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BOOK REVIEWS

SQEK, Cattaneo C. and Martínez M. (Eds., 2014), *The Squatters' Movement in Europe. Commons and Autonomy as Alternatives to Capitalism*, London, Pluto Press, pp. 268.

Can squatting be considered as an alternative to capitalism? This is the main question that provides a common thread throughout this second book from the SQEK, and which the authors of the essays it contains try to answer. They are all members of the SQuatting Europe Kollektive, a transnational information and social network of activist-researchers, born in 2009 and including scholars from several countries, that seeks to critically analyze the housing and social centres squatters' movement in its various contexts, trying to involve activists in research practices and sharing the knowledge thus produced with both them and society.

If squatting in general refers to the illegal occupation of empty property, used without the consent of its owner (whether a public institution, a private individual or corporation or organization) in this volume only the political features of squatting as an urban movement are considered. In fact, political squatting is not simply a way to meet the need for housing and spaces of sociability through direct action, the rejection of the rules and logic of the market and legal regulations, and denouncing and criticizing the way in which these needs can or cannot be satisfied in a capitalist society. It is also an attempt made by radical and antagonist left-wing activists to practice non-hierarchical and participatory organization models, offering an alternative mode of envisioning social relationships, political and countercultural practices.

The book, which contains essays drawn from many countries including Spain, Switzerland, the UK, the Netherlands, the USA, Italy, Germany and France, is divided in two parts. The first includes city "Case Studies", from chapters 2 to 5, in which the historical emergence of the squatters' movement, its development and occasional decline are described. If the housing issue is central in this part, in some cities squatting emerged as a justification for engaging in alternative lifestyles and counter-cultural activities, while in others the movement showed its more political approach, reclaiming housing rights. The second part of the volume, from chap-

ters 6 to 8, is articulated around three “Specific Issues”: the relations among cities, their environment and the ecological dimension of the squatters’ movement, the inclusion of gender minorities and diversities, and questions related to the criminalization, institutionalization and legalization of the movement. At the end of almost each chapter, one or more “boxes” are provided in which specific issues and cases are presented in depth.

In Chapter 1 - “Squatting as a response to social needs, the housing question and the crisis of Capitalism”-, the editors of the book, Miguel Martinez and Claudio Cattaneo, analyze the context in which squatting practices take place today, that is the crisis of capitalism that requires alternatives. Squatting can provide an answer to the issue of housing, though not for all those who need it, and it represents opposition not only to private property but also to many aspects of capitalism, even if it is not able to challenge the whole capitalist system. The authors consider squatting helpful for those who wish to change the system, because it is both a practical critique of urban speculation, and a “multidimensional way of living that pursues the collective satisfaction of human needs through autonomous, participative and horizontal means of direct democracy” (p. 12). Luca Pattaroni, in Chapter 2 -“The fallow lands of the possible: an enquiry into the enacted criticism of capitalism in Geneva’s squats”-, presents a case study of the Swiss city, where a powerful squatters’ movement was able not only to campaign for the right to housing but “represented a colourful diversity of attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles which flourished in opposition to the grey of the capitalist city” (p. 14). The chapter is structured as a narration of an intimate journey into the different phases of the squat’s cycle (occupation, installation, habitation, eviction and perpetuation), where the way in which the criticism of capitalism is practically applied in the lifecycle of a squat is showcased. The movement grew in the 1980s within a wide political consensus against speculation lasting until the 1990s. It attracted many sympathizers, showing that squatting was not only contestation but also an alternative lifestyle and festive conception of struggle. The movement later succumbed to the revenge of the market, state repression and the conception of the city as commodity. In box 2.1, Lucrezia Lennert describes the “house projects” in Berlin as places of alternative lifestyles to the dominant capitalist ways of living. How the squatters’ movements originated and developed in London and Brighton is recreated and narrated in Chapter 3 -“The right to decent housing and a whole lot more besides: examining the modern English squatters movement”- by E.T.C. Dee, focusing on the issue of criminalization of illegal occupations of residential premises. The author argues that political squatting “began in England in its modern form with housing need, and quickly branched into other areas of protest, which continue to this day, with the right to decent housing remaining as a fundamental driving force” (p. 85); in fact, despite squatting in residential buildings recently being made a criminal offence, it will not succeed while empty buildings and enough people willing to occupy them remain. Last, the “Needle Collective” explains in box 3.1 how the squatters’ movement has evolved after criminalization. In Chapter 4 -“The power of the magic key: the scalability of squatting in the Netherlands and the United States”-, Hans Pruijt makes a comparison of the histories of the squatters’ movement in Amsterdam and New York City, showing “how it became large-scale, and how it had the power and the organization to manage the adaptation of top-down public plans in Amsterdam ... while it did not succeed so much in

NYC” (p. 15). In fact, while in NYC squatting as deprivation-based and an alternative housing strategy model (squatting mainly as a means for people to be housed) prevailed, in Amsterdam it was also considered as an end in itself and more combinations of squatting types have occurred, making the movement part of political activism at the city level. In box 4.1 Alan Smart narrates the historical contribution of the Provos to the emergence of the Dutch squatting movement, while in box 4.2 Frank Morales tells the story of the Lower East Side squatters’ movement in NYC, showing how institutional repression made the survival of the movement highly difficult. In chapter 5 -“*Ogni sfratto sarà una barricata: squatting for housing and social conflict in Rome*”- Pierpaolo Mudu analyzes the case study of the Italian capital, highlighting the context in which squatting for housing becomes a political claim to the right to housing. After an historical description of the phenomenon, the author focuses on current housing conditions and examples of occupations where the struggle is rescaled socially involving precarious workers, unemployed people, students and different groups of migrants. The “movements for housing rights” are analyzed in their struggles not only for obtaining a roof over people’s heads but also for alternative living conditions, between self-renovation and legalization, reclaiming the city and providing “an effective form of welfare from below” (p. 158). In box 5.1 Thomas Aguilera reports the large wave of squatting for housing in Paris, where some organizations are active in providing shelters for deprived people, and in Spain where squatting is spreading largely as an extension of the recent campaign launched by the Platform of People affected by Mortgages (PAH).

