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Neighbours ≠ *vecinas*: The politics of language in Barcelona's housing struggles

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in conversation with **members of struggles for housing in
Barcelona**

Abstract

This Conversation emerges from Radical Housing Journal collaborators' curiosity and reflections about the growing use of the term *vecinas* —in English, neighbour— among housing movements in Barcelona in recent years. From our participation in the fight for the right to housing in this city, we wanted to more deeply explore the dynamics behind the word *vecinas* through a conversation with three housing activists based in Barcelona's Sant Andreu neighbourhood. From their experiences and activism, they explain the meanings of *vecinas*, to what extent its use signals a discursive turn, the reason for its feminisation and the convergences and divergences —and also the inclusiveness / exclusivity— in its use by different groups. Finally, they reflect on what *vecinas* has meant during the Covid-19 pandemic and the 'no return to normality'.

Keywords

Neighbour, language politics, resident, Lexicons of housing struggle.

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There are words in many languages that designate a person whose residential proximity attributes different levels of social, cultural or political closeness at different scales. Terms such as “inhabitant” or “resident”, for example, indicate practices of dwelling and place, but do not carry the strong connection with a defined territory of words such as “citizenship”, which connotes belonging to a city, and by extension a state. Within transnational lexicons

of housing struggle, territorial terms play a key role in mobilisation and self-identification. This text explores the (im)possibility of transnational translations through the diverging meanings and uses of the term *vecino/a* in Spanish—in English, neighbour.

Although the translation from neighbour to *vecino/a* is technically correct, its meaning takes on very different political overtones if its use in the Spanish language is compared in the context of the contemporary Spanish state with that of most English-speaking countries. In English, neighbour has a neutral connotation at best, but with a strong conservative and racialised, and thus pejorative, grounding. In recent years in Barcelona, we have noticed the increasing use of the word *vecino/a*, especially its feminine form, *vecina*. It is a phenomenon related to the territorialization of the movement for the right to housing, a fact that seems to reflect an important change both in the subject in struggle and in its form of organization. As collaborators of the *Radical Housing Journal*, within the call for contributions on lexicons of housing struggles we wanted to think more deeply about the word neighbour with people intimately involved in the fight for the right to housing in Barcelona, to understand how the concept is mobilised politically as well as the nuances of its use. To give more context on how such a concept is understood and to underline the importance of lexicons that cannot be accurately translated into another language, we briefly outline two social processes in the recoding of the word neighbour in the Anglo-Saxon context.

The first process that we want to signal occurs in relation to the growth of a form of vigilantism in the United States in the late 1960s. It was a period of racial and social revolt, with the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War and white flight from city centres to suburban areas. An alleged increase in crime in this period generated a prevention initiative focused on residential areas and driven by local citizens. With an eye on this “crime” and the legal and social control of these neighborhoods, the National Sheriffs Association founded

Figure 1

Neighbourhood Watch Sign.
Source: Unisouth/Ellison
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the Neighborhood Watch programme in 1972, extended to the UK (1982) and Australia (1980s) among other countries. Its roots, as highlighted on the official US National Neighborhood Watch website, “go back to the time of colonial settlements, when night watchmen patrolled the streets” (NNW, 2021). It also inspired more extreme privatised programs such as The Community Security Project in Johannesburg, South Africa, which can be understood as a reconstitution of the apartheid order (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2008). Neighborhood Watch is based on encouraging neighbours to observe and report on everything that happens in their neighborhood that may be out of the ordinary, in turn allowing the police to access and control the community in novel ways (Darian-Smith, 1982). Decades in the making, programmes are still active in both the US and the UK, Australia and New Zealand, funded mostly from national "security" and "justice" departmental budgets.

