SALIENCY LENDS A HAND: THE CHANGING FACE OF GLOBAL SQUATTERS' SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

SALIÊNCIA DÁ UMA MÃO: A NOVA FACE DOS MOVIMENTOS SOCIAIS GLOBAIS DE *SQUATTERS*

Benjamin Duke

▪ Institute for Inclusivity in Higher Education (ULIIHE), University of Leicester, LE1 7RH, Leicester, United Kingdom. Email: bd158@leicester.ac.uk | ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2220-6889

Abstract

This paper provides a conceptual theoretical review introducing an analysis of the political factors that influences the level of public support of squatters' social movements. Depending on the political thinking in vogue, certain issues are presented as being especially salient. For example, squatters should be moved on to enable urban regeneration. These issues provide the theoretical conceptual framework to discuss key concepts and relationships to analyse the societal perception of global squatters' social movements. The COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis were found to be significant factors. One of the conclusions to be drawn from this paper is that global squatters' social movements help to raise awareness of State absence or policy failure in critical resource allocation. The relevance of this work lies is the reminder of the link between empty properties, land banking, and homelessness.

Keywords: civil rights; social inequality; political impact; Squatter' social movements

Resumo

Este artigo fornece uma revisão teórica conceptual que introduz a análise dos fatores políticos que influenciam o nível de apoio público aos movimentos sociais de *squatters*. Dependendo do pensamento político em voga num determinado momento, certas questões são apresentadas como especialmente salientes, por exemplo, os *squatters* deveriam ser transferidos para permitir a regeneração urbana. Esses tipos de questões fornecem a estrutura conceptual teórica para discutir conceitos e relações-chave, para analisar a perceção social dos movimentos globais de *squatters*. A pandemia da COVID-19 e a crise do custo de vida foram consideradas fatores significativos. Uma das conclusões a retirar deste artigo é que os movimentos globais de *squatters* ajudam a aumentar a consciencialização sobre a ausência do Estado ou o fracasso político na alocação crítica de recursos. A relevância do trabalho é lembrar a ligação entre propriedades vazias, banco de terrenos e falta de moradia.

Palavras-chave: direitos civis; desigualdade social; impacto político; movimentos sociais de *squatters*

INTRODUCTION

This paper comes at a timely moment, with most societies being at various stages of a recovery period after the COVID-19 pandemic. The political economy of social protection to provide the basic necessities people need has been drawn into sharp focus by COVID-19 (Mendes, 2020). One of those basic human needs is accommodation, a place to live, the physical apparatus to create a safe environment, a home. As a result of COVID-19, there has been a significant increase in the number of people unable to pay their rent. Many countries experienced a significant economic downturn in 2020-22. "The poorest will be hit the hardest by the compound health and economic crisis" (United Nations Development Programme, 2020, p. 12). The exogenous shock of COVID-19 provided squatters' movements' the world over, with an unprecedented level of public support. This statement has to be qualified with the caveat, little attention has been paid to the effect of COVID-19 on people squatting in empty buildings. The political impetus to house the homeless, which was prevalent in many advanced countries in the global North, during the COVID-19 pandemic has dissipated. In global South countries that have larger populations of homeless people, there was little impetus in the first place. For example, in the *favelas* of Brazilian urban areas, there is an absence of political leadership, which is filled by criminal and/or paramilitary organisations. These non-State actors endorsed by the Brazilian government continued to offer drugs, protection, and weapons during COVID-19 pandemic. Paramilitary organisations conducted assassinations in the form of *favelas* social cleansing (Schmalz, 2024). Neoliberal policy making fails when the people who most need accommodation do not get the housing (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2024[1]; Mayer, 2016).

Squatters' social movements can occupy long-term empty properties with less public outcry than buildings which have more recently been in use (Hammond, 2015; Martinez Lopez, 2014; Mayer, 2015; Reeve, 2009). Social movements have an important permanent place in global societies, often filling in gaps in social protection left by an absent State (Domaradzka, 2018). Social movements also raise awareness of various societal inequalities, acting to change the minds of political decision-makers. "It should be added social movements do not aim only to change public opinion, but also seek to convince those responsible for implementing public policy, and change the values of political elites as well as those of the public" (Della Porta & Diani, 2020, p. 242).

