“Who Sows Misery Collects Rage:” Cultivating Insurrection in Crisis Barcelona

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**Session:** Cultural Expression, Social Knowledge and Political Consciousness in Social Movements

**Paper Title:**

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**Abstract:**

Barcelona as cosmopolitan, business hub and tourist destination can seem the antithesis of popular, anticapitalist struggle. And yet a walk through the city reveals a diffusion of efforts to resurrect Barcelona’s insurrectionary past. Forms of embodied contestation are increasingly common features of the urban landscape: loud marches defend squatted social centers as displaced families take back bank-owned apartments. Protesters armed with pots and pans occupy schools and hospitals, draping building facades with banners explaining this endless economic downturn “no és crisi, és capitalisme!” While the spectacular encampments of Spain’s 15M movement have been long evicted from public plazas, indignados continue struggles elsewhere, re-animating neighborhood assemblies, former bastions of anti-Franco resistance. The flourishing of local assemblies and myriad issue-specific collectives has brought the pre-figurative experimentation of the plaza into more localized forms of mutual aid. Such place-based organizing has created forums for collective learning and debate, making possible lines of solidarity between diverse groups of students, retirees, migrants, and precarious workers, and creating opportunities for regular dialogue. These articulations bring lived experience to bear on recent calls by popular theorists to locate transversal revolutionary subjectivities. Acting directly on the visual and aural landscape of the city, such groups attempt to shape an affective environment that builds awareness while opening spaces to realize oppositional community-building efforts. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted within various ongoing projects, this paper will discuss efforts by participants to situate themselves and fellow, urban residents as critical subjects in shared struggle.

A couple of the themes I want to bring up in this talk are: 1) the distinctions of civil and uncivil protest 2) ephemeral interventions and subversive leisure in times of crisis, and 3) imagined and enacted solidarities (as they work to disrupt processes of social abjection). I’ll draw on fieldwork conducted over the past two
years to discuss efforts by activists to situate themselves and fellow, urban residents as critical subjects in ongoing, shared struggle. I look at two events from this summer, both examples of attempts to open physical and discursive spaces from which to realize oppositional community-building efforts. I'll close with a consideration of the populist/progressive dichotomy that framed this session and which can hopefully serve to start our shared discussion.

First scene: June 2013 Barcelona

I. By the time I arrived, the community education center that was scheduled to host the premier of the documentary: 4F: Ni Oblit, Ni Perdó (Neither forgotten nor forgiven) was several hundred people over capacity. The documentary was the product of several years' investigation by friends and family members into a court case that had resulted in the imprisonment of four young people. One of these four - Patricia Heras, later took her life. Some background on the case:

On February 4th, 2006. A police officer was struck in the head by a potted plant while trying to shut down a party that was taking place at a squatted social center, near the center of Barcelona. The injured police officer was hospitalized and went into a coma. Four young people outside of the party were arrested on charges of assaulting a police officer and each served several year prison sentences. Over those years, support for the defendants of the 4F case grew (4f for February 4th). A number of protests called for a review of the case; condemned the physical and psychological abuse by the police involved; and later, made claims of corruption after evidence contradicting the police report was revealed and suppressed. Supporters argued that this case was

