy countries have rarely been satisfied with partial victories, as these are irrelevant in view of ambitious aspirations to overthrow the political regime and the capitalist mode of production (Koopmans, 1995, p. 32). Yet, when less radical housing movements resort to squatting, limited wins are usually highly valued and celebrated (Aguilera, 2018).

These are not the only issues complicating research into the political outcomes of social movements. Research also shows outcomes that are not intended by movements (e.g., an increase of police repression through the Spanish “Gag Law” facing the housing movement, as argued by Martínez, 2019, p. 1603) or even contradictory to their aims (e.g., the privatization of social housing when tenants criticize public management, according to Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Meanwhile, another long-lasting discussion relates to the co-optation of activists and social movement organizations, and the decline of movements due to their institutionalization (Kriesi et al., 1995, p. 231; Mayer, 2016; Pruijt, 2003, p. 136). In the case of housing and squatting movements this is often illustrated with the legalization of unauthorized occupations, and the employment of activists in formal nongovernmental organizations (Martínez, 2020, pp. 200–204). While this might solidify the continued existence of movements, at the same time, it might diminish the possibilities to reach fundamental movement aims.

Hence, in order to investigate such outcomes, we borrow Giugni’s (1998, p. 383) suggestion to clarify the different appraisals at stake, which may lead to add an evaluative framing (our term) to the three main framing processes distinguished by Benford and Snow (2000)—diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. Notwithstanding, we interpret framing processes not only as a way to access activists’ meanings and identity, but also as a means to understand power relations, practices and structural contexts associated to the impact of protests (Cox & Nilsen, 2014; Davies, 2011).

Following two very productive decades, according to Amenta et al. (2019, p. 459) “[m]uch progress has been made in the study of the political consequences of social movements.” However, they continue to stress that “there is much room for further work.” Amongst other things, they stress the need for more comparative work (see also Amenta et al., 2010; Bosi et al., 2016; Giugni, 1998). Admittedly, these suggestions mainly focus on comparisons between movements, and between different national settings. However, with the criticism on the state-centrism of the new municipalist literature in mind, we argue that cross-municipal comparisons are equally important.
Methodological choices

In this paper we mobilize these three literatures. From the literature on new municipalism we take a focus on the municipal level of Spanish government, and an interest in the question if—in settings with municipalist coalitions—municipalities are actually open to social movement demands. From the literature on the political outcomes of social movements we take an interest in these outcomes, wondering if they are substantial in settings with municipalist coalitions, or—as this literature suggests—if they are indeed limited, which would point at co-optation. Furthermore, based on this literature, we will also follow a comparative approach, by studying two cities with municipalist coalitions. And from the literature on the role of capitalism in social movement studies we take an interest in this role of capitalism in relation to issues of political opportunities and—especially—framing.

Within this framework, we have made two further choices. First, we focus our research on activism and policies regarding residential squatting, and at the municipal level. Admittedly, in Spain, responsibilities for housing are mainly organized at the national and regional level. However, municipalities are not restricted to develop additional policies of their own—for instance, by developing a municipal social housing stock—and as we will see, in the past they have also done so. Housing is therefore a remarkable topic to bring scale back into the analysis, and to see if mobilizations at the national level have had outcomes at municipal levels in cities with municipalist coalitions. Within the housing field, with a strong local orientation, squatting policies are especially interesting, as there is a strong need to respond to local cases, although local authorities tend to be more directly involved only when municipal properties are occupied. Since the global financial crisis, the number of housing squats in Spain has risen dramatically according to the media, but no official data can offer an accurate account of the phenomenon. While many cases remained unreported, and data on occupations are imprecise, based on various official sources, reports have suggested that the number of housing occupations was at its peak by 2015 with about 90,000 occupied houses in Spain.\(^1\) Meanwhile, the PAH has estimated that the occupants of about 4,000 squats adhered to their guidelines.\(^2\) However, PAH activists suggested to us that the actual figures could be double, because many cases were not reported to PAH’s online site.

Second, we have selected Madrid and Barcelona—two cities with municipalist coalitions—as our research sites. Both in Madrid and Barcelona many former housing activists have been part of the municipalist government in either executive or administrative capacities. Meanwhile, the number of housing squats in both metropolitan areas have risen considerably since the global financial crisis, according to reports disclosed by police and residents’ associations (Coordinadora de Vivienda de la Comunidad de Madrid, 2017). Following the research of activists on available official data, by 2016 there were at least 1,398 housing squats in the metropolitan region of Madrid (Coordinadora de Vivienda de la Comunidad de Madrid, 2017) and 869 unauthorized occupied apartments in Barcelona municipality (Obra Social BCN, 2018, p. 7). There have been frequent discussions and political disputes about these occupations. However, as we will discuss further below, the urban economies and political opportunities—including existing political networks—in both cities are significantly different. Has this effected the response of the municipalist coalitions?