Europe's squatters' movements did not begin until the post-war period during the 1960s. "Amsterdam became the locus of rioting and widespread discontent by the mid-1970s" (Dembski et al., 2019, p. 47). A new wave of autonomous social movements, a "politics of the first person", a new radical approach (see also Novak & Kurik, 2020). The social movements consisted of people who lived in groups, including squats, who shared most material things. These autonomous social movements were able to circumvent the social fragmentation of individuals, which is often imposed by materialistic consumerism (Martinez Lopez, 2013). Stable tenured people have supported European squatters' social movements to oppose unwanted urban regeneration schemes. "Throughout the inner city, squatters seized vacant buildings – preventing their demolition and renewal – and citizens demanded a more human-scale approach to urban planning" (Dembski et al., 2019, p. 34). Together, they have created social centres supported by permanent residents to create self-employed initiatives and workspace for artisans. Often homeless, deprived, asylum seekers, mental health sufferers, ex-prisoners, or care leavers become squatters to survive (Provan, 2020). Support from squatter's movement, altruistic, philanthropic, wealthier, skilled people, enabled disadvantaged people to become empowered and self-confident. Squatters' social movements working with stable tenured professional people can result "…in a clear increase in social capital and mutual learning for all" (Martinez Lopez, 2013, p. 880).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper analyses experiences of global squatters' social and political relationship with state power, alongside a theoretical-conceptual landscape of how critical resource allocation for homeless populations could be implemented. The concept of the saliency of global squatters' movements was analysed by applying the Ballestoros-Quillez et al. (2022) systematic literature review approach. I identified three classifications of the saliency of squatters and the interface with public power. These were "Political Impacts of Squatter's Movements", "Civil Rights Impact of Squatter's Movements", and "Squatter's Movements' Impact on Social Inequity". Martinez Lopez and San Juan (2020) identify the political impact of squatters' social movements electorally; articulating how they have contributed to the formation of a credible political force, i.e. the 15M social movement in Spain. In "Civil Rights Impact of Squatter's Movements", Domaradzka (2018) demonstrates the saliency of global squatters' movements in various ways. Domaradzka (2018) articulates how people having the self-confidence to form community groups have increased people's civil rights. In "Squatter's Movements' Impact on Social Inequity", Dadusc et al. (2019) and Dadusc (2023) discuss how social welfare issues are drowned

out by agenda setting from the dominant forces in society. The saliency of squatters' social movements here is to provide a counternarrative to the neoliberalism discourse in housing supply. Dadusc et al. (2019) and Dadusc (2023) demonstrate that global squatters' movements fill the breach caused by the absence of the state. By definition, squatters' social movements reduce social inequity.

METHODS

This paper delivers a critical theoretical review compiled from existing literature. In keeping with Ballesteros-Quilez et al. (2022) systematic literature review approach, information was obtained from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. I then went through the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol to sort the articles found during internet searches into the three classifications detailed in the theoretical framework section above. The PRISMA protocol consists of sifting the results of the literature review by conducting four phases, which are: Identification; Screening; Eligibility; Inclusion (Page et al., 2021).

The **Results** of the research become apparent as the critical review discussion develops.

DISCUSSION: POLITICAL IMPACTS OF SQUATTERS' SOCIAL MOVEMENTS'

The rise of the 15M in Spain provides another example of a large campaign protest group that has increased the political stock of squatters' movements (Martinez Lopez, 2016). The 15M social movement formed effectively on 15 May 2011, hence the organisation's name. 15M mobilised mainly in response to hegemonic paradigmatic forces maintaining the status quo in Spain, preventing perennial social problems from being addressed (Spash, 2020). The social and political impact of 15M, squatters' movements, and social movements in general need to be measured. Martinez Lopez and San Juan (2020, p. 13) assessed the effectiveness of 15M in terms of their "self-reproduction, the non-institutional effects and the 'unintended' consequence". The 15M reshaped large parts of day-to-day politics in Spain, including the resurgence of a Citizens' Assembly model of governance. Due to the 15M in Spain, identity construction, manifest as new, strong, completely novel allegiances formed between people from vastly different backgrounds, became more common. Martinez Lopez and San Juan's (2020) analysis of how to appraise the relevance of a social movement is clearly correct. Self-reproduction of 15M, is manifest in the formation of new populist political parties such as Partido X and Podemos. Also, the number of independent, autonomous activist groups and initiatives that formed in Spain directly

as a result of 15M. A non-institutional effect of 15M is manifest in the lasting increased public acceptance of alternative lifestyles, including squatters' movements in Spain. An unintended consequence of 15M is the electoral success of Podemos, which won five seats in the May 2014 European Parliament elections (Mayer, 2015).

