Beyond the Plaza: Barcelona’s okupa squatters at work in the wake of La Crisis

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**May 13th 2012, Barcelona, Plaça Catalunya, sometime in the afternoon…**

The metal cart rattles loudly, wheels screeching as several of us try to work it towards the kitchen tent. Hundreds of people are milling around the expanse of the large plaza. Small clusters of individuals are talking to each other, sitting closely under tents along the edges or debating in circles out under the sun. Tourists pose for pictures, some stop to ask what’s going on. An enormous paper-mâché snail has been plastered with environmental slogans; beside it, a group of adults and small children paint signs decrying school budget cuts. In another corner, an “occupied” television station has set up a couch and is interviewing passersby. The housing commission and neighborhood assembly tents are taking contact information and giving out fliers for upcoming meetings. Above the plaza, a Ray Bans billboard the length of a city-block features two young protesters, embraced in the center of a police riot, calm behind their stylish shades. The billboard provides grist for a steady stream of groans - against capitalism, neoliberalism, co-optation…

Despite myriad other sources of distraction, our squeaky cart manages to command some curiosity. A number of heads turns to watch us wind through the crowd. Balanced precariously on the cart are a greasy stove, several large pots, a small, wooden table, some boxes of food, a propane tank and a bright yellow sign that reads – in English - “Food Not Cops.” Behind the cart and the group of young squatters pushing it are two scraggily-looking puppies whose ongoing play-fight leaves a row of disrupted conversations in its wake. Feeling sheepish under the attention, I, the anthropologist tag-a-long, turn to one of my companions, an Italian squatter-metalworker and semi-regular participant in the weekly Food Not Bombs dinners, and ask if we shouldn’t talk with someone at the information tent, or maybe check with the assembly first or do something before we set up?” No” - he waves off my question – “we cooked the whole time last year. It’s fine.” As we pull up next to the official kitchen tent, I’m still not relieved. The multiple-folding-table operation dwarves our chungo’ little setup. And the confusion on the faces of the people behind the folding tables seems to confirm my suspicion that no one was aware of, nor expecting, the grand arrival of

1 “crappy, sketchy, poorly-made”
the alternative “kitchen.” Thankfully, they seem only confused, and not hostile. Some lean over to take a look, but no one appears concerned enough to question us or, even say anything to us, and eventually they return to talking amongst themselves.

From our rag-tag group, a Cuban friend, interlocutor and 10-year resident of various European squats, takes a look at the propane attachments with the aforementioned Italian. Meanwhile, his partner (also Italian) scolds me for trying to eat some of the mushroom sauce they’d prepared in advance at Panses - Panses, the nearby okupa (squatter) social center where we hold Food Not Bombs, a weekly free meal made with food rescued from garbage bins. Several Thursdays prior, police officers from Barcelona’s Guàrdia Urbana had shut the down the vegan dinner, and myself and two others were ticketed for “Occupation of a Public Way.” To draw attention to what was perceived as increasing police harassment some of the participants and residents of the house had made the new sign “Food Not Cops” and brought it to the acampada.

After some wrestling with the stove, the kitchen is up and running. Not until the pasta starts cooking do we realize we don’t have a ladle - or any utensil large enough for the pot we’re using. Frustrated trying to stir it with a spoon, my Italian friend walks over to the official 15M kitchen tent to see if we can borrow one of their ladles. A young guy with a beard, wearing an apron hands us one from their stock of supplies, and he and a silver-haired fellow-activist use the encounter to come over and check out our set up. As the Italian and the Cuban explain, the food we’re cooking is to offer a vegan alternative. More importantly one that’s recycled, or made with food that would have otherwise been thrown out and thus, they emphasize, not contributing money to big grocery stores. The “15M people” seem okay with our presence and head back to their area. Our pasta finishes. At the same time a donated box of roast chicken arrives at the official tent and people from the plaza, noticing the food, start coming over. Some take chicken from them, others pasta from us, most take a little from both. And no one seems especially curious why there are two kitchens…

So what might this moment, from one evening, in one corner, on the periphery of this year’s acampada tell us: about the protest encampment that took over Barcelona’s central Plaça Catalunya, and, about this moment of mobilization more generally. How do pre-existing projects – and problems – find their way into the encampment? How do emerging projects articulate immediate
desires and older trajectories? During the one-year anniversary of the “original” *acampada*, which took place from the 12th until the 15th of May 2012 (more or less), I participated in the alternative kitchen project described above, and sat in on numerous assemblies with translation help from Catalan squatters and some Mallorquin college students. I also took part in the many demonstrations that emanated from the *acampada* - most memorable the people’s tribunal at *La Caixa* bank’s headquarters, complete with mock guillotine. (At least I think it was mock…)

