



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 13(3) 2020: 1244-1251

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v13i3p1244

Published in November 15, 2020

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EDITORIAL

Squatting and Urban Commons: Creating Alternatives to Neoliberalism

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This is an equal authorship paper.

ABSTRACT

Here we introduce the special issue of *Partecipazione e Conflitto* concerning the theme "Squatting and Urban Commons: Creating Alternatives to Neoliberalism". In particular, we present the context and origins of this edition, the rationale behind these theoretical and empirical concerns, and the main contents of the gathered articles.

KEYWORDS

Neoliberalism, self-management, squatting, SqEK, urban commons

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1. Introduction to the Special Issue

In recent decades there has been an increasing body of research about collective self-management and organization regarding various kinds of resources in terms of commons or commoning. The collective self-management of resources, spaces, services, and institutions and its relationship to the practice of squatting is at the centre of this special issue. What is an urban commons? What is being commoned, and how? What role does squatting play in the creation of urban commons? And vice versa, what role does commoning play in squatting? These are the main questions addressed in the following articles. In so doing, we will follow squatters in the different national and local contexts of Italy, France, Mexico, Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands as well as explore how squatting contributes to social welfare and social reproduction in cities; what risks, complexities, and conflicts squatters face while building urban commons; how important the immaterial aspects—of mutual aid, solidarity, and the sharing of skills, experience, and knowledge—are in squatted commons, along with discussion on the role of a critical and anti-capitalist approach to urban commons.

This special issue is the result of many debates that some of the contributors have held within SqEK (the Squatting Everywhere Kollektive) over the years, but especially during and after the writing of a collective volume (Cattaneo and Martínez 2014). Since its foundation in 2009, the SqEK network has been very fruitful in sharing and discussing the works of different activist-scholars across cities, mainly located in Europe but also elsewhere. In numbers, around two hundred people have regularly stayed in touch through our email-list. In addition to the gatherings we have held, some members have managed to write collectively about squatting practices and movements as our books and other special issues in academic journals can attest (see an overview here: <https://radicalhousingjournal.org/2019/sqek/>), but it has proven more difficult to conduct research together. An external research project called ‘MOVOKEUR’ (2012–14) provided some resources to pursue this goal, culminating in outputs such as a collaborative map (<https://maps.squat.net/en/cities/>) and an edited book (Martínez 2018). Another research project (Baltic Sea Foundation 2185/311/2014) provided resources for conferences and workshops that later resulted in two special issues (Polanska & Martínez 2016 and this one) and one edited book (Polanska et al. 2018). After several brain-storming and planning activities in some of our meetings (from Rome in 2014 to Stockholm in 2018), our attempts culminated in the outlining of a detailed research agenda and an agreement to focus on the relationship between squatting and urban commons. However, without funding or other favourable conditions, we must acknowledge that our major strength is to produce independent research, which is run either individually or in small groups. Hence, the contents of this *Partecipazione e Conflitto* (PaCo) special issue reflect well both the researchers’ sound intellectual abilities and the inspirational background of reciprocal exchanges within SqEK.

As the reader will notice, the academic papers we gather here subtly speak to each other. They all investigate different expressions of squatting, are concerned with the impacts squats engender in their surroundings, and are motivated by prefigurative and anti-capitalist practices. Yet, this does not imply a confluence in the interpretative strategies of each author. Their theoretical frameworks show a diverse range of conceptual emphases too. Although in the end we finished with only one case outside of Europe—unfortunately, revisions from two other cases in Brazil were not submitted in time—the historical and spatial contexts vary significantly. Some authors are in the early stages of their careers, while others are more experienced. In the call for papers, we encouraged activist researchers to join our conference in Stockholm, and, among the contributions, the reader will find a significant number of studies done by researchers who were also active in squatting as practitioners. For us, the remarkable value of this collection is that all the articles are academically rigorous, consistent, and innovative, rather than homogeneous. All the authors

seriously engaged with the criticisms of at least two anonymous referees (often following two or more rounds of review) and sharpened their arguments accordingly; they were extremely precise with their data, analyses, and presentation of their methodological approach; and they worked hard to link their cases with the notion of urban commons. In so doing, the editors had to mobilize a large number of reviewers whose names and free labour tend to be hidden in many academic outlets but who we would like to explicitly thank here. Their quality assessment of every text added crucial checks and raised questions that neither the authors nor the editors would have easily imagined. Some of the reviewers are also SqEK affiliates; however, we wanted to open the scope of insights by inviting other critical and qualified scholars whose work was related to squatting and/or the commons. In sum, the involvement of all these scholars made this set of papers the product of a true collective and cooperative work.