> The occupation of buildings for housing purposes, or as social centres became, thus, a key illustration of these new alliances. The number of squats and the public acceptance of squatting as a legitimised non-institutional action of protest also became a milestone of the multiple forms of self-organisation which emerged out of the 15M movement.
>
> (Martinez Lopez & San Juan, 2020, p. 7)

La Via Campesina is an international peasant farmers' social movement formed originally in Mons, Belgium, in 1993, they are now based in France. La Via Campesina has a global reach that coordinates over 180 peasant organisations in over 80 countries across Africa, America, Asia, and Europe. La Via Campesina made a significant contribution to the policy formulation and subsequent global adoption of the 2018 UN Declaration on the Rights of the Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (La Via Campesina, 2023). La Via Campesina has several political, civil liberty and social inequity interfaces with global squatters' movements. There is advocacy of the right to peasant farming of small holdings, which mirrors the ethos of the "Right to the City". There is campaigning for the civil right to live as a peasant farmer, which harmonises with global social movements' support of people's rights to squat in empty buildings. Similar to 15M and Occupy Wall Street, the success of La Via Campesina is manifest in its use of mass peaceful protests and strategic lobbying. La Via Campesina provides a sustainable challenge to social inequity, in their campaigns regarding food sovereignty and the right to seeds. These two issues also chime with global squatters' social movements, as they are affected by neoliberal market forces, which directly affect the supply of land (squatters) and food (peasant farmers). If enough people were able to grow their food, the price of food and land would fall alongside the amount of investment return on land banking.

Platform for Mortgage-Affected People (PAH) began in Barcelona, Spain, in 2009. PAH is a Spanish campaign organisation who coordinates various responses for people who have or are about to lose their homes due to mortgage default. One of the campaign tools PAH uses is to arrange squats for mortgage-affected people (Constellation of the Commons, 2024). In concert with Las Via Campesina, PAH also has political, civil liberty, and social inequity

interfaces with global squatters' movements. For example, PAH advocates at the policy level against foreclosures, one-sided mortgage contracts, and non-fault evictions. In the civil liberty domain, PAH advocates for a guaranteed right to housing regardless of the ability to pay. PAH helps combat social inequity by challenging the current legal process for evicting people or foreclosing people's mortgages. PAH provides an advocacy service, which acts to mediate debt renegotiations with mortgage lenders, so an agreement is reached on payments whereby the mortgagee remains housed in the property. PAH provides a similar service for people renting accommodation from a state-sponsored or private landlord. The crucial difference between PAH and 15M is that PAH puts a substantial focus on influencing decision-makers to generate change. Whereas 15M became a political party to become decision-makers to implement change themselves. The difference between PAH and the Occupy (Wall Street initially) Movement is PAH offers long-term policy solutions to address various forms of social inequity. Whereas the Occupy Movement tried to be all things to all people and found it had spread itself too thin.

DISCUSSION: CIVIL RIGHTS IMPACT OF SQUATTERS' SOCIAL MOVEMENTS'

The effectiveness of global squatters' social movements can be considered through the lens of how some countries have better welfare provision than others. A strong squatter's movement in a country can push the Government into meeting the needs of low-income communities (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2019). One of the main causal factors resulting in people squatting is housing affordability. Here squatters' movements have slowly gained increasing public support, as people formerly permanently housed experience housing insecurity (Donaghy, 2020). House prices and housing rents have risen sharply since the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. These pressures on housing demand have been exacerbated by regular cycles of economic downturn in the same period. The twenty-first century has heralded the advent of precariousness, unstable employment, the gig economy, and zero-hour contracts (Schack, 2023). These societal changes mean that an increased number of low educated, low skilled, English speaking people, turn to the squatters' movement to secure accommodation (Campos & Martinez, 2020). Squatters' movements globally are part of a wider network of community groups, which have a remit of getting access to the city for all. The ethos of the "rights to the city" (Martinez Lopez, 2020; Mayer, 2012) is advocated by the UN, which defines access to housing as a

human right. By definition, the "rights to the city" are a civil right for all citizens of countries who are signees of the UN Convention.