Over the week, the *acampada* drew in tens of thousands to take part in actions and dialogues celebrating and re-energizing months of continued organizing. The 15M, alternatively, the *indignado* movement had gained visibility starting with the May 15th protests a year earlier in which thousands of “indignant” people had taken over plazas in various cities throughout Spain, some for weeks at a time. In the intervening year, demands for various measures of political and economic reform had not abated - evictions and homelessness had increased, unemployment rose to over 53% for youth and 25% overall, and severe cuts to social programs continued. Compounding the disillusionment of many was the violence of the previous *acampada*’s eviction by the regional police body (the *Mossos d’Esquadra*) - especially for those 15M participants who had never before witnessed state repression firsthand; young and old were beaten by clubs, several lost eyes to rubber projectiles. But despite a heavy sense of collective anger and frustration, there was also a feeling of celebration, as people who hadn’t seen each other since the previous year met again during the first general assembly to share a 15M “First birthday cake.”

That some participants thought of themselves as part of a cohesive, singular 15M movement, and others, though still participating in various actions or projects, did not identify with the movement at all, is a quality likely true of most things called movements and can be a particularly illuminating dimension for the study of how mobilizations are imagined and enacted. As Wendy Wolford, in her ground-level account of the MST, the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil,

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2 Aguilar, Lianna “Más de 500 familias desalojadas por día en España” BBC October 9, 2012; “Precariedad en la capital catalana” El Periodico April 13, 2012;
Helepololei contends:

…presenting a coherent and unified picture of social movements means choosing some subalterns over others. If we do not pay attention to alternative or multiple subjectivities within movements, we have selected for those voices we wish to hear and, as a result, we are likely to miss (or misunderstand) broader movement trajectories” (2010: 12).

Looking at the one-year anniversary mobilizations of the 15M in Barcelona, in this case through the participation of long-term squatters, affords a situated perspective from which to interrogate more dominant discourses, those coming from both outside and inside the movement. As David Graeber, among others has highlighted in his ethnography of direct action, anti-hierarchical consensus-based forms of decision-making, while aimed at challenging exclusion, are still beset by legacies of privilege and marginalization (2009). The acampada, as a convergence point of innumerable activist and non-activist trajectories was no exception. Complex issues of class, education and language became especially apparent in the ways some people participated (or didn’t). An example was the need some self-identified, working-class migrants from other parts of Spain felt to apologize before speaking in Castilian Spanish during the open mic sessions, sessions which predominantly followed presentations by university-educated and autochthonous Catalan speakers - a field of daily negotiations Kathryn Woolard has studied extensively among youth in Catalunya (1989, 2003).

Likewise, spaces such as the acampada and the coordinadora lacked substantial representation from the Asian, Latin American, and Afro-descendent migrant communities that make up nearly 16% of Catalunya’s population and are especially prominent in neighborhoods such as the Raval, which essentially bordered the acampada.

The benefit of ethnographic research within activist projects is that we can engage in the ongoing business of mobilization, not for the purpose of contradicting projections and self-representations, but to see what work self-representations do and where the lived phenomenon exceeds existing descriptions. One area where the convergence and divergence of movement discourse, practice, and researcher analyses have been especially interesting is in the idea of democracy. While the participants within recent mass mobilizations have called for direct
democracy, or “real democracy” in the case of Spain, I think there’s a risk in researchers describing them as directly democratic movements without exploring what that might mean in each specific context, and even more so, in un-critically employing those terms to describe the modes of sociality we are taking part in and witnessing. In the spaces described above, the long-term okupas and the short-term acampada, the term “democracy” was often referred to in skeptical, if not disparaging terms for two prevalent reasons. The first was the relationship between the idea of “democracy” and the promise of the modern Spanish state, which had nominally transitioned into democracy after Franco, but was seen by many activists and militants of varied stripes as an oligarchy of políticos y banqueros (not to mention the controversial ongoing institution of the monarchy). Second, some of the initial 15M organizing had come together through the emerging organization/movement Democracy Real Ya! which had started out through non-hierarchical, egalitarian, and politically autonomous organizing but by the spring of 2012, had groups within it seeking possible institutionalization in the form of a political party.

