Northumbria Research Link

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Martínez, Miguel À. 2020, *Squatters in the capitalist city: housing, justice, and urban politics.* New York: Routledge.

Reclaiming spaces for dwelling and other social uses through squatting has multiple and diverse global histories and geographies. When such practices coalesce into social movements in opposition to - or seeking openings within - the logics of private property, the law, and capitalist dynamics in cities, squatting becomes a significant dimension of urban politics. To address its intersection with housing and other urban justice struggles, it is necessary to draw some scholarly boundaries. Despite its universalist title, Martínez's book does so by focusing specifically on activist squatters in post 1990s European cities. It combines a critical re-reading of scholarship on squatting and squatters with a unique 20-year engagement with qualitative research and a vast, and often collaborative, publication trajectory. The result is a rich volume, firmly positioned within the canon of European sociological approaches to squatting rooted in social movement theory, while also borrowing from more interdisciplinary urban debates from political science to anthropology and geography.

The book is organized thematically, with each of the 6 chapters reworking and expanding upon prior publications on key political and theoretical issues. Chapter 1 sets out the implications of studying squatting as an urban movement by revisiting key theoretical traditions and themes within social movement literatures. The emphasis is placed on squatters' agency within systemic-structural powers: how they interact with, respond to and challenge socio-spatial constraints to enact different claims and types of rights to the city. Chapter 2 positions European squatters' and squats in relation to the often overlooked autonomist tradition of radical movements. Through in-depth examples from Italy, Germany and Spain, it argues that "[…] autonomy for squatters consists of practices of collective micro-resistances to systemic

forms of domination which politicize private spheres of everyday life" (p.64), as expressed in the unfolding of collectivist, feminist and anti-capitalist practices.

Chapter 3 outlines and examines 'socio-spatial structures of opportunities and constraints' for the occurrence and development of urban squatting, namely urban vacancy, housing shortages, legal frameworks and their enforcement, activist networks and issues of social recognition. Chapter 4 revisits different classifications of types of squatting and proposes a new typology in an attempt to move from "a focus on the differentiated motivations of squatters towards the most probable outcomes they produce" (p.139), with in-depth case studies of Madrid and Paris. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the 'movements' structural dilemmas' of when, why and how to interact with the political, legal and economic logics of capitalist cities, particularly around the thorny question of legalisation. Arguing for a more nuanced understanding of negotiations intrinsic to processes of 'institutionalisation', Martínez proposes three typologies of possible outcomes and introduces the concept of 'anomalous institutions' as a potential reworking of state assimilation. Finally, Chapter 6 analyzes the wave of criminalisation and repression that has transformed European squatting movements over the last three decades. Drawing on the analysis of mass media and squats' own materials, it examines common hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives deployed in discursive struggles over squatters' political legitimacy.

The volume is a rich resource for understanding and interpreting squatting movements in Europe and will be of interest to sociologists and urban scholars who are seeking comparative approaches to activist squatting, and especially to those looking beyond well-known case studies. Throughout the chapters, examples from lesser known movements in smaller cities and countries, including in Southern and Eastern Europe, intersect with other social mobilizations, such as housing and migrants' struggles. Inevitably, the subject matter requires great care with research epistemologies, ethics and positionality: how is knowledge about squatting produced, for whom and why? As explained in the Introduction and in the Methodological notes,

Martínez's own trajectory evidences a consistent engagement not only with an approach that "confers priority to the views provided by movement insiders" (p.274) but also with alternative forms of knowledge production and dissemination in that often controversial space between activism and academia. In particular, the book owes much to ongoing dialogue with the rich and diverse interdisciplinary scholarship on, about, with – and, importantly, by – squatters and other urban activists, thanks also to the effort of networks such as the Squatting Europe/Everywhere Kollective (SqEK), of which the author has been a key participant.

In bringing together these plural experiences and interpretations, the book shows a certain tendency toward taxonomies, classifications, typologies and diagrammatic representations. The breadth of scholarship undergirding such categorizations is quite unique, but there appears to be a slight ongoing tension with more open and less categorical ways of writing about and engaging with places, movements and their interpretations. In the latter, more ethnographic accounts there is a clear recognition that ideal-types and distinctions are neither static nor mutually exclusive, but rather dynamic and overlapping, and that even different political identities may, in practice, "cohabit in the same squats or across the local squatting scene" (p. 144). It is in those more situated reflections, and in the over 40 photographs accompanying them, that squatters and their struggles come alive in the power to resist, reclaim and reinvent urban practices and narratives.

The combination of structuralist taxonomies and 'messier' grounded accounts makes the book a generously annotated chart for navigating the complex and diverse territories of squatting cultures and their scholarly interpretations. Even the problematic yet oft used distinction between 'political' squatting and squatting *for housing* is revisited through empirical examples of squatting with and by migrants and asylum seekers. In the case of Madrid, for instance, it is acknowledged that "many squatters and migrants are aware of their broader political and spatial role in challenging some taken-for-granted assumptions in capitalist societies" (p.164), such as unequal distribution of property and access to citizenship. Here as

elsewhere, beyond different structural conditions, the founding principle of solidarity is shown as a logical consequence of longer histories of anti-fascism, a pillar of urban activism – including squatting - in post WWII Europe. In the current landscape of heightened urban displacement, tighter border regimes and the rise of right-wing politics, the book offers a powerful – and hopeful - reminder of the trasversal and plural histories of radical struggle for autonomous urban spaces.

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