Following our discussion of the literature above, in the remainder of this paper we will first discuss the framing of the demands regarding squatting by the housing movement, and then compare the outcomes of those demands in Madrid and Barcelona. In our explanation of possible differences between those outcomes, we will not only focus on variations in political opportunities—especially relating to the types of political alliances in each of the cities—but also on the characteristics of “urban political economies”—the concrete spatial expressions of capitalist dynamics in cities—that might structure those variations. Our analysis draws on 54 in-depth and semi-structured interviews—31 interviews in Madrid, 23 in Barcelona—that were conducted between 2015 and 2018. In both cities, we have selected two groups of respondents. On the one hand, we interviewed city councilors and managerial staff closely associated to the local government—nine in Madrid and six
in Barcelona. In each of the interviews, our principal aim was to investigate responses to the demands of local housing organizations. On the other hand, we selected interviewees from the PAH, from other urban organizations, and from squatters in residential buildings. Some interviewees were also activists in squatted social centers or participants to other forms of activism born during the 15M movement in 2011. In particular, we asked this second group of respondents about their protest activities and campaigns, and about the municipalist responses to their demands.

Interviewees were chosen according to purposeful criteria following our research agenda and the main political topics of each period. We first identified the activist groups, key informants, and networks according to our existing knowledge. Next, we used these as well as other informal contacts to find more significant actors. We applied a female gender quota of not less than 50% out of the total during the sampling process. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in line with the critical discourse approach (Wodak, 2013). Our interpretive strategy was twofold: first, we identified the contents and references to squatting within urban and housing struggles, and in relation to municipalist policies; next, we investigated the issue of outcomes in depth, according to the power relations involved and the relevant contextual features. This strategy was supplemented with a consultation of other empirical sources—official documents and mass media publications—which we reference in the endnotes when appropriate.

**Framing the legitimacy of squatting: The Obra Social**

In order to understand the outcomes of the housing movement in cities with municipalist coalitions, we will first have to understand the activist demands. As we have seen, it is widely acknowledged in the literature on the importance of capitalism for social movements, that the emergence of those demands is a consequence of the characteristics of the global capitalist system itself. Therefore, in line with Hetland and Goodwin’s (2013) first observation about the relationship between capitalism and social movements, which we introduced earlier, capitalism itself is an important factor in the explanation of the emergence of recent social movements (including the housing movement in Spain). However, this still leaves a lot of room for the precise framing of the legitimacy of squatting in the same country. After the financial crisis, the framing of the demands of the housing movement here especially focused on the victims of the real-estate financial system (Rolnik, 2019, pp. 264–277). PAH activists and people affected by mortgages demanded fundamental changes to the legislation. They had been subjected to murky conditions when they applied for mortgage loans—as was eventually confirmed by the European Tribunal—and remained heavily indebted after foreclosures. Amongst them were many migrants, single parents, families with children, working-class households and women (Gonick, 2021; Suárez, 2017). In response to their plight, squatting eventually came to be seen as a necessary solution, meant to house those who had become homeless as the global financial crisis and subsequent unemployment followed by mortgage arrears and eventual home evictions had ruined their lives. We argue that in the specific reframing of squatting, the fact that the “new” squatting movement now represented former homeowners who were let down by the specific characteristics of financial capitalism plays a crucial role.

Initially, the PAH-led housing movement had no intention to turn to squatting. Rather, since its inception, PAHs “Stop Evictions” campaign had been its main priority. In this campaign, activists tried to prevent evictions of impoverished homeowners on a case-by-case basis. Strategies included negotiations with banks to delay or reverse foreclosure procedures, as well as blockades as a last resort to prevent repossessions. However, despite its political novelty, wide media coverage, and substantial mobilization of supporters, by 2011 it was clear that the results of the campaign were not satisfactory. The occupation of empty buildings—and sometimes even the repossessed homes from which people themselves had just been evicted—therefore emerged as a logical next step, especially also in view of extreme vacancy rates in Spain compared to other European countries: in 2011, vacancy was estimated at between 14% and 28% or, in absolute numbers, between 3.5 and 7.1 million dwellings. Mocking the
name used by some banks for their social responsibility programs, the PAH called the resulting campaign the Obra Social.

According to a PAH spokesperson in Barcelona, “we could not stop the same foreclosure eviction five times . . . with all the anguish for the affected family” (Interviewee B4_2018_PAH_BCN). In other words, blockades could not prevent evictions forever; they were risky civil disobedience actions and the authorities could try to execute the eviction again after a failed attempt. People at risk of eviction thus had to pack their belongings and wait for the next battle to come. After the summer of 2011, the exhaustion over continuous eviction blockades instigated the Obra Social campaign: “By the time of the fifth attempt the lady told us: ‘look, I won’t resist again.’ Once the bailiffs take hold of the house and leave, we will return [and squat it]. And that’s what we did” (Interviewee B4_2018_PAH_BCN). The Obra Social campaign first took off in Catalonia (in particular in Montcada i Reixac, Terrassa, and Sabadell) before expanding across the region and then to the rest of Spain (B10_2017_ObraSocial_BCN).

