



# **Activist\*scholar collaborations in times of crisis, and beyond: Reflections on 'Urban Activism: Staking Claims in the 21st Century City'**

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## **Abstract**

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A conference organized in September 2019 at Harvard University brought together a group of activists and scholars from North America, Europe, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, to discuss the political and theoretical implications of the convergence between urban activism and urban scholarship. The interventions and debate are summarized here in relation to the shifting political context that followed the conference. We argue that the global demand to reframe the relationship between people and institutions should be addressed by reframing the production of knowledge, and we put forward three proposals: that academic departments develop permanent relationships with social movements that struggle against housing and resource dispossession, that research institutions demand that binding social impact assessments are undertaken for each development project, and that activists and scholars develop forms of collaboration on a broader scale to connect different models of grassroots governance into designing a new social contract.

## **Keywords**

Evictions, dispossession, displacement, urban activism, engagement, social contract

## **Introduction**

A year ago, in September 2019, we organized a three-day conference at Harvard University, bringing together people who work on the blurred frontier between local political movements against evictions and the production of scholarship on the city in different parts

of the world ([urbanactivism2019.org](http://urbanactivism2019.org)). Participation in the event was free and open to everybody - students, scholars, and interested members of the public joined us. Among the latter were residents from South Boston neighborhoods who collaborate in the local anti-eviction network 'City Life – Vida Urbana' ([clvu.org](http://clvu.org)).

In the week immediately after the seminar, many of the issues we debated in the conference seemed to escalate worldwide. Indeed, 2019 ended with a global explosion of revolt that spanned from Chile to Catalonia, from Hong Kong to Lebanon, expressing an array of discontent towards the varied social, political and institutional frames of respective nation-states (Mishra, 2019; Wright, 2019; Solnit, 2019). Then 2020 began with the Covid-19 global pandemic, which sparked the growth of networks of mutual help and a global call for a rent strike which might have been the greatest in history. This was followed by the protests against colonial legacies and police brutality in the context of racialized communities in the United States, that exploded after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis; leading, amongst other things, to fierce debate on the abolition of the police and to the actual demolition of symbols and statues of racialized oppression worldwide. In these uncertain and tumultuous times, the contacts we made at the September 2019 gathering were important, enabling some of us to maintain a multi-sited understanding of what was happening in the world. The discussions we had about the position of *activist\*scholars* in social and spatial conflicts helped us to define and refine our approaches to the struggles and events that followed. The definition of 'activist\*scholar' we use here refers to forms of activism and scholarship such as those we discussed at the conference, that do not fall into neat categories but are part of collaborative efforts to exchange and complement knowledges and experiences in collective projects and communities of practice (Yildirim Tschoepe, 2019).

Despite the differences among the participants, all of their interventions pointed to the fact that the generalized collapse of the present political, socioeconomic and environmental system requires us to reimagine a *new system*, and that this includes a new project for the production of knowledge. As City Life – Vida Urbana activist Lisa Owens asserted during the closing roundtable, the alliance between scholars and activists must not be thought of as a tactical alliance to obtain specific short-term goals and endeavors, but as a strategic conflation of forces for a long-term transformation of the social system. What this alliance shall produce, in the end, is not new research projects, but, as Lisa said, 'new human beings': new roles for scholars and activists, new capacities, new networks, and thus new institutions for a socially just future for all.

This aim, though, requires a reversal of the current paradigm of industrial and urban development. Policies should no longer emerge from the existing short-sighted political structures of elected representatives, concerned with manufacturing consent before the next elections. They should emerge, instead, from the ability of local communities to design, protect and share their living environments and lifestyles, and to voice and defend their claims through social conflict and locally developed forms of self-management (see: Reiter, 2017; Milstein, 2020). Stavros Stavrides, a conference participant, illustrated this with the example of post-2011 Athens, when the common spaces that emerged from the struggle of single groups or loosely knit archipelagos of individuals, spilled over the borders of those

who created them, and attracted surrounding others into the very definition of the rules that govern them.

We share here some reflections that emerged during and around the conference, with the aim of contributing to the global discussion on what kind of societies and cities are needed for the coming decade, moving towards a common future, and what the means are to achieve them. We begin by elaborating on the ‘stakes’ of activist\*scholarship in this context, referring where relevant to the participants’ interventions during the September 2019 gathering. We conclude with three practical proposals on the role of institutions devoted to the production of knowledge in urban social struggles.