1 For more information and to view the documentary: http://www.desmontaje4f.org/en/
representative of a much larger effort by the city to clean undesirable elements out of the touristic center, often resulting in excessive police violence (there was a recent case of a man beaten to death by police in the Raval, a nearby neighborhood). **Yelling over the crowd**, one of the organizers explained that they had found a new place to host the screening and that we were going to walk over together. I chatted with friends who’d come from all over the city to see the film and support the cause. Eventually our group converged with another group of people, a neighborhood tour group, in front of a shuttered building on the busy **Via Laeitana**, a street that cuts through the center of Barcelona and connects the waterfront to the posh Eixample neighborhood. On a ladder above us, someone began wheat-pasting a sign over the entryway. **Cinema. Patricia. Heras.** The crowd cheered on as the flapping, paper sign was flattened out and homemade glue smoothed across it. The sound of heavy tools began clanking from behind a fabric sheet and the applause grew louder as we recognized the sounds of locks being cut. Suddenly the sheet dropped and behind it, the doors to the building were opened. As the organizer explained, after 12 years of disuse, the former Palace of Cinema was being enlisted for this special premier. For only 24 hours they would be taking over the theater and using it to denounce police violence, and the property speculation driving it. In other words: **This wasn’t just a screening. This was an occupation.** Some people entered right away. Others remained in front of the building, debating whether or not to go inside. With such a public occupation, **arrest** (and probably a beating) seemed almost guaranteed. **Responding to this sense of hesitation, an older man, dressed in a neon-green vest took up a megaphone to speak to the crowd.** He introduced himself as a ‘iaioflauta’ – a member of a group of seniors, mostly
retirees, that had come out into the streets during the 15M or indignado protests in 2011. They had since become one of the most active groups, staging their own anti-austerity protests at banks and government offices across Spain. Their name, the iaioflautas, requires some unpacking. Early news reports on the 15M Movement had referred to demonstrators camped out in Madrid and Barcelona as *perroflautas*, a stereotypical figure of a young person who plays music on the street to make money (hence flauta, or flute), and often accompanied by mangy dogs (hence, perro). Reacting to the dismissal of young people, a group of seniors began calling themselves iaio (grandpa and grandma)-flautas. So this particular iaioflauta, after announcing his group’s support for the screening, declared that he and the several dozen other iaioflautas present would stand guard outside the cinema and deal with the police should they arrive. There was a fair amount of laughter and applause at his posturing. Many in the audience of young people, activists and squatters, were used to facing off with police during protests and found the idea of people their grandparent’s age fighting the police back to be quite a funny image indeed. But as a friend of mine, who’d been present at a previous occupation attempt noted, it really was the most effective defense. With so-called *perroflautas*, the police don’t feel the need to hold back, but with older folks they still show some level of restraint. And it worked. The documentary was screened in its entirety. Family members, members of the 15M audiovisual assembly, and even one of the four that had been arrested and spent several years in in prons, introduced the film and spoke about the effort it took to put it together and of their hope that it would pressure a re-opening of the case and prosecution of the police, judges and politicians implicated in the 4F muntatge – or set up. Commentary in the film included academics, like the
anthropologist Manuel Delgado, who fit the particularities of the 4F case into the larger issues of the ‘Barcelona Model’ of urbanization and closed with emotionally stirring appeals for continued mobilization. **It was an empowering experience,** not just pulling off the occupation, but using the space to show this film and to share a conversation. From the screening I want to note a number of convergences. First, we can see the civil and uncivil meeting, similar to what Ben Leiter and others have described among popular movements in Latin America (2013). The demands made by the occupiers (SLIDE): to annul the charges made against the 4 young people, to reopen the archived abuse case made against the arresting officers, to condemn the police, politicians and judges involved, and to demand reparations for damages caused are situated within a structure of authority, however vague. In this instance, the system isn’t condemned in its entirety. Consistent with reform-oriented tendencies within the 15M Movement, the occupiers demand justice through institutional channels, and a greater oversight role for the state. The inclusion of academic voices also draws on a form of institutionally recognized legitimation, critique, a channel of civil contestation. The action itself, however, conveys a willingness of the participants to engage in ‘uncivil’ actions, the unauthorized expropriation of space. Participation means acting directly - or as an accessory - to the violation of private property. The hanging together of these different groups: the 15M media group, the iaioflautas, the squatters, academics and other supporters of the 4F project reveals another interesting convergence of demands that we could describe as populist under the rubric of Ernesto Laclau’s work, in connecting demands across a tenuous, but expansive coalition of actors. **And I want to keep all of this in mind,** but switch quickly to a 2nd example of a similar dynamic,
rooted in a particular geographic location, but this time crossing national, ethnic and temporal lines, and articulating historical actors as imagined allies in contemporary struggle.

II. That same month, a neighborhood tour was held in the Raval neighborhood, organized by a Barcelona-based Anarco-feminist Collective. This was the second iteration of a *Ruta Herstorica*, a narrated circuit that stopped at a number of historic sites of resistance to gendered violence; it was accompanied by a printed newspaper with information that pertained to each site. Most of the sites that the route sought to bring attention to no longer exist. So one component of the trip was to reclaim these sites and to make them visible by putting up posters and signs, and in some cases performing street theater. Blocking pedestrian thoroughfares, disrupting a church function, and at one point, interrupting several police officers in the process of questioning a pedestrian. At various points, the tour itself turned into an intervention, a disruption, a protest. In the presentation of each site, the members of the organizing collective sought to connect historical events to contemporary issues. The organizers sought to recover and to unite these historic struggles, emphasizing the persistent problem of *erasure* taking place through urban redevelopment schemes, official historical discourses, as well as those erasures which occur within activist discourses that continue to marginalize the contributions of women. While maybe 100 people followed the entire route, many more pedestrians, residents and tourists stopped to see what was going on (SLIDE)