While squatting was a familiar protest repertoire for many PAH activists with an autonomist background, it certainly wasn’t for the majority of homeowners under threat of eviction. However, when out of despair they suggested squatting as an alternative to homelessness, they found much support amongst experienced activists. At the same time, most leading figures within PAH tried to avoid an association with the old left-libertarian squatting movement, arguing that it might not be beneficial for their specific demands regarding housing issues (Martínez, 2019, p. 1594). Therefore, they had to frame the housing occupations differently.

At the core of this reframing, PAH activists placed a specific type of vacant private property—a property owned by a bank which has been bailed out by the state—and a specific social situation—the “housing emergency.” Instead of rejecting private property as such, PAH squatters questioned the nature of the properties of banks that had been rescued by the Spanish central government with public money. The same government that transferred billions of Euros to the banks did not help impoverished people to save their homes. According to PAH activists, as the banks were saved with public money, vacant bank-owned properties were de-facto public assets, and homeless people and people affected by foreclosures had therefore the right to occupy. Squatting was thus framed as a “bottom-up social policy” to redistribute public assets, such as vacant properties, rather than a rejection of private property as such.

The apartments [that we occupied] had enjoyed public subsidies [protección oficial]. . . . The bank acquired them before it went bankrupt. Afterwards, the SAREB3 became the owner and sold them to an investment fund for an average of 20,000 euros each. . . . The fund is now selling the big [usually, three-bedroom] apartments at 90,000 euros. . . . In this neighborhood there were up to 2,000 vacant new apartments. They have been vacant for seven years or so, and have deteriorated over time. (Interviewee M22_2016_PAH_Madrid)

Compared to autonomist squatters who rejected private property as a key pillar of capitalism and real estate speculation, PAH squatters also questioned capitalism, but from a different angle: the collusion of interests between the government and financial institutions. The PAH did not criticize private homeownership as such. Rather, it focused on the willingness of squatters to pay an affordable rent to legitimate landlords. This reframing helped to reinforce the image that squatters were citizens with respect for private property. Obviously, for most squatters, affordable rents would be far below the market price. As one resident of the occupied building La Bordeta (Barcelona) expressed: “We do not want to have the property. We do not want to keep the building for us. From the moment that we declare that we want to pay an affordable rent, we are not claiming the property title” (Interviewee B9_2017_ObraSocial_BCN). Additionally, the PAH squatters blamed public authorities for a lack of assistance. Without sufficient social housing for evicted residents, activists felt compelled to act, and squatting—now labeled as “recuperation”—was presented as a substitute for the inefficient actions of state bureaucracies. Another PAH activist from Arganda in the periphery of Madrid explained the preference for the term recuperation over the more conventional “squatting” (okupa): “When you say ‘I have recuperated a house,’ you mean that someone took it over before. . . . The bank took my house and I retake it. That’s all” (Interviewee M22_2016_PAH_Madrid).
The strategic framing of “squatting” as “recuperation” has had another symbolic benefit. It meant that activists were striving to recuperate their “right to decent housing,” which is enacted in article 47 of the Spanish Constitution. Since public authorities do not guarantee that right, housing activists claim that they have a constitutional mandate to self-defend it (auto-tutela). Squatting is one of the means to establish this right to housing. While many PAH activists were sympathetic to the historical squatting movement, they thus rejected their overarching anti-capitalist discourse and, instead, framed squatting as a legitimate way to obtain a normalized housing situation as an urgent need:

We strive to get the right to housing recognized and normalized. And this is achieved through an affordable rent. This is it. I do not occupy a house to live for free. I am not a free rider. I will pay rent unless I do not have money, income, a job, or a public subsidy. In that case my rent should be zero Euros. But my situation will be normalized. (Interviewee M22_2016_PAH_Madrid)

This reframing has helped to counter international stereotypes about squatters who, by some mass media, for instance, were depicted as young people who steal and vandalize properties (Fox O’Mahony et al., 2015). In contradiction to such stereotypes, according to evidence from a survey based on 626 respondents in Catalonia, the “recuperations” promoted by the Obra Social involved squatters of all ages: 22% of the squatters were aged 46–65; 34% were between 36–45 years; and overall, 87% were older than 26 years-old (Obra Social BCN, 2018, p. 20). News reports and activist video clips in Spain during the examined period also contributed to counter the stereotypes of squatters as young, marginal individuals. As a squatter herself observed:

When there is a residential emergency it is easy. There is a family; they become jobless; they cannot pay the rent; and so on, and so forth. [And they squat.] You have all the legitimacy, no doubt. On the contrary, take a guy who is studying and perhaps she is working but earns a shitty salary, six or four hundred euros max, let’s say, and she cannot access any sort of housing. How can you change this . . . ? How can you give her the same legitimacy as a mother with children who became unemployed? (Interviewee B9_2017_ObraSocial_BCN).