The full list of reviewers are as follows: Viviana Asara (Vienna University, Austria), Iolanda Bianchi (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain), Sam Burgum (University of Sheffield, UK), Claudio Cattaneo (Masaryk University, Czech Republic), Sutapa Chattopadhyay (St. Francis Xavier University, Canada), Deanna Dadusc (University of Brighton, UK), Myrto Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou (Malmö University, Sweden), Ibán Díaz-Parra (University of Seville, Spain), Danijela Dolenc (University of Zagreb, Croatia), Salvatore Engel-Dimauro (SUNY New Paltz University, US), Mara Ferreri (Northumbria University, UK), Lucy Finchett-Maddock (University of Sussex, UK), Federica Frazzetta (University of Catania, Italy), Udo Grashoff (University College London, UK), Ståle Holgersen (Uppsala University, Sweden), Amanda Huron (University of the District of Columbia, US), Marc Martí (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain), Pierpaolo Mudu (University of Washington Tacoma, US), Arnošt Novák (Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic), Luca Pattaroni (Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland), Gianni Piazza (University of Catania, Italy), Grzegorz Piotrowski (European Solidarity Centre, Poland), Johan Pries (Lund University, Sweden), Valeria Raimondi (Gran Sasso Science Institute, Italy), Raquel Rolnik (Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil), Håkan Thörn (Gothenburg University, Sweden), Chiara Valli (Malmö University, Sweden), Rita Velloso (UFMG Belo Horizonte, Brazil), and Ana Vilenica (London South Bank University, UK).

We would also like to thank the team behind the *Partecipazione e Conflitto* journal for two things: first, for allowing us to assemble this special issue and trust us to lead it according to their guidelines, and second, for being a reliable, high-quality, well-established, self-managed, and open-access journal which represents a crucial outlet for social scientists wanting to reach a broader audience. In neoliberal times, scientific knowledge is being increasingly enclosed and privatized by commercial publishing houses, and scholars are subjected to unprecedented labour precarity and great anxiety regarding the amount and prestige (i.e. ‘rank’) of their publications. Journals such as PaCo make a difference in this trend by, at the very least, giving control of academic production back to its producers without promoting exploitative and profit-making practices. For many, this publication could be regarded as an example of a commons, although, as we will see, no definite consensus exists about this key concept.

What is the commons, then? And what is its relationship to squatting? Our initial call for papers left these questions very open. In particular, we defined ‘urban commons’ as the collective self-management of resources, spaces, services, and institutions located in urban settings which are deemed essential for social reproduction. Squatting—defined as the unauthorised use of empty premises for housing, cultural, and political purposes—is often considered an outstanding case of urban commons and resistance against neoliberal enclosures and urban policies. Squatting practices are not always expressed in a coordinated manner or as a social movement, but they usually challenge social injustice, housing unaffordability, and

urban commodification. We suggested potential contributors focus on how squats or other expressions of urban commons associated with squatting were created, claimed, and defended. Sometimes, we observed squatters who contributed to the engenderment and care of other urban commons not directly related to squatting (i.e. access to food and water, sharing work, community gardens, and so on). In doing so, squatters usually join other urban activists and campaigns. This implies that squats, due to their frequent attachment to specific neighbourhoods and through use of their long-lasting legacy of protest and performative tools, can be crucial nodes in various grassroots coalitions creating urban commons. Despite a few relevant publications on these joint phenomena (Cattaneo and Martínez 2014; Dadusc 2019; Di Feliciano 2017; Finchett-Maddock 2016), the topic is largely ignored by mainstream social science. In contrast, debates about the commons and the urban commons abound nowadays (Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Card 2020; Chatterton 2010; Dardot and Laval 2019; Hardt and Negri 2009; Harvey 2012; Huron 2018; Linebaugh 2008). Not surprisingly, left-leaning political activists across the world have increasingly devoted a lot of attention to the commons since the global justice movement triggered this debate in the late 1990s (Klein 2001).

Therefore, this special issue focuses on squatting as a significant practice for creating and promoting urban commons. This roughly means that squatted social centres, squatted houses, or squatting activists are the main actors or participants in an activist network that defends, produces, or manages specific urban commons. However, more often than not, researchers and activists tend to concentrate on particular squats, with their own contradictions and limitations, as commons themselves. Yet, in the following articles we can grasp new insights about the detailed dimensions and outcomes that these squats-as-commons entail. In particular, we believe it is worth asking: How and why did the link between squatting and the commons occur? As also suggested in the initial agenda, we wanted to interrogate the achievements of self-management given that this is an essential component of the commons but also a feature of most squatting practices. For example, what types of self-management were achieved in squatting and urban commons' experiences within its different stages (before and after repression or legalisation, inside and outside the squats, between squats, according to different economic and political-ideological components, and so on)?

