

## PREFACE

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THANKS TO THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT, THE CALL TO SQUAT IS ONCE again raised more widely and acted upon with increasing frequency. The movements of the Arab Spring and the 15M movement in Spain, which catalyzed similar “real democracy” movements of ‘*Indignados*’ in Italy, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Greece, as well as the Occupy movement in the US all started out with taking over – not buildings but – public and private squares and plazas. Most of these movements used the (re)appropriated spaces to set up tents, kitchens, libraries, and media centers to collectively organize their assemblies and working groups, their rallies and marches, as well as their everyday lives in a horizontal, self-managed, and direct-democratic style. In the process, they have transformed public spaces into commons – common spaces opened up by the occupiers who inhabit them and share them according to their own rules. As with squatters of social centers or large buildings, the occupied squares represent(ed) not only a collective form of residence on the basis of shared resources, but also a political action: in this case laying siege to centers of financial and political power. Importantly, they have also served to explore direct-democratic decision-making, to prefigure post-capitalist ways of life, and to devise innovative forms of political action. As with squatting, the practice of occupying has enacted a democratic (re)appropriation of public squares epitomized by their inhabitation. As with squatting, the power

of bodies that continue to be present – that don't go home at the end of the demonstration and that speak for themselves rather than being represented by others – exerts a forceful message as it gives *ongoing presence* to political protest.

In today's situation of the worldwide spread and the open future of the Occupy movement, it is helpful to take some lessons from squatters' movements as they have influenced the trajectory of many contemporary movements and struggles. Squatting is a unique form of protest activity that holds a potential of unfurling energies; it focuses action in a way that is prefigurative of another mode of organizing society and challenging a paramount institution of capitalist society: private property.

## THE SPECIAL FEATURES OF SQUATTING

SQUATTING – SIMPLY defined as living in or using a dwelling without the consent of the owner - occurs in many different circumstances, and as such, even if it occurs with the intention of long-term use, is not necessarily transformative of social relations. Most forms of stealth squatting or other forms of deprivation-based squatting, whether carried out by homeless people themselves or by advocate activists opening up buildings for destitute would-be squatters, are not part of transformative progressive social movements.

Thus, squatting as a tactic can be used by individuals to improve their housing situation outside of any social movement, or it can be used, as a technique or action repertoire, by a variety of different social movements (including right-wing movements). Of the many different types of squatting, the one highlighted in this book is part of wider progressive or radical social movements. This squatting movement assertively operates in the open (rather than stealthily), engages in networking and coalition building with tenant organization and urban or environmental and/or other social justice movements; it makes explicit demands on the state, calling (most often) for affordable, decent housing and social centers, but also for (more or less) radical solutions to the underlying causes of the lack of adequate housing and social infrastructures. Crucially, it uses the occupied space not only for collective living arrangements, but also for collective self-organization and empowerment, in the case of the self-managed social centers for political and counter-cultural activities.

Thus, for these movements squatting is a two-fold experience: it involves, first, the actual act of civil and social disobedience, which then

allows other counter-cultural and militant practices to take hold, prefigurative free spaces to be built, and thick bonds of solidarity to be forged. Horizontal and assembly-oriented forms of self-organization and political participation are as essential to this practice as cooperative management and direct democracy. But since the movement is also making use of the illegal act of squatting (also as a way to draw public attention to massive social and housing problems, the high social cost of speculation, or the waste of public land and buildings), this challenge to the primacy of the individual right to private property puts the movements at risk of repression, even when they enjoy broad legitimacy and popular support. Repressive or containment strategies of the state often force the movements to ‘choose’ either eviction or some form of legalization. But under specific circumstances, some squatting movements have been able to experiment with double track strategies and been able to go back and forth between (or even apply simultaneously) direct action and negotiation, most often in some kind of division of labor between radical core groups and more moderate supporters, and thereby managed to extend their squats and with them the infrastructures for their collective living, working, and political organizing.

Even where squats have been evicted with more or less police force, their actions have often led to saving old buildings from being demolished; in many European cities squatters movements have enhanced political participation of tenants and residents, and led to new forms of institutionalized participation and “careful urban renewal” instead of “urban removal.”

Observers have also begun to identify certain patterns and waves of squatting that correlate with movement cycles and different phases of urban development and urban politics, shifting from fordism to neoliberalism.

