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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE CONFIGURATION OF A MULTI-PRONGED HOUSING MOVEMENT IN BARCELONA

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ABSTRACT

The housing movement that emerged in Spanish cities during the 2007–8 global financial crisis has undergone various mutations. If at first it was led by the anti-evictions fight of the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) and the housing groups of the 15M mobilization cycle (2011–14), the successive rent crises since 2013 and during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–22) have given rise to new activist expressions—housing/neighborhood unions (*sindicats d'habitatge / de barri*) and a tenants' union—in metropolitan areas such as Barcelona. These have played a central role in housing organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article we investigate the development of the housing/neighborhood unions while understanding their relationships with other housing groups in Barcelona. We first aim to know if, how, and why they have adopted, modified, or replaced the protest repertoires used by the PAH and the tenants' union and, second, to what extent the local housing movement in Barcelona evolved into a more diverse and multi-pronged configuration. Our findings indicate significant divergences between these housing organizations but also a common and complementary field of activism that eventually proved to be resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Barcelona, COVID-19 pandemic, Housing movements, Multi-pronged movements, Social movements.

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1. Introduction

The crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated, among other things, the housing crisis, making visible inequalities connected to the “stay home” securitization and immunization claim for those without a home (Accornero et al., 2020; Mendes, 2020; Furceri et al., 2020; RHJ editorial collective, 2020; Ortiz and Boano 2020). In addition to the numerous people already excluded from access to decent and affordable housing, pandemic-related unemployment and rent prices, on the rise since 2013 (Gil and Martínez, 2023), have caused increasing cases of eviction threats and displacement, both for tenants and for indebted homeowners with mortgage arrears, due to the extraordinary economic recession produced by COVID-19 restrictions¹. In a context of deepening housing inequalities and exclusions, the governments’ responses, often pushed by housing movements, have been mostly designed to postpone, rather than solve, these problems. The policies, adopted via a multilevel governance arrangement, were insufficient given the magnitude and acuteness of the social conflict (Accornero et al., 2020) around housing as a fundamental human right.² There is ample evidence that this situation has triggered social movements and urban alliances to step up and contest financializing pressures on urban housing markets, claiming housing rights around the world before (Fields, 2017; Madden & Marcuse, 2016) and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chenoweth et al, 2020). Moreover, it has previously been established that contexts of socioeconomic distress increase direct social protest actions (de Nardis and Antonazzo, 2017).

Barcelona’s metropolitan area is the focus of our case study because, above all, the city has been suffering major housing affordability problems and high real estate pressure in recent decades due to gentrification, touristification, and widespread housing speculation and financialization (Christophers, 2021; García-Lamarca, 2021; Gil and Martínez, 2023): initially, due to the 1996–2008 real estate boom (Directa, 2022; López and Rodríguez, 2010); later, because of the financial crisis, the touristification process, and the increase in rental housing prices during the 2010s (Mansilla, 2023; Crespi and Domínguez, 2021; Palomera, 2014); and, currently, with the social costs brought about by the global pandemic, the global supply chain crisis, and the war in Ukraine. In fact, in the Barcelona metropolitan area, the real estate sector has outperformed the prices it had at the beginning of the 2008 crisis (CTESC, 2021). Between 2014 and 2020, coinciding with the economic recovery, the purchase prices of housing rose by 38.7% while the growth in new rental prices has been 39.6%. Among the factors (both structural and contextual) behind this trend, some were prominent: a decline in the promotion of subsidized housing (CTESC, 2021), a low amount of “social rental” housing in Barcelona—only 5.2% owned by public administrations and just 1.1% by non-profit organizations—the effect of platform economies on housing markets (García-López et al., 2020), and the difficulties in accessing credit and home ownership that have increased demand for rentals. In this context, many residents in Barcelona have been increasingly facing extreme housing precariousness in recent decades, with all the structural violence that this entails: forced sociospatial displacement, primary home evictions, lawsuits, police violence, stigmatization, and family breakdown.

In addition, the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has increased residential exclusion and the emergency in the city. Although the main impact of the pandemic has been on health, the restrictions on social activity to limit the contagion have deeply impacted both the economy and society. Examples of this are an 11% drop in the gross domestic product in 2020 at the state level, the largest drop recorded since the late 1930s’ Civil War (El Economista, 2021). Despite the specific regulatory measures passed by both the

¹ <https://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/2021/03/04/29406-desahucios-en-plena-pandemia/>

² E.g., Article 34 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, published in December 2000.

Catalonian and central governments to temporarily stop evictions during the pandemic (the Royal Decree 463/2020),³ in Catalonia, 2,422 evictions were still carried out from April to December 2020 while the health authorities imposed home confinement on the population.⁴ In the first three months of 2022, Catalonia was the region that witnessed the greatest number of evictions, with 2,410 procedures.⁵ Three out of every four home evictions were related to rent arrears. In terms of evictions of this kind, Catalonia occupies the first position in Spain, with 1,702 cases, 22.3% of the national total (El Periódico, 2022). This situation prompted Barcelona's mayor, Ada Colau, who is also a former housing activist from the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH), to declare: "We have to civilize a market that has gotten out of control . . . A problem that was bad before the pandemic has suddenly gotten worse" (New York Times, 2021)⁶.

Despite new laws often promoted or influenced by housing movements and negotiations with corporate landlords, a complex bureaucracy, an overwhelmed public system, and structural racism and class inequalities kept representing unbeatable barriers for many. As a response to that, Barcelona (and its broader region, Catalonia) has become one of the most contested battlegrounds for housing struggles (interview BC2, S1). Emerging activist groups, composed of old and new militants and participants, have organized into new collective, voluntary, and self-managed grassroots organizations. The mutations experienced by this housing movement thus motivated our research. A considerable body of literature has been devoted to studying the anti-eviction movement and the PAH as its leading organization (Barranco et al., 2018; D'Adda et al., 2021; Di Feliciano, 2017; Flesher, 2020; Gonick, 2021; Martínez, 2019; Santos, 2019). However, there is a shortage of research on new housing organizations that were especially prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the housing/neighborhood unions (*sindicats d'habitatge / de barri*) in Barcelona, which are the main focus of this paper.

Compared to the city-wide scale of the PAH and the Tenants' Union (Sindicat de Llogaters), the housing/neighborhood unions operate on a more locally-bounded scale: the urban neighborhood or district. These local unions were initiated in 2015 but experienced important growth in terms of activism during the COVID-19 pandemic (Federación Anarquista et al., 2020; Martínez, 2020). They consist of self-managed popular structures based on solidarity and mutual support (Lira and March, 2021) to defend neighbors under threat of home eviction against speculative landlords. Due to their limited territorial scale, "besides stopping evictions, these local platforms have built a (neighborhood-based) community that is formed by people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and ages and a space for transversal learning on both legal and self-management issues and values of social transformation."⁷ This article aims to first understand the context that allowed them to emerge as well as the strategies and tactics deployed by this peculiar territorial organization of housing activism in order to compare them with other local housing organizations and their trajectories. Secondly, we investigate the relations between them and other housing groups, such as the Tenants' Union and the PAH.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss theoretical approaches that shed light on the development of housing movements and their specific reconfigurations over time. This framework is connected to the development of the PAH and ensuing housing groups representing alternative or complementary forms of housing activism. Secondly, we briefly reflect on our methodological choices before presenting the main empirical results of the study. In the third section, we focus on how movement cycles and

³ The decree declares the state of alarm for the COVID-19 health crisis, later resumed by Royal Decree 537/2020

⁴ «BOE» num. 65, March 17th, 2022, pp. 34290-34306.

