

CITY AS PROTOTYPE. A FRAME FOR PRAGMATIC SOCIAL ACTION.

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The purpose of this article is to examine, from a contextual and situational viewpoint, the evolution of recent forms of urban social contention in Madrid in the context of the current crisis. I argue that these moments of commonality constitute a prototype for a new urbanity, based on the recursiveness of bodily practices where the conflictive and sharing bases of commonality are being reconciled and forged anew, establishing an alternative model for understanding social contention and re-imagining the future evolution of shared urban space in European cities.

I discuss aspects of these forms of conflict and sharing together with changes that have taken place in the nature, practice and paradigmatic position of public space in the city of Madrid. Furthermore, I consider these changes under the emergence of the prototype as a new paradigm that re-edits the culture of the open city and invites us to re-question common public life in our contemporary European cities.

Forms and context

In July 2013, the municipal government of Madrid approved the selling of more than 3,800 social housing units to real estate funds controlled by Goldman Sachs, Blackstone and HIG Capital. At the same time, during the period 2011-2014 Madrid witnessed the advent of new social movements following a surge in 15M demonstrations and sit-ins in public squares, their extension to different neighbourhoods and their transition into, and involvement with, the so called *mareas ciudadanas* and different civil rights movements, such as *Plataforma de afectados por la hipoteca* (PAH). More than 9,629 demonstrations since the beginning of 2012 testify to the scale of this social contention.¹ Intense activity has been observed in the context of sustained social effervescence in southern European cities. Are these forms of protests simply reviving old urban struggles, or do they engage in forms of conflict and sharing capable of renewing our urban imaginary? Are we witnessing an act of futile nostalgia for an activism incapable of counteracting the ruthless invincibility of globalized capital, or is this a substantial reformulation of *civitas* that will eventually rearticulate the public sphere into shared urban space? In order to answer these divergent questions of conflict and sharing, our enquiry must correctly tackle two dimensions that have tended to be regarded as oppositional in their different declinations: context and form, structure and situation.

Following Madrid's metropolitan expansion (up to 2008), the implementation of an urban geography of fragmentation has been accompanied by the establishment of a **state of exception/exemption**,² in practice denying access to the cohesive public

¹ Source: Anuarios Estadísticos 2012-2013. Spanish Ministry of Interior Affairs.

² Giorgio Agamben's notion as a prolonged state of being, but also applied in the sense of deprived access to

space on which the urbanity of capitalist western democracies seemed to be founded.³ The recently approved new Citizen Security Law (Dec. 2014) establishes the levying of fines for several kinds of protest,⁴ thereby increasing the pressure on civil pacific forms of protest⁵ and confirming the atmosphere of repression.⁶ Following the surge in protests, both the central government and the municipal government in Madrid tried to restrict the right to demonstrate in public space by establishing off-limit zones in the city centre; it cited concerns such as the protection of cultural heritage, tourism, or priority issues of general interest such as mass mobility. This approach was adopted together with a system of forced house evictions implemented by the authorities and housing stockowners, mostly private banks and state agencies holding the “toxic” real estate assets of nationalized banks. Evictions rose to 67,189 in 2013,⁷ 10% of which in Madrid; this created a social tragedy condemned by the European Union Court of Justice.⁸ With the state on the retreat, we move from the ashes of the welfare state into a realm of conflict in which the apparent relinquishing public realm is subject to a new hegemonic role of private finance. The state has shifted from its role as a promoter of public structures of well-being to a guardian controlling who owns and who uses urban space. As such, public space is now subject to the re-affirmation of a historical pendular tension between state normativity and emergent popular sovereignty over common space.

Structure and situation. Public space unmasked

The landscape of social contention in southern European cities is the result of the long capitulation of the project of public space, from its celebrated mythological essence of the European city to its dystopian image as a fragile tourist theme park surrounded by leaky security fences. Moreover, the common place of the militarization of urban space and the policies of control⁹ does not seem, however, to be happening today in suburbia. In Madrid it is affecting the core of what was meant to be a place of maximum urbanity (centrality in a Lefebvrian sense) and a buffer for social difference. The shrinking field for sociality unveils the increasingly evident contradictions of a public space project supported by a network of physical

opportunities, rendering the exclusion also spatial. Agamben, Giorgio, *The State of Exception*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)

³ The rapid increase in social inequalities, captured by the impressive evolution in the Gini coefficient, illustrates a societal rupture in which the urban dimension is unfolding in unforeseeable ways

⁴ Up to a maximum of €800,000 for illegal demonstrations outside the Parliament.

