

Book review: **Squatters in the Capitalist City: Housing, Justice and Urban Politics** Miguel A. Martínez, 2020

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Abstract

What is squatting? Is squatting a social movement? In a retrospective analysis of some of the most emblematic cases of squatting in Europe as well as through an exhaustive review of the literature on this field of study, the author responds to these and many more questions. The book presents the past learnings and current and future challenges for the radical urban social movement of squatting. I examine the book's content and point to some issues I would have liked to see included.

Keywords

Squatting, Europe, inequality, resistance

Squatters in the Capitalist City: Housing, Justice and Urban Politics by Miguel A. Martínez is a volume in the Housing and Society Series edited by the late Ray Forrest, at the University of Bristol's School for Policy Studies. *Squatting in the Capitalist City* is in part a comprehensive approach to the field of squatting studies, in part a self-academic-biography of its author, who confesses at the beginning of the book that this has been his topic of interest since he was a student and participated as a young researcher in squats in Madrid. This dedication to the field is evident in the vast knowledge accumulated through the years, which the author summarizes in the book, as well as the fact that he has become one of the most well-known scholars worldwide in this field of studies.

The book, lavishly illustrated with images, all taken by the author, which complement the text and bring the reader closer to the sites of the events, invites the reader to a fascinating read that deals with the questions: is squatting a social movement, and, by the way, what is a social movement? The author makes an exhaustive tour of the history of this particular field of research. In his search, Martínez makes up with classic scholars who preceded and inspired him in his personal travel, including Manuel Castells. As Martínez recounts the history of the

study of squatting and the positions adopted by scholars through the evolution of the movement, he narrates the process of transformation of Castells' work from a left radical urban sociology to a more conformist approach. The reformist turn that Castells made towards the 1990s disappointed many senior urban radical researchers like me, for whom Castells used to be a sort of guru. This is why the passage on Castells' de-radicalization and adaptation to the conditions given by an hegemonic and neo-liberalizing capitalist society, to the extent that he appeared as almost a defender of the capitalist system, particularly attracted my attention.

Time and space converge harmoniously in the book, which is a sort of genealogy of squatting at the same time, as it acts as a map of some of the most emblematic cases of squatting in Europe, combining the collection of many of the author's own experiences with relevant secondary sources. Martínez ties together the work of several scholars studying squatting movements in Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, Poland and Italy, which are revised and reframed in an ambition to rethink the very concept of squatting as a social movement, and, in that case, what kind of social movement we are talking about. It is clear that for this author, the intersection between different kinds of struggles (housing, anti-gentrification, anti-evictions, feminist, class, antiracism, among others), as well as multiple systems of oppression (capitalism, neoliberalism, racism, patriarchy), are important factors to understand current urban mobilizations. All these aspects are incorporated in the critical approach to categorize squats, which focused on the activities carried out in the occupations rather than on the political contexts and motivations for each occupation. In Martínez's typology, the focus is on the use of the buildings, for housing or social and cultural activities on the one hand, and for tactical and strategic purposes on the other. Furthermore, he looks at the interactions between these two types. In this sense, the approach is innovative and emphasizes the political dimensions of squatting.

The examples of squatting from different locations in Europe are intertwined with the topics discussed in the thematic chapters: autonomy (from capitalism) and in particular feminist autonomy; the structural and political context; the integration with state institutions; and the problem of the criminalization of the movement. The autonomy claims from some of the squatting groups are illustrated mostly, though not only, by feminist demands on separate spheres of struggles for men and women. This has been thoroughly explained by Silvia Federici, frequently quoted in the chapter. Autonomy and separatism have been important feminist strategies worldwide for moving positions forward, and the author draws connections between autonomous groups and some of his proposed typologies of squatting in a serious effort to incorporate feminist activism in our understanding of squatting.

Among the things that I had wished were better addressed in the book is the importance of police brutality in light of the neoliberal militarization of cities, a process ongoing and affecting all radical social protests in public space, including squatting. In his critique of Castells, Martínez comments: "These mediations in my view, should be supplemented with different degrees of engagement by other third parties (the police, by-standers, other social groups and organisations)" (p. 31). Here, the relation between an increasingly militarized state repression and the criminalization and repression of squatting and other forms of urban

resistance is in need of major scholarly critical scrutiny. While Chapter 6 treats the issue of police violence and brutality against squatters, the analysis of the role being played by the militarized state in defending private property and capitalism could have been given more space in the book. The role of the police defending private property rather than protecting human lives or “mediating”, seems to be attached to the very essence of the existence of the police. Coincidentally, at the same time I was writing this review, I was reading the book *Police. A Field Guide* (Correia & Tyler, 2018). Through recalling the works of Adam Smith, the authors conclude that “the state’s use of violence to enforce property relations is how capitalism defends what it considers just. To speak of enforcement is to speak of police. Property is thus a form of police violence” (p. 48). Criminalization goes necessarily hand in hand with repression and police violence.

Another aspect touched on, but not fully developed, is racism. Although mentioned several times, especially in Chapter 3, racism is almost only associated to the presence of migrants in contemporaneous squats in Europe, and in some cases to antiracist demands expressed by the occupants. Yet as many scholars have pointed out since the 1980s, racial relations are a fundamental force shaping the capitalist city. This reality is rather absent from the analysis. The centrality of race and racism in squatting movements in North-American cities for instance are the most illustrative, though not the sole examples. The particular patterns of racialized segregation might vary from case to case, as the populations of migrants, i.e. the racialized urban population, may live in city centers or in the urban peripheries. Regardless of where migrant residential areas are located, these residents are socially excluded and stigmatized, resulting in serious difficulties entering the housing market, especially in times of financialization and marketization of housing (Baeten et al., 2017). Furthermore, they are exposed to racialized police violence and racial profiling on a daily basis.

This links to the next aspect that deserves some attention, which is the very title of the book. While the richness of the variety of examples from European cities contributes to an important update of knowledge production within this field of studies, important aspects related to contemporary urban neoliberalism are left aside due to the limited geographical scope to the European region. I am thinking of the cases of occupied factories in Argentina or the commonplace occupation of land for the unhoused in Latin American cities in general, in times of recrudescing poverty. This not only affects housing conditions, but is also triggered by reduced access to housing under the current neoliberal condition. Talking about the centrality of poverty means talking about the centrality of housing. A more suitable title could have been “Squatting in the European capitalist city”, at the same time, because a global approach to the issue of squatting, through a trans-local dialogue, is still needed.

Martínez’s book suggests that the meta-change that Castells was looking for, inspired by the revolutionary urban movements from the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America and elsewhere, may have to wait or be abandoned. Meanwhile, the achievements of local groups struggling for decent housing around the world, social movements or not, are already today making important contributions to urban change at the global level, and these are steps forward towards the acquisition of a more egalitarian city. Martínez makes it clear that more

important than trying to define whether the phenomena that we are looking at is possible to classify as a traditional social movement or not, which has been almost an obsession for some urban sociologists like Castells, we should look at the ways in which the urban struggles that we study and participate in as researchers and activists, should articulate to succeed in achieving their goals.

This book must be read by scholars and activists interested on the topic of squatting and in general those interested in urban movements of resistance against neoliberalism.

References

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