



The 'Caravana pelo Direito à Habitação': Towards a new movement for housing in Portugal?

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Abstract

The Caravana pelo Direito à Habitação travelled across Portugal together with local groups and associations to collect information on and give visibility to housing needs, while aiming to create new networks and influence the national political agenda. This conversation brings together seven scholar-activists that participated in the Caravana, who reflect upon the Caravana and contemporary struggles on the right to housing in Portugal. The conversation sheds light on some contentious issues that are presented through a selection of relevant excerpts, which cover personal identities as scholar-activists; contexts shaping contemporary

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housing struggles; and the relation of the Caravana to the politics of housing in Portugal.

Keywords

housing, caravana, Portugal

Introduction: the Caravana pelo Direito à Habitação

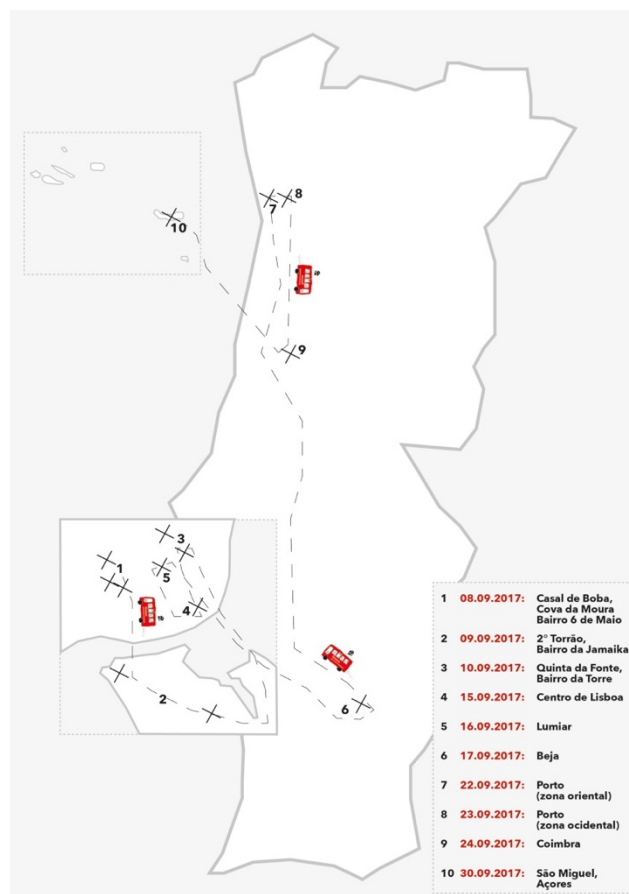
For one month in September 2017, the Caravana pelo Direito à Habitação (Caravan for the Right to Housing; hereafter Caravana) travelled across Portugal taking in more than fifteen locations, on both the mainland and the Azores. Stops on this tour included self-constructed¹, squatter neighbourhoods on both public and private land, public housing estates as well as central urban areas experiencing gentrification driven by spiralling real estate speculation. Everywhere the Caravana went, it met local groups and associations, organising debates, protests, collective meals and parties (Figure 1). The Caravana had a number of goals: collecting information on the diversity of housing needs throughout the country; strengthening and creating new networks; increasing the visibility of housing struggles; and producing political proposals to push policymakers to act.

Figure 1

The tour of the Caravana.

Source:

<https://caravanapelahabitacao.wordpress.com>



¹ We use the concept of self-construction - as opposed to terms like 'slum' or 'informal settlements', which have often a disparaging nature and tend to underestimate the agency of the residents.

This collaborative conversation brings together seven scholar-activists who participated in the Caravana. We were inspired by the questions posed for the first issue of the *Radical Housing Journal* to reflect upon its role and significance for contemporary struggles on the right to housing in Portugal.

We start by setting the scene with a brief introduction to the intersection of old and new housing struggles in Portugal. We then present the Caravana and our respective roles and positionalities in relation to it. Following this, we present an edited version of a discussion held at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais at the Universidade de Lisboa on 23 May 2018, around eight months after the conclusion of the Caravana. In the discussion, we reflect on how longer-term issues have intersected with post-crisis tendencies creating a new conjunction of housing crises. We go on to consider the role of the Caravana as an activist response to the intensification of these crises, reflecting on how the process reveals some of the core challenges involved in bringing different struggles and social groups together.

New and old struggles for housing in Portugal

In December 2016, Leilani Fahra, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, visited Portugal. Her visit was partly a result of calls from Habita, a group fighting for the Right to Housing and the City, who from 2012 onwards had encouraged the UN and other international institutions to acknowledge large-scale evictions, especially of Afro-descendant populations, in self-built settlements. A few months later, the Rapporteur published a report providing a stark picture of housing problems in the country, pointing to the coexistence of different, yet deeply interlinked, structural issues (Fahra, 2017).