⁵ 1,117 procedures in Madrid in 2012. Source. Ministry of Interior Affairs.

⁶ Amnesty International España, *el derecho a protestar amenazado*. (Madrid 2014)

⁷ Source 2013: CGPJ. The estimated figure for 2014 is 68,472, reaching a total of 377,932 for the period 2008-2014.

⁸ Sentence of the Court of Justice, 14 March 2013 *

⁹ Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (London: Verso, 2010), 432 pages

structures projected for an audience of citizens indoctrinated by the dance of democratic equality. Such choreography is no longer valid and reveals the resurfacing of an ancient opposition between the category of public (as a collective political strata of citizens, but also with its appeal to the idea of an audience of passive public, of *auditorium*) and that of the multitude¹⁰ (mob) of undifferentiated individuals that gather and act according to supposedly irrational impulses. It is in this contrast that we can better appreciate how moral economies, in the sense coined by Thompson,¹¹ motivate not only the revolts, but also the reunion of apparently un-combinable citizens. Such indiscipline, traditionally deplored as primitive, evil and even as feminine in its hysterical nature,¹² is now fertile ground for a new set of situations reconciling both the necessary *publicité* and the recognition and encounter of the other.

Beyond oppositions between *espace public* and *espace communautaire*, this expansion of the public no longer follows any Habermas-style notion of the public sphere where good civic practices constitute the construction of public order and guarantee the necessary buffer capable of assuming the social differences and subsuming them into pacified civility. On the contrary, and overcoming this out-dated notion new basic commonality seems to imperfectly but powerfully reignite. It is perhaps an attempt to coin a new common language upon which a new set of spatial practices, an urban imaginary, could provide the basis for an organic interaction and dialogue. We should revise established forms of conceiving urbanism as a way towards symbolic interactionism. One of the most remarkable successes of the *mareas ciudadanas* as legitimate heirs of the 15M movement is the fact they have reconquered socially meaningful space together with a language. Cries of “yes, it is possible!” bring together volunteers who defend the common good in front of hospitals, occupy schools or stop evictions. Where urban regeneration has simply meant speeding up gentrification, these pulsating moments of public life perhaps constitute the most genuine attempts to refund public space. We arrive at this apparently contradictory position perfectly exemplified by the *mareas*, the occupations, and the unexpected moments of liquid and unstructured solidarity: only by destroying the very norms (law) that were supposed to regulate difference and negotiate alterity can shared public space reimagine itself as public.¹³ A conflict by which urban life can perhaps again be shared and conform society beyond community.

¹⁰ Lately recharged by Negri and Hardt, identifying it with a new form of sovereign subject capable of containing heterogeneity within a collective entity. By embracing Spinoza’s figure of thought, this notion reopens the possibility of a democratic stratum without recurring to the fallacy of the communicational negotiation among abstract uprooted citizens.

¹¹ Thompson, E.P. “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century”. *Past and Present*. (London: Oxford University Press.1971)

¹² Clear in the treatments by Gustave Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, [1895] 1913), 102–5, 158–60. And Gabriel Tarde. *La opinion y la multitud*. (Madrid: Taurus 1896 (Paris 1904)

¹³ In the active sense intended by Hanna Arendt. *The Human Condition* (Chicago 1958)

As the new movements gather momentum they promptly and paradoxically reunite the anonymity required by the multitude with a radically re-found form of *extimité*.¹⁴ The relevance of the *Stop desahucios* (Stop evictions) campaign resides in the fact that by grouping anonymous volunteers to stop the evictions of individuals, it has created loose support networks without strong affiliation but who share a notion of perceived injustice touching on a common right; this mobilises a momentary reaction by volunteers driven by a variety of motivations. Drawn by the overlaps of strong new identity-making links –bonding– and the freedom of casualty and change –bridging¹⁵– it seems impossible to imagine the project of an inclusive contemporary European city without formal and informal, current and virtual commonalities. Original forms of mobilisation were said to “prefer unconventional and spontaneous modalities of activism expressing an energetic form of the phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity with which hermeneutic constructionism elaborated their social theory”.¹⁶ However, these supposedly unanchored individuals for whom “the conceptualisation of the collective is complicated if not impossible”¹⁷ seem to clearly be constructing a plural collective subject represented by the structuration of extremely mixed social movements.¹⁸