Gentrification was the second process that denominated the "neighbour" as a figure that carries a certain project of moralizing normativity in contexts of rapid urban change. In the US, after the previously mentioned period of white flight to suburban areas, large-scale urban renewal projects were also accompanied by the return to city centres, aptly described by geographer Neil Smith (1979) as a back to the city movement by capital. As sociologist and activist Sylvie Tissot explains, in many urban centres the establishment of white landlords' neighbourhood associations occurred in parallel and in response to Black and Hispanic tenants' movements for civil rights (Tissot, 2015). These neighbours assumed the role of mediators in local conflicts, incorporating what the ethnographer Elijah Anderson defines as the values of good neighbours that constitutes “a peculiar combination of neighborhood and self-defense” (Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community, quoted in Tissot, p.126), strictly linked to private property and the liberal civic spirit. Contrary to opening up a transformative, activist space, neighbours establish themselves largely as figures to maintain the status quo.

At the same time, the recent effervescence of the use of the word *vecino/a* in the Spanish state is not without precedents. Under the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975), the growing migration of rural populations to urban areas during the 1950s and 1960s, as well as demographic growth, contributed to the chaotic expansion of vast urban centres devoid of basic services. In this context, from the 1950s onwards, a neighbourhood movement began to take shape that would take hold throughout 1960 and connect with the clandestine political opposition to the regime (Molinero & Ysás, 2010; Pérez Quintana & Sánchez León, 2008; Radcliffe, 2011). In this context, so-called “neighbourhood associations” emerged from the daily struggle to improve existence in neighbourhoods where substandard housing and poor living conditions prevailed, a first popular organisation that would end up being decisive for the configuration of a “democratic culture” and the end of the dictatorship (Cuesta Gómez 2015, p. 27). Their initial collective actions sought to respond to the challenges caused by different urban projects, but as of 1970 they acquired an explicitly political dimension aimed at overcoming the new “formal representative democracy” (Cuesta Gómez 2015, p. 49). As a “school of civil democracy” and openness to social “participation” (Santacana 2011, p. 1), the neighbourhood movement consisted in the configuration of a

popular culture that —although conflictive, complex and later in decline— constitutes a fundamental precedent of the use of the word "neighbour" as a form of reclamation.

In recent years, *el/la vecino/a* has been reborn in the discourse of the fight against evictions, to mobilise solidarity at the neighbourhood level and promote direct action. In cities like Madrid and Barcelona, more and more groups and social movements use the word *vecinas* to focus their political demands and target audience. We observed it as a small discursive twist, since we saw from first-hand experience that “neighbours” was hardly used by the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) in its first years of activity. It was around 2017, when the housing movement began to decentralise and various neighbourhood groups and unions emerged following a logic of territorialisation, that the word *vecino/a* entered onto the scene or, at the very least, came in with more force. The Barcelona Tenants Union (Sindicat de Llogateres), in its inaugural campaign, presented itself as follows: “We are a group of *vecinos* and *vecinas* of Barcelona who want to promote a union of tenants in defense of the right to housing and fair rents”. Likewise, in 2019, Barcelona’s PAH titled one of its communications underlining the role of this same subject: “Blackstone expels *vecinas* and makes the city precarious”. Currently, the term *vecina* is used by practically all neighbourhood groups and unions, both in their campaigns as well as to stop evictions. For example, the Sindicat de Barri del Poble Sec defines itself as a group of “*vecinas* organised from mutual support for the collective defense of the neighborhood”; the Grup d’Habitatge de Sants has denounced police violence in various evictions while “*vecinas* are still inside defending their houses”; and the Sindicat d’Habitatge de Sant Andreu managed to challenge the expulsion of the “*vecinas* of Pons i Gallarza”.

Barcelona is a city that historically has been the scene of important struggles and forms of self-organisation, and more recently on issues around the right to housing. The first PAH was founded here in 2009 and housing has been a central axis of protests and direct action, with great resonance in Europe and beyond. For this reason, and because of our participation in the fight for the right to housing in this city, we wanted to more deeply explore the dynamics behind the word *vecinas* through a conversation with three housing activists based in Barcelona’s Sant Andreu neighbourhood. From their experiences and life learnings, they explain to us what meaning the word has, to what extent its use signals a discursive turn, the reason for its feminisation, the convergences and divergences —and also the inclusiveness / exclusivity— of its use in different groups and, finally, what *vecina* has meant in the past year during the Covid-19 pandemic.