The report underlines the persistence of extremely precarious, inadequate and unhealthy housing, including self-built settlements, and sub-standard and deeply degraded housing in both public and private ownership. According to a recent survey, this situation requires the rehousing of around 26,000 households throughout Portugal, and particularly in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Oporto (IHRU, 2018). These longstanding housing issues are linked with successive processes of migration – first from rural to urban areas and then, particularly after the democratic revolution of 1974, from former Portuguese colonies. Both the market and policy responses have consistently failed to provide affordable solutions (cf. Tulumello et al., forthcoming in 2018). Racialisation, and ongoing institutional racism, have also played a significant role in the (re)production of these issues throughout the country, and especially in the metropolitan area of Lisbon (cf. Alves, 2016).

The impacts of the economic crisis and subsequent austerity politics on Portugal were particularly marked during the years of the external bailout from 2011-2015. However, in recent years these dynamics have intersected with a much-vaunted economic recovery, based on tourism and real estate speculation, resulting in new strains in the housing system affecting large portions of the population in major cities. Many of those worst affected have suffered a triple whammy, hit first by the worsening economic situation and the austerity-driven weakening of social housing programmes and then by rapid rises in housing costs.

Though different, both longer standing and newer housing challenges have common roots in the Portuguese variety of capitalism, and particularly the central role of private rent in processes of accumulation. This has been identified as a wider feature of Southern European capitalisms, linked to broader European patterns of uneven development (cf. Hadjimihalis, 2011). In line with global trends over the last few decades, public policy has favoured the commodification of housing, for example, subsidising homeownership and pushing the financialization of housing (Santos et al., 2014). However, this has occurred alongside a relative absence of the public housing policies found in central and northern European countries. This led to pronounced tendencies towards accumulation by suburbanisation during the 1980s and 1990s. More recently it has been driving an equally marked emphasis on re-urbanisation and gentrification. Not only has this housing system proved incapable of addressing the most acute housing needs in society, it is now offering few, if any, solutions for tenants put under pressure by the housing boom in metropolitan areas. Instead, any tenure security they may have enjoyed has been weakened by a combination of measures approved during the years of austerity. Examples of these measures include legislation that has liberalised the rental market (the New Urban Lease Regime Law), and new measures that favour non-resident housing speculation, such as the ‘golden visa’ scheme that offers citizenship to anyone investing more than 500,000 euros in the country.

It is against this backdrop of intensifying housing politics that, in 2017, the Caravana was imagined and launched.

From the Assembleia dos Bairros to the Caravana and beyond

On March 2017, an open letter ‘in defence of the right to human dignity and housing’ was launched as the first public act of the recently founded Assembleia dos Moradores (Residents’ Assembly; hereafter Assembleia).² The Assembleia was launched by the *moradores* (residents) of three precarious *bairros* (neighbourhoods) located in suburban municipalities of the Lisbon metropolitan area: the self-built Bairro 6 de Maio (Amadora) and Bairro da Torre (Loures), as well as Bairro da Jamaica (Seixal), a squatted estate.³ Later, another public housing estate, Bairro da Apelação, also joined the Assembleia. These *bairros* are predominantly inhabited by Afro-descendants, in most cases from former Portuguese colonies, as well as Portuguese Roma. The Assembleia was created as a way to build networks of solidarity and support between the neighbourhoods, hence scaling up the fight for basic living conditions, housing and related rights. Each neighbourhood had its own distinctive history of struggle: in 6 de Maio, against forced evictions being carried out by the municipality, in many cases without any offer of rehousing; in Torre, with a past history of forced evictions, for the provision of basic services, including water and electricity; and in Jamaica, for the provision of electricity and rehousing due to the extremely precarious condition of the buildings, which are at risk of collapse; in Apelação, against the extremely poor condition of the flats. The actions of the Assembleia, which meets every second Sunday

² See <https://caravanapelahabitacao.wordpress.com/carta-aberta/>.

³ Though with a less regular presence, the Assembleia also includes residents of Quinta da Fonte, a public housing estate in Loures.

in one or another of the neighbourhoods, has been facilitated by the long-term support of both activist and academic groups: in 6 de Maio, Habita, which is, a major actor in housing movements across the Lisbon metropolitan area; in Torre, Gestual, a research group specialised in socio-territorial studies and local action based at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Lisbon; in Jamaika, Chão – Studio for Urban Ethnography.