This analysis suggests that while the discussions about PAH squats have been as politicized as earlier forms of squatting, the framing of their legitimacy differ (for a similar argument, see González, 2019, pp. 190–193). The PAH activists also developed banners with symbols and slogans that were distinct from those used by earlier squatters. Furthermore, in contrast to earlier left-libertarian squatters, PAH activists did not see squatting as the end of their struggle either. They remained involved in painstaking and exhausting negotiations with local authorities and banks—and sometimes also property developers associated with occupied buildings—in order to organize relocations to social housing or achieve affordable rents in the squatted properties. As one activist in Barcelona for instance, remembers, “[i]n case of the three apartments of Europa 1, we have tried to negotiate with the owner on the possibility of an affordable rent. But the owner refused” (Interviewee M22_2016_PAH_Madrid). According to a housing activist with a long experience with squatting, the PAH focus on negotiations has helped to normalize occupations: “We must accumulate forces around the negotiations. In practice this is not always efficient because, de facto, there are evictions in the meantime” (Interviewee M30_2015_PAH_Madrid).

However, despite support for “institutional” negotiations, the adoption of “squatting” as a protest tactic of direct “recuperation” has not gone unchallenged within the PAH itself. In Madrid, for instance, the foundational branch of the PAH did not participate in squatting actions for many years, and only changed course after such actions were taken by other PAH and 15M housing groups (Coordinadora de Vivienda de la Comunidad de Madrid, 2017; Interviewee M21_2016_Obra_Social_Madrid). This coincided with concerns about social issues in squats: “in our Obra Social we had to face issues such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and beaten women. That was a shock” (Interviewee M30_2015_PAH_Madrid). Meanwhile, in Barcelona, according to several informants, after many years most members of the Obra Social were expelled from the PAH organization:
Right now, the PAH is not active [in squatting matters]. For the last two years, all the energy has been put into “The Five of the PAH” campaign and the legislative change. This is one way, cool. That’s it. But, you know what? They [the PAH leaders] do not let the Obra Social thrive. As if they went on in parallel… As a movement, we could push much stronger if… Even if the law changed, the Obra Social would still be an essential resource until the new regulations were settled and implemented. (Interviewee B9_2017_ObraSocial_BCN)

These internal conflicts illustrate that support for this new framing of squatting as legitimate action had to be reestablished time and again in changing social relations of power, and in response to changing central actors with different class-relations to housing. In other words, in both Madrid and Barcelona, as across Spain as a whole—where homeownership is the predominant housing tenure—squatters has remained a controversial practice. The vast majority of the initial “anti-capitalist” squatters were not home-owners and resisted the commodification of housing. However, the current “new” squatting movement was speaking on behalf of former working-class home-owners who had lost their commodity as a result of perceived problems within the capitalist system itself. In other words, these “new” squatters had a different class-relation to housing—which reflects the third way according to Hetland and Goodwin (2013) in which capitalism can shape social movement. In other words, the reframing by the PAH activists of “squatter” as “recuperation” can be explained by the different class-identity of those represented, and it helped to garner support for this protest activity (Barranco & Parcerisa, 2020). However, we wonder how far the housing movement has been successful in translating such support into concrete outcomes, especially in cities with relatively “friendly” municipalist coalitions.

Outcomes of squatting activism: Madrid versus Barcelona

Our analysis suggests that the reframing of squatting as a legitimate action during a “housing emergency” has contributed to greater openness of municipalist coalitions toward squatting, increasing the willingness to de-escalate interactions with activists. We also argue that the extent to which this has been translated in concrete outcomes partly depends on the specific make-up of the municipalist coalitions in both cities: while in Barcelona former housing activists—some with a squatting background—including the mayor Ada Colau, had become leading members of the municipalist coalition that governed between 2015 and 2019, in Madrid “activist councilors” did not attain a majority position. However, at the same time we argue that reference to these coalitions alone is insufficient to explain the differences in outcomes, as these characteristics of the political opportunity structure themselves reflect differences in urban political economies as well.

Madrid

Madrid municipality became the central engine of a larger urban region that was considered a “global city” during the 1997–2007 economic boom, in which construction and real estate speculation were some of the leading sectors (López & Rodríguez, 2010). The spectacular rise in housing prices here throughout this period also caused problems with unaffordability and vacancy (López & Rodríguez, 2010). Before this boom period, both the municipality and the regional government had created public housing companies, which provided some relief from the market pressures. However, around 2008 these companies were at risk of collapse and in 2013 the authorities privatized nearly 5,000 units. In turn, this triggered residents’ and housing activists’ protests and court trials (Gil & Martínez, 2021, p. 9). Meanwhile, the municipal housing stock was meager, accounting for only 6,000 units in a city with more than 3.2 million inhabitants and with more than 30,000 requests on the social housing waiting list (Martínez & Wissink, 2021, p. 9). The municipalist government tried to mitigate this shortage with the construction of 3,374 new units, but these were not completed by the end of its mandate in 2019.5 While most funds and guidelines for housing come from the central and regional governments, the above features indicate that municipalities, especially those with large budgets such as the capital city, can develop their own
housing policy too, which explains why this is also a matter of contention for local housing activists.

