

The autonomy of struggles and the self-management of squats: legacies of intertwined movements

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Abstract

How do squatters' movements make a difference in urban politics? Their singularity in European cities has often been interpreted according to the major notion of 'autonomy'. However, despite the recent upsurge of studies about squatting (Cattaneo et al. 2014, Katsiaficas 2006, Martínez et al. 2018, Van der Steen et al. 2014), there has not been much clarification of its theoretical, historical and political significance. Autonomism has also been identified as one of the main ideological sources of the recent global justice and anti-austerity movements (Flesher 2014) after being widely diffused among European squatters for more than four decades, which prompts a question about the meaning of its legacy. In this article, I first examine the political background of autonomism as a distinct identity among radical movements in Europe in general (Flesher et al. 2013, Wennerhag et al. 2018), and the squatters in particular—though not often explicitly defined. Secondly, I stress the social, feminist and anti-capitalist dimensions of autonomy that stem from the multiple and specific struggles in which squatters were involved over different historical periods. These aspects have been overlooked or not sufficiently examined by the literature on squatting movements. By revisiting relevant events and discourses of the autonomist tradition linked to squatting in Italy, Germany and Spain, its main traits and some contradictions are presented. Although political contexts indicate different emphases in each case, some common origins and transnational exchanges justify an underlying convergence and its legacies over time. I contend that autonomism is better understood by focusing on the social nature of the separate struggles by the oppressed in terms of self-management, collective reproduction and political aggregation rather than highlighting the individualistic view in which personal desires and independence prevail. This interpretation also implies that autonomy for squatters consists of practices of collective micro-resistance to systemic forms of domination which politicise private spheres of everyday life instead of retreating to them.

Keywords: Autonomy, squatting, feminism, anti-capitalism, Europe

Introduction

Once squatters' movements become visible, articulated, durable and challenging to the status quo, there is an increasing elaboration of political discourse. This process is usually controversial, both internally and externally. Not all branches or factions of the movements agree with the major narratives about the nature of squatting. Some of these narratives in circulation are so intimately related to academic debates that the boundaries between both realms can also appear relatively blurred. This is the case with the notions of 'autonomy' and an 'autonomous movement' which have permeated many theoretical understandings of squatting over time, despite the indifference or disdain of some activists. In this article I argue that autonomist approaches have widely circulated among squatters all over Europe and provided an often implicit or vague identity for most of them. However, what is the meaning of autonomy? By revisiting the accounts of autonomist and squatters' movements in Italy, Germany and Spain, I will show the relevance of the social aspects of autonomy, which are sometimes obscured by more individualistic interpretations. In addition, I suggest that anti-capitalist stances, feminism and solidarity with migrants have significantly contributed to the ideological meaning of autonomy, which has especially influenced the way squatters—especially its most politicised branches—manage their occupied spaces. This approach delineates the prevailing left-libertarian tenets as well as the squatting practices of houses and social centres, while helping to distinguish them from the occasional cases of far-right squats.

Autonomist politics emerged first from radical workers' struggles but squatters followed suit. During the 1960s and 1970s, squatting combined autonomist, countercultural and feminist inputs, although the latter are not so frequently highlighted by the literature. The connection of struggles across urban territory and different social issues found fertile ground in the squatted social centres, usually in tight connection with housing campaigns and squatting actions too. Principles, memories, and examples from these autonomous experiences became adopted by the global justice movement around 2000 and, again, by the anti-austerity mobilisations a decade later (Flesher 2014), which indicates their long-lasting influence.

In my interpretation, the main misunderstanding about autonomism is the role played by 'individual autonomy' as a 'politics of the first person', a 'politics of desire' or the prevalence of individuals over organisations (Flesher 2007, Gil 2011, Katsiaficas 2006, Pruijt and Roggeband 2014). Although most authors mention this individualistic feature to distinguish autonomism from the more authoritarian, hierarchical and bureaucratic organisations of the institutional left, I do not find this view very informative. Instead, as I shall argue, the expression 'social autonomy' seems to capture more accurately the central concerns of the collective practice of horizontal direct democracy and self-management fostered by autonomists. Even the feminist insights reveal that issues usually considered personal and private are politicised by making them socially visible and publicly debated. In addition, the radical independence of

both the struggles and the oppressed groups is always voiced in a relational manner, not as individual independence: first, by identifying the social sources and dynamics of oppression; and second, and in a collective way, by empowering those who cooperate with each other in order to get rid of their perceived oppressions. More than a tension between the individual and the social dimensions present in all social phenomena, I argue that it is the specific emphasis given to the ‘political method’ of autonomism (self-organisation and self-management, autonomy from capitalism, patriarchy and racism) and their ‘immediatist’ engagement in various contentious campaigns that makes it distinct compared to other political identities.

Although massive occupations of houses took place in some European countries in the aftermath of the Second World War, and many housing movements resorted to squatting as their main protest action (Aguilera 2018, Bailey 1973, Mudu 2014), squatters’ movements developed their autonomist bases starting in the mid-1960s with the eruption of countercultural groups such as the Provos in the Netherlands (Dadusc 2017: 24, Smart 2014: 113) and the Situationist International group (see, for example, Debord 1967, Knabb 1997, Sadler 1998). Moreover, feminism provided a framework to challenge ‘everyday life’ around social reproduction and housework beyond the housing question at large (provision, access, affordability, policies, etc.). However, the self-management of social relations and spaces within squatted houses and social centres did not imply a fully liberated space from capitalism, patriarchy, and racism (Kadir 2016). Feminist groups and campaigns thus proved crucial in persuading autonomists and squatters of the need to incorporate their demands into radical politics (Bhattacharya et al. 2017, Federici 2012, Fraser 2008).