The Caravana came together rapidly. In April 2017, the idea of organising a wider mobilisation was mooted. Habita secured a small grant from Guerrilla Foundation⁴ and in May the Caravana was launched. Soon, having realised that *assembleia* meetings alone were not going to provide enough time to meet the ambitious timescales envisaged, additional weekly meetings were organised. For practical reasons of time, location and the personal motivations of those engaged in the Assembleia, these additional meetings were often attended by activists and scholars rather than moradores. Although the Assembleia sought to secure the active participation of all, these nominally logistical meetings ended up making substantial decisions that shaped the development of the Caravana. Despite some setbacks – particularly those that prevented the setting up of a working participatory method for use during the mobilisation (see below)– the Caravana eventually started in September 2017 (Figure 1).

Though the process was time-pressured, the Caravana was timely; taking advantage of, and helping to shape, a renewal of political interest in housing during its month on the road, which intersected with the campaigns for local elections held in October. During the summer of 2017, the government also appointed a new Secretary of State for Housing, who began preparing a programme called Primeiro Direito (First Right) – part of a so-called Nova Geração de Políticas de Habitação (New Generation of Housing Policies). Primeiro Direito supports ‘housing solutions for people living in inadequate housing and unable to afford the cost of access to adequate housing’ (Decree-Law 37/2018). As part of this process, the Secretary of State was active in meeting local groups, including members of the Caravana. The Caravana was therefore able to secure considerable media coverage⁵ and create valuable opportunities for some *moradores* from the Assembleia to be heard in the political/public arena.

Notwithstanding doubts raised by activist groups about the willingness of the government to regulate the housing market (see, e.g., Silva, 2017), the existence of Primeiro Direito cannot be dissociated from the social mobilisations of the last couple of years, including the long-term fight by the inhabitants of Bairro 6 de Maio, the Assembleia and finally the Caravana. Concrete, if precarious, successes were also secured by the neighbourhoods of the Assembleia after the Caravana. Albeit set back by delays and doubts about the overall process, the rehousing of Jamaika has begun. Though since disrespected by the municipality, in early 2018, 6 de Maio also secured an informal agreement to stop ongoing evictions without the offer of rehousing. The Assembleia has also been growing with the participation of residents from Bairro das Pedreiras, an extremely precarious self-built neighbourhood inhabited by Roma people in Beja, a mid-sized town in the region of

⁴ See <http://guerrillafoundation.org/>.

⁵ See <https://caravanapelahabitacao.wordpress.com/a-caravana-nos-media/>.

Alentejo that was visited by the Caravana. More recently, a platform for direct action against forced evictions, Stop Despejos (Stop Evictions),⁶ has been created in response to the Caravana and an open assembly called by Habita to mobilize support and solidarity against increasing instances of forced displacement.

The Caravana, therefore, occurred during a period of fairly rapid development for housing movements in Portugal, playing a role, however modest, in the definition and consolidation of a new, high profile politics of housing.⁷

The conversation: our method and us

Six of us (Roberto, Ana Rita, Sílvia, Jannis, Rita and Simone) met for a conversation that lasted around two and a half hours.⁸ The discussion was guided by a series of prompts prepared by Roberto, Andy and Simone. Roberto moderated the discussion, while Simone took notes. The conversation was left to flow as freely as possible. Some of us consciously spoke as members of activist groups involved in the organisation of the Caravana, whilst others preferred to discuss their personal perspectives.

The text that follows is structured according to the main topics covered in the conversation. Each topic is briefly introduced before an edited selection of relevant excerpts. This means that we cover issues of (i) our personal identities as scholar-activists, (ii) the contexts shaping contemporary housing struggles and (iii) the process of the Caravana and its relation to the politics of housing in Portugal. The selection and editing process was undertaken by Roberto, Simone and Andy before being sent to the others to check, comment and agree on the final text. As a result, what follows is not a straightforward transcript but rather the product of a collective process of reflection and analysis that continued beyond our discussion.

Before getting on with the conversation, we briefly present the paths that brought each of us to engage with housing struggles and the Caravana.

Roberto: A couple years ago, I was asked by a member of the Assembleia to help design a participatory strategy with residents to solve urgent issues in the provision of basic services in some of the neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, the Assembleia was about to start the Caravana, and we realised that my academic practice in citizenship participation might be better employed to support that challenge. This is how I decided to get involved in the Caravana.

Simone: I have been involved with Habita since 2013, but with little time available. More recently, I have tried to shift my research work toward housing to be able to collaborate more with Habita. Since receiving funding for the project exPERTs (<https://expertsproject.org/>), I am now an active member of Habita, being, for instance,

⁶ See <https://stopdespejos.wordpress.com/>.