## **The conference: ‘Urban Activism: Staking Claims in the 21st Century City’**

### **Background/Impetus**

‘Urban Activism: Staking Claims in the 21st Century City’ was proposed by Harvard’s Department of Anthropology and Center for Middle Eastern Studies through professors Michael Herzfeld and Cemal Kafadar. They engaged us in its organization as doctoral and postdoctoral fellows affiliated with the two departments, and encouraged our input in choosing our invitees, using Harvard funds to bring together activists and engaged scholars from different parts of the world. We saw in this an opportunity to create a transdisciplinary, international exchange of knowledges and experiences beyond academic and national boundaries. We decided to invite specific people who navigate an intermediate field between research and action: people who research for, and with, communities; and people who use critical knowledge on the frontlines of urban struggles. The aim was to create a collective discourse on how, by increasingly converging and creating a common field of inquiry and action, critical urban research and urban political activism can bring changes to the way we consider our involvement in academic institutions and social struggles.

The discussions began on Thursday 12 September 2019, with two keynote speeches by professors **Michael Herzfeld** and **Loretta Lees**, both of whom pointed to the contentious issue of objectivity. Herzfeld, a prominent Harvard University anthropologist, explained his work with communities under the threat of eviction in Rome and Bangkok, illustrating the importance of assuming an engaged role in the field. To seek neutrality or objectivity in situations of conflict, he argued, puts researchers on the side of the offender, and prevents them from developing the intimacy with ‘the informants’ that is an essential prerequisite for ethnographic research (Herzfeld, 2012). Lees, a leading scholar on gentrification and displacement, and professor of human geography at Leicester University, drew on her scholar-activist work with London council estate residents fighting displacement to discuss the value of different community-based strategies in the ‘fight back’ (Lees and Ferreri, 2016; see London Tenants Federation, Just Space and Lees, this volume).

The event continued on Friday 13 September with three panels—‘Knowledge, practices, mobilizations,’ ‘Contest, participation, commons,’ and ‘Self-construction and self-organization’. These structured the interventions of all the activist\*scholars present, which included: **Nadine Bekdache** from Beirut’s Public Work Studio and graphic designer at the

'Think housing' competition of ideas; **Erin McElroy**, member of the San Francisco Anti-eviction mapping project; **Diana Bell Sancho**, urban planner based in Quito and affiliate to MIT's Displacement and Research Action Network; **Stefano Portelli**, anthropologist and founding member of 'Repensar Bonpastor' competition of ideas in Barcelona; **Stavros Stavrides**, Professor of Architecture at the Technical University of Athens; **Aylin Yildirim Tschoepe**, postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Basel and the Basel's FNHW Academy of Art and Design; **S'bū Zikode**, president of Abahlali baseMjondolo shack-dwellers movement in Johannesburg; **Welita Caetano**, community leader at the Frente de Luta por Moradia (Housing Struggle Front) in São Paulo; **Dominic T. Moulden**, former resource organizer at Organizing Neighborhood Equity in Washington DC (ONE-DC); and **Yaşar Adnan Adanalı**, urbanist and member of Istanbul's Center for Spatial Justice. **Abir Saksouk** from Beirut and **Aleksandar Shopov** from Istanbul participated online.

The discussants were Professor **Mindy Fullilove** (The New School, NY), Professor **Sai Balakrishnan** (Harvard Graduate School of Design), and Professor **Cemal Kafadar** (Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, also a promoter of the seminar). After the panels, we engaged in a roundtable discussion introduced and moderated by **Lisa Owens**, community activist and member of the board of City Life / Vida Urbana. The same organization, the following day, took the participants on an anti-gentrification tour through Jamaica Plains, the South Boston neighborhood where the network holds its weekly meetings.

### **The urban character of contemporary political activism**

What we, the authors, call here 'urban activism' is not necessarily the activism that develops in cities. The 'urban' character inherent to the mobilizations that have taken place over the last decade and that intensified at the end of 2019 lies beyond the binary of city and countryside, or North and South. The scenario for the 'year of protests' in 2019 could be better described as a:

'single urban cloth, without form and order, a bleak zone, endless and undefined, a global continuum of museum-like city centers and natural parks, of enormous suburban housing developments and massive agricultural projects, industrial zones and subdivisions, country inns and trendy bars: the metropolis' (Invisible committee, 2009; See also: Consejo Nocturno, 2018; Brenner, 2013).