In the next sections, I review the main references in the literature that help to make my case. Only three countries are selected (two from Southern Europe and one from the North), but it suffices to disentangle the intertwined relations of autonomist struggles and the historical origins of the notion of autonomy. I recall this debate because I noticed its legacies in the squats I visited, read about or joined as an activist during the past two decades all over Europe. However, the allusions to the autonomist notions and related events were seldom unequivocal.

Italy: from the factory to metropolitan struggles

The influences of anarchism, heterodox (anti-state) Marxism, anti-institutionalism and countercultural anti-authoritarian politics in the ‘new social movements’ and the ‘new left’ after-1968 were pervasive in squatting activism, although at different paces in each country (Van der Steen et al. 2014). These first trends of a vague autonomist movement had another precedent in the Italian Marxist-inspired *Operaismo* (workerism). This intellectual and political group had been sowing the seeds of autonomist politics since the early 1960s by focusing on the autonomy of workers’ struggles from political parties and from labour unions. They also launched activist self-research (*coricerca*)

with factory workers and favoured wildcat strikes, absenteeism and sabotage on the assembly line (Balestrini and Moroni 1997, Katsiaficas 2006: 17–57). Leftist intellectuals and students engaged with class struggles in which the lowest tiers of the proletariat and the workers' viewpoint were expected to take the lead. A full opposition to salaried work and an invitation to take over the factories were a decisive inspiration for those who started occupying empty buildings and setting up squatted self-managed social centres (*Centri Sociali*) some years later, especially around the large mobilisation peaks of 1967–69 and 1976–77.

This move, as Geronimo recalls, had its roots in the defeat of many labour struggles, the transformation of the productive system and the rise of the precarious class, which merged impoverished university graduates, casual workers and unemployed people: “[Militants] looted supermarkets... rode public transport for free, refused to pay for rock concerts and movie screenings... [and some] used guns... ravaged hotels, and hundreds of cars and buses [were] toppled and torched.” (Geronimo 2012: 42–45) Both Geronimo and Katsiaficas (2006: 65–66, 188) acknowledge that the Italian *Autonomia* was so influential in German extra-parliamentary politics that these activists changed their own name to the *Autonomen* by 1979–80. Danish political squatters did the same in the late-1980s, precisely when most political squats were evicted and anti-fascism, anti-racism and anti-imperialism replaced the priority hitherto enjoyed by squatting (Karpantschov and Mikkelsen 2014: 188–193).

Workerism was the origin of autonomism, but the occupations of houses and social centres, along with tenants' struggles, were already in place and often supported by the Italian Communist Party (Mudu and Rossini 2018: 100). The turn to autonomism started with a wave of occupations around 1968, especially in large cities such as Milan. For example, located in Piazza Fontana, the very heart of the city, was the squatted “Ex Hotel Commercio”. Run by university students in alliance with many political groups and the local tenants' union, it was considered “the largest urban commune... in Europe” (Balestrini and Moroni 1997: 276; Martin and Moroni 2007). Despite the call for the autonomy of the struggles, and as a reaction to harsh state repression and several fascist murders (Balestrini and Moroni 1997: 363, 542), workerist activists set up multiple extra-parliamentary parties and organisations (Lotta Continua, Potere Operaio, Avanguardia Operaia, etc.) over the 1970s who joined anarchists, feminists, situationists, students and housing activists in the squatted social centres of the following decades. These groups were short-lived, but their promotion of workers' autonomy has left a strong legacy among squatters, mainly since 1973: “The proletarian sociality defines its own laws and practices in the territory that the bourgeoisie occupies by force.” (Balestrini and Moroni 1997: 451) As a consequence, beyond independence from electoral and institutional politics, autonomists fostered the autonomy of workers' power, knowledge, cooperation, needs, resistance and struggles in order to take back the time, money and spaces from the hands of the capitalist class. A diffuse political identity, multiple points of conflicts and insurrections, and decentralised actions aimed at mobilising large amounts of the proletariat were translated into the politicisation of new squatting waves from the mid-1980s

onwards (Mudu and Rossini 2018: 101).

The Indiani Metropolitani and the Circoli del Proletariato Giovanile represented one of the countercultural echelons that connected autonomist politics and squatting. For example, a celebrated pamphlet of the latter from 1977 declared: “We want it all! It’s time to rebel!... We occupy buildings because we want to have meeting places to debate, to play music and do theatre, to have a specific and alternative place for family life.” (Balestrini and Moroni 1997: 524) In addition to demands for affordable housing, the constraints experienced through conservative family traditions, a deep opposition to commodified and state-controlled leisure as well as the alienation engendered by salaried work motivated this mixture of autonomism and, often joyful and satiric, Situationism applied to urban squatting.