⁷ The report of the Caravana is not yet publicly available. We can provide the draft upon request.

⁸ While all the authors were directly involved in the Caravana, one of them could not take part to the conversation but contributed to the writing of this text.

responsible for the coordination of the monthly debate series. Through Habita I got involved in the Assembleia and the Caravana.

Andy: I spent two years in Lisbon from 2016-2018 working with Roberto and Simone. Roberto suggested that I help him out in his work with the Caravana, particularly the planned participatory process. It seemed like a good opportunity to explore long-standing interests in the intersections between housing, urban struggles and engaged scholarship in a Portuguese context. I attended a series of the preparatory meetings but, unfortunately, for personal reasons, wasn't as involved as I would have liked during the Caravana itself. I hope to keep in touch with the movement as it develops, albeit now from a distance as I've since moved to the UK.

Ana Rita: I have long been involved with anti-racist movements and struggles. In 2012, I got to know that evictions in the Bairro Casal de Santa Filomena⁹ were being carried out under the scope of the Programa Especial de Reajustamento (Special Rehousing Programme), offering no housing alternatives to the inhabitants. This is how I had my first contact with fights for adequate housing. In addition, together with other colleagues, within the academic sphere, we decided to form Chão, aiming to understand how academic knowledge could be used to support on-going struggles for adequate housing of inhabitants of self-constructed neighbourhoods in the Lisbon metropolitan area.

Sílvia: Through academic experiences in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and Maputo (Mozambique), I developed a general interest in housing, with a particular interest in urban outskirts and practices of local resistance to the commodification of space. Back in Lisbon, as part of Gestual, I have followed the case of Cova da Moura¹⁰ to understand patterns of local organisation in the long fight against the municipality, and of Bairro da Torre.

Jannis: In 2012, for my bachelor's degree, I studied segregation, gentrification and housing policies in the context of Rio de Janeiro's south-zone favelas. Later, I moved to Portugal where, thanks to a summer school on dispossession and dissent, I was surprised to find similar issues to those I had experienced in Rio. During an occupation at the Ministry of the Environment organised by Habita to protest against forced evictions, I met Rita and decided to get involved in the local struggles and eventually joined the preparation of the Caravana.

Rita: In 2005 I joined Solidariedade Imigrante (Immigrant Solidarity), an activist group in the field of immigration, and through that experience I learned about the poor living conditions of many immigrant populations, violent evictions and the lack of any activist support. We created Plataforma Artigo 65¹¹ to collectively organize people from the neighbourhoods against the evictions. This gave visibility to the issue and created connections with other groups. In 2011, we created Habita, which originally worked with immigrants and their descendants, who were, together with Roma, the most vulnerable

⁹ A self-built neighbourhood in Amadora, which was predominantly inhabited by Afro-descendants, now completely cleared.

¹⁰ A self-built neighbourhood in Amadora, which has been successfully resisting clearance also thanks to a strong network of local organisation.

¹¹ From article 65 of the Portuguese Constitution, about the right to decent housing.

populations. From the beginning, we also wanted to include other groups and sectors from civil society. After the crisis, housing has become a more transversal social issue, hence the idea to organize the Caravana.

Social movements in the making: discussing the Caravana

1. Identity

Despite planning a gentle start to the discussion, we quickly found ourselves exploring important and controversial issues related to the construction of identity within the Caravana. These posed fundamental ethical and political challenges around positionality and the difficulties of traversing scholar-activist subject positions. They also led to an important discussion on the relations between primarily white academics/activists and the *moradores* whose struggles they seek to promote and support.¹² We discussed how the Caravana had raised enduring concerns about organisation and leadership in the building of social movements. Our discussion didn't resolve these issues, but it did highlight the need for ongoing vigilance and offer a space for collective reflection about how such dilemmas might be better navigated in the future.

1.1 Academics or activists?

Sílvia: It is hard self-defining as activist, because I think academia should be engaged with real life. However, this is not the case in academia today, and those who engage with struggles often end up being marginalised as 'activists'. Academia should stop being enclosed within its walls and participate more, promoting a closer relationship between theory and practice, but also a critical and reflexive thinking about social realities.

Rita: I like the combination between activism and academia. There is a lot of empirical knowledge in activism that should be used by academia. That said, I feel more an activist than an academic. Still, there is the issue of time: I need to survive somehow, that is, to earn a salary. What's expected of academics, like publishing for a small public, takes too much time from action.

Jannis: Academia often seeks to hide and protect itself by keeping out of struggles, but at the same time to make consistent 'scientific' knowledge about those struggles.