In Madrid, the mayor and her closest councilor—who has refused to talk to us—both had a background in the judiciary. Their law-and-order stance toward squatting has been well-publicized in the media,6 attracting extensive criticism from housing activists (Coordinadora de Vivienda de la Comunidad de Madrid, 2017, pp. 135–137). However, their view was supported by the dominant faction of the municipalist coalition, who took a hardline stance toward local housing activism in general and squatting in particular. As a result, despite the participation of seven “activist councilors” in Madrid’s municipalist government, the situation for housing activists in this city was tough. While PAH activists managed to achieve some minor concessions, housing squats across the city were not supported by Madrid’s municipal government. In the end, when occupied properties were owned by the municipality, “activist councilors” mainly helped to prevent more repressive measures.

The existence of a divide within Madrid’s municipalist government is clearly illustrated by our interviews with members of the council who have been in close contact with the squatting scene in the past. One of these “activist councilors” had written regularly about the benefits of squatting, arguing that it should be seen as an “expropriation from below,” on a par with large-scale confiscation of church-owned properties in the 19th century.7 He insisted that squatting had been the most efficient housing policy during the recession, autonomously implemented by society. In his view, “the Obra Social means the self-defense of rights; if they don’t give you something, you take it” (Interviewee M8_2017_PAH_Ayuntamiento_Madrid). However, this view was not shared by the council. As a result, squats for housing supported by PAH groups that proliferated across the city were either harshly rejected by Madrid’s municipal government, or met with indifference. In the words of another “activist councilor,” “[s]ince there are no municipal properties involved in these residential squats, we have no responsibility regarding the evictions. We have not even mediated” (M9_2017_Ayuntamiento_Madrid).

In this setting, despite the early creation of a “mortgage mediation office”—the Oficina de Intermediación Hipotecaria (OIH)—the local government in Madrid rarely engaged with housing issues which made PAH activists very upset.8 The mediation agency closed its doors at the end of 2017, when it was replaced by a new, albeit similar, municipal department intended to assist cases of acute housing need: the Servicio de Asesoramiento a la Emergencia Residencial (SAER). According to one activist, when the OIH was created in 2015, evictions due to unpaid mortgages were declining while those due to unpaid rentals and squatting were on the rise. As a result, focusing on mortgages as it did, the OIH was highly ineffective. However, the subsequent SAER agency was unable or unwilling to support evicted residents and squatters, as there were no municipality-owned units in which they could be accommodated (Interviewee M7_2018_EMVS_Madrid). In this setting, housing activists have been dissatisfied with the outcomes of their efforts to negotiate solutions to individual cases and to pursue a more effective welfare policy in general: “We have achieved hardly anything regarding social services. We had some meetings with the Equality and Social Services department in order to advance a common policy, but the results have been appalling” (M17_2017_PAH_Madrid).

Negotiations by housing activists with Madrid’s municipalist government also targeted rules for the allocation of social housing. PAH activists advocated that squatters should not be excluded from waiting lists, and they did gain a specific concession. In the “evaluative framing” of the housing activists, this was seen as a positive result. However, we have to take the bigger picture into account as well. In terms of process, activists agreed that the municipalist government provided more institutional openness, channels, and meeting opportunities than previous right-wing governments. While the government stressed its independence often, both saw each other as allies, at least in the first three years of the 2015–2019 mandate. However, notwithstanding increased access, in terms of direct outcomes, our information suggests that the results have been poor:
The opportunity to sit around the table with the local government and the banks didn’t exist before. This is important for me. But things are not actually changing. … It is us who stop the evictions. And they take this for granted. The institutions assume that it is us who will stop the evictions on the streets. … They also assume we are not going to publicly criticize their uselessness because that could entail votes for the PP [the right-wing party]. … They are a disaster, but we cannot tell so. It’s a love-hate relationship. (M17_2017_PAH_Madrid)

**Barcelona**

Over all, Barcelona presents an altogether different picture. Before the municipalists came to office in 2015, this city of 1.6 million inhabitants had less instruments and social housing units than Madrid. However, a wide range of actions and very ambitious policy goals in the field of housing produced a substantial change in the municipal approach to this issue (Blanco et al., 2020), especially when compared to Madrid. While both cities were seriously affected by high price inflation during the economic boom until 2008 and the following speculative cycle after 2013, the municipalist government of Barcelona managed to develop a strong housing policy of its own. For example, before 2019 it purchased around 700 units to be used as social housing, facilitated affordable social rents in 250 formerly vacant units and constructed 721 units of social housing. These developments are indicators of the influence that former housing activists had as city councilors, and also of the greater access that PAH activists had to the municipal agencies, operating from a more consolidated and active network of urban activism, including the squatting movement, than in Madrid.