Internal ideological controversies among squatters adhered to different branches of autonomism, anarchism and feminism were very frequent, but they also contributed to the creation of a vibrant political milieu in many cities (Mudu 2009: 217–225, 2012: 416–418). In contrast to Anglo-Saxon countries, where anarchism and autonomism are almost synonyms, both branches had different historical trajectories and stances in Italy and Spain (Mudu 2012: 414–418). During the 1977 protest waves, for example, both shared an anti-authoritarian approach, but autonomists tended to lead and hegemonise the movement (Mudu 2012: 417). Nonetheless, in my interpretation, the collective self-management of squats, either for living or for socialisation, and in tight connection with the autonomy of the working-class and oppressed groups, represents the best theoretical and political coincidence among all the politicised squatters. This has hardly been noted in the literature on autonomous politics where squats are often seen as just another strand of activism (Wennerhag et al. 2018). However, due to the decline of struggles at the workplace, the self-management of squats all over the metropolitan area took the lead, affecting different spheres of social life and helping to unite anarchists, punks and autonomists in the second-generation social centres during the mid-1980s, as argued too by Mudu (2012: 420) and Piazza (2018: 503). In short, by considering all the above insights, a dominant politics of what I designate ‘social autonomy’ increasingly found its own way, its own proponents and its own practitioners in urban politics beyond the institutional labour unions and the parliamentary political parties of the left. Furthermore, this notion was also crucially nurtured by feminism.

Although less mentioned by the literature, during the 1960s and 1970s an innovative and challenging feminist movement emerged in tight connection with Italian autonomism. Active women in leftist politics called for their self-organisation without men in their groups, meetings and protest actions. By doing so, they were able to politicise many issues conventionally considered personal and private, such as housework, sexuality and violence against women. These topics were not yet at the centre of institutional feminism, which at the time was more focused on gender equality in terms of voting rights, access to education and managerial positions. “We learned to seek the protagonists of

class struggle not only among the male industrial proletariat but, most importantly, among the enslaved, the colonized, the world of wageless workers marginalized by the annals of the communist tradition to whom we could now add the figure of the proletarian housewife, reconceptualised as the subject of the (re)production of the workforce.” (Federici 2012: 7) Autonomous feminists contributed to identifying housework as a pillar of the social-metropolitan factory. Instead of a consideration of domestic life as informal social relations or mere consumption, reproductive labour, even under a wageless condition, was seen as crucial for the continuation of capitalism. Adding to the state provision of welfare services (education, health, pensions, subsidies, etc.), feminists revealed that the production of meals, shopping, cleaning, having and raising children, taking care of the ill and the elderly, etc. was reproductive work, or ‘housework’, and it was an arena where women are oppressed, hidden and dismissed by other male-driven struggles (Federici 2012: 18–19).

Campaigns such as Wages for Housework during the 1970s, demonstrations for the right to abortion and marches to “re-appropriate the night” (Balestrini and Moroni 1997: 499) initiated a long-lasting wave of autonomous feminism that pervaded most squats as well as autonomist and anarchist groups. The frustrating experience of the sexual division of labour within radical organisations and the dominance of men when it comes to speaking out and writing, in addition to other forms of sexism in leftist politics, motivated the creation of only-women groups, campaigns, demonstrations and squats (Balestrini and Moroni 1997: 491–494, 506; Martin and Moroni 2007: 162–163). Autonomy meant a separation from men that was conceived as a necessary step to demystify femininity, to make visible women’s subjugation and resistance, and to further forge the unity of all the social categories of subordinated groups, including workers, but also gay people, prostitutes, ethnic minorities, migrants, etc. Autonomy also implied an exercise of women’s power apart from state institutions, even from dominant discourses about women’s rights: “Feminism risks becoming an institution.” (Federici 2012: 61)

In order to appreciate the shifting contents of autonomy, it is also worth mentioning that Italian post-autonomist groups split during the 1990s into various factions (with anarchists also taking sides) mainly due to three contested issues that constrained the reach of self-management: the legalisation of squats, the participation of radical activists in electoral politics and the introduction of waged employees in social centres. In particular, individual autonomy was a key basis for many anarchists who, in turn, were less interested in the social dimension of class struggles. Individual leadership was criticised by all but was not a big issue for many post-autonomist groups represented by well-known spokespersons. The call to ‘exit the ghetto’ of the squats and reach out to a larger social sphere indicated a crucial concern for all kinds of radical activists—the size and scale of the ‘social’ feature of autonomous struggles. Therefore, the Italian radical-left scene was subject to “both movements of convergence and divergence between post-autonomists and anarchists” (Mudu 2012: 421).

A landmark moment that signalled the main division between anarchist and post-autonomist squatters was the 2001 anti-G8 mobilisation in Genoa. Since then, their mutual interactions in practice have been scarce and limited to broader campaigns, such as the NO-TAV struggle against the high-speed train to connect Italy and France (Della Porta and Piazza 2008) and the referendum against the privatisation of water (Mudu 2012: 422). However, recent developments of squatted social centres and houses over the 2010s have kept reproducing the tenets of social autonomy while adding new meanings and tensions. For example, housing movements have included more subaltern groups such as poor migrants and homeless people in the squatting movement (Aureli and Mudu 2018, Feliciano 2017, Grazioli and Caciagli 2018). The occupations of abandoned theatres and cinemas stirred larger political debates on the grassroots production of culture as a common good and the increasing precarious working conditions of the youth (Maddanu 2018, Valli 2015, Piazza 2018). Although these experiences remained attached to the legacies of autonomous self-organisation of oppressed groups and their active involvement in the self-management of squats, they were more prone to negotiating legal agreements with the authorities, and more experienced activists often led the initiatives.