⁵ Data from the CGPJ: <https://www.poderjudicial.es/cgpj/>

⁶ The local government of Barcelona, led by Ada Colau's party, Barcelona en Comú, has since 2015 placed the housing problem among its priorities, creating a city "Plan for the Right to Housing" (<https://www.habitatge.barcelona/es/estrategia/plan-derecho-vivienda>; interview BC1).

⁷ <http://sindicatdebarri.org/>

relations between different forms of housing activism unfold along relatively divergent trajectories and outcomes, albeit sharing a similar and complementary multi-pronged configuration. Finally, we conclude with specific responses to the two main research questions formulated in the previous paragraph.

2. Protest cycles, the rise of rentierism, and the development of housing movements

What happens when a housing movement is born as a response to a deep economic and political crisis but also amid other social protests, and these conditions change over time? The Spanish case during the 2008 financial crisis and the long and steady growth of housing movements in its aftermath has been widely investigated, especially when attention was paid to the leading organization of the anti-evictions housing movement, the PAH (Di Feliciano, 2017; Flesher, 2020; Gonick, 2021; Martínez, 2019). The context of housing financialization in Spain, the bursting of the real estate bubble in 2007–8, the rise of unemployment, the austerity policies, and the massive wave of foreclosures triggered by these were the political-economic cradle of the PAH (Alexandri and Janochska, 2017; López and Rodríguez, 2010; Yrigoy, 2018). This strand of the literature has also shown that the financial crisis was based on increased and unsustainable indebtedness rates, especially in the realm of homeownership. However, it was soon overcome by a new cycle of housing financialization, animated by an increasing rentierist business model and led by vulture funds and global corporate landlords, that fully unfolded in Spain after 2013 (Christophers, 2021; García-Lamarca, 2020; Gil and Martínez, 2023). In addition, the PAH, although born in 2009, mainly thrived within the 2011 protest cycle that saw many different grassroots social movements, known as the 15M or Indignados Movement, jointly challenge the political order (Kriesi et al., 1995; Tarrow, 1994), and new protest repertoires and organizations were introduced. Although by an autonomist background had nurtured the PAH, the mobilization peak between 2011 and 2014 was a crucial platform for its development as the most relevant housing organization in Spain. Their “Stop Evictions” tactics, among other forms of protests and multiple claims addressing housing rights, were essentially shaped by the context of bank bailouts by the state and unprecedented numbers of primary home evictions (Martínez and Gil, 2022). Notably, the center of their claims was to question the neglected state intervention in the housing emergency in contrast with the benefits that financial entities gained after the crisis ravaged the country.⁸ Although most observers noted the persistence of the PAH beyond 2014, many signs of their decline (for example, more than half of their 250 local nodes are no longer active) and the entrance of other housing grassroots organizations to the scene during the rentierist phase suggested theoretical interrogations, for example: (1) To what extent has the PAH been adapted to a new context? (2) Has the housing movement been fragmented between radical and moderate wings? And (3) how are housing movements shaped and reconfigured over time?

Social movements analyses have given various responses to these dilemmas. On the one hand, Koopman’s (1995) protest cycle analysis model proposes a traditional distinction between novelty, growth, and decline—either by weakening or vanishing. According to him, it is in the last stages when the main social movement organizations may split into different branches, and co-optation and institutionalization are more prone to occur. This model has been questioned by other scholars (Flesher and Cox, 2013; Katsiaficas, 2006; Martínez, 2018; Owens, 2009) who observed that urban movements may experience different forms of decline and even revival, especially through alliances with other movements or organizations. Long-term mobilizations and

⁸ According to the Court of Auditors, on December 31st, 2018, the public resources allocated to the “bank restructuring” plan between 2009 and 2018 amounted to 122,754,000 euros.

attention to periods or events of discontinuity have also been argued to be key components in the development of social movements (Martínez 2018). Mayer (2016) and Jacobsson (2015) have also shown that urban movements change over time according to the different developments of neoliberal urbanism, to which activists either respond or succumb (Rossini and Bianchi, 2019).

We follow these contributions in order to ask whether the emergence of housing/neighborhood unions in Barcelona represents a radical split, a novel reaction to the housing context, or a supplement to Barcelona's already existing housing movement. We also propose the notion of a *multi-pronged* housing movement in order to capture the phenomenon of various housing organizations adding to the same movement by building upon previous legacies, reviving some of its tactical innovations, and reinforcing its claim-making activity.

In this article we define social movements in general, and housing movements in particular, as when a contentious conflict between activists and their opponents persists over time and across determined spaces and significantly results in non-institutional protest actions and claim-making activity concerning housing issues (Nicholls et al., 2013; Yip et al., 2019; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007). The PAH was able to unite many housing groups established during the 15M mobilizations in 2011 and to expand their organizational model across the country. Their repertoires of actions encompassing campaigns aiming at legislative changes were innovative compared to other former autonomist movements; however, their direct actions, such as eviction blockades and unauthorized occupations of vacant buildings, resembled their own autonomist background. Its unusually long duration adds to the features that made it a social movement despite being an extremely decentralized social movement organization—every node was autonomous, but all were supposed to adhere to the same principles and protocols. When *global corporate landlords* began to take over a large part of the foreclosed properties in the hands of bailed-out banks and the state-backed “bad bank,” Sareb⁹, at below market prices, the PAH continued with the same campaigns, self-help approach, and social basis, although new housing problems were added to the already devastating situation. Home evictions and sociospatial displacement started to affect not only homeowners but also tenants due to rent increases and violations of tenants' rights. Different grassroots initiatives, therefore, responded by resisting these emergent forms of rent extraction and state-led policies that favored the financialization of housing both in Spain and elsewhere (Martínez & Gil, 2022; Polanska & Richard, 2021; Sabaté, 2020; Thörn, 2020), claiming for rent controls and new housing legislation. The Tenants' Union and housing/neighborhood unions in Barcelona thus became new prongs supplementing the already eroded capacity of the PAH. These new organizations emerged in a context of multifaceted housing struggles, where property, homeownership, debt, affordability, and the stability of homemaking were under discussion, in addition to the forces associated with rentierism. Moreover, the co-optation of the highest ranks of the PAH movement by local institutions, according to some of our interviewees (S1, S2), “has left the movement without the numbers and visions necessary to be able to plan and sustain political pressure capable of generating real change on issues of the right to housing” (interview BC2).