In this setting, the alliance between activists and the municipalist authorities has been more solid than in Madrid. Under the leadership of Mayor Colau, most councilors had a positive attitude toward residential occupations, especially when they were managed according to the PAH principles. However, the municipalist party—Barcelona en Comú—also needed support of parties such as the PSOE, to get policies and budgets approved. Hence, public statements about squatting were cautious and moderate, above all emphasizing housing and human rights. Meanwhile, many squats were legalized. Interestingly, while some Barcelona squatters were not affiliated to the Obra Social campaign, most adopted the PAH standpoint to withdraw from squats when an affordable accommodation was offered. According to the municipalist politicians and managers in Barcelona that we have interviewed, this was the bottom line of their “housing as welfare” policy. However, at the same time, this approach was not always feasible and many negotiations failed. Therefore, in Barcelona evictions continued to take place as well.

Despite the continuation of evictions, in striking contrast to Madrid, in Barcelona there were frequent negotiations between the squatters and city council about adequate solutions. Among the attempted measures, our respondents from both sides cited requisitions, purchases, legal leases, and relocations to social housing. Furthermore, in this city, banks, developers, and private owners also participated in many negotiations. Generally, when deals resulted in housing opportunities with affordable rents, activists and squatters were satisfied. The local government even encouraged to establish housing co-ops, which usually involves savings and individual loans that are not easily accessible to most residential squatters. In general, the municipalist coalition intended to expand the social housing stock as much as possible, and squatters were instrumental to that policy. Thus, according to one municipal housing manager,

<squatted houses can be bought at a price below the market rate. … These buildings have many problems and need rehabilitation. Tenants are also included but we have to assist them anyhow, so it’s better to assist them right now. It’s more humane. (Interviewee B8_2017_Ayuntamiento_BCN)

Whenever the structural condition of the occupied buildings necessitated repairs, local authorities tried to relocate squatters to social housing, provided that they met the requirements. However, according to many interviewees, the policy to purchase squatted buildings from private owners, which was supported by most housing activists, also had its downsides. In particular, owners could raise prices and make a substantial profit if the government was willing to pay. Hence, some private owners
might even have an interest in the illegal occupation of their buildings. Meanwhile, transactions might also push housing inflation. The purchase of buildings at high prices would then diminish resources for other public policies, which eventually would hurt the common interest of the city. Authorities were therefore cautious, following a case-by-case approach, strictly following legal and economic concerns.

Despite the amicable relationship between housing activists and the municipalist government in Barcelona, PAH activists have also pointed at disagreements. In case of the occupied building La Bordeta, for example, the situation was legally and financially complicated. One interviewee told us that the owner had a debt with the SAREB bank (Interviewee B8_2017_Ayuntamiento_BCN). The owner and the bank were both interested in selling the property to the municipality. However, the bank did not yet own the full legal title of the property, and the owner wanted to negotiate a reduction of its debt. For the municipality, such a transaction would entail an illegitimate subsidy to a private owner. In this setting, the municipal negotiators made several unsuccessful offers to buy the building. As one housing manager admitted,

[w]e didn’t buy it because we could not make a good deal with the SAREB. . . . It’s difficult not to buy. The situation is very serious with 1.5% of social housing compared to 15% or 20% in many European cities. . . . We are managing a brutal situation of emergency and the average citizen would not understand that you lose the opportunity of buying an apartment for 30,000 Euros when its market price is 150,000 euros. . . . It was a shame that we did not buy more during our first year in office. (B21_2017_Ayuntamiento_BCN)

Activists were critical. They argued that SAREB assets had already been paid for with state resources, and that it is wrong to pay twice (Intervieweess B9_2017_ObraSocial_BCN and B10_2017_ObraSocial_BCN). In their view, these properties were already public property and should be used for public purposes. As a consequence, in the case of La Bordeta, the Obra Social activists rejected its acquisition by the municipality and instead pushed for a right-to-use agreement. In addition, squatters argued that they should not pay any rent to the SAREB either, because this bank already belongs to the Spanish tax-payers. In fact, the local government had achieved right-to-use agreements with the SAREB applicable to 200 units—half of them vacant and half already squatted (Interviewee B21_2017_Ayuntamiento_BCN). These agreements lasted for eight years and the authorities also wanted to purchase these properties from the bank. La Bordeta, however, was not included in this package due to the aforementioned circumstances.

**Comparing outcomes in Madrid and Barcelona**

At the end of their terms of office, the municipalist coalitions in Madrid and Barcelona published official reports, evaluating the outcomes of their policies from 2015 to 2019. In Madrid’s report, housing issues got limited attention, with discussions mostly focusing on extreme poverty and homelessness (“housing vulnerability”) and on increasing the social housing stock. Remarkably, the report does not mention the number of added units, nor the allocated amount of money. In stark contrast, Barcelona’s report offers a full assessment of the problems, programs, and municipal investments in regards of the housing crisis in the city. The report discusses increases of the public housing stock, subsidies for rentals, control over tourist accommodation, and measures against housing and land vacancy.