Germany: mobilisation and liberation of everyday life

Even before being adopted as a political identity, autonomism in West Germany reshaped extra-parliamentary politics and urban struggles in a different manner compared to the ‘new social movements’ that had already emerged around 1968. For example, instead of focusing on self-management, Katsiaficas (2006: 3–6) recalled situationist and Lefebvrian concepts—‘alienation’ and ‘everyday life’, above all—to define autonomy in that context: “By 1980, a movement existed which was clearly more radical and bigger than that of the sixties. The new movement was more diverse and unpredictable, and less theoretical and organized than was the New Left. Despite their differences, they shared a number of characteristics; anti-authoritarianism; independence from existing political parties; decentralized organizational forms; emphasis on direct action.” Katsiaficas’ interpretation of autonomist ideas in Germany highlights two aspects that might resemble individualistic views of autonomy: the ‘politics of the first person’ and the ‘decolonisation of everyday life’. Within the autonomist scenes, individuals would feel free from party discipline, state control, capitalist-induced compulsive consumerism and patriarchal domination. However, he also insists that German autonomist activists were well organised in small groups of militants and as a coherent movement. Furthermore, his definition also included ‘self-managed consensus’, ‘open assemblies’ without leaders and ‘spontaneous forms of militant resistance’ to domination in all domains of life, society and politics, which very much resembles the collectivist anarchism approach (Ward and Goodway 2014). Despite the frequent references to the ‘politics of the first person’, autonomy is defined as collective relationships, or ‘social autonomy’ on my terms, not as individual subjectivity: “The

Autonomen... see their ideas as a revolutionary alternative to both authoritarian socialism (Soviet-style societies) and ‘pseudodemocratic capitalism’... The Autonomen seek to change governments as well as everyday life, to overthrow capitalism and patriarchy.” (Katsiaficas 2006: 8)

But what is ‘everyday life’? And how can it be decolonised? According to Katsiaficas, everyday life is the sphere of civil society which is separate from state institutions. It is also a political sphere where direct democracy is possible in contrast to both the delegation of power to formal organisations and aspirations to conquer state power. Activism focused on everyday life tries to change the whole political and economic system through direct actions against established powers but, at the same time, against its manifestations in every domain of life (education, family life, friendship, dwelling, workplaces and urban settings in general). Hence, Katsiaficas defines autonomism as an emergent social movement aiming to promote feminism, migrant rights and worker cooperatives—for example, while suggesting that autonomy opposes universalising forms of oppression (Katsiaficas 2006: 14–16, 238). In particular, what he designates as the ‘colonisation of everyday life’ refers to the rise of ‘instrumental rationality’ worldwide. This means that the forces of capital intend to commodify every aspect of our lives and needs (food, shelter, air, water, communication, mobility, affects, etc.) and make profit out of it. Individualisation, atomisation, privatisation and alienation are the tools used by the capitalist colonisers. As a response ‘collective autonomy’ as it is represented in squats, appeals to the emancipatory will of youth, women, ethnic minorities and precarious workers: “communal living expands the potential for individual life choices and creates the possibility of new types of intimate relationships and new models of child rearing.” (Katsiaficas 2006: 247)

Although there is no agreement about the meaning of autonomism, the “theses” formulated by German activists in 1981 are eloquent: “We fight for ourselves and others fight for themselves... We do not engage in ‘representative struggles’. Our activities are based on our affectedness, ‘politics of the first person’... We fight for a self-determined life in all aspects of our existence, knowing that we can only be free if all are free. We do not engage in dialogue with those in power! ... We all embrace a ‘vague anarchism’ but we are not anarchists in a traditional sense. We have no organization per se... Short-term groups form to carry out an action or to attend protests. Long-term groups form to work on continuous projects.” (Geronimo 2012: 174) This political approach led to solid opposition to fascism, imperialism and capitalism on the one hand, but also to the creation of lasting networks of self-managed occupied houses, social centres, women’s groups and cooperative initiatives on the other. The influence of Italian autonomism was noted in some publications and debates of various political groups during the 1970s, which sometimes intersected with the squatting initiatives of the decade (Geronimo 2012: 48–57, 61–66).

However, more elaborate contents were explicitly added to the German version of autonomism in the early 1980s due to the resurgence of squatters’ mobilisations (Geronimo 2012: 99–106). Originally, the remnants of 1968 anti-

authoritarianism and the new peace, environmental, and feminist movements merged with multiple residents' protests (*Bürgerinitiativen*) all over the country and with countercultural situationist-inspired politics, such as the *Spontis*: "Like the Metropolitan Indians in Italy, *Spontis* loved to poke fun at their more serious 'comrades' and used irony rather than rationality to make their point. In 1978, *Spontis* in Münster helped elect a pig to a university office, and in Ulm, a dog was nominated to the Academic Senate." (Katsiaficas 2006: 63, 65) In this milieu, according to Katsiaficas, feminists centrally contributed to the definition of autonomy (Katsiaficas 2006: 67). They fought for the decriminalisation of abortion, equal pay for equal work, housing affordability, shelters for women subject to male violence and public subsidies for mothers, but, and no less importantly, they also focused on a radical change in the sphere of 'everyday life', demanding men (activists included) share domestic chores with women, creating self-help groups, launching campaigns to "take back the night" and setting up feminist publications, centres and residential spaces (squatted ones included) in which men were not allowed (Gaillard 2013). "From the first big squatting wave in 1980/81, in which more than 200 houses in total were occupied, until 2013, around 20 houses in West Berlin and (united) Berlin have been squatted by female/ lesbian/ gay/ queer/ trans people." (azozomox 2014: 190) Their large mobilisations, direct actions and even guerrilla groups added new meanings to what I term 'social autonomy' as women's power against male violence and complete independence from hierarchical structures and institutions (Katsiaficas 2006: 74–75). Although the motto 'the personal is political' might obscure this collective dimension, it was the politicisation of all hitherto considered private topics and 'everyday life', by questioning the social domination inside them and by making it visible, that justifies their autonomist insight.