A crucial feature of the recent wave of social mobilizations was the widespread dissent in small cities and in the countryside. The dispossession of land and housing and the threat of displacement, in fact, affected in particularly severe forms mid-sized cities and villages (see: Desmond, 2016; Bennett and McDowell, 2012). Since the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, land-grabbing policies have forced the privatization of millions of acres, particularly in the Global South (Liberti, 2013), leading to what the Global Justice Network called a 'new scramble for Africa' (and Asia, and Latin America). Over-stressing the role of big cities, as many media did in 2011 and 2019 alike, resonates with the same cosmopolitan contempt for the countryside that pushes residents of internal areas worldwide into the arms of right-wing

revanchism or xenophobia (Bock, 2019). What is urban and metropolitan today is not a specific territory, but the global mode of production that impoverishes and depletes whole territories, forcing huge amounts of people out of their lands and houses, only to maintain and expand an industrial complex designed for profit-making and the consumption of cities (Merrifield, 2015; Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, 2016). In this context, urban activism is the political activism that confronts an urban model of production and consumption that brings violence and destruction to city and countryside alike. Those who confront it uphold the right to safeguard communities, territories, and local ways of producing and consuming, *against* the effort to divert all resources into the hands of a few.

The urban roots of the problems were already evident in many of the regions that in 2019 expressed their profound discontent with the nation-state. The three examples of Catalonia, Chile, and Lebanon illustrate this. The slogan popularized during the 2017–2019 Catalan protests—‘the streets will always be ours’ (*els carrers seran sempre nostres*)—echoes a claim to recover control of urban space that spans from the 2011 revolt against the mortgage crisis, to the ‘reclaim the streets’ counter-culture of the 1990s, all the way to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century conflict over Barcelona’s streets and squares that pitted working-class and migrant neighborhoods against Francoist and capitalist elites (Ealham, 2005; Delgado, 2009; Portelli, 2015). The Chilean protests of 2019 were especially strong in the areas hit by gentrification and displacement during Pinochet’s dictatorship, in those that resisted evictions in the early 2000s, when residents prevented huge-scale urban requalifications aimed to attract international investors, and in self-built neighborhoods produced by displacement from the central city. The protests in Lebanon were the effect of a series of deeply entrenched inequalities in the distribution of wealth, highly visible in the housing system and in the form of the urban environment (Public Works Studio, 2019), now exacerbated by the hoarding of urban land after the August 2020 blast. These urban roots are also evident in other countries now in turmoil. One is Brazil, where Bolsonaro’s persecution of indigenous activists that defend the Amazon rainforest from land-grabbing policies runs parallel to the turn of the screw against activists defending housing rights in big cities, brought to international attention by the 2018 killing of the activist and sociologist Marielle Franco in Rio de Janeiro.

Related to this, Mindy Fullilove observed that the insensitive post-war urban policies that dubbed as ‘blighted’ and tore down over a thousand African American neighborhoods in the US are very much part of this global assault on human ecosystems and lifeways. Urban renewal and displacement shatter entire communities whose ways of functioning are embedded in the physical spaces they inhabit. The scattering of neighbors throughout and outside metropolitan areas, the increased precariousness of their lives, and the collapse of communal ways of living, have dramatic and undocumented consequences, far beyond the immediate effects on the specific people affected by displacement (see: Fullilove, 2004; Fullilove and Wallace, 2011; Pull et al., 2020; Adey et al., 2020).

Recent events widely confirm and expand this insight. The Syrian architect Marwa Al-Sabouni (2016) situates urban renewal as one of the causes of the mutual estrangement among communities that fueled the Syrian war; the ‘architecture of the occupation’ is mobilized by Israel to control and divide Palestine (Weizman 2007); and urban

transformation is also employed by the authoritarian Turkish state against the urban poor and minority groups, specifically used in the South-East of the country as a kind of urban warfare and property transfer (Ünsal and Kuyucu, 2010; Gambetti and Jongerden, 2011; Habitat International Coalition, 2016; Pajares Barbero, 2018; see also: Crisis Group, 2016, Kadioğlu Polat, 2016 and Yardimci, O. in this RHJ Issue). Covid-19 has also amplified, and exposed, pre-existing forms of marginality and vulnerability by hitting precisely the marginalized, impoverished and racialized areas already affected by neoliberal urban policies, such as the Boston African-American and Latinx ones we visited in the closing tour of our conference. These are the same areas affected by the racialized police brutality confronted by the Black Lives Matter protests. In the United States as elsewhere, the urban roots of social problems have to be put at the center, as they are key in understanding the local and territorial dimension of contemporary social struggles (see Sennett 1970).