While the legalization of squats is not explicitly discussed in either of the documents, our interviewees suggest that Barcelona’s politicians and public managers often attempted and succeeded in doing just that—and this is also reflected in the considerable media attention for forced evictions and purchase of empty buildings and apartments in this city. Squatting thus became part of Barcelona’s comprehensive municipal housing policy. On top of this, there were regular channels of communication between the PAH and Barcelona’s municipalist coalition, which were also institutionalized through the participation of activists in various advisory boards (with all its limitations, as argued by Davies, 2011).
Meanwhile, in Madrid, housing activists became increasingly detached from the administration following the failure of OIH and the lack of alternatives for squatting families. Hence, the PAH and other housing groups here had to continue organizing protests in order to press local officials and politicians to deal with housing issues. Not only was institutional access for activists in Madrid more restricted; the lack of a clear and ambitious municipal housing policy as well as the council’s negative attitude toward squatting highly constrained the activists’ chances of success. The municipalist government here has thus not done much to reverse the earlier privatization of its social housing stock, and acquisitions of squatted buildings remained beyond their political framework.

Conclusions: Understanding differences

We have set out to analyze the outcomes of housing activism in Spain, wondering how the Spanish housing movement framed its claims regarding residential squatting; how this framing has impacted policies in Madrid and Barcelona between 2015 and 2019; and how we can explain the differences—if any—in these outcomes. Our analysis shows that the framing of claims about squatting in Spain after the global financial crisis was based on creating a clear distinction between earlier autonomist anti-capitalist squatting efforts, and a newer politicization of squatting which normalized “squatting” as “recuperation” of repossessed assets by bailed out banks. This framing emphasized the constitutional right to housing and presented squatting as a bottom-up response to widespread violations of that right during the “housing emergency.” The Obra Social mainly targeted bank-owned properties, supported the payment of affordable rents, remained involved with other forms of negotiation, was in regular contact with the media, and formulated an approach to private property and social housing that could appeal to a larger audience that is not necessarily anti-capitalist (González, 2019). According to Hetland and Goodwin’s (2013) framework, this increasing wave of residential squatting was first shaped by the specific restructuring of capital in the realm of housing financialization via foreclosures, rescued banks and shortages of affordable housing due to privatizations and state neglect of social housing. Secondly, the squatters’ “ideologies and idioms” explicitly targeted the capitalist interests of financial corporations as triggers of their protest actions to guarantee affordable housing, although without questioning all the dimensions of capitalism and its urban politico-economic expressions. In this regard, there are no substantial differences in the examined cities since these processes occurred across the whole country.

The municipalist coalitions of Madrid, Barcelona and elsewhere created a favorable environment for this normalized framing of squatting by housing activists, resulting in a growing openness to squatting practices, as compared to past local governments. However, we have also observed distinctly different outcomes in our two target cities. In Madrid, authorities were generally unsupportive of squatting initiatives, with responses ranging from indifference to outright hostility. Here, the municipalist coalition did do little to reverse the previous privatization of social housing, while squatting was mainly seen as a hindrance to welfare policies. Meanwhile, in Barcelona, the Obra Social was met much more positively, and it resulted in favorable relocations, in the acquisition of squatted buildings, and in the transformation of those properties into social housing. Here, residential squatting was seen as instrumental to a comprehensive municipal housing policy in development.

How can we account for these substantial differences? In terms of political opportunities (Kriesi et al., 1995; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007) we have shown that—compared to Madrid—in Barcelona there were more allies of activists in city hall, while their position within the council was more dominant. Meanwhile, the hands of municipalists coalitions of both cities were also partly tied due to the need to create coalitions with traditional parties that support mainstream market approaches to housing, which weakened the possibility of open support for squatters. “Activist councillors” therefore had to moderate their stance, given this balance of forces at the town halls and within their own municipalist parties, especially in Madrid, where the mayor didn’t have any ties with the housing movement. These dependencies have considerably limited a more radical municipalist approach to squatting and further alleviation of the housing crisis; and they were much more prominent in Madrid.
However, we argue that this explanation of differences in outcomes in Madrid and Barcelona based on political opportunities related to local coalitions has a deeper, structural, background in the different urban political economies in both cities. In other words, the political coalition in Madrid reflects the dominance of the real estate and financial complex in this city; a dominance that is less pronounced in Barcelona (Rolnik, 2019). On the back of the recovery of these speculative sectors after 2013, along with broader global processes of touristification and gentrification, shifting flows of real estate investment to rental housing (Gil & Martínez, 2021) and the inherited meager social housing stock (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2018), this capitalist complex had little impediment to substantially modify the prevailing housing conditions. In post-municipalist times there are still conflicts over the legitimacy of squatting, but the structural conditions such as the financialization of housing, high vacancy rates, and a high shortage of affordable housing, certainly kept feeding the persistence of “communities in resistance” and “urban syndicalism” (terms also used by some of our interviewees alluding to the Obra Social) while confronting poor housing policies. While similar processes can be identified in Barcelona, Madrid as a region is a powerful leader of the economic globalization of the country, hosting the main headquarters of international companies and attracting the majority of global investments. It is not surprising then that this city’s housing policies—including the privatization of social housing units—align with the city’s dominant capital interests; interests that were hard to overturn by the municipalist coalition. According to activists, in comparison to Barcelona, the Madrid municipalist government reflected the influence of corporate conglomerates much more, it supported getting large urban developments approved (for example, Operación Chamartín), and it facilitated investments in tourism while neglecting most of their electoral promises in the housing realm. Their harsh reactions to squatters paralleled friendly relations with the banks and failed mediations between the latter and housing activists.