Two other specific components of the German political context were the long-lasting peace and anti-nuclear movements, first, and the institutionalisation and co-optation of a substantial share of those activists by the Green Party, next. Members of those camps, as well as the *Autonomen*, were less involved with workers' struggles than their Italian counterparts due to the more generous welfare state and labour unions effective in obtaining concessions, which softened the precarious condition of many activists and attracted more middle-classes to activism as well. However, squatting became a key icon for the autonomists, and, in neighbourhoods such as Kreuzberg in Berlin, poor Turkish immigrants, marginalised youth, punks, gays and artists also became fully engaged in the movement. "They were more a motley collection than a self-defined collectivity of mainly students like the New Left was. As living behind barricades became a way of life for many squatters, the illegality of their everyday lives radicalized their attitude toward the state." (Katsiaficas 2006: 91, 168–173) From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, squatters took over hundreds of houses (at least in the large cities)—, performed street fighting and demonstrations in which the black colour was dominant in both flags and dress codes, and created leaderless organisations, although they also had to face harsh police attacks, arrests and prosecution. This phase ended in partial legalisations

that depoliticised part of the movement (Holm and Kuhn 2011) but still kept squatting as the primary identity sign for its remaining militant wing, especially where it was considered a victory against overwhelming repression, such as the Hafenstrasse squatted buildings in Hamburg in the late 1980s (Katsiaficas 2006: 91–96, 124–128, 178).

More generally, it is also worth recalling that another attempt to define autonomism in 1983 combined the general anti-capitalist stance with concern about all forms of domination: “Aspiring autonomy means first of all to struggle against political and moral alienation in life and work... This is expressed when houses are squatted to live in dignity and to avoid paying outrageous rent; it is expressed when workers stay at home because they no longer tolerate the control at the workplace; it is expressed when the unemployed loot supermarkets.” (Geronimo 2012: 115) This author engages with the view of autonomy as collective self-determination. This implies the capacity of every social group to define the norms that will rule their own collective life. Most people are deprived from this right and basic source of power in both representative and authoritarian regimes, although to different extents. In so doing, autonomists need to deliberate in public, justify their stances and reach consensus. This intense process of communication occurs prior to making decisions about the norms and actions to follow.

Eventually, autonomists had a contradictory relationship with the post-1968 alternative movement that became one of the moderate electoral bases for the Greens and for social-democratic politics. Although food cooperatives, bars, bookstores, cultural events, self-managed clinics, playgrounds, etc. formed a convenient and ideologically sympathetic environment for autonomists, they usually criticised alternative infrastructures and enterprises because of their limited anti-capitalist impact (Geronimo 2012: 103–105). The contributions of autonomism to squatting were also accompanied with conflicts of violence among activists; sexism, homophobia and transphobia (azozomox 2014); subtle forms of social control and uniformisation within the scene; extreme measures to prevent police infiltration; and even a nihilist rejection of intellectual analyses and affirmative political alternatives (Katsiaficas 2006: 177–180; Geronimo 2012: 174).

Squatting movements in Germany unfolded especially during the early 1980s and, after a combined policy of legalisation and repression of new squatting attempts, at the crossroads of its reunification with former East Germany, around 1990 (Holm and Kuhn 2011). As an illustration, between 1979 and 1984, there were 287 squatted houses and wagon places in West Berlin (azozomox and Kuhn 2018: 148). Another peak was reached between 1989 and 1991 when 214 buildings were squatted in Berlin, mostly in the former Eastern boroughs (azozomox and Kuhn 2018: 152). The issue of the squat legalisation was highly controversial and engendered splits among autonomists of the first period, but it became more widely accepted after the 1990s. In cities such as Hamburg, the language of social autonomy permeates both legalised initiatives (Hafenstrasse in the late 1980s and Gängeviertel in the 2010s) and those partially tolerated

(Rote Flora), but the strains with the authorities' attempts to institutionalise and co-opt autonomist activists keep going. On the one hand, the large numbers of legalised squats in those periods granted the Autonomien a long-lasting material infrastructure for continuing their political projects and struggles. On the other hand, although the German autonomists remained the main proponents and supporters of squatting actions, the more repressive contexts forced them to shift focus towards other campaigns, such as solidarity with migrants, anti-capitalist summits, environmental protests, tenants' rights, anti-fascism and feminist claims at all the levels of politics.

Spain: diffused autonomy and interdependence

Autonomism was well spread in other European countries such as Spain. The fascist dictatorship that lasted from 1936–9 to 1975 made a striking difference compared to other Western political regimes based on liberal democracy. Many workers' unions and strikes had to operate underground until the late 1970s when they unfolded massively in most industrial areas. Despite the hegemony of the Spanish Communist Party in many of these struggles, workers' autonomous organisations and assemblies were quite significant in many sectors. Extra-parliamentary politics also consisted of manifold leftist organisations that often engaged with the demands of residents in urban neighbourhoods (Castells 1983). The practice of squatting buildings was not very frequent, but the revival of anarchism contributed to the establishment of Ateneos Libertarios, occupied social centres run by anarchist unions and various affinity groups, and countercultural social centres (inspired by the hippy and alternative movements around 1968) in the period known as "transition to democracy" that lasted until the early 1980s (Martínez 2018, Seminario 2014: 23–77).