Bodily reactions. Commonality in conflict

Reacting to the general sense of discontent, the *mareas ciudadanas* movement rapidly gathers new collectives of bodies in the form of both organized demonstrations and informal actions to defend public service structures. Nowadays, these actions, which place the bodily dimension at the centre (through an inclusive self-management of space) are increasingly connected to other forms of occupations that merge the informal squat movement¹⁹ with the defence of the structures and services of an agonizing welfare state. Liquid, decentralized and heterogeneous, these movements question public space as an ideological embodied construction, casting territorialisation over a bodily sovereign space regained through conflict and self-organization.

To combat urban fragmentation and social segregation these movements seek to reconstitute particular and specific accessibilities ranging from the collective to the individual with an implicit cohabitation model that moves into the informal

¹⁴ In the original sense intended by Lacan and complemented by Tisseron. Jacques Lacan *Séminaire XVI*, 2006, édition du Seuil. Serge Tisseron, *L'intimité surexposée*, (2001) Ramsay.

¹⁵ Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon & Schuster 2000)

¹⁶ Delgado, Manuel. *El espacio público como ideología*. (Madrid: Catarata 2011)

¹⁷ *ibidem*

¹⁸ Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas. *Representaciones políticas y movimiento 15-M*. Study number 2921. (Madrid June 2011)

¹⁹ Martínez, Miguel Ángel. García, Ángela *Convergence of anti-neoliberal movements: Squatting, Housing and the 15M movement in Spain*. (Athens 2013)

patrimonialisation of common space.

In short, bodies reclaiming their place and drawing our analyses of urbanity away from the disembodied realm of agglomeration economies²⁰ into the pulsating nature of moods and encounter. Conflict has brought together strangers who share something; emotion has transformed their identities and sparked a new spatial awareness reuniting politics with *urbs*. These new social aggregates base their commonality on the politics of the body and *perform*²¹ a transition towards a new mode of spatial perception.

From abstract situationality to the recursive nature of practices

This reconciliation of anonymity and *extimité* ironically revisits and simultaneously denies both the ideal of the anonymous citizen surfing a field of market choices and the concept of urbanity capable of rendering the cross between *mixité* and a rootless modern citizen into a public space and public sphere project. Moments of gathering are, therefore, spontaneous connections and place urbanity in situational politics. As a result, it's a shift from a pragmatist consideration of *situationality* as a characteristic way of conducting urban life (in suggested by Louis Wirth), to a *situationist* frame as a criterion inspiring pragmatic social action.²² In addition, a form of radical parliamentarism is exercised and vindicated by these movements, combined and intimately linked to the liquid and magmatic nature of the outbursts of indignation and gathering. Indeed, many open citizens' assemblies in Madrid were initially started by demonstrators who spontaneously decided to stay in a given location. Moreover, these social movements prefer to exploit networks, ensuring a set of distributed governance practices that benefit from a perfectible method in the construction of consensus and allow for improvement in resources.

One of the important ways with which these movements re-instate urbanity is by their conflict over space, linking language to a bodily space and framing the interaction within and without the movements. When asked by external observers, these movements deny established schemes and do not answer with just one criterion or a set of assertions to be negotiated. Instead, as Claus Offe has noted,²³ they respond with a flood of items referring to their essentially *intra-locutory* rather than *inter-locutory* nature. However, in the accelerated and oversimplified era of tele-democracy, negotiation at urban level has been simplified into a caricature, as if participation in urban space could be equated to the automatic yes/no answer to the next billboard. Instead, the assembly acts, intervenes and restores public life.