In relation to the above debates, we here investigate how a local housing movement may mutate from being led by a single and city-wide—and with cross-city and state-wide reach—organization (the PAH) to become a multi-pronged local combination of various housing organizations in which the housing/neighborhood unions could revive certain protest actions and expand housing struggles at the city-district level. We also contribute to the literature by focusing on how this process occurred while different housing organizations both cooperated with each other and diverged.

⁹ Sareb, the so-called bad bank, was founded in the 2008 real estate crisis and has today 14,800 rented homes. More than 10,000 (according to Sareb's website) are affordable “social” rental housing (as a response to the pressures of the housing movements).

3. Methodology

The hypothesis from which this investigation started was based on the following question: To what extent have neighborhood-based housing collectives, acting on an highly local urban-district scale and connected through a network of mutual support, had greater impact in implementing local resistance than other previously established housing organizations during the special circumstances generated by the COVID-19 restrictions? In a period where social contradictions were obvious, for example, the lack of housing needed to comply with home confinement restrictions, we aim to understand how the housing movement responded in Barcelona. While data are not yet available to provide a conclusive answer to this specific question, we have managed to identify the expression of a multi-pronged housing movement and detect both significant divergences and commonalities between the leading housing organizations. The result, as we will show, was a mutually complementary field of housing activism that eventually proved resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic period and beyond. This development is studied by analyzing the origins of the new housing groups and their organizational strategies and protest repertoires. In all cases, we noticed the mixed use of non-institutional practices (e.g., unauthorized occupations of housing units or buildings and demonstrations) and institutionally-channeled mechanisms (e.g., petitions demanding legislative changes and direct negotiations with local- to state-level authorities).

According to that rationale, this study proceeds, first, through a historical and documents-based analysis that allows for the identification of the context in which the housing/neighborhood unions originated in relation to former housing struggles as well as other forms of neighborhood organization (Andreu, 2015; Preston, 2001). Secondly, our main fieldwork consisted of the selection of two neighborhood unions—the *Sindicat de Barri de Poble Sec* and the *Sindicat d’Habitatge de Nou Barris*—which were approached through seven semi-structured interviews (S1–S7) and participant observation in assemblies and actions carried out between 2021 and 2022. Moreover, in order to understand whether the same patterns characterized other housing/neighborhood unions, we conducted two interviews with activists from other similar groups in the *Gràcia* (SGr) and *Gotic* districts (SGo) as well as several informal conversations with more militants involved in such unions in Barcelona. Lastly, to ascertain the relations between the housing/neighborhood unions and other grassroots organizations fighting for housing rights, we interviewed four activists from the *Tenants’ Union* (T1–T4), three PAH activists (P1–P3), and two members of the governing political party in the municipality of Barcelona, *Barcelona en Comú*, who had previously been PAH activists (BC1–BC2). We interviewed an equal number of women (9) and men (9), all between the ages of 25 and 60. Some of them had suffered from severe housing problems (mostly migrant women), some were young people from Barcelona with different income levels looking for affordable housing, and a third group consisted of militants with a longer activist experience. Besides the exact number of semi-structured interviews (approx. one hour each), many informal conversations were conducted with participants in the assemblies and the actions. Additionally, we conducted exploratory analyses of the social media activities of these groups on Telegram, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as in mass media news.

Concerning the researchers’ positionality, all the authors have been actively participating in various forms of housing movements in Barcelona and other European cities. Two of us have joined housing/neighborhood unions on various occasions, participating in 17 assemblies and 8 eviction blockades. Our research questions emerged during the activist participation in these assemblies. The research was thus discussed and agreed upon with other activists in the assemblies.

4. Social and spatio-temporal configurations of a local housing movement

In this section we present the results of our empirical analysis by scrutinizing how the post-2008 crisis housing movement emerged and became articulated in Barcelona. Moreover, we focus on how housing/neighborhood unions emerged and added to the local housing movement. We then explain the main differences and relationships between the active housing organizations that shaped this multi-pronged movement.

4.1 Barcelona housing struggles and the emergence of new housing organizations

“The restructuring and repurposing of the city started with the [1992] Olympics. Prices began to rise and generated what is now a thematic park for tourism fostering the displacement of the population from working-class neighborhoods And from there, we have been thinking, and we said that it was interesting to explore the path of squatting as a way of entrenching ourselves in the neighborhoods I personally started in the squat Kasa de la Montaña, which is still squatted. Then we went on to generate a public and visible occupation . . . denouncing the speculative process, the gentrification, and tourism The whole process that was generated later settled on the 15M and the creation of the PAH, of which I was a part for many years . . . opening and . . . preparing flats for families. (interview S1)

This quote shows how the response of social movements to the housing crisis in Barcelona has been regular, albeit with different intensities, for several decades. The squatting movement marked the 1990s and early 2000s (González 2019; DeBelle et al., 2018), then enhanced by the cycle of anti-globalization protests and those against the war in Iraq. During the first half of the 2000s, the V de Vivienda mobilizations stood out for claiming the right to decent housing (Aguilar and Fernández 2010), especially in the main Spanish cities such as Madrid and Barcelona. After the 2008 financial crisis, the PAH, in alliance with 15M groups, became the main opposition to the austerity measures. The “Stop Evictions” campaign thus marked a new cycle of mobilization in the fight for the right to housing in the Spanish context (D’Adda et al., 2021; Romanos, 2014), a cycle that culminated in the arrival of the PAH spokeswoman, Ada Colau, as mayor of the city in 2015 and a progressive municipalist agenda.

The 15M uprisings also generated new groups struggling for the right to housing. They first started organizing in different Barcelona neighborhoods, calling themselves “neighborhood unions.” Another significant organization was formed in 2017: the Sindicat de Llogateres (the Tenants’ Union). The intention behind this new group was to set up an organization that could respond to problems specific to the rental market and which the PAH was unable to address sufficiently (Palomera, 2018). More than three hundred people attended the first assembly; currently, the organization has more than three thousand affiliates in Barcelona alone, according to our interviews with their members.



Figure 1. La batalla per l'habitatge en Barcelona (The struggle for housing in Barcelona).
 Source: Sindicat de Barri Poble Sec pamphlet

As Figure 1 illustrates, currently, in addition to the PAH and the organizations and groups linked to the fight for the right to housing distributed across the neighborhoods of Barcelona, including the Tenants' Union, there are a few other organizations comprising the local housing movement.¹⁰

Their strategies range between “radicalism” (i.e., more prone to non-institutional protest) and institutional claims, including unauthorized occupations of empty apartments, eviction blockades, legal support to people affected by rental or mortgage arrears, institutional pressure, and attempts to achieve legislative changes, such as rent controls and public resources earmarked for affordable social rents.