### **Activist\*scholar resistance**

What appeared evident to all during the conference was that much like the urban-rural binary, the clear-cut distinction between scholars and activists is just another dichotomy we should get rid of. Many of the people present at the debate did not identify clearly with one side of the hyphen or the other: identities are fluid, and people pass through different roles and positions according to contexts, life-stages, careers and even strategies. Very often activists consider knowledge production an essential part of their political commitment. Dominic Moulden explained how education and theoretical elaboration are considered a substantial part of ONE-DC's community activism, and that as soon as the organization stopped doing grassroots education, it lost much of its capacity to act. This conception is part of the 'Just City' framework in which struggle and understanding mingle in an effort to build liberation, health and joy for all (Hyra et al., 2019). The existence of an anti-scientist prejudice among community members is often taken for granted by scholars, to justify their lack of capacity in communicating with the general public. On the contrary, Michael Herzfeld affirmed that those who hold contempt towards intellectuals and their expertise are more easily found among people in power, than among those who have none.

In the case of the Barcelona neighborhood of Bon Pastor, for example, the authorities that sentenced the community for demolition found disposable both the neighbors they wished to displace, and the researchers that were elaborating viable alternatives to its destruction (Portelli 2015, 2020, Col·lectiu Repensar Bonpastor 2015). This does not mean, however, that intellectual work deserves respect per se. Another participant at the conference, S'bū Zikode, president of the shack dwellers union Abahlali baseMjondolo in Johannesburg, stated clearly in his intervention that the legitimacy of intellectuals is based on their capacity of being grounded in popular struggles. This Gramscian insight emerges from the observation of how the media keep presenting shack dwellers as people unable to speak for themselves, constantly in need of members of the higher classes to interpret and direct their desires. Many 'experts' claim guidance of 'ordinary people', although their knowledge is not grounded in their everyday lives (see: Soprizzetti, 2017; Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011; Rakopoulos, 2015, cit. in Herzfeld, 2018). The function of an activist\*scholar is to reverse

this bias, elaborate a language through which useful knowledge is channeled to communities, and make local knowledge and political positions available to the general public, as well as to the academic milieu.

This comes together with a second concept Loretta Lees brought in: the ‘gentrification of scholars.’ While departments are bound to the audit culture that forces them to produce huge numbers of papers and books for the sake of ‘impartial’ evaluation (Strathern, 2005; Shore and Wright, 2015), the activists involved in academia are often enrolled into doing the public engagement and impact work that the academy demands. The spaces of cultural critique and public engagement that many institutions maintain, however, are often used as a means to compensate for their self-centeredness. While the great majority of peer-reviewed articles published in humanities journals are not read even once (Heleta, 2017), and corporate publishers extract profit from unpaid and specialized work, activist\*scholars are often subject to a supplementary extractivist mechanisms which draw profit not only from their work, but also from their carefully-built and carefully-nurtured networks of solidarity, and on the body of experience that comes with them. As Stavros Stavrides remarked, these critical spaces are indeed very small, and most academics hold contempt, or at least detachment, towards grassroots struggles and to the scholars that collaborate with them. Researchers who try to keep open spaces of grassroots political intervention are often penalized, and not only in their scientific respectability. For those involved in building a career, dedication to community, political justice and fairness with the people with whom one works requires time that is already scarce.