Squatters' social movements have helped mobilise community groups and street level activism to deliver civil and political rights. Examples of squatter's movement contributions include advocacy groups, estate councils, local election committees, right to the city groups, and watchdog initiatives (Domaradzka, 2018). International human rights organisations such as UNESCO promote that people should have these civil rights. Formal national actors have sometimes chosen to work with or for activist or protest groups, especially on mobilisation to protect cultural or heritage sites (European Commission (EC), 2021)[2]. Squatters have worked with local people to protect socio-spatial rights, such as protesting against the closure of a public footpath or right of way. The squatter's movement often acts as a street level activist reminder of any lack of community consultation or social inequality which has occurred locally (Black et al., 2020). The right to the city aspect of squatters' movements requires special attention. There is a moral obligation by local and national decision-makers to deliver people's rights to information and access to the city centre (Domaradzka, 2018). These civil rights apply to people regardless of their tenurial status. Squatters' social movements raise awareness, there are excluded groups of people who may have a home but are disadvantaged in other ways. The public is concerned at "the gap between rights promised and rights delivered" (Zhang, 2021). The quality of life uncertainty generated by such civil rights policy failure increases the number of people searching for change. The social malaise provides squatters' movements with an opportunity to mobilise collective action and facilitate debate on new concepts of citizenship (Bertuzzi, 2017). The public is supportive of squatters' movements, for bringing the impact of the creeping erosion of people's civil rights to their attention (Blomley, 2020).

A threat to the squatters' movement of potentially losing the public perception of being a force for good arises during policy disagreements (Russell, 2019). A practice of "rendering technical" or somehow "not worthy of social concern" approach is a political process which can undermine squatters. Socio-political neutering of squatters' social movements continues in the 2020s (Castells, 1938; European Union, 2013; Levitas, 1999; London School of Economics and Political Science, 2023). The complex social tapestry, the ethos which can differ for individual squatters' social movements is dumbed down, blocked out by essentially "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu, 1991). This effectively renders an irrelevant process, often has the effect of circumventing any political or ethical action in

support of squatters' social movements. During such times, hegemonic and paradigmatic forces from the State can be used to sow the seeds of discontent and division within community organisations. The State often has a preferred approach or provides only one to an urban regeneration scheme. Public support will also be given to squatters' movements, when people realise the State does not respect people's civil rights (Karyotis, 2020). Ignoring the will of the people as expressed by the consultation exercise, forcing elderly people suffering ill health to attend Court would be corrosive. These types of circumstances would provide the impetus to mobilise people into collective peaceful action, in support of squatters' social movements.

DISCUSSION: SQUATTERS' MOVEMENTS IMPACT ON SOCIAL INEQUITY

Squatters' movements act to provide community consciousness, a public reminder of the many social inequalities which exist in the global north and south. For example, sporadic enforcement of building codes results in illegal, unsafe redevelopments, in both North and South hemispheres (Alterman & Calor, 2020). Squatters are seen by many in society as undesirable, if not dangerous individuals, who will steal from and injure innocent people. The reality is somewhat different. Squatters' social movements are often initially shunned by society, designated as nuisance people who do not conform to norms and values. The societal benefit of squatters is two-fold, physically, they occupy disused buildings, so they remain in community hands providing shelter for poor people that the State will not support. Socially, squatters' social movements occupy social spaces, providing an alternative narrative to prevent colonisation of public debate by neoliberal economic and housing policy (Dadusc et al., 2019). The occupation of disused buildings is crucial, especially if they were formerly used for business purposes. Derelict commercial buildings, such as disused factories or leisure centres, can be brought back by the local squatters' movement into community use (Jackson, 2019). These community hubs and workshops are valued by local people, who can now see a different view than that given by some public bodies. Activists of the squatters' social movements are usually deprived people, who are campaigning to deliver local services for themselves and the wider public. They also albeit indirectly, help counter land banking.