Ana Rita: Academia is mostly a conservative institution. Accordingly, positivist-oriented thought and research are inherent to it. Nevertheless, I cannot split myself in two and therefore I prefer to self-identify as an engaged scholar. Even though the use of the word engagement is controversial to me, because when researchers are engaged with public institutions there seems to be no concern, the 'problem' is only raised when engagement favours resistance and therefore a certain kind of action that challenges the status quo. I

¹² The irony was not lost on us that, for largely practical reasons, our discussion unfortunately reproduced this distinction.

also think that we should take care of the ethical relationships with those we work with. We should produce knowledge in order to improve the lives of the people.

1.2 Taking the Lead¹³

Roberto: How would you characterize your role in the Caravana?

Ana Rita: I'm critical of the positionalities developed within the Caravana due to the re-centralisation of white academics in the design of the process. The original idea was about helping residents to take the lead and, as such, our role should have been linked to collectives in the neighbourhoods. For methodological reasons and to make preparation easier, things changed and meetings were planned in the centre of the city¹⁴ on working days at 6 pm. This made it impossible for people from the bairros to participate. That's my biggest criticism of the Caravana: somehow we took more initiative than residents, and it shouldn't have happened like that.

Rita: This is a discussion worth having. I understand your point, Ana Rita, but I think that the Caravana did also allow the neighbourhoods and their leaders to lead the process and take initiative. Weekend assemblies never stopped. However, when we realised that we weren't going to manage the logistics, we proposed additional workday meetings. Truth be told, those ended up being spaces of conceptualisation too. In particular, the contributions of researchers to define the methodological approach of the Caravana also contributed to its conceptual development. However, when the participatory method was abandoned, weekday meetings went back to being purely logistical. I also feel like I have a different position from the *moradores*, I have more time to think about the fight, more access to information and even more political experience. For these reasons, I have more responsibility and seek to support the organisation of struggles. It is fundamental to take into account the issue of leadership and empowerment. I tend to take the initiative and then try to share it with other people, although this is not always easy.

Sílvia: The assumption of leadership roles and raising of the political consciousness of residents is a clear output of the Caravana, which kept growing as time went on. It was amazing to see how people were empowered and spoke out fearlessly, even with high-ranking policymakers. Local leadership is another issue to deal with. Some leaders clearly emerged in the Caravana and they continue to be very visible in the Assembleia. But even today, only some people speak out in the neighbourhoods we work with.

Jannis: The Assembleia was a good ground to start the Caravana, which, in turn, provided both negative and positive inputs to the Assembleia. Some residents have become more self-confident and determined. The challenge is to see whether the grassroots work can

¹³ Here we are translating the Portuguese 'protagonismo' as 'taking the lead' or 'taking initiative', it does not feel an exact fit but we hope it captures the enduring challenges involved in assuming a leadership role and organizing an initiative like the Caravana.

¹⁴ Namely, at Mob, a collective space managed by Habita along with other groups.

keep going without any need for external inputs: how to make a second edition of the Caravana a more local and endogenous process?

Sílvia: It is also important to say that the Caravana was not homogeneous, nor the same everywhere. The Assembleia played a great role in the Lisbon metropolitan area.

Rita: There has been a lot of long term fieldwork in Lisbon, even if there has not been continuous involvement with all the neighbourhoods involved in the Caravana. We have made some progress. For instance, Beja is now fully involved in the struggle and we're trying to include more communities in the Assembleia.

Simone: Don't you think that talking about 'protagonismo', and the idea that the 'white privileged scholar' should just provide logistical support, also reveals a form of paternalism? Are we not allowed to be active in the political production of the Caravana?

Rita: We should always be vigilant, because there is a very strong risk of speaking on behalf of the *moradores*. The mobilisation must be done with and for the people that are affected. But I agree that we cannot be silent. There was a time when I tried to shut up in the fights for 6 de Maio because a group, which we were working with, suggested doing so. I had ideas to share but forced myself to shut up. I tried, but residents didn't really understand why I kept silent, what was going on, and began to lose confidence.

Sílvia: But, for example, what if the vast majority of those occupying the Ministry, as done several times in 2017, were not *moradores* and rather (white) activists? The message would be totally different.

Ana Rita: Here again my point is on the internal methodology of the Caravana. We have to think about our positionality, both when we speak and when we hear the others. It was interesting to have a continuous negotiation sharing the development of the initiative but this decreased after the Caravana. How should the alliance between movements and residents work? How can we effectively manage the limited time we have to work with everything that is happening at the same time? There is always a risk of perpetuating colonial methodologies in practice. I can read a lot about decolonisation and postcolonial studies and still reproduce colonial practices. How do we solve this paradox? How can we build a strong movement capable of facing all these issues and avoid internally reproducing these dynamics? For these reasons I think that a participatory approach could have helped our action.