RHJ: In the specific group, organisation or campaign where you participate, what does the word *vecino* or *vecina* mean and why is it used?

Roger: In October, from the Sindicat d’Habitatge de Sant Andreu, we organised a presentation of a book entitled “La ciutat sense veïns” (The city without neighbours), by the journalist Andreu Merino. I imagined a city packed with people who don't greet each other, they don't even look at each other when crossing the street. A city without neighbours is a depersonalised city, without character. Where I participate, the word *vecina* is used more and more as a subject of daily life, community and above all as a generator of urban conflicts, in the best sense of the word. That is to say, the *vecina* is the one who

lives a community life and in some way organises with other neighbours, either at a cultural level or to face social injustices.

Enric: When we use the term *vecinas* in the Sindicat, we refer to any person who lives in the neighbourhood, to all those with whom we share places. We refer, in a way, to each of the components of the community to which we aspire, based on equality, respect and mutual aid. “Against resignation, a call for neighbourhood self-defense” (*Contra la resignació, una crida a l'autodefensa veïnal*), announced the first leaflets issued by the Sindicat. But this definition of *vecinas* is somewhat problematic and needs to be qualified. In Sant Andreu there is also a significant community of owners whose class and thus economic interests collide with the interests of impoverished tenants and people without access to housing. When we appeal to our *vecinas* to stop an eviction or to carry out a protest action, we are actually invoking a certain class solidarity among those who recognise ourselves as equals. Maybe we should stop saying *vecinas* and start saying *vecinas who empathise with housing access problems*.

Jelen: From an anarchist background and trajectory, however, the word *vecina* may have similarities with its English connotations. That is, in traditional anarchist spaces, the word *vecina* is used to refer to a political subject associated with reformist positions or those of institutional politics. As an ideology against the state, until a few years ago any type of connection with this institutional perspective has been avoided. However, in the last five or six years, the meaning of *vecinas* has been subtly changing. With the emergence of housing movements and their growing connection with the movement for political squatting, this connotation has gradually faded. People who a few years ago would never have used the word *vecinas*, considering it as “reformist”, now do, although it is still controversial. Beyond the connotations of the word in Spanish, what is interesting and inherent in the evolution of its use is, in reality, the evolution and confluence of two previously very distant social movements: the movement for the right to housing and the anarchist movement for political squatting.

RHJ: The issue of the evolution of the term *vecinas* is of great interest to us in order to deepen our understanding of this semantic and political change. In your opinion, where does this discursive turn come from, if it can be considered that way? How does it differ from its use in earlier times and movements?

Roger: Until the end of the 1980s, when city councils had practically no power to govern their municipalities and depended on the central government, it was neighbourhood associations (AAVV), organised by neighbours themselves, who were in charge of letting the leaders know, usually through street mobilisations and direct action, what the neighbourhood needed or did not want. An example is Barcelona’s Roquetes bus line. In 1987, Roquetes was a totally peripheral and working-class neighbourhood. The Roquetes AAVV had been asking for a bus line for a long time so that its neighbours would not have to walk to Barcelona. The City Council said that a bus could not go through these narrow and steep streets. What did the neighbours do? Well, they organised themselves and decided to go to Plaza Catalunya and hijack a bus, since one of them was also a bus driver. They took the hijacked bus to Roquetes and demonstrated that a bus could pass

through those streets. Since that day, Roquetes has had a bus line. However, after the transition, when regional and municipal elections began to be held, the municipalities turned the AAVVs into a tool to demobilise neighbours. Years later, although we live in a much more atomised world and the word *vecino* or *vecina* more generally only refers to those who live nearby, it is true that, in the last four years, thanks to the decentralisation of housing struggles many collectives and neighbourhood groups have emerged, organising and acting in each neighbourhood outside of institutional control. And that is where the word *vecino* or *vecina* once again has political connotations, once again becoming a generator of urban conflicts.