These collective, voluntary, and self-managed organizations are often seen as the only way to guarantee the housing rights of citizens (regardless of their national and ethnic status) who have to deal with issues such as

¹⁰ The full list and social media identities: PAH Barcelona @PAH_BCN, Sindicats de Llogateres de Catalunya @SindicatLloguer, Federacion d'Associacions de Veïns i Veïnes de Barcelona @FAVBcn, Desllogades @desllogades, Associació 500x20—Asociación pel Lloguer Public i Asequible @500x20, Obra Social @obrasocialbcn, Xarxa Ciutat Vella @XciutatVella, and Sindicats de Barri / Grupos d'Habitatge (various accounts).

the denial of free justice to low-income families, years-long waiting lists to access emergency housing, racist measures that exclude people without a residence permit, and lawyers who are unfamiliar with the latest housing laws. Therefore, it is worth investigating how these groups operated in relation to each other and what goals they achieved.

4.2 Housing/neighborhood unions: history and organizing

In the years following the 15M protest wave in opposition to the austerity measures imposed after the 2008 crisis, new groups struggling for the right to housing emerged, most notably in the metropolitan area of Barcelona (Lira and March, 2021). These were mainly formed by university students who had participated in the 2008–10 anti-Bologna mobilizations, people engaged in the squatting movement (*okupas*), and PAH activists who disagreed with the organization's approach to squatting, especially once some former PAH leaders became city councilors in 2015. As one activist recalled:

“I started to take part in this world at the time of the students' struggle against the Bologna process. From the student occupation of the UB [(University of Barcelona)] headquarters in 2008–09, arose “La Rimaia Universitat Lliure” [(La Rimaia fFree Uuniversity)]. . . . Since our occupations lasted a few months and were constantly evicted, after the 15M, the movement in Barcelona generated a reflection: that it was necessary to create an autonomous infrastructure that could really be rooted in the neighborhood and wouldn't be so temporary, depending on an illegally occupied space.” (iInterview S2).

From this emerged the first space, called *la Base*, located in the Poble Sec neighborhood. This self-managed non-squatted social center helped establish a stable and autonomous spatial infrastructure to gather people to support the local housing struggle. This was the first in a number of self-managed popular structures that the housing/neighborhood unions started to set up, aligning with earlier and similar political traditions in Barcelona (Andreu, 2015; Preston, 2001). Starting in 2015, the first of these unions launched in Poble Sec, followed by other groups in the Sants, Vallcarca-Gràcia, and Raval districts. They started organizing in different neighborhood-based housing collectives that acted on a very local scale, connected through a network of mutual support (Lira and March, 2021) and organized in housing groups (*grups d'habitatge*) and/or unions (*sindicats de barri*). Some of them are more linked to the autonomist movement, whereas others are closer to the pro-Catalonian independence left camp, as one of the activists recalled:

“The other union that was born when the PAH was a bit in decline and the Sindicat de Llogateres had not yet been born, was the Sindicat de Gràcia [Gracia housingabitatge uUnion], which was born together with us [(Poble Sec)]. And Sants, which was made up of many people who had been expelled from the PAH and who lived in a squatted block called *La Bordeta*. . . . While we called ourselves a Sindicat de Barri (nNeighborhood uUnion), the one in Gràcia was called a *Oficina d'Habitatge* (Hhousing oOffice [*oficina d'habitatge*]), and the one in Sants was called Grup d'Habitatgea (hHousing Ggroup). So, the idea of re-signifying unionism was our contribution. . . . Some of the people who set up the Sindicat del Raval and who came from ours, ended up in the Esquerra Independentista ([pro-independence left]), in an extra-parliamentary party called ‘Endavant’.” (iInterview S2).

The Poble Sec neighborhood union started organizing by hosting outdoor meetings in the neighborhood squares and setting a 5-point agenda of claims: (1) rental price limits, (2) default rental contract renewals, (3)

no more evictions, (4) a substantial reduction in tourist apartments, and (5) an end to housing as a business. This 5-point agenda was agreed upon with the other associations in the neighborhood that had to “defend it to the best of their ability” (interview S2). The union then changed its organizing model by holding a weekly assembly employing collective counseling, “copying the PAH model a bit” (interview S2). Also, closely following the PAH’s previous approach, the Poble Sec union placed the “Stop Evictions” protests and affordable social rents negotiations at the center of their struggle. Squatting was still very much supported by the union, but it had to be balanced with the wills of “people who needed and wanted stability in their lives, not wanting the occupation as a way of life” (interview S2).

In the case of the Nou Barris housing union, the decisive trigger for their self-organization was the COVID-19 pandemic. They were also concerned about the historically poor performance of other organizations based in the neighborhood in relation to housing issues and squatting, and they criticized their lack of confrontational actions with state institutions:

The core group [of the union] were people who came from different social and housing movements in the neighborhood The union was born to mark a political discourse and point out those to blame for an economic crisis that did not come from the pandemic, but was something prior, to encourage the self-organization of neighbors, and to politicize their discontent. . . . Our union especially began to mobilize in the Roquetas area, which is one of the most working-class neighborhoods in Nou Barris. . . . There were many people who were in economic crisis in that moment, that they were not paying their rent, the people who were dedicated to squatting. (interview S6).

In the case of the Gòtico neighborhood union, it started as a space to give individual advice to neighbors with housing issues, also with the help of the PAH:

“But when things got out of hand because we had a large number of people coming from the neighborhood, we decided to give it a collective force The first assembly was a success. A lot of people came, affected and not affected, but with the will to work on the issue. And, from there, we decided to establish ourselves as a collective and meet regularly with an organizational structure. (interview SGo).

As Figure 2 illustrates, there are today at least 23 housing/neighborhood unions active in Barcelona.¹¹ They have established local references for solidarity and resistance against speculative landlords, including banks and global investment firms (so-called vulture funds).

¹¹ Cohabitem Sarrià, Grup d’Habitatge de Sants, Akelharre, Fem Santa Eulàlia, No mes Blocs, Xarxa d’Habitatge Esquerra d’Eixample, Assemblea Marina Zona Franca, Fem Sant Antoni, Sindicat de Barri del Poble Sec, Grup d’Habitatge el Raval, Resistim al Gòtic, Comissió Habitatge Barceloneta, Ens Plantem Poble Nou, Sindicat d’Habitatge de Gràcia, Sindicat d’Habitatge de Vallcarca, Sindicat Habitatge Nou Barris, Xarxa Habitatge Horta Guinardó, Sindicat Habitatge Eixample Dret, Sindicat d’Habitatge de Cassoles, Sindicat Alt Maresme, Grup Habitatge la Salut, Associació de Veïns i Veïnes Ciutat Meridiana, Observatori d’habitatge del Clot-Camp de l’Arpa, and Sindicat d’Habitatge de la Verneda i el Besòs.



Figure 2 – Collectius, assemblees i grups d'habitatge (Collectives, assemblies, and housing groups).