During the first wave of political squatting in the mid-1980s, the autonomist identity was more imported from round-trip visits to Italy, Germany and Holland than linked to their own legacy of autonomous factory struggles. Many squatters also preferred to associate their ideological roots with the core vigorous anarchist tradition from the decades before the dictatorship, which sometimes produced frictions with the 'vague anarchism' and heterodox-Marxism embraced by the autonomists. Against this backdrop, it is worth mentioning that the successful anti-militarist movement at that time (Martínez 2007: 380) achieved a high legitimation of non-violent direct action among most social movements, especially those who fully supported the anti-conscription campaign like most autonomists and squatters. In addition, nationalist-independentist militants and members of left-parties took part in some squats or initiated their own, especially in Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country.

An autonomous branch of the feminist movement was also very active over the decades and was especially engaged in the squatters' movement, even founding their own social centres exclusively for women, such as Matxarda, La Karbonera and Andretxe in the Basque Country (Padrones 2017: 227–235), Eskalera

Karakola in Madrid (squatted in 1996) and La Morada-La Fresca in Barcelona (1997–8) (Gil 2011: 77–97). In a similar vein to what happened in Italy and Germany, there were endless debates between ‘diffuse’ and ‘organised’ forms of autonomy, especially among those who participated in the political scene around Lucha Autónoma in Madrid (Casanova 2002, Seminario 2014: 121–182). By 1987, the autonomists had presented a political agenda with an explicit social orientation in the squatted social centre Arregui y Aruej based on self-management, anti-authoritarianism, direct action and anti-capitalism (Casanova 2002: 36–37). During the next decade and a half, squatted social centres and houses became a focal point of activity for all the autonomists, but there were many more squats in which ‘autonomy’ was no more than a package of multiple radical ideas in circulation. Anti-fascism as a political priority, for example, distinguished a certain number of squats from the rest (Seminario 2014: 130–131), which denotes the existence of significant social and political diversity in the squatters’ movement. However, the regular practice of assemblies, direct democracy, self-organisation and engagement with numerous social struggles around the squats disseminated a ‘diffuse’ politics of social autonomy among the most active and politicised squatters (Salamanca et al. 2012).

An abundant publication of short pamphlets, fanzines (*Resiste, Sabotaje, El Acratador, Ekintza Zuzena, Etcétera, Contrapoder, etc.*) and some radical newspapers occasionally served to discuss theoretical and political aspects of autonomism. In Madrid, the squatted social centre Laboratorio (initiated in 1997) was one of the most prolific in recalling the post-workerist views and engaging with the Zapatista uprising (1994 to date) and its anti-neoliberal discourse: “We aim to experiment with how to embed the squatted social centres in the metropolitan territory: struggles against real estate speculation against the deterioration of the urban peripheries, against the expulsion of residents in the city centre, against the militarisation of the land and CCTV surveillance, against total institutions, against the authoritarianism of urban planning, against new forms of fascism... We aim to express the potential of an insubordinate life facing the void of capital, ... forms of cooperation against hierarchy, control and separation.” (Casanova 2002: 162–163) As in Italy, precarious young workers and students were the most active social composition of the squatters’ movement, although residents of all ages, migrants, artists and activists from many other social movements were often attracted to participate in the squats. Therefore, anti-capitalism and concerns about labour conditions (precariousness) were crucial in their political approach to reclaim urban spaces and neighbourhoods.

In addition, the autonomist branch of Spanish feminism since the 1980s was intimately attached to squatting (see, for example, their publication *Mujeres Preokupando*), although not all the groups occupied spaces, and their political concerns were much broader (Gil 2011, Seminario 2014: 303–357). Interestingly, they nurtured autonomist urban politics by building upon insights from other international trends of radical feminism and by raising debates that were beyond the usual agenda of squatters. On the one hand, ‘autonomy’ for

them meant independence from both institutional politics (parties, unions and state agencies) and male domination in different spheres of life, including squats and autonomist organisations (Gil 2011: 57); on the other hand, ‘autonomy’ invited women to take matters into their own hands, to empower and liberate themselves by cooperating with each other and by establishing ‘networks of counter-power’ (Gil 2011: 46).

The legacy of the 1960s and 1970s in terms of the politicisation of private and personal matters (seclusion of family life, abortion, contraceptive methods, sexual freedom, domestic work, harassment and rape, etc.) paved the way for more ambitious concerns in the 1990s: rights for LGBTQI people; opposition to militarism; the precarious labour of women, especially those making a living through prostitution and domestic work; immigration; and even feminist porn. These topics hardly recalled the attention of the more institutionalised branches of feminism but, in turn, found a fertile ground of expression in the squatted social centres and, above all, in the feminist squats (Gil 2011: 46, 68–97, 295–298). Conversely, this development questioned sexism, LGBTQI-phobia and racism within the squats and autonomist scenes. Furthermore, it revealed how neoliberal capitalism manipulates the notion of ‘autonomy’ in order to promote free individuals to consume, vote and comply. This is manifest in the so-called ‘crisis of care’ for children, the elderly, the ill, the disabled and its gendered and racialised dimensions. Self-determination and cooperation of the oppressed, thus, entail an essential ‘inter-dependence’ with one another and a systemic (anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal and anti-racist) search for alternatives to the crisis of care, which is on the shoulders of women, in order to halt the reproduction of capitalism: “Capitalism... has turned personal and collective autonomy upside down...: atomised experiences, competition with each other, self-entrepreneurialism... no future prospects... vertiginous rhythms of survival and production... fragile communities... loneliness... The ideal of independence... [only applies to] personal and social situations in transit, casual ones, based on youth, health, strength, power, wealth, and without care for other people (their offspring, the elderly, the ill, etc.).” (Gil 2011: 305) Therefore, when individual autonomy is introduced in this approach, it is always defined together with issues of social interdependence and the constraints set in place by capitalist society.