Sílvia: As an example, in the last meeting of the Assembleia we took the initiative by imposing a discussion about finalising the report of the Caravana. Residents just weren't interested and didn't get it.

Simone: Still, it is a big failure that the final report has still not been finished eight months after the end of the Caravana.

Sílvia: Yes, but we occupied and, at a certain moment, even dominated the conversation in the latest Assembleia with this topic.

2. Context

Our debate on identity and taking the initiative soon scaled up towards broader reflections on ongoing housing struggles in Portugal. At this stage, the conversation focussed on the increasing range of social actors now struggling against the wave of evictions and advocating better housing conditions. We discussed the challenges involved in bringing these often diverse struggles together and, particularly in light of recent initiatives by the national government, the risk that some programmes may once again favour the middle classes over those groups most in need. This seems a marked possibility since political and media attention tends to be oriented towards their recently intensified struggles; is there a risk that the claims of the marginalised will be overlooked again in any unified housing movement? If so, how should activists respond during a moment when their concerns are high on the political agenda?

2.1 Struggles

Rita: In Portugal today, a great diversity of actors is mobilising in the struggle for housing. There is the mortgage crisis, the diversification and liberalisation of rental contracts, social housing, self-construction, homelessness, and so on and so forth. Habita has been challenged to support all the different groups affected. Unlike in Spain, these diverse housing struggles cannot readily converge under one umbrella, that is, the newly indebted middle class. We are rather seeking a way to make the voice of these struggles louder and, on occasion, to find opportunities for convergence. Convergence is needed because these different problems are the result of the same housing policies, which have promoted private debt and not developed long-term strategies capable of meeting social needs.

Ana Rita: There is a common issue to ongoing fights, that is, the lack of access to housing. While uniting these distinct fights is fundamental, the danger that some claims could make others invisible should be carefully monitored. It is clear that public debate gives more visibility to evictions occurring in the centre of Lisbon, to the detriment of those in the periphery or outside the city. These are rendered invisible because there is an ontological and structural racialisation of those communities, mostly composed of Afro-descendants and Portuguese Roma. The *Primeiro Direito*, which was promoted by the government as a programme focused on people rather than places, seems to be actually directed at the middle classes.

Roberto: Do you think that there is a risk of a ‘demagogical housing politics’ today in Portugal?

Rita: The demagogical risk is not on our side. Habita does not want to homogenize the fight, however it is important to create solidarities and new forms of dialogue. There were two important moments that testify to the Caravana’s attempt to do that. First, during the launch of the Caravana, there was the intervention of one of the women from Rua dos Lagares,¹⁵ who had just secured a victory against an attempt at evicting them. The woman

¹⁵ A building in the historical centre of Lisbon whose residents have been threatened with eviction.

said that she could not celebrate after what had been said by other women about their fights for housing in peripheral bairros. She cried and hugged those women. Second, the public intervention made by Ricardina, from Bairro da Torre, in one of the meetings of the Caravana in Mouraria, in the historical centre of Lisbon. When she shared the conditions in her *bairro*, people just could not believe what she had just said. And they were affected, no one knew what to say after her intervention.

Sílvia: Different problems of access to housing also concern the middle classes. However, I also think we should problematise what middle class means today. If uniting fights is important, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are different ‘degrees of room of manoeuvre’ among affected groups. Someone who loses her house because of speculative rent-seeking has a different room for manoeuvre from those who are evicted in self-built neighbourhoods, for example. However, since the middle class is being affected, the new policy instruments on housing are being captured by them.

Rita: It is sad the Prime Minister and the Minister of Environment – who is responsible for housing – keep repeating that it is time to help the middle class. This has been the case throughout the last two centuries! They are talking to their constituencies, while racialised groups remain in the background. The *Primeiro Direito* has been ‘colonised’ by families earning more than €1,500 salary per month,¹⁶ whose leases may not be renewed.

2.2 Institutions

Rita: People feel the lack of dialogue and participation in policy solutions. They feel that their voice has been excluded, and institutions have often treated them as if they were children. On the contrary, people have their claims and proposals, which are hard to realise.

Simone: Should recent dialogues between social movements, the Secretary of State and other institutions be considered a result of the Caravana?

Rita: The Secretary of State for Housing launched a public consultation based on the general strategy of *Primeiro Direito*. However, I think organising another consultation once a first draft of the actual programme existed would had been better. I mean, the consultation was carried out without an actual draft to be debated. Still, during the consultation we did bring several points forward. For instance, the fact that the worst thing for these communities is being dependent on municipalities: in response, of course the implementation of *Primeiro Direito* will rely almost exclusively on municipalities!