**So why focus on these two, brief events? How can they help us think about “cultural expression, social knowledge, and political consciousness?”**
Two figures might be useful for us to consider how these articulations extends as
this might demonstrate their populist aspects. From the first example, we have
the figure of the *perroflauta*, the young person whose assumed *refusal* to
contribute to the productive world allows for their maltreatment, torture, and
even death to be portrayed as inconsequential, even self-inflicted. Luis
Fernandez (2008) and David Graeber (2009) have discussed the class
antagonisms portrayed as underlying the policing of alter-globalization, and
especially anarchist activists, in which the “working class” police officer is pitted
against the presumed to be middle class or wealthier activists who are ‘playing
poor,’ who resist economic development and progress, despite having other
options themselves, and are thus too naïve to be taken seriously. This is the
perroflauta. In the second example of the *ruta herstorica*, we have the *puta*, the
prostitute, morally-degraded and morally-degrading, who requires isolation and
removal from public space. Portrayed as female and foreign, the *puta* is on
several counts removed from consideration as a serious political subject with
agency, with a role in the political community, and a vision of social change -
**even among otherwise progressive groups** (Ruta pointed out the lack of
solidarity conveyed by the UGT union that displaced hundreds of families
through construction in the Raval). In both of these actions we can see activists
*attempting* to disrupt this exclusion and the **de-politicization** of these figures.
Within a community of struggle, these abject figures, normally chased out of
public space, are allowed to belong, and to articulate their belonging. [Other
talcs of the complications involved in such attempts can be found in James
Holston’s “insurgent citizenship” in Brazil (2008, 2009) or Imogen Tyler’s recent
discussion of chavs, Gypsies and Travellers, and migrants in Neoliberal Britain].
In 2012, a group of “putas indignadas,” indignant prostitutes, marched on the Catalan regional government building, drawing on the momentum and memes of the 15M. One poster read: Los políticos no son hijos nuestros! Politicians are no sons of ours, in response to the practice of calling politicians, bankers and police ‘hijos de putas.’ There, self-identifying ‘ putas,’ playing off their own imagined selves as being formerly at the bottom – that is, even the putas want nothing to do with those responsible for the crisis, and in this way can bring themselves closer to the unemployed and evicted middle classes. In the example of the screening, the squatters, dismissed as perroflautas, targets of abuse and legal maneuvering can assert the necessity of taking back unused space and rejecting the role of the police. Their long-running critique, denouncing property speculation and the predatory real estate practices, now impacting millions, are made more acceptable by the presence of the iaioflautas, they’re folded back into a multigenerational society at odds with the state (Feixa, Costa, Pallarés 2002, Unió Temporal d’Escribes 2004, Delgado 2007, Vilaseca 2013). What do the ephemerality of these interventions permit or preclude, when compared to longer-term movement building? Along the progressive, popular divide that frames this session we could consider the extensive aspect of articulating these many, very different demands. This approach is consistent with Laclau’s dissection of populist movements and the process by which ‘a people’ is created. Rather than pursuing more stable forms of organizing, which would require participants arrive at a greater degree of agreement along ideological or at least tactical lines, these convolutions of diverse groups and actors are continuing to use the moment of rupture, of kairos, to stage an expansive antagonistic front (even an imagined one), incorporating the socially embraced and the socially
excluded, the civil and the uncivil as a challenge to the institutions of classification.

These tactics: disruptive and mundane, aggressive and leisurely, enact new public spaces through cultural production. They call for an audience to receive and legitimize that production and invite others to produce as well. At the same time these affective environments, the visual and aural landscapes created by these temporary provocations are underwritten by a body of popular investigation. They are the manifestation of a collectively theorized right to self-definition, enacting the claims of the anarchofeminist newspaper from which the herstories were read², or the documentary which projected a familiar, lived experience and provoked a shared analysis. As both knowledge-based and expression-oriented, how might these interventions align with or trouble a dichotomy between progressive and popular politics? [What is progressive about them?]

1. If we consider all social movements as knowledge producers (e.g.: Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, Powell 2008, 2013, Escobar 2008, Conway 2006)

2. If we recognize tendencies within these examples as actively denouncing political reform, urban planning, history, technical expertise? Tools of progressive social change.

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² Boletina Anarcofeminista: http://anarcofeminista.wordpress.com/