Yasar Adanalı added that as well as the fear of losing respectability for being considered a political dissident, academic precarity also complicates the work that a politically engaged position requires. To this point, Lees gave the example of a public inquiry she was involved in, in which a barrister discredited ‘Lees and her rabble’ as dissident lefties in order to undermine their academic credibility. Participants observed that less dominant university departments often manage to keep higher degrees of freedom in expressing their political involvement than their counterparts in high-ranking universities, and often host strongly politically committed groups of researchers (for example, CLACSO, Universidad de San Martín IDEAS’s working group on popular economies in Buenos Aires, or Barcelona’s Observatory on Anthropology of Urban Conflict). This is coherent with state systems designed for the protection of people over profit: in Ecuador’s and Brazil’s legal systems, for example, property must accomplish a social function. Diana Bell, Welita Caetano, and S’bu Zikode highlighted how these institutional protections increasingly eroded by neoliberalism, are often enforced by squatters and occupiers of vacant lands (Del Rio, 2016), who paradoxically face repression and reprisal for the defense of legally-sanctioned rights! The housing activist Welita Caetano, for example, had to flee Brazil shortly before the conference, fearing a prison conviction for converting abandoned buildings in São Paulo’s city center into homes for single mothers (Jornalistas Livres, 2019).

The dispossession experienced by communities threatened by displacement is mirrored by the dispossession of the public and engaged function of the researcher, carried out as part of the fundamental ‘third mission’ of universities, and can represent a new foundation for

common struggles across class and professional barriers. Mindy Fullilove considers urban crises as opportunities to overcome roles and frontiers and to work together. After displacement, she explains, people often re-organize into gang-like groups based on strong identity ties. New hardships can also bring separate groups to work together again, as Fullilove explained in some earlier work (2013), something that can also be witnessed during the Covid-19 crisis. A classic example of the heterogeneous alliances we point to is the ‘crime to fit the punishment’ that gave birth to the masterpiece movie ‘The Salt of the Earth’. In 1954, blacklisted Hollywood professionals allied with the women and men of a unionized New Mexico coal mining community in defense both of the workers’ right to fair pay and decent working conditions against mining companies, and of the filmmakers’ right to free speech against McCarthyism. It was a frontal challenge to the ruling institutions: through collective work, it asserted the right to resist, to dissent unjust laws, and to oppose illegitimate policies.

### **Reflecting on the role of the institutions**

What role can - *must* - universities play in urban struggles for justice? Despite the drastic changes that surround them, universities cling to their traditional role as supposed impartial observers of social reality. Though positivist and objectivist theoretical frames are being abandoned in most fields of (social) science, the inherent paradigm of scholarship is still the naturalist observation of reality as if the observer were detached from it – regardless of whether it is observing the dissolution of a cell, of a neighborhood, or of a state (see: Juris and Khashnabish, 2013).

Objectivism, in fact, rests on the same epistemological basis as colonial urban planning: it legitimizes and rationalizes the greed of conquerors and self-proclaimed rulers, through the ‘verifiable truths’ of allegedly impersonal disciplines (Porter, 2010). Today these claims are untenable, but academics who challenge them still feel that they need to hyphenate their political engagement, as though it were a willful variation on some standard purity of research detached from reality. In anthropology, for example, labels or sub-disciplines such as ‘dialogic,’ ‘applied,’ ‘public,’ ‘engaged,’ and ‘collaborative’ research suggest that some non-hyphenated, uncollaborative, un-engaged way of working really exists. In geography, the whole critical geography movement plays off of these terms and approaches. We argue that a horizontal, situated, and transparent approach to knowledge production is the only reasonable form of research outside of colonialism and domination (see: Hale, 2008; Lassiter, 2005; Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell, 2008; Low and Merry, 2010; Juris and Khasnabish, 2013).

As a part of criticism raised by some participants, together with our own critical reflection, we must question and define the role of academic institutions in their local contexts. In urban areas all around the world, beyond the North-South divide, cultural and educational institutions are catalysts for redevelopment processes that grab public funding and force the displacement of communities (See: Hirsch, 1998; Maurrasse, 2001; Carriere, 2010). Like other large US Ivy-league universities, Harvard University is a massive real-estate

owner that has led a ‘fourth wave’ of gentrification (Lees et al., 2008) in one of the least affordable cities in the United States - one whose diverse historic center, particularly the West End, was almost completely erased in the process of urban renewal in the 1950s (O’Connor, 1995; Fisher and Hughes, 1992). Nowadays, a new campus in the Boston suburb of Allston is extending the price-breaking influence of Harvard outside the frontiers of Cambridge to the other side of the Charles River. Meanwhile, Harvard’s pension funds are invested in Brazilian farmland through third-party agribusiness companies which are displacing Afro-descendant communities (Grain, 2020). This speaks to a new momentum in the neoliberalization of cultural institutions through commoditization, profit-making, the promotion of unregulated labor, and the privatization of previously common goods (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Jurik, 2004; Hyatt, 2010).