Sílvia: Indeed, as if municipalities are neutral entities, when we know that in some cases they have agendas contrary to the proposals or principles outlined for the neighbourhoods during the Caravana.

¹⁶ Which corresponds to almost three times the minimum and almost twice the average monthly wage in Portugal.

Rita: I think it was positive that the Secretary of State did open the dialogue. However, in 6 de Maio, previous agreements are being put aside. We will have to occupy the ministry again. We need to go on struggling without illusions.

Jannis: The Secretary of State seemed to be open and to have the intention of including residents' claims. However, the way the *Primeiro Direito* was issued did not reflect those intentions.

Rita: The Caravana succeeded in strengthening residents' voices. For example, the meeting between residents in Beja and the Secretary of State was extremely important. Since that first meeting, the residents are much more organised and ready to confront the municipality directly. The Secretary has shown an attitude towards dialogue, but this is limited by the way the 'machine' of the state actually works.

Jannis: The biggest issue with institutions is that they consider housing problems on an individual level. The Caravana helped make housing struggles less individualised for people, in most cases women. It has helped make struggles more collective – even though the state never promotes collective solutions to problems that are collective. Given the absence of collective or cooperative housing policies in Portugal, there is a need to create new solutions outside the state.

3. Process

We went on to focus on whether, or to what extent, the Caravana had actually worked. This started with a discussion of the main goals and motivations of the project, which included making visible housing issues identified through the *Assembleia*, such as the lack of essential services, problems related to self-built settlements and rehousing. The aspiration to scale up the experience of the *Assembleia* led the Caravana to map a wide range of the housing issues people are contending with. We also reflected on some issues that the Caravana was not able to address and on the attempt to adopt a participatory approach, aimed at co-creating events with residents in the neighbourhoods we visited. We concluded by exploring the reasons why the Caravana ultimately failed to develop such a participatory method, despite its potential to deepen our understanding of the issues at stake.

3.1 Goals

Roberto: What were the core issues touched upon by the Caravana?

Jannis: Our starting point was to take advantage of the growing visibility of middle class housing struggles to give visibility to other groups, including those living in self-built settlements and those caught up in problematic rehousing programmes. The main purpose was to address growing pressures being created by the financialization of housing in Portugal. We decided to visit and meet places where some forms of struggle already existed, because we knew we could not reach all the places facing housing issues.

Ana Rita: The Caravana was born in the Assembleia around three existing struggles: first, for access to essential goods and services for communities in self-built settlements (especially in Torre and Jamaica); second, against evictions (especially in 6 de Maio); and, third, the critique of the way rehousing processes have worked without involving those affected in decision making (especially in Quinta da Fonte). These big issues are all being experienced in the relatively small space which is the Lisbon metropolitan area. The open letter written by the Assembleia gave the impetus for the Caravana, because we knew that other communities elsewhere in the country were facing similar problems. So, we wanted to build solidarity with those communities and work toward gathering those claims together. In fact, the violence that is being perpetuated in the field of housing is less an exception affecting particular places, and more something that is being perpetuated across the country. The Caravana aimed to promote dialogues among residents and create new opportunities for debate. It was intended to make the struggle carried on by the Assembleia more visible, upscaling it by bringing issues together and linking communities and families experiencing similar problems.

Rita: When Habita proposed the Caravana, we felt it was important to continue the work developed by the open letter. We needed to move from meetings to action, because getting stuck in meetings could have killed the process of mobilisation. The Caravana aimed at providing more visibility; creating alliances among neighbourhoods; widening the field of struggle; empowering the *moradores*; and making political proposals. Some degree of success was reached with regard to all goals. However, its impact on the general public and policies was not very big.

Sílvia: The Caravana aggregated *moradores* and neighbourhoods, as well as people and groups working with residents. Housing precarity is not only about self-build, it is also an issue for those being rehoused. Precarity describes a number of situations that were made evident through the Caravana.

Rita: Racism and vulnerability of women were further issues that emerged through the Caravana.

Roberto: Were there any particularly important issues that the Caravana did not address?

Rita: The issue of housing credit. Many people are losing their houses because they are failing to pay mortgages and, in particular, many immigrant people are now seeing their lives impoverished because of bank debts. Another issue that was barely approached was the physical decay of housing in the private rented sector, because many owners do not care and leave residents living in precarious conditions. This also relates to health issues connected to poor housing conditions. Lastly, gender and domestic violence, and cycles of violence due to lack of access to housing solutions for women, were only marginally addressed by the Caravana.