This aim directly engages with social movement studies concerned with the 'success' and 'failure' of grassroots activism. These evaluations fall not only on the shoulders of external and 'objective' researchers but include the judgements of militant researchers and activists too, not to mention third party perspectives. Academic scholarship should shed light over all these assessments but also reveal the significant contexts, events, phenomena, and social relations at stake. In connection to the second part of our call, we wonder to what extent urban squatters and commoners can bring about alternatives to neoliberalism? We are aware that not all squatters, especially the most exploited and vulnerable ones, hold an explicit interest in that question or define their activity as commoning per se. However, we have learned that squatting movements have regularly consisted of outspoken activists contesting the inequitable effects of urban capitalism and neoliberal policies. This stance has also led to controversies concerning the cooptation and institutionalization of this form of social antagonism. Since the occupations of empty buildings and land without owner consent is considered a civil or criminal offence in most jurisdictions, a great deal of squatting deals with resistance to evictions and repression, negotiations with authorities or owners, campaigns to gain social support for squatters' struggles, and finding ways out of contention in order to meet the needs of urban squatters and commoners. We thus urged researchers not to overlook the relationship of squatters and commoners to the state and property owners, regardless of how unsatisfactory it might be.

The contributions to this special issue range from studies of urban commons created in particular squats to those unfolding on the city-level or over a longer period of time. In examining the production and promotion

of commons through squatting and self-managed spaces, the authors have covered issues concerning the success and failure of such activities, the conflicts and collective identity-making in these spaces, the solidarity and mutual aid provided, the complexity of self-organization and self-management, and also the anti-capitalist nature of this kind of collective action along with the need for a critical approach to the notion of urban commons.

In the article on squatted workspaces, Luca Calafati discusses the relation between squatting and solidarity economies. Drawing on action research conducted in the squatted workspace of RiMaflow in Milan, Italy, the author argues that this bottom-up initiative aims to reclaim the means of production, access income, and create alternative economies beyond capitalism.

The article on squatting and self-managed social centres in Mexico by Robert González García, Diego de Santiago Delfín, and Marco Antonio Rodríguez Gutiérrez challenges Western-centric discussions of urban commons and fills an important gap in the literature. The authors examine four cases of social centres in Mexico City by critically assessing their achievements and limitations, arguing for their success in providing anti-capitalist alternatives.

In Greta Rauleac's contribution to this issue, the role of squatting in the creation of urban commons is explored. Through the case of the Casa Madiba social centre, located in Rimini, Italy, a successful story of squatting is told, focusing on the creation of space where bottom-up welfare is provided through self-management.

In Lukas Kotyk's piece about a squatted garden in France, the focus is on decision-making processes and efforts to establish non-hierarchical structures in a self-managed space. The relation between the vision and the reality of horizontality is examined, and the author elaborates on the tools, methods, and techniques used in the creation and maintenance of a horizontal distribution of power.

In retrospective research about Amsterdam's squatting domain in the 1970s and 1980s, Hans Pruijt suggests the notion of a *city-wide urban commons* by emphasizing how commoning was done on the city level, resulting in the legalization of many squatted spaces. The author explores how the collective efforts of squatters, stretching all across the city, contributed to the expansion of squatting through commoning projects.

The importance of conflict in commoning and squatting is raised in the article by Galvão Debele dos Santos studying the case of the squat Espai Social Magdalenes in Barcelona. Commoning is often interpreted as the ability of collective actors to come together, and less focus is given to the conflictual dimensions of collective action. This piece demonstrates the complexity of commoning practices by emphasizing internal and external conflicts in relation to the attempts to legalize a particular squat.

The immaterial dimension of commoning through squatting is studied in the piece written by Dominika V. Polanska and Timothy Weldon. Their study focuses on the sharing of knowledge and skills in a squat, Högdalen Folkets hus, which was established in Stockholm, Sweden, by showing that not only physical objects and spaces were commoned but also knowledge, skills, and even emotions.

Ann Ighe's contribution revolves around the role of heritage in the creation of urban commons by studying squatting in the neighbourhood of Haga in Gothenburg, Sweden in the 1980s. Through the concept of *common ground*, the author traces the sense of belonging and the sharing practices of the activists involved in squatting and countercultural activities held in the neighbourhood during this period.

The final piece written by Miguel Martínez brings this special issue to a close by elaborating an anti-capitalist approach to the urban commons. The author discusses the role of squatting and housing cooperatives as anti-capitalist urban commons arguing about the centrality of class struggles and the perspective of the global working class in the conceptualization and understanding of urban commons.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Baltic Sea Foundation (grant no. 2185/311/2014) for funding our conference and work with this special issue.

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