We argue, though, that these institutional resources should and can be diverted for the benefit of marginalized communities. Groups of engaged Harvard workers, students, staff and faculty criticize and oppose the neoliberal and discriminatory institutional practices in which the university is involved. Universities are also sites of engaged scholarship that acknowledges different ways of knowing, often at the service of communities. This is the frame in which we inscribed the use of Harvard resources for this conference: it helped to feed a transnational debate on how activist\*scholarship can make struggles more effective. To avoid this debate becoming reduced to yet another marginally influential space of cultural critique (See: Hale, 2008), it will depend on our ongoing conversations and on the degree to which this summary and the debate that follows may contribute to the work of other activist\*scholars. With the backing of academic institutions, engaged scholars obtain the role of supportive allies for communities through their existent practices and knowledges: they tap into networks, speak truth to hegemonic powers, and point to injustices on the ground. Solutions must come from local communities. The methodology to validate these solutions can be elaborated in networks that universities contribute to create.

### **Three ideas for the next decade**

We venture here, now, to propose three ideas that we debated and sought feedback on prior to the conference actually happening. They stem from conversations within a global network for housing, the International Alliance of Inhabitants ([habitants.org](http://habitants.org)), and were discussed at the Social Forums for Housing, at the World Assembly of Inhabitants and at the meetings of the International Tribunal on Evictions that this network promotes and participates in. The first point is realistic, the second will be hard to achieve, the third is utopian. The first one is aimed at universities, in an effort to push their involvement into urban struggles to a more collective level of engagement. The second one addresses not only researchers but also policy makers, trying to produce a small structural change that could make land grabbing and neo-Haussmannian policies more difficult. The latter is harder than the first one because it does not depend only on universities, but also involves state or suprastatal institutions. The last one is a general proposition to frame the idea of a new social contract.

### **First point: universities should be involved in urban struggles**

Whether they frame it as engaged ethnography (Eriksen, 2006; Herzfeld, 2012; Juris and Khasnabish, 2013), as activist research (Hale, 2008; Chatterton et al., 2010), or as action-research (See: Chevalier and Buckles, 2019), very relevant work has been produced by many individual scholars, on, from, and within social movements. Very often these projects allow researchers to use their know-how and time to support struggles and at the same time produce a comprehensive analysis of their strengths and weaknesses. The following historical conjecture is key here: the post-Seattle, post-Zapatista turn away from state-centered left-wing party politics into decentralized, less hierarchical network-like alternative politics (See: Halloway, 2002) is favorable to individuals willing to contribute to specific struggles. Their personal involvement with research can represent a contribution to the community, without the need of bigger political structures that authorize or orient them. Countless numbers of young and not-so-young scholars have engaged with research on sensitive topics in contested areas, trying to contribute to local movements, groups, or networks. This involvement, however, has been mostly *individual*: specific people involved in, for instance, PhD programs with the aim of working on a political issue they care about, or activists engaged in an academic project because they consider it functional to their political project.

What we propose here is to make these activities systematic. The demise of the objectivist paradigm opens more space for professors or even departments to encourage their students to be involved in social movements. As soon as being part of a housing struggle does not run counter to the respectability of scientific production but is considered instead a privileged point of view from which to observe reality, academic supervisors can establish enduring relationships with activist networks and involve their students in comprehensive learning experiences. The networks will receive new and fresh energies with which to address their problems (for example, in doing surveys or writing materials, but also in contributing with hands-on labor). In an ideal scenario, the students will be placed in a responsible position from which they may pursue their study ‘from the inside,’ develop an understanding of diverse ways of knowing beyond academia, accepting the expertise that comes out of the community, understand themselves as part of a forcefield, with both privileges and responsibilities as fellow human beings; while the community will obtain visibility and help to strengthen their claims through systematic methods of analysis. This obviously requires a series of additional cautions, especially after Cambridge PhD researcher and sociologist Giulio Regeni was purported to be tortured and killed in Egypt by Al Sisi secret police in 2017: departments and students need to be aware of the risks but also of the opportunities that any ‘situated’ position implies. They should be able to choose their own position accordingly and with the proper ethical and precautionary measures in place.

