

Miguel A. Martínez López (ed), *The Urban Politics of Squatters' Movements*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-349-95313-4 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-349-95793-4 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-349-95314-1 (ebook)

Following the global financial crisis and the adoption of severe austerity measures, large social movements emerged across the Global North and beyond, the “occupation” of squares and other public spaces being one of the main manifestations of this new wave of transnational mobilizations. The squatting of buildings for different purposes (e.g. housing; cultural activities; solidarity work and mutual aid) – often under the “umbrella” claim of the “urban common(s)” meant as both a practice and a political goal – has been part of this wave, although its historical roots are deep, complex, and diverse, according to different contexts and subjects who make use of it. Previous studies discussed the “elusive” character of squatting (e.g. Martínez López 2013), appropriated also by far-right groups (see the case of CasaPound in Rome, which has been at the core of political debate in recent years, the promoters claiming their right to occupy as Italians vs leftist squats that see the large participation of international migrants).

The Urban Politics of Squatters' Movements therefore represents a useful contribution allowing readers to familiarize themselves with the complex and variegated history of squatting in Western Europe. The book provides a robust account of the history of the squatting movements in nine Western European cities (Madrid; Barcelona; Seville; Rome; Paris; Berlin; Copenhagen; Rotterdam; Brighton). I believe the use of the plural “movements” here is particularly important because the contributors make a good job of avoiding reductionist and uniform understandings of the practice of squatting. The chapter (no. 6) on Paris by Thomas Aguilera is the most effective in this regard, his main argument being that the “conflictive diversity represents a strength rather than an obstacle in the movement’s perpetuation as well as its impact on public policy. The more heterogeneous a social movement, the more powerful it may be in challenging authorities and, more broadly, urban social organisation” (p.123).

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is its genealogy. *The Urban Politics of Squatters' Movements* is the result of the research project “The Squatters’ Movement in Spain and Europe: Contexts, Cycles, Identities and Institutionalisation” (MOVOKEUR), funded by the

Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (2012-2014). The project led to the creation of databases and maps concerning all the squatting initiatives that emerged in each city under scrutiny. Thanks to this database, the reader gets to know in detail the evolution of squatters' presence in each city. For instance, in the case of Barcelona (Chapter 3), the authors Galvão DeBelle, Claudio Cattaneo, Robert González, Oriol Barranco and Marta Llobet examine both the stock (average number of open and active squatted social centres – SSCs – per year) and flows (newly opened and evicted SSCs per year) of initiatives. This way the reader is able to get a very clear picture of the institutional repressive response, as well as the persistence of the movement over time.

The contributors to the volume are part of the Squatting Europe Kollektive (SqEK: <https://sqek.squat.net>), an activist-academic network aiming, among other things, at deconstructing the negative and biased representation of squatters in mainstream media, while showing the diversity of initiatives and claims addressed. Indeed in its research agenda published in *ACME*, SqEK is defined as “not only a group of scholars but a socially committed group as well”, thus “available as a public resource” (SQEK 2010: 380). The methodological approach of SqEK promotes the “engagement” of the researcher, although this is a controversial issue that “invites self-reflection on the researcher’s involvement with the practices and struggles carried out by squatters. There are different ways to express that engagement, from researchers who live as squatters themselves, to their availability to offer advice and information to squatters who request it” (Martínez López 2014: 19). SqEK emerges then as “a means for researching *about* squatting, for making collaborative research *with* squatters, and advancing public understanding *of* squatting” (ibid.). In order to promote a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, the comparative perspective appears crucial: “Systematic comparisons point a way to overcome both local and descriptive stories about squatting” (Martínez López 2014: 22).

Resulting from this important political effort, *The Urban Politics of Squatters’ Movements* is composed of an introductory chapter by the editor, Miguel Martínez López, and two parts: the first, “case studies”, includes a historical analysis of each city (Chapters 2-10); the second, “comparisons”, includes three chapters that aim to discuss the nine case studies in a comparative perspective. The chapters in this section do so along three main lines: the temporality of squatting

cycles; the tension between repression and institutionalization; the relation between squatted social centres and the housing question.

In the introduction, Martínez López briefly overviews the main literature on squatting, highlighting the tension between those studies usually focusing on squatters' agency and identity issues, and those devoting more attention to structures. In an attempt to reconcile these different positions, the editor suggests thinking of squatting as a response to contexts and structural power relations, this response mobilizing subjective aspirations and both symbolic and material resources. The book frames this interplay through the use of the concepts of "protest cycles" and "socio-spatial structures". Thinking of "cycles" rather than "waves" allows an understanding of the changing manifestations of social movements according to other movements and political contexts. This is particularly important for squatting because of its long history of accumulated experiences. The idea of "socio-spatial structures" aims to include political interactions, thus highlighting how urban movements contribute to the construction of social relations of space and time but are also limited by them.

Chapters 2-10 aim analyse the history of squatting in each city along the (contested) lines of "protest cycles" and "socio-spatial structures" introduced by Martínez López. For each case, the authors choose a particular angle, such as the relation with specific urban political economy conditions characterizing the city/country (e.g. Berlin, Rotterdam, Seville), the criminalization of the movement (e.g. Barcelona), or the negotiation patterns with institutions (e.g. Rome). These chapters are very descriptive, although they lack a more specific focus on some initiatives (especially those surviving over time) that would have been beneficial for a better understanding of the complex negotiations between squatters, institutional actors and urban dynamics. Moreover even when briefly introduced, the specific initiatives are represented as internally homogeneous, thus hiding the tensions between different subjects and the power relations shaping the internal organization of social centres.

The "comparisons" chapters (11-13) try to develop a systematic comparative analysis of each case. While the attempt to compare the history of squatting in nine cities through different lenses represents an admirable effort, these chapters end up being very repetitive. They offer a very

rich description of a variety of squatting movements in different European cities, but do not really push beyond established work to provide a substantive and innovative understanding of squatting.

The edited volume is definitely recommended for activists, students and scholars willing to learn more about the histories of the squatting movements in Western Europe, emphasizing the importance of considering the (complex and dynamic) relations between squatters, formal institutions and urban processes of transformation. My main concern is with the book's very limited geographical breath. While I suspect the choice to focus only on Western European cities might result from the original funded project, I think inviting people active in different contexts, especially the Global South, would have given the volume a much stronger basis for theorizing squatting according to very different "protest cycles" and "socio-spatial structures". In fact, despite geopolitical differences, the contexts analysed are overall quite homogeneous, not to mention the fact that three case studies are from the same country (Spain). While the book does a great job discussing the links between squatters in different European cities, it would have done an even greater job if it also showed how the histories of this practice, likewise the cities it takes place in, are embedded in "multiple elsewhere" (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 348) beyond Western Europe.

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