### **WHAT’S NEW ABOUT SQUATTING IN NEOLIBERALISM?**

THE NEOLIBERALIZATION OF capitalism has reintroduced “accumulation by dispossession” as a way to solve the problems of flagging capital accumulation (cf. Harvey 2005). As with original accumulation, it involves the conversion of common, collective, and state forms of property rights into exclusive private property rights and the suppression of rights to the commons. Neoliberal forms of dispossession complement the (intensification of) the older, time-tested forms by also chipping away at common property rights that have been won in the course of

the Fordist class struggle (such as access to education, health care, welfare, and state pensions) and reverting them to the private sector.

However, neoliberalization dissolves forms of social solidarity not only in favor of private property, economization, and marketization, but also in favor of unbridled individualism, personal responsibility, and entrepreneurial activation. These latter dimensions resonate in some ways with movement values of self-determination and empowerment, and with its critique of the bureaucratic and paternalistic Fordist welfare state. In both neoliberal as well as new social movements' visions instead of the state, individuals, communities, and voluntarism should be playing stronger roles so as to create more vibrant societies. Both view 'too much state intervention' as hindering not only personal development and self-realization, but also societal self-regulation – which the neoliberals, of course, prefer to see happening via the market and economic rationality, whereas progressive movements would like to see happening through alternative networks.

In the course of the neoliberalization of urban governance, a series of political demands as well as organizational forms of the new social movements have become incorporated into the neoliberal project. With new public management and the shift from public to private and semi-public institutions via outcontracting, not only established third-sector but also oppositional organizations were integrated into this regime; and with the shift from centralized to local and more differentiated modes of decision-making, more consensus-oriented and participatory modes found their way into local governance.

What's more, with intensifying interurban competition, cities have discovered cultural revitalization and creativity-led economic and urban development policies as a useful strategy to enhance their brand and improve their global image. Becoming a 'creative city' is increasingly seen as necessary to attract tourists, global investors, and affluent middle and upper classes. Politicians have thus become keen to instrumentalize dynamic local subcultures and harness them as a competitive advantage in the interurban rivalry. In this context, the cultural milieus of artists and other 'creatives', subcultural scenes including squats and self-managed social centers, have taken on a new function as they mark urban space as attractive. They charge them with cultural capital, which in the scheme of 'creative city' policy then becomes transformed by investors into economic capital.

Clever urban politicians harness the cultural production that goes on in squatted centers as branding assets that contribute to the image of

‘cool cities,’ ‘happening places’ or sub-cultural magnets. Many German cities offer contracts for interim use of urban space (see for Berlin’s example Colomb 2012), while Dutch cities have created a so-called ‘Breeding Grounds’ policy in order to “maintain and recreate the cultural functions previously performed by large squats” (Owens 2008, 54).

Not just in Holland, but also in the UK, an industry of anti-squat agencies has sprung up, where interim use of vacant private property is managed on the owners’ behalf on the basis of “guardian angel” contracts that require payment of utilities but not rent, and that strictly control the rights of the temporary tenants: they are in a very weak legal position, the agencies barely respect their privacy, often neither visitors nor pets are allowed; the tenants may be prohibited from contacting the press, and they can be evicted with 14 days’ notice. About ten times more vacant spaces in Holland are occupied by such “anti-squatters” than by actual squatters thanks to this clever commercial strategy, and in spite of the infringements of the residents’ rights, most appear to appreciate living in high-value central city real estate (cf. Priemus 2011; Buchholz 2011).

Neoliberal urban policies thus on the one hand manage to hijack and incorporate alternative and subcultural activism including the creativity of squatters (who, in the process, may find it difficult to maintain their political autonomy), while on the other they entail intensifying repressive strategies, stricter laws, tougher policing, and hence more evictions and fiercer criminalization of squatting. Often local authorities implement both strategies simultaneously, which tends to sharpen the differences among and create collisions between cultural and political squatters. As a result, radical political action and alternative cultural production that before had been part and parcel of the same movement increasingly become differentiated and sometimes even opposed to each other. Such processes can be observed in all European cities, and have accelerated in the wake of the economic crisis, which has provided a rationale for dismantling alternative infrastructures and for cutting back on funding for self-organized projects of all kinds – at the same time as neoliberal urban regeneration and hyper-gentrification of central city land accelerates displacement pressures and threatens leftist “free zones” and alternative infrastructures, seeking to displace them with trendy bars, chic new designer stores, and expensive condos.

This hostile environment has been making radical oppositional politics far more challenging than in the past.