Rather than direct democracy, participants in the acampadas and the coordinadoras (the ongoing city-wide coordinating meetings) more commonly emphasized the idea of autogestion, or roughly “self-management,” on the part of the different commissions that made up the acampada, as well as different neighborhood assemblies. Whereas direct democracy describes a manner of decision-making, the responsibility of autogestion includes the continued implementation and reassessment of decisions and investment in an ongoing project. Related to this was the preeminence of coordinating structures over decision-making structures as scale increased: so the general assembly within the acampada, and the coordinadora for all of the different neighborhood assemblies. This mode of articulation was presented as valuable because it allowed groups to maintain their autonomy. It produced relatively quicker assemblies, but it also meant people involved in multiple projects spent a significant amount of time attending assemblies for each project in which they were involved. Without any kind of coercion or fixed membership, assemblies required members’ ongoing affinity to keep together, which resulted in unpredictable fluctuations in attendance. This bounded-ness (or lack of) is a crucial way in which these kinds of organizing might
be seen to have broken from models of governance (democratic or otherwise), and becomes especially visible through their ambivalent relationship with sovereignty. The *acampada* “took back the plaza” by opening it as a platform from which new projects and subjectivities might emerge. It was an assertion of popular control, but it was manifested in an active contestation of boundaries: between the quotidian and the political, between economic experts and neoliberal objects, and between public and private, as participants attempted to restructure society at a smaller scale, living within the visible laboratory of the plaza. By design, the structures of the commissions and assemblies were built to accommodate and to thrive off the engagement of newcomers and their ideas. The designation of *indignados* can be seen as embracing a process like Laclau’s “chain of equivalences,” an expanding roster of positions whose affiliation emerges through the common thread of indignation toward the status quo. This permeability of the *acampada* created a different kind of accountability in its participants. Rather than citizens, subject to the institutions and regulations of a bounded territory, participants could come and go as they saw fit and were subject to the agreements made by consensus only for so long as they felt like staying, a very different situation in practice from that of any kind of rigidly-bound, or even clearly-defined association.

Sovereignty, the assertion of authority over a territory was still *discursively* present (in the idea of taking back “the people’s plaza”). However in practice, expressions of sovereignty were seen as problematic, if not antithetical to the values of autonomy, non-hierarchy and self-management espoused within the *acampada*. Illustrating this is the Food Not Bombs episode, as well as the continued use of the plaza as a place of leisure and commerce by people not interested in participating in the *acampada* itself. As I was told by students who had been at the *acampada* the previous year, the general assembly had come to a consensus that it would ask street vendors to refrain from selling beer and samosas during the assembly (which was seen as a distraction). This in turn provoked debate about *who* had the right to decide how the plaza could be used and whether or not those kinds of restrictions would be re-creating systems of exclusion which the mostly migrant, Pakistani vendors faced on a daily basis. By contrast, the more long-term *okupas* (squats) generally required persons interested in living in the occupied home, or presenting a social center project, to
present themselves at an assembly of all the residents or members before they would be considered a resident.

Part of what has limited and compounded the murkiness of describing recent mass mobilizations like the 15M has been in part, a tendency to focus on the decision-making aspects of mobilizations, with less attention to what happens after. Consensus might be reached on a proposal in an assembly, but what that looks like in implementation, in the *acampada*, or in the running of a commission, could be entirely different and require other mechanisms to maintain over time - including more assemblies but also less-visible means of collective action. To the “logic of aggregation” which Jeffrey Juris has identified among contemporary mobilization moments, I would emphasize the complementary logics of free dis-aggregation, the flows in which people come together, disperse, and re-aggregate in recurring fashion as projects become more and less meaningful to participants over time (Juris 2012). The “emic” terms mentioned above: *autogestion*, autonomy, affinity, offer us some concepts for talking and thinking about these modalities of organizing as practices rather than ideologies. Marina Sitrin, in describing similarly self-managed workplaces and assemblies in Argentina, offers the term *horizontalidad* (horizontality), used by participants to describe not only the practices, but the desire for non-hierarchical relationships (Sitrin 2012). Likewise, Hannah Arendt, in her comparative analysis *On Revolution*, identifies the concept of isonomy, or “no-rule,” which was used to describe the pre-democratic relationships between members of the Greek polis. This notion of “no-rule” as Arendt describes it:

… was expressed by the word isonomy, whose outstanding characteristic among the forms of government, as the ancients had enumerated them, was that the notion of rule…was entirely absent from it. …The word ‘democracy,’ expressing even then majority rule, the rule of the many, was originally coined by those who were opposed to isonomy and who meant to say: What you say is ‘no-rule’ is in fact only another kind of rulership; it is the worst form of government, rule by the demos” (Arendt 1965: 20).

Since informal pressure and the cultivation of affinity are the only means in which to keep the collective together, there is no formal division between the rulers and the ruled, not even in the
sense of a “collective rule.” Bernard Steigler adapts this idea to cultural production in the concept of “technocultural isonomy” which he uses to describe phenomena such as YouTube, “where hegemonic subjective relations imposed by the cultural industries seem reversed and which make an auto-production based on isoproduction possible” (2009: 45). Here, we have a creative understanding of social relationships, rather than one of governance, which aligns well with the earlier descriptions of people coming together in the acampada to produce social and cultural projects, rather than establish fixed institutions.

These concepts are likewise limited in what they can describe, but offer for us some additional tools towards developing a more exploratory analytical approach to looking at this current moment of global mass mobilizations. As anthropologists, we have the theoretical and methodological capacities to go beyond the assemblies, beyond the plazas, beyond “democracy” - to see how political formations emerge and submerge from the infinitely complex and messy social landscapes where we work.

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