Enric: The first time I observed the reclaiming of the term *vecinas* as a political identity was in 2017, in the squatted Bloc La Bordeta in Hostafrancs. At that time, there was a growing tension between two very different groups in Barcelona's PAH. On the one hand, there was the coordination commission that objectively held power within the organisation and was highly focused on achieving legislative change. On the other hand, the Obra Social commission was betting on squatting, autonomy and internal democratisation of the group. In this context of conflict, the coordination commission often prioritised PAH members and the attention their personal cases deserved. Namely, from highest to lowest: foreclosures, rents, and occupations. People who were squatting a home were even explicitly and publicly stigmatised. It was then that some of the neighbours (almost all women) who lived in the squatted Bloc La Bordeta decided to claim themselves as organised neighbours (*vecinas organizadas*). This shift introduced, from my point of view, four important nuances: 1) the term neighbours diluted the distinction between mortgaged homeowners, tenants and squatters; 2) it summoned neighbours who were not facing housing problems; 3) next to the adjective organised it became a call to action; and at the same time, it 4) moved the space of struggle from the collective to the street and to the block, to everyday life.

Roger: As it has been noted before, the PAH did not use *vecinas* previously, and in fact it would not have been correct to use it. Their discourse was addressed to all "homeowners" (who were not really homeowners), who could not afford to pay their mortgage. The current scenario is very different. It is no longer just about people who cannot pay their mortgage, it is about the exorbitant price of rent, especially in Barcelona and its surroundings. It is about the impossibility of young people to access housing due to the job market, it is about the fact that people are being thrown out of their homes for owners to make more money, even if tenants are older and have rent-controlled housing (*renta antigua*). It is about the fact that an increasingly broad sector of the population is pushed to street homelessness. It is about the fact that, depending on which country you were born in, you won't be rented a flat, or that if you are undocumented you can't access any government support, or the fear that your children will be taken from you if you are evicted. All these people are our *vecinas*. Therefore, this term implies closeness, hence the decentralisation of housing struggle in groups or unions that act in their area and that are therefore neighbours. They are the ones who are close to you, the ones who give you

warmth, the ones who come immediately if you need them. The *vecina* is the one who gets organised, but not only that.

Jelen: On the one hand, it is the term that best suits the definition of the people it represents, since we are talking about people who live in your same neighbourhood, your same street, etc. Literally, they are your *vecinas*, and what's more it refers to the organisation between equals, of people who live in the same territory and are affected by the same problem. And in the face of this reality they organise to defend themselves. For this same reason, most of the housing defense groups are called "Sindicats" (Trade Unions), because they defend the interests of a group of people who are affected by a common problem. On the other hand, I think it is a marketing tool that works. The word *vecina* sounds less harsh than working class, it is less out of date and people can better recognise themselves in this word. In an age of zero or minimal class consciousness, in which the majority of the population does not consider itself to be the working class but rather the middle class, the term *vecina* is more palatable.

RHJ: Why do you use the term *vecina* or *vecinas* in feminine? Why this feminisation?

Jelen: The intentional use of the feminine generic serves to make other gender identities visible without using a very complex language. It is a positive declaration of intentions, since the masculine generic in Spanish makes the rest of gender identities invisible. I use the word *personas* to refer to people¹, which is the only inclusive thing to represent and encompass all gender identities beyond the cis man-woman binary. Nor can we ignore that gender oppressions intersect with those of class and origin. The most affected political subject is numerically cis women of migrant origin, so speaking in the feminine plural is also the closest thing to the reality of the movement.

Enric: In fact, my first conscious encounter with the concept of *vecinas* came from a group of women who were defending their homes and their community. The gender of the term was feminine and it could not be otherwise. On the other hand, its use was inscribed in a Barcelona with a strong and booming feminist movement, where gender-inclusive language was increasingly being used. Today the use of the inclusive feminine is absolutely normalised in practically all housing and political groups in the city. But if I analyse it a little more, I soon realise that my neighbourhood imaginary is quite feminine, perhaps due to the traditional connection of women to reproductive work and the home. My grandmothers immediately come to mind, visiting their neighbours and sharing the mid-afternoon break together, just before going back to the kitchen to prepare dinner for the whole family. And perhaps it has to do with this daily socialisation between neighbours, my intuition that looking at the past we would find echoes of the feminisation of the struggle for housing, carried out on many occasions by women, by *vecinas* defending their homes.