Even while critical of neoliberal urban policies and resisting ‘creative city’ programs, the activities of squatters often end up contributing to upgrading and valorizing such contested urban areas – the more so where cultural experimentation has displaced political radicalism. At the same time, demands for self-management and self-realization have lost their radical edge, as participation and self-management have become essential ingredients of sub-local regeneration programs as well as in the public discourse (if with the purpose of encouraging activation and self-responsibilization rather than political empowerment). In this situation, struggles for the recognition and legalization of autonomous squats are taking on a qualitatively new political significance. Withdrawing these spaces from neoliberal utilization for profit-making and disrupting the private property-based logic of capitalist urbanization puts the struggle over the proper conception of rights on the agenda. And claiming the currently secondary rights – such as the right to economic security, education, or housing, the right to organize, or rights to freedom of speech and expression – as primary over and against the right to individual private property and profit, would “entail a revolution” (Harvey 2006: 57) because the latter is essential to capital accumulation as the dominant process shaping our lives.

The more people comprehend the logic of this system the more they see housing being speculated upon while their own access to adequate shelter becomes precarious. Claiming housing as a right has a great potential to win mass support. Once that argument has entered the collective imagination (re)appropriating vacant buildings becomes a logical and defensible next step.

## **NEW OPPORTUNITIES OPENED UP THROUGH THE CRISIS AND THROUGH OCCUPY**

THE FINANCIAL CRISIS created a situation, where more people are without (adequate) housing, while more than enough buildings owned by the 1% sit vacant awaiting better yields. The “market” as well as the political and legal system favor those owners and stigmatize those who struggle to find shelter. In this situation, occupying is not only the logical response, but is increasingly resorted to, politicizing previously apolitical squats by foreclosed and homeless people.

After their eviction from squares and plazas all over the US, the Occupy movement has fanned out into neighborhoods to (re)claim abandoned and foreclosed properties for ordinary people. The Spanish

15M movement, after it was pushed off the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, joined community groups and came to the defense of homes threatened by foreclosure, occupied an abandoned hotel and more than 30 buildings, and secured, through negotiations with the federal government, a vacant tobacco factory and turned them into social and community centers. “Occupy the ‘hood!” became a new rallying cry, spin-off organizations (such as Organize4Occupation, O4O – with the second O crossed through with the squatting sign) were formed, direct action events at bailed-out banks and the physical presence of Occupiers at threatened buildings have prevented evictions, and re-taken and refurbished homes, while other actions have disrupted auction sales of foreclosed houses.

With these actions, new connections are forged between the Occupy movement and community-based groups that have been resisting evictions and displacement for a long time, lending more visibility to those struggles. As these campaigns become more coordinated, they scale up local struggles, turning them into regional movements that protest the same banks at the same time or go to each others’ rallies; and participants increasingly see themselves as part of national and international movements.

## **SQEK AND THIS BOOK**

MAINSTREAM RESEARCH HAS paid scarce attention to the unfolding of squatting movements, their dynamics, their differences, their transformations, let alone their new challenges. With careful observation and analyses of squatting movements and the development of self-managed social centers in a variety of European cities this book provides a huge treasure trove of insight into the differentiated experiences, path-specific developments, internal operations, unique achievements and challenges of the politics of occupying – from the period of Fordist growth via deindustrialization and urban restructuring all the way to the current neoliberal era and austerity politics. With an emphasis on comparative research and the involving of activists in the research, the Squatting Europe Kollektiv has chosen the most productive methodology to push our understanding of this extremely important yet under-researched movement.

Several chapters in this book do a great job identifying the radical and transformative potential of those squatting movements that challenge the neoliberal market logic and are political while at the same

time providing movement infrastructures. Especially the large squats that serve as (self-managed) social centers along with places of residence (integrating counter-cultural, political and productive activities) and that strengthen the political activities of the local movements, are analyzed in order to comprehend how they offer not merely spaces for performances, happenings, concerts, exhibits, community organizing, and homes, but also for organizing protest and political events, and how they manage to be open not just to movements and the alternative scenes, but also to urban residents beyond those circles, which allows them to serve as “recruiting” spaces.

Much still needs to be better understood – about the containment strategies of the authorities, the management strategies of the squats themselves, the local and global sides of this movement and its relationship to the anti-globalization and Occupy movements. But the chapters brought together in this book by the Squatting Europe Kollektiv provide an excellent base for gaining a better understanding of these questions and for building the power of this movement, by researchers and activists together.

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