Self-critical analyses within Spanish autonomist politics and squats are illuminating too; for example, the short-lived span of many organisations and squatting experiences, the superficial discussion of feminist concerns and the ineffective practices against sexism, the rejection of experts and professionals (except lawyers, to some extent) as well as accusations of vanguardism to the most devoted and politicised activists (Carretero 2012), to name just a few. When the autonomist experience cross-fertilised the global justice movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Martínez 2007), other shortcomings were brought forward: multi-militancy, irreconcilable tensions with the ‘institutional left’, scarcity of resources, a high diversity that resulted in the alter-globalisation movement’s fragmentation and a limited capacity for mass mobilisation (Flesher 2007). Nevertheless, autonomists contributed to this larger protest

wave (and also to the 2011 upheavals [Flesher 2014]) with practical skills rooted in assembly-based organisations and with engagement in urban politics while bridging self-managed squatted buildings and more global issues: “The autonomous actor actively attempts to negate the isolationism created by capitalist consumer society, through the nurturing of social relations that create community.... Just as single total identities (e.g. worker) do not make sense from an autonomous perspective, neither do single issues.” (Flesher 2007: 340)

Although squatting was criminalised in 1995, the movement kept active in many cities over the following decades and even experienced a remarkable upsurge in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 (Martínez 2018). Since the 2000s, an explicit autonomist identity has been reshaped by networks of squatted and non-squatted social centres, especially those more inclined to legalise their spaces and to interact more directly with some public policies and state institutions—despite all the difficulties they faced—such as the Casa Invisible shows in Málaga (Toret et al. 2018). A common theme of the so-called ‘second generation of social centres’, shared with many Italian post-autonomists, was their intention to get rid of stereotyped identities and to engage with broader publics—neighbourhoods, social and political organisations, migrants, precarious workers and artists. However, a diffused notion of autonomy quite intertwined with anarchism and a strong anti-institutional standpoint has to date prevailed among the squatters of Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville and Zaragoza, for instance. The main turning point was represented by the emergence of a housing movement led by a formal organisation, the PAH (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages), in 2009. This movement also occupied buildings but rarely developed social centres. Many of their activists had an autonomist background and still endorsed it, but they mainly claimed affordable housing, the increase of social housing and substantial changes in housing policies. As a consequence, a more institutional approach was combined with the social empowerment of those who became homeless due to the widespread financialisation of housing.

Conclusions

The term ‘autonomy’ has been rightly criticised because it is charged with the burden of liberal and individualistic connotations, even when adopted by countercultural and anarchist trends (Bookchin 1998). As Flesher noted: “Although the legitimate political actor is the autonomous individual, acting collectively, this does not translate into a rejection of collectives or affinity groups.” (Flesher 2007: 340) She also argues that organisations are dispensable for autonomists because they only “exist to serve the desires and goals of the individuals participating in them” (Flesher 2007: 339). Therefore, it is not uncommon to see individual self, subjectivity, autonomy and independence as the pivotal bases of the autonomist political identity. This is explicit in widely-circulated texts such as the Temporary Autonomous Zone (Bey 1985: 114) and pamphlets engaging with individualistic anarchism and the “radical criticism of any authority principle” (Mudu 2012: 414). Some post-workerist and feminist

activist-scholars also attached the language of desire and subjectivation to autonomy (Berardi 2016, Gil 2011: 100), although they always interpreted them according to broader social conflicts of domination in late capitalism, not as an individualistic approach to autonomy. In particular, squatting movements following an autonomist orientation represented a practical way to refuse salaried labour and establish free spaces for the emancipation of women and LGBTI-Q people. However, artistic squatters in France and Germany, for example (Aguilera 2018, Novy and Colomb 2013), have been frequently accused of adhering to the creative and individual view of autonomy rather than its more subversive, organised, prefigurative and collective forms of class struggle and self-management. Squatted social centres such as Tacheles in Berlin and Gängeviertel in Hamburg, for instance, would exemplify individual self-interests in “the seizing of cheap studio spaces” (Novy and Colomb 2013: 1828) and were instrumental to neoliberal city-branding policies aiming to attract well-educated but precarious creative classes. An additional feature that populates the distinctions between the autonomous and institutional left refers to decision-making processes. Autonomists oppose delegation and most prefer face-to-face assemblies and consensus over voting (Piazza 2013). This implies that specific individuals may veto collective decisions or force the collective into long discussions, postpone agreements and even into stalemates and internal splits. Notwithstanding these risks, the relatively small-scale size and the decentralisation of autonomist networks posed no substantial threats to the persistence and predominance of consensual principles over time, although majoritarian voting has also been adopted by many squats.