Source: *Sindicat de Barri Poble Sec website*

The unions' offered support, understood as mutual support, is organized in the weekly assembly through collective counseling in which the affected people participate to expose their problems, and the assembly collectively advises them. Based on what has been learned in previous meetings, the most experienced militants provide information on laws that can be applied to address the specific problem and what documents and paperwork are needed in order to assess it.¹² This process implies active learning, not just a one-way flow of information (Lira and March, 2021), thus eventually raising political awareness: "The purpose is to try to break with the militant/affected dichotomy, which is really impossible to break, but [also] to generate a dynamic that would make it more porous" (interview S2). Through this process an affected person that decides to keep participating in the union becomes aware of the collective political struggle needed to solve their housing issues and becomes able, in turn, to provide counseling to a new affected person. Very often, the affected person is accompanied by other militants to the social services offices, to the involved real estate agencies, or to speak with the owner/landlord in order to negotiate an alternative solution to the eviction or rent increase (e.g., a social rent). This collective support extends to eviction blockades, protests in front of real estate offices,

¹² In addition, a very detailed booklet is provided to all the newcomers on the first day of contact with the union.

contact with the media to gain public attention, or the occupation of apartments or entire housing blocks to find a radical and immediate solution to unaddressed housing problems—or to apply pressure to the confrontation with the institutions. It is worth stressing that the unions claim to only target large and corporate landlords instead of those owning only a few properties and have an internal policy that prevents further commodification of properties subject to the political struggle in which the union is involved. This is explicitly mentioned in the Poble Sec neighborhood union’s self-regulation document: “Don’t occupy properties of small holders: if any member of the union does so autonomously, it will imply their expulsion from the union,” and “Do not sell or rent any apartment belonging to the union or protected by the union (in which an eviction has been stopped): it implies expulsion from the union.”

The occupation of entire housing blocs has been a protest action performed by various housing/neighborhood unions in the city, mostly when the residents experience “residential mobbing,” where investors buy an entire building and want to replace the tenants with a higher-income population. The protest pattern here is as follows: the block is occupied by activists who then try to force negotiations with the public authorities to buy the building and transform it into public housing. This way, there is an opportunity to reverse the speculative process in the neighborhood, as was the case with Bloc Ruth in the Gràcia neighborhood, which became a symbol of the struggle against the vulture fund Cerberus.¹³ The following account by an activist illustrates the above strategy:

“On two occasions, we have asked the city council to buy a block we occupied. The first was a block that belonged to one of the most historic real estate developers in Barcelona and is in the center of Villa de Gràcia. . . . We occupied the empty building to stop the eviction of a woman, who was the last tenant left. We did it halfway with the PAH. Despite the negotiations between the property and the city council, the latter never bought the building because it was too expensive and because it was too old. The second case was a block that we occupied a year ago that belonged to the Cerberus investment fund. It was empty. We occupied it, we filled it with people, and then we did called the city council for an explicit meeting to ask them to use the *tanteo y retracto*¹⁴. . . . We knew that the Cerberus vulture fund wanted to sell it, and we met with the city council to explicitly ask them to make the purchase through this mechanism, and they accepted. In this case, the city council has the political will to do it because the municipal architects calculated that the building was worthwhile, being quite new. . . . Now we are waiting for the moment of the sale to see what happens.” (interview SGr).

As suggested in the above quote, people affected by housing problems may thus attend the unions’ meetings to find legal and personal support and solidarity with their case or to find an actual alternative solution to their housing emergency. Through a process of mutual learning obtained via the active participation of experienced activists and affected people, all engaged in “collective consultation” practices, the unions become capable of collectively producing, transforming, sharing, contesting, and politicizing urban knowledge toward more socially just urban transformations. According to our observations, producing and sharing knowledge is a fundamental mechanism for organizing around housing precariousness, which also helps to reduce the distance between militants and affected people who come to the unions seeking support. Through their active involvement in the collective struggle, precarious dwellers achieve awareness of the political, legal, economic, and social dimensions of the different housing situations they face (Lira and March, 2021).

¹³ This and the case of “La Janela” were largely covered by local media: <https://directa.cat/el-bloc-ocupat-a-gracia-la-janela-exigeix-lloguers-socials-al-propietari-lluis-marsa/> <https://www.totbarcelona.cat/habitatge/antiavalots-dels-mossos-intenten-desallotjar-un-bloc-ocupat-del-fons-voltor-cerberus-134933/>

¹⁴ Right of first refusal and withdrawal in favor of the administration (Decree-law 1/2015).

4.3 Relations between housing organizations in Barcelona

The main groups that are currently active in Barcelona for the right to housing are the PAH (since 2009), the Tenants' Union (since 2017), and the housing/neighborhood unions (since 2015). All have some similarities, mainly based on their internal organization and tactics while differing in strategies, ideological approach to certain issues, and spatial-political scales. Furthermore, there is no formal coordination system between these different housing organizations. There was an attempt to do so at the First Catalan Housing Congress¹⁵ held in late 2019; all these grassroots groups participated, but no formal structure was further established. More recently (2022), a joint legal commission has been created in order to defend housing activists from fines and arrests, especially those applied following the so-called Gag Law (*Ley mordaza*), and a joint campaign against Cerberus was launched.

Therefore, the three mentioned activist groups work in parallel, especially in terms of their territorial scale and institutional reach, but also often in relation to the social groups affected by housing precariousness who approach them. In an informal conversation with one PAH activist, we were told that, sometimes, a tenant under urgent threat of eviction may ask for help from all three organizations in the same week, which does not mean they become regularly engaged in all three but usually only in the one which is more immediately useful for their purposes. Cooperation between the housing organizations occurs more often among those of the same category, as is usual among the housing/neighborhood unions. However, the PAH and the Tenants' Union are also invited to join their protest actions:

There is always a spirit of collaboration in campaigning, when possible, or resisting evictions. We have all the evictions posted in a social platform group that is shared by the housing movement in general. Once the call is published, we agree on which group will lead the action or how to cooperate if needed so we do not step on each other. That is an example of very active collaboration between housing groups [housing/neighborhood unions] and the PAH and the Tenants' Union. (interview SGr)

Yet, the people involved in the different housing groups have often been part of some other organization before, such as the squatting movement or the PAH—this is often the case for housing/neighborhood union militants. In fact, two main ideological clashes can be traced to the fragmentation of the PAH, which have partially fostered by the creation of the unions. On the one hand, the approach to squatting actions differs between the PAH and the housing/neighborhood unions, at least in Barcelona. For the latter, it is a legitimate political tool to use not only for housing people in need but also to question the commodification of real estate in general. For the PAH, however, squatting, or better, “reclaiming” in their terms, is only legitimate when it serves to help people in need as a last resort, when there are no other available options. PAH activists are also especially concerned about only squatting in the properties of banks or vulture funds that have benefited from the government's bailout programs (interview P1). On the other hand, when political parties, such as Barcelona en Comú and Podemos, were formed and included some of the former PAH activists, there was criticism by other militants involved in the housing struggles who later became part of the housing/neighborhood unions. For the latter, maximum autonomy from state institutions is preferred. The PAH is also very strict about its autonomy from political parties. Notably, although all housing groups may often negotiate with local and regional authorities, the housing/neighborhood union activists tend to emphasize their distance from institutional politics more, as the following quote reflects:

¹⁵ <https://catalunyaplural.cat/es/el-primer-congreso-por-la-vivienda-en-catalunya-un-encuentro-para-crear-un-frente-comun-contra-los-especuladores/>

A year before that part of the group, like its spokespersons and the most significant leaders, began to organize a new process to create a party to run for elections, I personally spoke with Ada Colau and told her that I believed that it was important that the movement didn't enter politics because it would end up being neutralized, we would generate contradictions, we would divide ourselves . . . because we hadn't built a strong enough organization with real political weight yet. (interview S1)

Nevertheless, the housing/neighborhood unions were fully inspired by the PAH, an organization in which some of its activists had been active. This inspiration is recalled as an approach to do "true unionism, with non-activist people, class unionism" (interview S1) through horizontal assemblies and collective advice. One source for the legacies from the PAH organizational model was the organization of the militants into specialized working groups (*comisiones*) and the use of some state-driven mechanisms and institutional negotiations to achieve affordable rents and protect tenants' rights. All in all, the PAH is seen as a more reformist group by the housing/neighborhood unions, who identify themselves as more radical and more connected to autonomist traditions (although this identity also applies to some members of the Tenants' Union). For example, the PAH protocols before attempting squatting and blockade actions are considered too bureaucratic by the unions:

"We don't reclaim properties for the first person who says, "Hey, I want to squat a house." We ask the family to be part of the PAH and for a series of requirements which prove that they have exhausted all the other options, including the attempt to negotiate with the bank, access the housing emergency services [*Mesa de emergencia*]), seek assistance from the social services, etc." (interview P1).

Many of our interviewees explained the emergence of the Tenants' Union and the housing/neighborhood unions as a result of the inability of the PAH to respond to the increasing rent hikes once access to mortgages and home ownership became difficult for larger parts of society. Although the PAH also dealt with rental issues, the new organizations were more focused on them. On the one hand, the housing/neighborhood unions had a more local scale approach across different urban districts, whereas the PAH and the Tenants' Union usually took a city-wide scale. On the other hand, both the PAH and the housing/neighborhood unions mostly worked with the lowest fractions of the working class, and the Tenants' Union encompassed a much larger income-based constituency.

The Tenants' Union, similar to the PAH, holds a more institutionally-oriented approach in actively proposing new legal frameworks to protect tenants' rights against speculative landlords and the violence of housing commodification (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). All three organizations are organized through assemblies and working groups. However, the Tenants' Union also started to experiment. Unlike the PAH and the neighborhood/housing unions, it is a more formal organization with explicit affiliations and a focus on a very specific social category—tenants. In fact, the main distinctive feature is that the Tenants' Union asks its members to pay a regular fee as most labor unions do. With this money, they hire paid workers (management) and lawyers (when needed) and rent the space where the meetings occur. Although neither the PAH nor the housing/neighborhood unions collected fees from their members in the past, at least one of the latter (*Sindicat de Barri del Poble Sec*) has recently implemented this measure in order to access the shared legal services of the Tenants' Union.

Last but not least, the Tenants' Union does not perform squatting in its action repertoire nor manage any squatted space. They are not explicitly against squatting, but they consider the neighborhood/housing unions

to be much more effective in stopping evictions and managing squatted spaces. When a housing conflict involving the Tenants' Union leads to the mobilization of an entire block against a speculative owner, there is collaboration with the local neighborhood/housing union if the block includes squatters (interview T3). Figure 3 summarizes the analysis of similarities and differences between the scrutinized housing organizations.

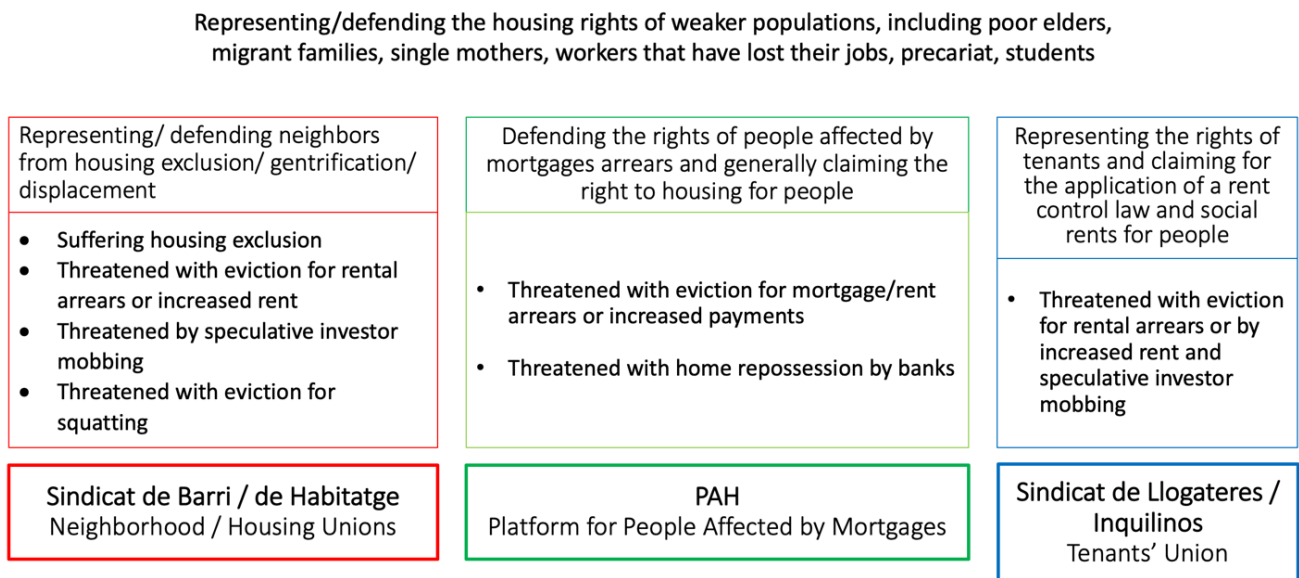
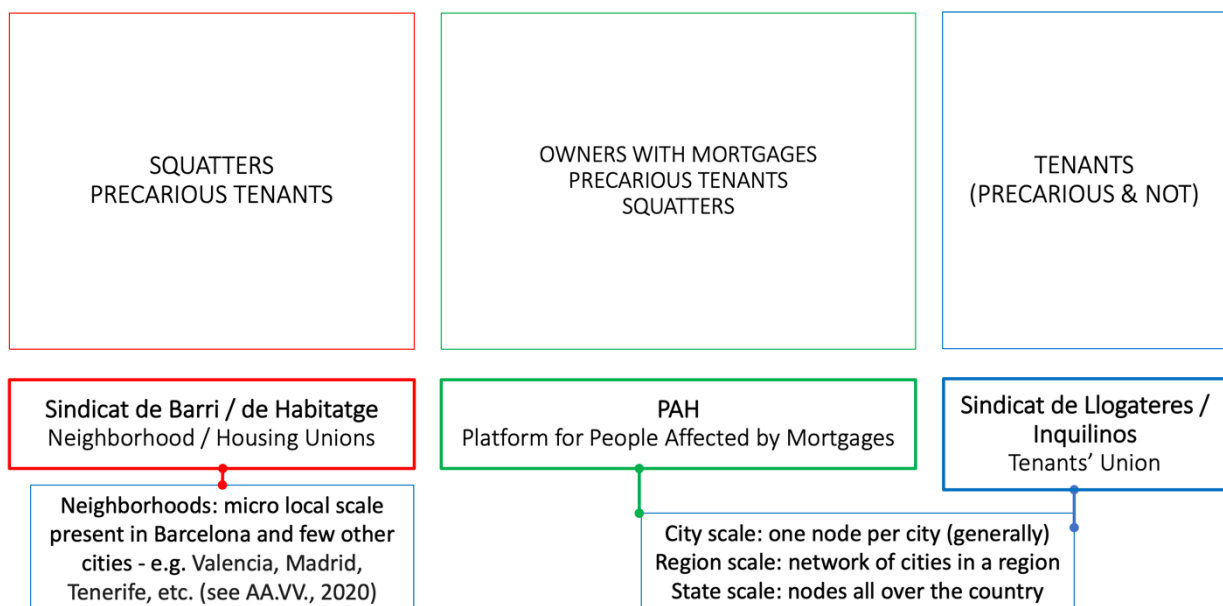