Roger: Yes, on the issue of the struggle for housing, the word *vecina* fits perfectly because women are both the most affected and the most present in housing unions and groups. However, the latter also occurs due to gender roles; it is much more difficult for a man

¹ In Spanish, "personas", which means "persons, people", is a feminine noun.

to ask for help. Added to this is the fact that although there are differences in the way each neighbourhood group or union is organised, they all share certain “libertarian” principles. That is, they are autonomous, assembly-based, there are no formal elements of power, they are anti-capitalist, etc. And that implies a minimum social conscience on many levels, not only in housing. If feminism has been on the rise in recent years, this has not happened just because. Feminism has been working in the shadows for a long time and is now on the political agenda. This has meant, however, that today everyone declares themselves a feminist even though they have no idea what that implies.

Jelen: That's right, on many occasions using the feminine in left-wing political environments has become fashionably "progressive", rather than a political statement. Without the real and everyday work to deconstruct gender oppressions on a personal and collective level, it remains empty of content. Hearing the word *vecina* from those who have not made many efforts in this regard is hypocritical. It would be more honest if they spoke in masculine, since the term *vecinas* can be used in a very demagogic way.

RHJ: We have talked about a fairly widespread use of the word throughout the city, but does it mean the same in all campaigns and organisations? Is there a broad convergence or are there divergences?

Enric: Although there is a certain unanimity in the use of the concept of *vecinas*, since it is difficult to find housing groups that do not claim it, it does not have the same meaning everywhere. It is practice, not language, that defines our political action, and the housing movement is heterogeneous in its practices. Thus, we see how today the word *vecinas* is used by both PAH Barcelona and the Grup d'Habitatge de Sants, for example. Although the two groups meet very close to each other, their practices are worlds apart and consequently so is the meaning of the word *vecinas*. It is not the same to think of your neighbours from a welfare perspective vs. when your political proposal is mutual aid. The Sindicat d'Habitatge de Sant Andreu can be framed the same way as the Grup d'Habitatge de Sants. Both emerge within a few months of each other, as part of a generalised dynamic throughout the city that, as a result of the verification of the immobility of PAH Barcelona (until then a reference in terms of the fight for decent housing) and the growing need for organising a response in each neighbourhood, was leading to the emergence of more local proposals. In Sant Andreu, the Sindicat was born on the back of the neighbours of Pons i Gallarza Street, who were organising to defend their homes from a real estate operation that threatened to evict them. The motto "against resignation, neighbourhood self-defense" (*contra la resignació, autodefensa veïnal*) was present from day one, when the public presentation of the Sindicat took place in January 2018. Unlike the PAH, which very deliberately addressed the so-called mortgaged middle classes who were losing their homes as a result of the 2008 crisis (it was directed at homeowners), the new housing groups were targeting the entire neighbourhood. The objective of groups such as the Sindicat d'Habitatge de Sant Andreu was not only to solve individual housing problems,



Figure 2

Col·lectius, assemblees i grups d'habitatge

but to contribute to the construction of strong communities and to weave solidarity networks between neighbours, with the geographic-neighborhood axis as a starting point.

Roger: As it is a question of class, obviously the use of the term *vecina* is much more solid in peripheral or almost peripheral neighbourhoods or areas where there are already everyday interactions. Calling *vecinas* those who live in Barcelona's central Eixample neighbourhood does not have the same force as those who live in more peripheral neighbourhoods like Sants, Sant Andreu or Nou Barris. The reality is very different. If you grow up in the Eixample, the concept of helping your neighbour is very different than if you grow up in Roquetes, mainly because in the Eixample the help that someone may need does not require a neighbourhood organisation. It is true that even so, the Eixample is where we find more rental homes and in which their owners are large flat holders. Nor will those who act in the Raval neighbourhood use the same language as those who act in Trinitat Vella. And this despite the fact that both have a high percentage of migrant people. In other words, the reality of each area could give a different nuance to the term *vecina*. What is clear is that one of the main reasons it's used in social movements is because it transmits closeness and humanity, but also because it is not a class or political term.