There are already many examples of these more collective and enduring relationships between university departments and housing struggles. To remain geographically close to the place and institutions in which we developed our conference, we want to cite Harvard’s Law Clinic’s permanent collaboration with City Life / Vida Urbana (See: Jobin-Leeds, 2016: 102-127). Every week, attorneys from the Harvard School of Law provide free consultancy to Boston residents threatened with eviction or foreclosure who attend CLVU’s meetings. The

experience at the Law Clinic provides an invaluable opportunity for training law students, who might become experts in the jurisprudence of evictions, while offering a crucial contribution to Boston residents' individual struggles and their collective campaign for a just-cause eviction law. Other professional tools that were put in service of community struggles were presented at the conference: the architectural competition of ideas to develop alternative plans for neighborhoods threatened by demolitions in Barcelona (Stefano Portelli) and Beirut (Nadine Bekdache); the critical mapping of evictions in San Francisco (Erin McElroy); the development of a critical "icono-ethnography" as an interdisciplinary approach to foster emancipatory participation and collaboration among diverse actors affected by urban transformation (Yildirim Tschoepe & Käser 2020); and the toolkit developed by MIT Displacement Research and Action Network to measure displacement, tested in Quito, Ecuador (Diana Bell: see IDMC 2014).

### **Second point: independent monitoring**

As Loretta Lees pointed out during the debate, while neoliberal policies keep imposing their agenda on governments worldwide, the aim of activist\*scholars' involvement should be to make disruptive policies riskier for investors. Researchers linked with community struggles are often experts in evaluating the negative impacts of a specific 'operation' (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2018), having studied in detail and from the inside its effects on communities and people. This knowledge, however, very often ends up confined in a PhD or Masters thesis, or in scholarly articles and books that increase the prestige of the writer, of the university, and of the publishers, but rarely manages to make a difference for communities. There is a tool that has been developed since the 1970s to evaluate the impact of policies, but this is rarely connected to the independent monitoring that scholar-activists perform. It is the variously defined 'human impact assessment' or 'social impact assessment' procedure debated inside and outside state institutions, but not yet officially implemented (See: Vanclay, 2003; Burdge, 2004; Vanclay and Esteves, 2011). As a small factory owner confronting displacement from the Barcelona neighborhood of Poblenou once said: 'When they build a highway, they study its impact on birds and trees; why when they destroy 200 hectares of urban fabric they don't do the same for people?' (Portelli, 2015).

Social Impact Assessment, or SIA, includes 'the process of analyzing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, projects) and any social change process invoked by those interventions' (Vanclay, 2003). Nonetheless, the social and anthropological impacts of projects have been neglected, and social impact assessment is only triggered when environmental concern arises. Social Impact Assessment has been called the 'orphan child' of impact assessment, since it received much less juridical attention than the Environmental Impact Assessment (Burdge, 2002). This is a consequence of a nature/culture divide, and is reflected in the experience of communities that often consider that their natural environment is held in better regard than their lives (as in Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel 'The Hungry Tide,' when residents of a Bengali community are neglected by the NGOs that protect deadly

tigers), or, in an urban environment, where buildings are more protected than its inhabitants (Herzfeld, 2009; Portelli, 2015; 2020; Hasan, 2015).

A scholar who criticizes the inadequate influence that SIA has on actual policies wrote that ‘it is time for a generational shift in the way socioeconomic studies and community participation are undertaken in resource development decisions and design’ (Harvey, 2011: xxxiii). Channeling scholar-activism into SIA and campaigning to make the impact of policies accountable might be a way of adding depth and political value to this moribund bureaucratic structure. If a ‘human impact assessment’ was made compulsory, all urban development projects would have to provide verifiable longitudinal evidence that they had not had a negative impact on communities, for example causing evictions or displacement, including phenomenological displacement (Marcuse, 1986; Lees and Hubbard, 2020). Obviously, human impact assessment can be circumvented by fraudulent methods as easily as environmental impact assessments; countless environmental disasters were caused by projects that obtained an environmental impact approval (emission trading is one example of the perversity of greenwashing). However, a campaign for human impact assessment beyond local governments, up to international jurisprudence, will make it more difficult for companies to implement projects with obvious negative social consequences, like the infrastructural mega-projects that devastate the environment of entire communities such as the flooding of the ancient town of Hasankeyf caused by the Illisu Dam, which displaced tens of thousands (Initiative to Keep Hasankeyf Alive 2000).