Housing activism found more fertile grounds in Barcelona. This city was amongst the most affected by the new cycle of inflation in housing prices and forced displacements after 2013. However, compared to Madrid, here grassroots autonomous protests and occasional alliances with municipalists bore some fruits. Some of the activist councilors, for example, not only supported the resistance to home evictions but also openly opposed the speculative activities of specific real estate firms in media debates. Furthermore, the municipalist housing policy took different angles and measures to face the crisis. Among them, purchasing new units from property owners, banks and developers sent a strong signal to the real estate market in terms of increasing and reinforcing a non-commodified part of the housing stock. When the deals were feasible, squatted properties were used as facilitators of that process. In this regard, the significance of tourism in the urban political economy of Barcelona was relatively higher than in Madrid, which was reflected in joint protests between housing activists and anti-tourism mobilizations of local residents even before the municipalists came to power. This pressing tourist-led housing market affected large parts of the city so the new development of a municipal housing policy combined limitations to short-rentals and hotels with attention to squatting as one of the components of their housing strategy. Although housing activists in both Madrid and Barcelona were highly critical against the capitalist arrangements that bailed out many banks and gave birth to the “bad bank” SAREB, their demands were more easily channeled through the Barcelona municipalist government. The latter made many deals with the SAREB, even in relation to their squatted premises, in order to promote affordable rents and relocations to social housing.

In line with the framework that we developed earlier in this paper, these conclusions underline the importance of capitalism for the analysis of social movements and their outcomes (Barker et al., 2013; Della Porta, 2015). Throughout this paper, with others we have argued that the characteristics of neoliberal capitalism have been a crucial factor in the emergence of new social movements in response of the global financial crisis; we have argued that capitalism plays a role in the explanation of the reframing of squatting from anti-capitalist activism to justified recuperations in view of the shortcomings of the characteristics of financial capitalism, as it reflects the importance of home-owners in this new framing; and we have argued that capitalism plays a crucial role in explaining the differences in the outcomes of squatting activism between Madrid and Barcelona. We have argued that these different explanations relate to the different
ways in which capitalism relates to social movements according to Hetland and Goodwin (2013), as developed in our theoretical framework. The impoverishment of large sectors of the Spanish working class (with a strong racialized, migrant and female composition: Gonick, 2021) has also driven the activism within housing movements in which squatting has been revived and reframed according to their specific urgent needs as well as to new political strategies. The transition in the framing of squatting from a general anti-capitalist approach into justified recuperations also involves, as we have argued, specific anti-capitalist practices concerning municipalist authorities and their relations with financial corporations too. Additional research can certainly shed further light on the precise mechanisms that link these structural characteristics of capitalism to the day-to-day interaction between municipalist governments and activists. The suggested notions of “evaluative framing” and “bottom-up housing policy” as represented by residential squatting in our analysis, might nurture future studies about the social and political outcomes of social movements, so we hope that new empirical studies follow this direction if proven useful.

Notes

1. https://www.icerda.org/media/files/Presentaci%C3%B3%20Ocupaci%C3%B3%202017.05.02.pdf, accessed on 2 October 2019.
3. This number of 3.5 million vacant houses (13.6% of the total housing stock) was the last official figure provided by the government in 2011. If we add “secondary homes” (homes that are only partially used, if occupied at all), we end up with a total of 7.1 million dwellings (28.3% of the total housing stock) in 2011. By the end of 2016, this number had only slightly decreased to 6.6 million (25.5% of the total housing stock; Ministerio de Fomento, 2017, p. 9). Vacancy rates in other European countries were much lower; for example, 1.5% in The Netherlands, 1.7% in Sweden, 5.3% in Denmark, 7.3% in France, and 8% in Germany (Observatorio de la Sostenibilidad, 2015).
4. SAREB is a bank established by the Spanish government to administrate the toxic assets of bailed-out banks (García-Lamarca, 2016, p. 48).

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