²⁰ Fujita Mashahisa; Thisse, Jean-François. *Economics of Agglomeration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

²¹ In the sense of the performative, developed by Judith Butler. in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Psychology Press 1997)

²² Delgado, Manuel. *El espacio publico como ideologia*. (Madrid: Catarata 2011) pp. 53. Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life". *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 44, No. 1, (Jul., 1938), pp. 1-24

²³ Claus Offe. *Partidos Politicos y nuevos movimientos sociales* (Madrid: Sistema 1992)

Although its capacity for permanence and effective action is being questioned, these momentary bursts have undeniably created a dense experience capable of turning alienation into a possibility.

Considered thus, the analysis of public space ought to elude a still pervasive Durkheim-style notion of space as location²⁴ and instead embrace a reconsideration of space as capacity and link it ontologically to the notion of agency. In the words of Alberto Corsin Jimenez, “space is no longer ‘out there’, but a condition or faculty -a capacity- of social relationships”. It is what people *can* do and not where they are.²⁵ New social interventions in public space revisit the culture of the open city along these lines, coining a new paradigm that reunites active participation with the culture of the prototype.²⁶

Change of model; towards the prototype

If the public space project is promptly being emptied and explodes due to social contestation in an fragmented urban body, it is also accompanied by the disappearance of the city model. In 2012, twenty-two Urban Extension Plans (PAUs) have been declared illegal by the Superior Court of Justice in Madrid; the sentence affects more than 135,303 future housing units many of which have already begun to be built or are actually inhabited. This sentence leaves the model of city growth and expansion in a fragile limbo.

The prototype, as new emergent figure in social and cultural studies, helps us understand the situationist framework used to create new pragmatic social action. It places the emphasis on practical and recursive action over an object, the city, which becomes an accessible artefact. Just as urban decay is measured by coupling control and fear, budding associative movements and direct interventions in search of an embodied spatial justice are the best signals of the vitality of public life. In particular, the actions of *Stop desahucios* emerge powerfully in collective imaginary as a way to access a new *intervenible* geography of collaboration and direct intervention. The incommensurable and often abstract entity of the city as a whole is once again reconciled with the dimension of the everyday experience and with the rush of heterogeneous and non-affiliated individuals who gather to act, respond and debate. Public space is again tentatively reconstructed by a mix of popular assemblies and the physical support of streets and squares that again provide a basis for dense and free liquid commonality, which is the basis of urbanity.

From among the ruins of a depleted model of expansionism and the masquerade of a

²⁴ Durkheim, Emile. *The elementary forms of religious life*. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915)

²⁵ Alberto Corsin Jimenez “On the Space as a Capacity”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* . vol. 9, n. 1 (2003) pp. 137-53

²⁶ Alberto Corsin Jimenez, “Asambleas populares: el ritmo urbano de una política de la experimentación” (with Adolfo Estalella.) in *La democracia del futuro: del 15M a la emergencia de una sociedad civil viva*, eds. Marta Cruells y Pedro Ibarra, Madrid 2013: Icaria Editorial

failed civic equality no longer effectively supported by the State, this prototype emerges as unstable, *intervenable* and *hackable* geography. The prototype is similar to the urban imaginary vindicated by Delgado, placing the emphasis on the practice of social relations of reproduction and adding the spatial dimension. This notion is similar to the concept of social form coined by Raymond Ledrut, which structures social experience at every moment, engendering both behaviours and real images, because imaginaries are not representations but representational schemes, or schemes of representation.²⁷ We should beware of reducing the notion of the prototype to a banal marketing image; conflict and sharing interact re-signifying spaces but they also change the subjects and inform a new diversity to be drawn and sedimented over the dense European city through much needed new governance structures. For the category of the prototype, space is a practice and imaginary puts the emphasis on the meanings of practiced social relations, providing the substance - textural, fleshy and concise- to urban experience as an act and not just as a passively perceived abstract meaning.

Based on the moral economies of the multitude, these outbreaks of collective actions temporarily restate an incomplete yet embodied *publicité* of urban space. Without centre, fixed image or organic core, these moments of urbanity and citizenship seem to be the key to the articulation of the upcoming future of the European metropolis within the new horizon of the city as commons.²⁸

²⁷ Raymond Ledrut "Société réel, société imaginaire" Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie, 82, (1987) pp 42-45.

²⁸ David Harvey, "The Right to the City" International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 27, 4 (2003) pp 939-41.