In this article, I have argued that the meanings attached to autonomism by Italian, German and Spanish squatters, in tight connection with the activists from intertwined movements, prompted me to prefer ‘social autonomy’ in order to represent their novel contribution to urban politics. This approach reminds of ‘social anarchism’ or ‘libertarian communism’ in its aspiration to set up ‘communities of equals’ (Bookchin 1998; Graeber 2004: 2, 65–66). Nonetheless, autonomists go beyond anarcho-syndicalism, the factory walls, the central role of the working-class and the utopian models of a post-revolutionary future (Foucault 1982). Rather, they oppose all forms of domination spread throughout the metropolitan space by seeking cooperation with all oppressed social groups and by focusing pragmatically in the oppressions they all experience at present. Therefore, the emancipation is conceived as the political responsibility of the oppressed themselves. Instead of following vanguard leaders and external organisations, autonomists set direct democracy, assemblies and horizontal cooperation at the top of their political agenda and practice. To fight the oppressors implies becoming separated from them and affirming the identity of the oppressed, temporarily, while the subordination and the resistance persist (Fraser 2008). Social autonomy thus indicates: (1) separation from the oppressors and the social relations where oppression occurs; (2) self-affirmation of the oppressed groups in direct social conflict with the oppressors; and (3) self-determination of the norms, decisions and goals through the collective self-management of resources and spaces.

Their disbelief in future utopias and essentialist differences leads autonomists to attempt any possible revolution here and now. Thus, they aim to shape, in a prefigurative manner, spaces of equality, creativity and resistance among those struggling together. As I argued above, the self-management and socio-political aggregation provided by squats (Piazza 2018) and other autonomous social centres (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006) are the best materialisations of autonomist politics. Illegal and disruptive means of protest, when targeting empty buildings, supply affordable spaces to those who wish, in turn, to separate themselves from patriarchal domination and the capitalist dynamics of labour exploitation, mass consumption and urban speculation. Squats also provide safe and self-organised spaces for immigrants and refugees (Colectivo Hinundzurük 2018, Refugee Accommodation 2018). Buildings are rehabilitated, resources are shared, domestic life is often articulated through collective decision-making, an ethics of do-it-yourself (DIY) and do-it-together (DIT) is put in practice, counter-cultural expressions and radical left ideas are promoted, and other movements' activists and campaigns are hosted (Cattaneo et al. 2014, McKay 1998, Notes from Nowhere 2003, Van der Steen et al. 2014). Everyday life as the sphere of social reproduction, consisting of welfare services as well as the collective self-management of the buildings and urban areas where they live, become a central concern for autonomism and squatting: "the rediscovery of reproductive work has made it possible ... to redefine the private sphere as a sphere of relations of production and a terrain of anticapitalist struggle." (Federici 2012: 97)

As a common thread shared by most autonomist and anarchist traditions, both state-driven socialism and capitalism (and, in its late stages, as global neoliberalism and financialisation as well) are confronted. Autonomism is nurtured by a strong anti-authoritarian concern that seeks the experience of freedom in all spheres of social life, for all, and as immediately as possible. This entails the need for the oppressed to exert their available power and to use their own capacities in order to be released from the chains of domination, which can be designated as an 'immediatist struggle': "In such struggles people criticize instances of power which are the closest to them." (Foucault 1982: 780). Not only are 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and one-party regimes resisted, but also all state institutions and formal organisations in liberal democracies that may reproduce social domination and inequality. Capitalism, patriarchy, racism, fascism and imperialism are thus seen as notoriously resilient in both authoritarian and pluralist regimes, which determines the multiple points of bottom-up resistance and the corresponding autonomous struggles. Squatted spaces are manifestations of this micro-politics (Dadusc 2017, Yates 2014) of the 'everyday life' (Katsiaficas 2006) in small living and self-managed communities, domestic and small-group relations, and horizontal affinity groups, while the squatters themselves also organise protest campaigns broadly and foster networks of solidarity with other autonomous and grassroots struggles worldwide (Mudu 2012).

My emphasis on the social features of autonomism also involves a long-lasting commitment to women's, LGBTI-Q, migrants' and ethnic minorities' struggles.

The feminist call to politicise, disclose, question and abolish oppression in every sphere of private life pervades the internal spaces of squats, which makes them more open and public but with a broader anti-systemic stance. Despite being subject to forced temporality and nomadism, squatters who take over abandoned buildings usually aim to stay as long as possible. The persistence of squatters' movements also indicates the existence of networks that make them more challenging to the status quo than isolated activism and insurrectional uprisings. The autonomist ethos, regardless of being expressed through vague and diffuse political identities, radiates from the specific urban spots of the squats to the neighbourhoods and other urban struggles intertwined with them, as far as coalitions are forged and are capable of articulating commonalities.

Nonetheless, autonomist projects are, more often than not, seriously constrained and menaced by the political and economic conditions that surround them. On the one hand, state repression and manoeuvres to institutionalise, integrate and neutralise autonomous struggles severely reduce their radical reach and engender or accentuate splits among activists (Karpantschhof and Mikkelsen 2014). Privatisation and outsourcing of collective consumption by the state also threaten how squatted social centres relate to social needs, public services and the market (Membretti 2007, Moroni and Aaster 1996). Frequently, urban activists need to break apart from the isolated 'ghettoes' of many autonomist and countercultural scenes and connect with the society at large through institutional actors, professionals and mass media (Castells 1983: 322) or use the resources of the 'institutional left' (Flesher 2007: 345). On the other hand, the concern for everyday life implies a continuous warning about the reproduction of social dominations inside autonomous movements. Sexism is the most prominent and overtly debated one but is far from unique. Tendencies towards dogmatism, retreating to individual and neoliberal forms of autonomy, *alternative* performances of vanguardism and hierarchy (Kadir 2016), exclusionary lifestyles and aesthetics (Flesher 2007: 350), exhaustion from long lasting conditions of illegality, an excessive and unwanted fragmentation of politicised groups and endless dissatisfaction with the political achievements of the struggles, due to their *limited* revolutionary capacity (Koopmans 1995), have been raised as the major internal troubles which would deserve further investigation.

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