There is a strong body of literature on this, and in some contexts a human impact assessment is already compulsory. In Brazil, the *laudo antropológico* is compulsory for companies operating in indigenous lands. Despite its contradictions (See: Leite, 2005; de Oliveira et al., 2015), the model of the *laudo* can serve as a model for other forms of human impact assessment in other contexts. University departments can employ their students not only in doing research on the impacts, but in validating or contrasting human impact assessment reports, thus offering a decisive contribution to the defense of communities; at the same time, departments can engage in campaigning to make them compulsory. This could guarantee some local victories. But the stakes, at this point, should be higher.

### **Third point: a new social contract**

A broader look at the variety and number of struggles over housing and land all over the world reveals that every single struggle can only be considered effective within its own frame of emergency. While joining together on single issues, activists and researchers can also work together to develop a broader task: that of imagining a different legal framework. The 2019 protests suffocated by the global Covid-19 pandemic, were a reaction to a combination of factors: heavy cutbacks to welfare; millionaire bailouts of private banks with citizens’ money; unacceptable segregation on the intersected bases of race, gender, and class; environmental catastrophe; the exponential growth of private companies’ intrusiveness in public policies; and the vacuity of the rhetoric employed by politicians to enforce social cohesion by discriminating against minorities or leveraging ethnic or religious nostalgia.

Many of these protests direct/ed their anger not only against specific policies or governments (in fact, progressive governments were also contested: see Riofrancos, 2019), but against the nation-state and the Rousseauian social contract itself. Some of these protests made this concern explicit, as in Chile or Catalonia; others made evident how the pressure of corporate forces and the military-industrial complex perverted the original scope for which people pledged their allegiance to the State. The creation of ‘autonomous zones’ in the US George Floyd protests, as well as the toppling of statues, also call into question the need to redefine the relationship of people and the nation state. The same pattern emerged in the diffusion in many countries of self-managed structures of mutual support in response to the lack of initiative of governments towards the Covid-19 crisis.

A new social contract should go beyond the nineteenth century imposition on people to respect the sovereignty of states, it requires state institutions to respect the sovereignty of people. Debates on a new social contract until now have rarely gone beyond imagining new Keynesian-like policies that states are no longer able to implement (see: Rifkin, 1996; Schwenninger, 2010; Dasgupta, 2018). Invocations to supra-national entities seem pointless in a decade that opened with the Copenhagen Climate Summit and the World Bank endorsement of the ‘Right to the City’ in Rio de Janeiro, and yet witnessed one of the worst waves of land-grabbing and urban displacement in human history. These pledges do not acknowledge the extent to which communities everywhere have shown their capacity to manage the territories they inhabit in a more effective and sustainable way than national or international policies. Thus, comparative studies can help local communities to not only recognize their specificity in a broader context and develop collective solutions for localized problems, but also contribute to framing local problems in a comprehensive way, beyond immediate concerns. The leaderless and horizontal social struggles and revolt of 2019 have brought to the forefront the new political subject that can take the lead of a new political system for the future; nonetheless, we don’t just need to win single battles, but to change systemic conditions. Universities can be a place where such a new system could be co-produced.

Disciplines like history, anthropology or geography can help find solutions for problems that today seem unsolvable, by highlighting how human systems function(ed) in other spatial and temporal frames (See: Graeber and Sahlins 2017, Scott 2017). In the concluding remarks at our seminar Cemal Kafadar referred to certain forms of Sufism as examples of inclusive, network-like, trans-territorial, and ethically concerned ways of organizing societies, previous and alternative to colonial nation-states. Other forms of ‘spiritual citizenship’ (Castor, 2017) or of trans-national diasporic communities, can also inspire our attempts to imagine what we will bring in a future when our lives will not be encapsulated in the fixed, and allegedly timeless boundaries of national entities.

Examples of community management and self-government should be drafted and reflected upon, comparatively, with the aim of designing new models of territorial governance: a new grassroots legitimacy that can function as a political horizon for the ongoing and coming struggles against dispossession, land-grabbing, and the commodification of life. If this conference - through its emphasis on transdisciplinary

exchanges and the building of scholar\*activist networks beyond academic and territorial boundaries - helps us to advance in this direction even a little bit, then it was certainly worth the effort.

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