An unintended consequence of squatters' social movements activism is that their mobilisation reveals numerous other examples of intersectional inequality suffered by housed people. Intersectionality can be defined as a theoretical framework by which to analyse all aspects of a person's demographic profile. Intersectional inequality analyses a person's social identity concerning other social actors, which create unique nodes of discrimination (Atrey, 2019; Crenshaw, 2020[3]; Porter, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2015). This can be manifest in societal failure to provide a disabled toilet at public meetings, or important public information not being made available in the main language of a BAME neighbourhood. Squatters' social movements globally, have highlighted these intersectional inequalities in the course of their collective activism in support of local people (Ishkanian & Saavedra, 2019).

Squatters' social movement's community consciousness utility can act to enable people to come to terms with urban gentrification, whilst highlighting social inequality (Dadusc, 2023)[4]. Permanently housed residents are affected by urban redevelopment schemes in their neighbourhood, which often change the nature and demographic profile of the local area. Squatters' movements are beneficial in two ways. When squatters occupy empty buildings, after a certain level of initial public outcry, they can be seen as a temporary community resource, taking care of the building. The local squatters' movement also acts to dampen property speculation, making people aware investors have entered their neighbourhood for profit, not the community (Antunes et al., 2020). This neighbourhood enlightenment can lead to organised community driven Estate Boards being established. The formation of local decision-making panels can articulate calls for the regular cleaning of empty properties, whilst the development process is ongoing. Communities can also ask for long term social covenants to protect cultural heritage sites, schools, and parks after development completion. Vacant properties standing empty for long periods of time can have multiple effects. They demonstrate social inequity, manifest in homeless people having nowhere to live, meanwhile, there's unoccupied housing in the neighbourhood not being used (Westwater, 2019). Empty redeveloped housing acts as land banking, increasing the price of the few houses that become available. People informed by local squatters campaigning could support activist groups in reclaiming vacant housing or buildings, putting them back in community use.

CONCLUSION

When the Occupy Wall Street movement was in the public's eye, many cities squatter's social movements were not just tolerated, they were actively encouraged. As the Wall Street movement faded, public saliency of the plight of the squatters' movement diminished, easing the removal of squatters without outcry. This discussion has identified a variety of motivations for squatting, as well as numerous discriminatory practices by national governments and local officials in their communities (Grashoff et

al., 2020). There has been indirect discrimination sourced by national neoliberal economic policies, which have acted to increase housing prices and reduce labour intensive employment. This analysis has revealed some of the social dynamics at play influencing how the public may perceive squatters' social movements. The COVID-19 pandemic has graphically demonstrated both the importance of squatters' movements, and why they need to be brought to an end by eradicating homelessness. This discussion confirms the requirement of the "*dynamics of hybridisation*", a process of collaboration between civil society, humanitarianism, and social movements (Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021, p. 176). "Dynamics of hybridisation" would engender a new form of solidarity between different community activist movements, coalescing around various social causes that need addressing. It is essential that the social movement "SMOization" of civil society organisations and the non-governmental "NGOization" of social movements continues apace (Della Porta, 2020). Public saliency of squatters' social movements has been reinforced by the current cost of living crisis.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript.

Contribution of the author

This manuscript was written by the sole author listed, who contributed to all the study conception and design. The author conducted all the material preparation, data collection, and analysis. The author read, approved, and submitted the final manuscript.

Notes

[1] This Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) webpage discusses PESTLE (Political, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental) analysis. CIPD identify many factors which influence organisational behaviour. These same factors harmonise in public policy formulation, for example, housing supply, alongside critical resource allocation, who gets to access housing and/or a right to the city.

[2] This is an EU H2020 project, which discusses good practice in implementing *"adaptive heritage reuse to broader culture and urban programmes"* (EC, 2021, p. 7). The Report's relevance here are the numerous descriptions of joint working between Government agencies, activists, protest groups and squatters' social movements (see for example, pp. 37-38, p. 41, pp. 166-168, pp. 198-199, p. 205, pp. 208-209, pp. 237-239 and p. 249).

[3] "Crenshaw was the first to coin the phrase 'intersectionality' in 1989." (Ishkanian & Saavedra, 2019, p. 992).

[4] There is no date on this contemporary philosophy essay, the date of access was 9 July 2023.

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