Jelen: The fundamental difference lies in who uses it. In the squatting movement of Sant Andreu it is not used, while in the Sindicat d'Habitatge it is; precisely because of the connotations I was commenting on earlier. However, I think that the Sindicat uses it from a more honest perspective, since I believe that there is active work to blur the differences

and distances between people affected by housing problems and people who are activists. In general, the intention is that involvement is always reciprocal and the people who participate are both activist and affected, although this is not always achieved.

RHJ: It also seems to us that in the use of the term *vecino* or *vecina* there is an intention to make the language different (from another language of political interpellation) but at the same time quite open. That is to say, it seems that the objective is being pursued, on the one hand, to give a political content, different from the figure of the *vecino* or *vecina* and, on the other, to make this interpellation sufficiently inclusive to be able to reach various profiles of people. In which cases is it not achieved? To what extent is it a term that is inclusive enough?

Roger: More than inclusive, it is a closer, direct, fresh word. Less political and more humane. It does not pretend to include all *vecinas*, but rather invites those affected to organise themselves.

Jelen: In the face of capital's discursive victory over class consciousness, working-class movements have seen that it works better to speak in less politicised terms and with more capacity to bring together [different people] than to continue using terms that require greater political consciousness. This has its pros and cons, of course. On the one hand, it enhances the capacity for mobilisation regarding housing issues specifically, but on the other it reduces the capacity for empathy of affected people towards other working class issues, which people might also suffer from, but feel distant from (work, migration, etc.). It is quite inclusive if you have Spanish citizenship or are LGBTQ+. But in favour of this inclusiveness, political reflection is lost and we move away from the root of the problem, which is none other than class war and private property. People without the right to Spanish citizenship, for example, are excluded. The imaginary of the word *vecina* evokes a white person, cis, of a certain age and encompassed within the traditional family unit. I don't think migrants or people with non-normative gender identities or expressions are included in the common conception of our *vecina*. Everything that leaves these frames does not enter, and it is not a problem so much of the word itself but of the significant cultural load that it carries. Shifting from *vecinos* to *vecinas* has been a step to reflect the participation of cis women; that is, a victory for second wave feminism. And this is not bad, but we must keep trying to find practices and terms that include not only women, but decolonial, transfeminist and class perspectives.

Enric: In fact, the typical reactionary *vecino* often appears, angry about certain local protest messages. He usually says something like "you do not represent me" or "you do not speak on behalf of the neighbours". Could we then deduce that the term is void of content and we have the opportunity to give it political significance? Who is the good neighbour? The one who is dying to act as a "balcony cop"²? The one who goes down to the street to stop someone else's eviction? The one who walks past all evictions and doesn't get into

² The term "balcony cop" (*policía de balcón*) refers to a surveillance phenomenon that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic: "They are anguished and pissed-off neighbors who establish themselves as an authority and issue warnings, reproaches and threats to anyone they see on the street and whose behavior they judge is irregular." (Muñoz, 2020).

trouble? We know, and that is clear to us, who is not a good neighbour. The homeless person who lives on the street is not our neighbour. They have been left out of all neighbourhood logic, perhaps in part because of their nomadic nature, perhaps because they put us in front of the mirror. In Sant Andreu we have reflected on this, and although we have not reached any conclusion in terms of a proposal, we have confirmed our collective inability to welcome and accompany people in a more serious housing situation. We lack tools, we haven't even looked for them. Just as the PAH addressed the owners and not the squatters, we address the squatters and not the homeless.