Ana Rita: I believe the Caravana also neglected the situation of the people coming to Portugal for medical treatment from countries such as Cape Verde or Guinea Bissau, under the scope of bilateral agreements between the Portuguese state and other Portuguese speaking African countries. During the period they have to live in Portugal, many of them

have to live in pensions, often in extremely bad conditions. There are also people that are left in the lurch, while being in a fragile state of health.

Rita: We did not tap into homelessness either, or the insalubrious conditions of some rooms rented by charitable institutions, especially the Santas Casas da Misericórdia, where people are pressured to stay.

Ana Rita: I remember when I was living in Naples, I had heard of basements rented to immigrants. These spaces have barely any sunlight and are therefore very humid. In Lisbon, we do not know much about this, but I am sure that it is happening too. Such shameful situations make people even more invisible even as evictions for new AirBnBs increase in the city centre.

3.2 Participatory approach

Rita: Another thing we did not succeed with was developing a systematic participatory approach. We even made a test in the Bairro da Torre, but residents found it confusing and complicated. We had no time to explore the approach after that. During the event in Beja, many residents actively took part and spoke out, although there wasn't a tailored participatory approach planned for that visit. In other meetings, community leaders took the stage and spoke on behalf of communities. In 6 de Maio the meeting was a catastrophe, because it didn't connect with the needs of many residents, especially the large majority of elderly residents who could not participate in the event at night.

Simone: Maybe participatory methods are less useful in contexts we already know in some depth, such as the peripheral neighbourhoods of Lisbon like 6 de Maio?

Ana Rita: In Jamaica, Chão and the *moradores* did organize a participatory workshop before the Caravana and met again after in order to prepare a report. What matters is not just building knowledge, but making space for collective reflection capable of producing new knowledge. Even when we know a lot about something, I believe that participation and dialogue can help people reflect upon and reach awareness of things never thought before.

Roberto: Maybe we needed different participatory approaches. In the Lisbon metropolitan area, where we have longstanding experience, we needed to foster collective reflection on shared knowledge about situated problems. In other cities, like Porto and Coimbra, we primarily needed to collect information while bringing people together to reflect. In Beja we heard a lot of testimonies without really getting to a stage where any collective thinking could happen. We also need to consider the issue of timing, and whether one event per place could ever have achieved the goals of the Caravana.

Concluding considerations: toward a new housing movement in Portugal?

In the final part of our conversation, we returned to consider the role of the Caravana within the wider political context of housing struggles in Portugal. We therefore ended by

discussing how to continue the work of the Caravana in the context of new imperatives and opportunities.

Roberto: So, what's next for the Caravana?

Rita: The Caravana is over, but a new edition can be organised. The first edition is over because the report was submitted to the Secretary of State for Housing. There are still some people who are concerned to collectively finalise the report before giving it back to the local communities. However, the report should be considered as concluded and ready to be delivered, and I don't think residents are really interested to go on discussing the report, because there are more urgent issues to be discussed. As the Caravana has been a process, it has not reached its ultimate goals. However, it did reach certain 'internal' objectives. People were empowered and communities met and came to know each other. There was a struggle before the Caravana and there is still a struggle after the Caravana. The Assembleia is still going on and evictions seem to be the big issue helping create solidarity among people today. I think we can prepare a second edition of the Caravana to create new contacts and contribute to improve collective awareness.

Jannis: The visibility of the Caravana attracted new people who realised what is going on and catalysed the creation of new groups, such as Stop Despejos. This suggests that the centre got closer to the periphery and to the diversity of housing struggles. Generally, that is a step toward a more global acknowledgment about fights for housing.

Simone: The Caravana created Stop Despejos, in a way, because of the large number of issues Habita was pressured to deal with after the Caravana. When Habita called for collaboration, people were reticent to join Habita, because they did not want to be absorbed into an existing organisation. So, we had to invent a different thing which was eventually called Stop Despejos.

Rita: I don't agree that it was just because of Habita that Stop Despejos was created. It was born out of an event organised by Habita called 'hands off our home', with many different groups participating.

Silvia: Stop Despejos is indeed more than Habita, it's a collective of different people and groups. The Caravana is a process that has been closed, but that can be reopened. This will depend on the Assembleia.

Rita: The future of the Caravana depends on the Assembleia, whether residents think that a new edition can help their fight. Still, I don't really understand why we are still talking about the present and future of the Caravana when there is a panoply of new legislation coming out. The Assembleia has many things to worry about. We need to take a stance, relate our agenda with the agenda of those in power. The fight for housing is hot. Habita goes on, and grows. Stop Despejos is working as a sort of 'militant branch' for communication and direct action. It can be important for other fights. We are living a new moment in the struggles over housing in Portugal: movements are overcoming their divisions and converging.

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