Figure 3 a-b-c-d. Graphs that illustrate and summarize the relations between housing organizations in Barcelona
Source: Authors

MAIN SOCIAL GROUPS OF ACTIVISTS AND BENEFICIARIES IN EACH ORGANISATION



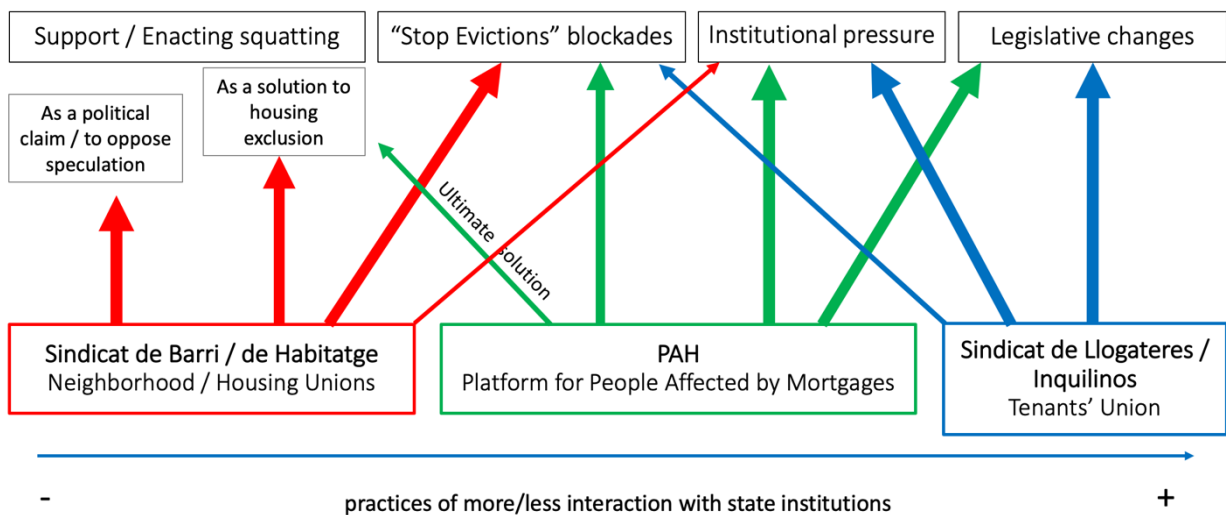
SHARED ELEMENTS AMONG GROUPS / INSPIRED BY THE PAH: PRACTICES FOR THE COLLECTIVIZATION OF CONFLICTS

1. Organized through assemblies and working groups (committees also called “comisiones”)
2. Collective counselling performed during assemblies. A form of mutual support, the affected person exposes its problem, and the assembly collectively advises, mainly with legal information (active learning)
3. Organizational practices: detailed informative booklets for general info, accompaniment of the affected person by militants to negotiate with the property, collective pressure on property or institutions (e.g., protests in front of real estate offices, contacts with the media to call public attention, etc.)

MAIN DIFFERENCES: SCALE, AFFILIATION FORMS AND ACTION REPERTOIRES

1. Scale: the local scale of the neighborhood unions vs. the city-scale of the Tenants' Union and the PAH (present all over Spain)
2. Affiliation: only the Tenants' Union and one Neighborhood Union of Poble Sec ask to the participants to affiliate through a payment
3. Action Repertoires: Supporting / Enacting squatting as a form of political claim / institutional pressure or as a solution to housing emergency vs. main activities focused on legislative changes and institutional negotiation

SHARED / DIFFERENT ACTION REPERTOIRES BETWEEN GROUPS



4.4 What happened during COVID-19?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Spanish organizations fighting housing injustice jointly claimed for a stop to rent payments and mortgage installments. By March 2020 many local groups across the country called for rent strikes, which resulted in around 15,000 households refusing to pay April 2020's rent. The rent strike, mostly organized by the Tenants' Union in Barcelona and Madrid and then spread throughout the country, was brief and decentralized—although, according to our interviewees (interview T3 and T4), webpages and telephone lists were circulated on a national scale (and in the incredible span of few weeks) to help tenants pursuing a freeze in rents. The rent strike was never recognized by the state but pressured the central government enough to eventually trigger a moratorium on evictions. By only postponing instead of interrupting the payment of rent or mortgage installments for those facing serious economic problems, this may be considered a form of “neutralization”¹⁶ of what was actually claimed by the movements (interview T4). Despite the successful enactment of the moratorium after March 2020 (which was renewed several times until December 2022), many households did not comply with all the legal requirements or did not attach the requested documents, which resulted in regular home evictions and resistance protests by grassroots housing organizations. Moreover, the temporary evictions moratoria and some forms of rent payment suspensions were governmental responses “not accompanied by measures to automatically allow the renegotiation of installments in line with income losses or the cancellation of the debts that will pile up during the emergency” (Accornero et al., 2020: 199).

In this context, many people suffering from salary or job loss due to COVID-19 restrictions started to participate in the active housing organizations. The neighborhood/housing unions were, in particular, the easiest to reach due to their hyperlocal scale and the restrictions on moving around the city. They also offered a sense of proximity, and their ethos of mutual support in line with that strongly emerged during the first phase of the pandemic, as manifested by local venues for the collection of food, clothing, medicines, and blankets in various neighborhoods.