RHJ: Finally, we would like to know if and how the term has resisted in the last year, especially in the networks and organised actions to face the Covid-19 crisis. In many of Barcelona's neighbourhoods Mutual Support Networks (*Xarxes de Suport Mutu*) have been created to guarantee food, material, school support and employment advice. Currently, there are about 20 networks distributed among the 10 districts of the city. This recent emergency seems to have given new impetus, in a way, to "neighbourhood support" in many parts of the city. At the same time, the challenge that the pandemic has posed for the right to housing has made many neighbourhood groups and unions visible and legitimised, both in the discourse against real estate speculation and gentrification and in the need to organise to stop evictions, especially considering the wave that threatens after the end of the eviction moratorium. Is that so? In what sense has the crisis caused by Covid-19 placed the need for mutual aid at the centre, and what relationship may this have had with the use of the term *vecino* or *vecina*? How is this visibility of the need for mutual aid in the neighbourhood reflected today in the struggles for decent housing?

Enric: In March 2020, hours before the entire population was strictly confined to their homes (whoever had one), some people from Sant Andreu called an open meeting where we evaluated the situation, anticipated the scenario for the next few weeks and started the Xarxa de Suport Mutu de Sant Andreu. As in other neighbourhoods in the city, the Xarxa called on the residents of the neighbourhood to organise themselves in their housing blocks or on their street and take care of their neighbours. In those early days there was a general feeling of panic, everyone was looking for shade under which to take shelter. In record time, the Xarxa was managing to reach many more people than any other previous political experience in the neighbourhood, even if it was only a Telegram channel and a promise: "you are not alone". It was a proposal as radical as it was common sense: during the months of confinement, for many older people having a supportive neighbour was a blessing. But make no mistake, there was nothing extraordinary about this neighbourhood solidarity and it would certainly have occurred spontaneously if the Xarxa had not existed. In my understanding, the Xarxa only facilitated this process, emphasising the concept of mutual aid and providing it with certain practical tools. But the weeks went by and as the situation became chronic, the neighbourhood instant messaging groups that had served to organise neighbourhood solidarity faded. The same happened with the contributions to the neighbourhood's Food Network (*Xarxa d'Aliments*).

Jelen: It could have been a political opportunity to join forces and struggles, and undoubtedly the term *vecina* has gained more importance in this context. However, we

have not been able to do that. And by now, the potential force for change has deflated. Despite the more than negative forecasts due to the post-pandemic crisis that may begin to hit harder and harder, it does not seem to me that sufficient mobilisation has been achieved. In part, I think it is because of the lack of class consciousness that prevails in the population today. In this sense, the word *vecina* does not encompass or define with enough forcefulness this working class. Due to its depoliticised connotation, it has not served to generate the necessary breeding ground to face what is coming our way. The term *vecina* represents, from my point of view, the inability of a movement to deal with something beyond the housing urgency of the moment, without generating medium or long-term proposals with true transformative potential, because it sugarcoats the roots of the problem and makes them invisible. This, together with the lack of strength and the lack of political discourse, makes it difficult for us to face what is approaching us.³

Enric: The phrase "We cannot return to normality because normality is the problem" (*No podem tornar a la normalitat perquè la normalitat és el problema*) was sadly premonitory. We went back, and even though the new normality is even more screwed up than the old one, we got used to it. Along the way, some of us learned to ask for help and also to give it, and we realised that the smallest geographical unit beyond the home is the front landing, and then the block, the street ... And that in this spiral are the *vecinas* of the front landing, the block and the street, the people on whom we can most quickly rely on in extreme situations. After this specific experience of mutual aid and despite some echoes that still resonate today, I do not detect a significant change in struggles for decent housing. Or rather yes: we are more tired, we have more health problems and we are more precarious. The gap is getting bigger and bigger and we, who are still very few, can barely act on it like a miserable band-aid. But we will have to continue organising, because the alternative would be to resign ourselves to living this normality that hurts us so much. And I can't think of a greater tragedy than that. We will have to continue weaving humble neighbourhood support networks, while we wait for the next crisis (on top of the ones we've already faced) to see what we have learned from the previous one.

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³ In the original text, Jelen used the word "a-vecina" as a play on words of the term *avecina* (translated into English as approach).

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