The second part of the book starts with Chapter 6 -“Squats in urban ecosystems: overcoming the social and ecological catastrophes of the capitalist city”-, in which Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro e Claudio Cattaneo analyze the local alternatives provided by the squatters’ movement in Barcelona and NYC that “in response to capitalist devastation, develop their ecological conversion through setting up urban gardens, bicycle workshops or rural-urban (rurban) communes” (p. 16). The authors state that these experiences are part of a more general process within the squatters’ movement, which has started to recognize how anti-capitalism is based not only on social justice but also on the supply of sustainable resources and access to the means of primary production. In Chapter 7 -“Squatting and diversity: gender and patriarchy in Berlin, Madrid and Barcelona”), Azozomox presents a comparative study of three cities concerning the issue of social diversity within the squatters’ movement, focusing on gender relationships, LGBTQ identities, non-white and migrant women, everyday sexism and the division of labour in the reproduction of life. A narrow correlation between anti-capitalist and gender-emancipatory struggles is affirmed, and is also an outcome of strong self-criticism within the squatters’ movement about gender relations. Miguel Martinez, Azozomox and Javier Gil address the question of different legal regulations in European countries in Chapter 8 -“Unavoidable dilemmas: squatters dealing with law”-, reflecting on strategies of resistance, the challenge of criminalization and the disputes surrounding “legalized” squats. The focus is on the cities of Madrid and Berlin, and trying to understand the ways in which squatters deal with the criminalization of their practices, and in particular threats of eviction. While Deanna Dadusc discusses the outcomes of the new Dutch legislation aimed at criminalizing the movement in Amsterdam in box 8.2, in box 8.1

Claudio Cattaneo explains the illegal behaviour of squatters as grounded on moral principles combined with the capacity to resist oppression.

In the conclusions, the editors offer some answers to the original question, discussing whether squats are considered a means and/or ends in themselves, and if squatting could scale up from a local to a global alternative to capitalism. The summary response is that “squatting does not represent a complete alternative to capitalism. Mainly, squatting provides a strong local alternative, with various branches of critical discourse, small-scale behaviours and autonomous practices directly connected with other anti-capitalist and emancipatory social movements. In addition, there are many hindrances and internal contradictions which squatters’ movements need to face if they want to scale up to a level at which they become powerful enough to challenge the hegemony of capitalism” (p. 17). One of these contradictions relates to the means/ends debate: while for some squatters the occupation is an end in itself, because trespassing is considered a sufficient anti-capitalist gesture to challenge the dominant order of society, for other activists squatting is only a means in order to set up a project, like a social centre, where self-managed anti-capitalist activities unfold. According to the editors, in this second case, “there is a high likelihood that these squatters would easily accept an agreement with the owners in order to get the squat legalized” (p. 240), because the ultimate end would be to avoid eviction and to maintain the squatted place. Nevertheless, many empirical cases show that the social centres and other squats considered by activists as means to a political end (ultimately, the overthrow of capitalist society), refuse to negotiate with authorities on principle as they believe the anti-institutional practice of breaking the law to be more important than maintaining a legalized space.

The book, well structured and argued, is a powerful tool for those who want to come to know and study the squatting phenomenon and squatters’ movements in advanced capitalist societies. Together with the first SQEK book, the volume is the only English text of its kind in scientific literature, as existing essays – both in books and articles – dealing with the squatters’ movement are related to a single country or city, or at most a comparison between two countries or cities. The importance of the book lies firstly in its effort to analyze several dimensions (although not exhaustive) of political squatting: the historical emergence of the movement, the dynamic of network activists, connections with local society, the inclusion of diversity, the process of legalization, the cultural critique of consumerism, the alternative ways of life and the urban and rural dimensions. All these elements are analyzed from a comparative perspective, based on empirical research in different European cities. The book reflects current concerns in both scientific and political spheres. The different dimensions of the phenomenon are well framed from diverse scientific perspectives (sociology, geography, anthropology, history, urban studies, etc.), based on empirical research conducted by researchers “inside” the movement that strongly contribute to improve knowledge. From a political viewpoint, the dimensions and the cases analyzed provide cultural resources and analytical tools for the squatters and movement activists, stimulating their debates on crucial topics. The left-wing radical political commitment of the authors will surely be considered a weakness by those scholars who do not share this point of view or who assert the need for “neutrality” in the social sciences; neverthe-

less, for others, this standpoint is a strength not only because the position is clearly and explicitly declared, but because being “within” the squatters’ movement has allowed the authors direct and deep access to an environment and scene in which activists are usually diffident, if not hostile, towards social scientists and academics in general. Although some aspects of political squatting are not covered in the book, and despite their explicit radical commitment, the authors never fall down into simple propaganda for squatting, but argue their thesis on the basis of empirical evidence. The contradictory elements of the squatting are not hidden but highlighted and debated. In fact, the authors are aware that, while on the increase in some countries most affected by the crisis such as Spain, Greece and Italy, political squatting remains a minority practice that cannot alone aspire to overcome and replace the capitalist system, but can contribute to build alternatives together with other social movements.

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