Although the official restrictions prevented the weekly assemblies from taking place face-to-face, the housing groups demonstrated their capacity to quickly reorganize, first through online communications and then slowly returning to gathering with all the sanitary measures in place. This online organizing includes the abovementioned rent strike, representing a remarkable achievement in the critical context of the pandemic emergency.

In sum, these struggles have revealed that in times of high social distress, the victims of real estate speculation seek support from grassroots organizations due to the state institutions' inability to provide effective solutions to severe problems of housing deprivation. Moreover, the three examined organizations proved capable of managing the housing emergency on different scales, with different resources, and by mobilizing different social groups.

¹⁶ In its Gramscian meaning, “passive revolution” (or “hegemony through neutralization”) refers to situations where demands which challenge the established hegemonic order are recuperated by the existing system by satisfying those demands but in a way that neutralizes their subversive potential (Rossini and Bianchi, 2019).

5. Conclusions

Our analysis shows that the housing/neighborhood unions emerged before the COVID-19 pandemic due to (a) changes in the political-economic context, mainly the rise of rentierism, and (b) the declining efficiency of the PAH and the lower reach of the Tenants' Union at the urban-district level. Our analysis has also revealed that the pandemic crisis entailed a huge challenge for the housing movement in the city, with the banning of public gatherings, including assemblies and demonstrations; the sense of unsafety; and the limited ability to participate in housing activism. Moreover, while many evictions were halted at the courts due to the government's moratoria, the digitalization of bureaucratic procedures, the overwhelming number of requests, and the inability of many tenants to gather all the required paperwork still led to a significant number of home eviction cases that housing organizations actively tried to prevent.

Nonetheless, the pandemic crisis became a critical period that helped the housing/neighborhood unions consolidate while addressing urgent housing matters that the governmental-led moratoria could not tackle. Although the PAH and the Tenants' Unions were also active during this last period (2020–22), the addition of the housing/neighborhood unions at the most local urban scale and their emphasis on less institutional forms of protest, compared to the other two organizations, engendered what we have designated a multi-pronged, multifaceted local housing movement in Barcelona. In this regard, the unions encompass specific features that either supplement or even question those of the other two actors in the local housing movement: (1) the urban-district scale of political action while also involving an extended network with other neighborhood organizations and, occasionally, city-wide coordination with other unions and housing organizations; (2) less frequent engagement in institutional actions, such as legislative initiatives, although negotiations with the municipal government and landlords are always attempted when possible; and (3) a more explicitly critical stance toward state institutions and global capital as drivers of housing precariousness, unaffordability, and socio-spatial displacement.

As we have seen, beyond the dilemmas between radicalism/reformism or direct/institutional actions, the housing/neighborhood unions have focused on the creation of solidarity networks and mutual aid at the most local level within the metropolitan area. This way, their mobilization capacity to prevent home evictions or to support squatting for housing purposes has sometimes supplemented, sometimes surpassed that of the PAH and the Tenants' Unions. On the one hand, the PAH has experienced a certain decline in its public mobilizing and mainly welcomes impoverished homeowners. In contrast, the unions have steadily grown in recent years, especially during the pandemic, and they focus on supporting tenants, mostly with working-class and migrant backgrounds. On the other hand, the Tenants' Union was established and has grown as a more formalized organization, integrating all types of tenants and their concerns, especially in relation to their legal rights. The housing/neighborhood unions instead tend to focus on the most urgent cases of precariousness and eviction threats, resorting to direct action protests more often. All the housing organizations have their own self-regulating principles that reflect different priorities in terms of their politics and activities. However, they all address the dramatic context of housing precariousness in which rentals with corporate and wealthy landlords are increasingly causing most of the attacks on the reproduction means of the working-class urban population.

In particular, we observed that by strengthening ties with other neighborhood and housing organizations, the housing/neighborhood unions had kept grassroots mobilization alive during the pandemic period. The unions have also taken a distinctive critical stance in relation to state institutions, especially after Barcelona en Comú assumed leadership of the municipalist government. More than regular collaborations with the town hall or engagement in municipal committees or participatory processes, the unions have focused their claims to

municipal services on immediate solutions in order to house people in urgent need. This entails that their protest repertoire is more limited compared to other housing organizations, but not less efficient. While sustaining their networks of mutual support, most of the unions' actions are dedicated to providing legal advice, negotiations on a case-by-case basis, non-violent resistance to evictions, the squatting of vacant houses, and campaigns against large property owners, such as Blackstone and Cerberus. Regardless of their evaluation of the current housing laws and policies, or the bills under parliamentary discussion, the housing/neighborhood unions are not directly involved in legislative initiatives or public policy reforms.

In contrast, both the PAH and the Tenants' Union have very much focused on claiming legislative changes. In this regard, one of their main accomplishments, after campaigning and direct negotiations with policymakers, was the approval of Law 1/2022 by the Parliament of Catalonia to deal with the housing emergency. In the case of large holders, such as banks, vulture funds, and real estate corporations owning more than 10 properties, this law required the owner to offer a "social (affordable) rent" of seven years to households instead of evicting them. Other measures were included, for instance, the compulsory transfer of housing by banks and vulture funds to the Barcelona City Council Vacant Apartments Program, which allows vacant flats to rehouse families at risk of residential exclusion. Moreover, the Tenants' Union achieved the regulation of rental prices (Law 11/2020) in Catalonia. This was the result of both the Tenants' Union and other housing organizations, demonstrating that rent prices can be regulated after 35 years of neoliberalism and a lack of social protection in this matter (since the 1985 "Boyer" Decree Law). This rent regulation was later abolished by the Constitutional Court but partially incorporated into the National Law for Housing, which is currently subject to parliamentary debate. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 crisis, the PAH and the Tenants' Unions pushed for the introduction of measures that could protect families from evictions due to mortgage or rental arrears, which triggered the moratoria of evictions enacted by the central government.

Our argument is that the contribution of the housing/neighborhood unions has not weakened the capacity for action of the previous housing organizations but, on the contrary, has supplemented the movement with an additional prong of local mobilization. Although the relationship between the different organizations is weak and based on specific actions and initiatives, such as shared legal services, it is not characterized by a logic of either competition or elimination. Indeed, our research offers evidence that the unions have been more efficient in establishing and reinforcing mutual aid networks and rapidly responding to prevent home evictions, even by calling other organizations to contribute. Therefore, the weak relations engendered a strong multi-pronged housing movement, which also indicates that trends toward internal fragmentation may appear in the short term unless their coordination and cooperation experience further development.

In relation to previous literature and academic debates, we have contributed with a more historically and spatially focused examination of the development of the housing movement over the last decade beyond the growth and remarkable achievements of the PAH. The notion of a multi-pronged local housing movement also has the advantage of capturing the tensions and internal cooperation between different grassroots organizations that do not compete with each other. They do share part of their social base (the most vulnerable sections of the working class facing the abuse and precariousness of the current housing market), but they also coincide in claim-making strategies, such as the demand for affordable or just social rents and autonomous ways of grassroots organizing, which mainly build upon one of the main legacies of the PAH.

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