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Please refer to the published version: Ferreri, M. (2020) Contesting displacement through radical emplacement and occupations in austerity Europe. In Adley, P., Brickell, K., Bowstead, J., Desai, V., Dolton, M., Pinkerton, A. and A. Siddiqi (eds) *Handbook of Displacement*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 739-752.

## ***Contesting displacement through radical emplacement and occupations in austerity Europe***

### *Introduction*

In cities across the Northern hemisphere, displacement from a place of home has long existed and affected low income communities, migrants and ethnic minorities. In different forms, urban policies and models rooted in financialisation, deregulation, limited or dwindling social housing provision, and a pro-development approach to planning, have left urban residents vulnerable to predatory transnational investment, privatisation and new waves of gentrification across Europe. The financial crisis of 2007/8 has further exacerbated, and in some cases drastically precipitated, an already unjust situation, and “brought home to us our vulnerability to displacement and dispossession” (O’Mahony and Sweeney, 2011: 2). The threat of displacement and evictions has become commonplace for increasingly larger swathes of the population (Brickell et al., 2017; Rolnik, 2013). The generalisation of the threat of displacement has been accompanied by a rise in organised resistance which has reignited existing social movement and encouraged the emergence of new ones. From campaigns to ‘stay put’ in threatened social housing, to protest camps to solidarity occupations with migrants and refugees, a politics of radical emplacement has come to the fore in the transnational political arena.

In both northern and southern European cities, resistance to displacement has been articulated through a shared repertoire of action, from anti-eviction resistance to the occupation of public spaces and vacant buildings (European Action Coalition, 2016). Anti-eviction work has targeted dispossession through displacement by physically reclaiming place, increasingly through forms of direct action. Similarly to the large scale mobilisation against home foreclosure and towards the re-occupation of vacant housing in the United States, the “strategic illegality of ‘home liberations’” (Roy, 2017), practices of occupation have accompanied wider organising to offer spaces to meet, find shelter and make ‘home’ under inhospitable conditions (Lancione, 2019). In doing so, occupations have become important tactical ways to make visible material and political causes of displacement, and for connecting specific and localised instances with wider social justice both city-wide, national and transnationally. In this chapter, I present key issues in displacement resistance across northern and southern European cities in response to post-2008 austerity policies and to new processes of gentrification and speculative real estate development. Without attempting an exhaustive overview, in what follows I bring into dialogue interdisciplinary literature on organised practices of displacement resistance that deploy the occupation of spaces. I broaden the gaze from strictly academic contributions to include ‘grey literature’ produced by displaced people and allies, to give visibility to alternative sites of knowledge production and to understand

practices that are often tactical and ephemeral, and produced through complex local and transnational meaning-making processes that may not be neatly captured by academic categories. From the standpoint of organising, 'displacement' is a signifier imbued with multiple meanings and forms of organising, which in widespread austerity-led precarization build on but exceed familiar repertoires, strategies and subject positions. Challenged by embodied encounters and practical solidarity, customary notions of displacement are questioned and stretched to encompass wider and multidimensional dynamics, with resistance articulating in response and against different processes of dispersal or removal of unwanted bodies from cities.

### **An expanded definition of displacement**

The concept of displacement has long been central to critical scholarship concerned with the disruptive effects of urbanisation dynamics on the lived geographies of individuals and communities, particularly the urban poor and minorities. Classical understandings of gentrification have long placed displacement at the core of the issue, not simply in terms of its direct effects on individuals and households, but also in relation to the wider logics of urban change (Lees et al., 2013; Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009). In a more expanded sense, displacement has been defined as the result of processes of unmaking 'place' through stigmatisation, the threat of eviction and the foreclosure of the possibility of being emplaced (Nowicki, 2017; Tyler and Slater, 2018; Slater, 2013). From claiming a right to 'stay put' (Newman and Wyly, 2006) to claiming a right to 'dwell', understood as "the right to exert a reasonable level of power over one's basic living conditions, with all the physical and mental benefits that entails" (Baeten et al., 2016: 2), the debate on definitions of displacement and resistance to it are increasingly becoming more nuanced. The need for an expanded understanding of displacement and displacement resistance has been made more urgent by the 2008 global financial crisis, with calls made for a 'reinvigorated critical gentrification studies' to "explore these new forms of austerity-fuelled dispossession and document ways to resist them" (Annunziata and Lees, 2016).

'Displacement' can name urban phenomena that can differ greatly and affect various subject positions in terms of tenure, power relations, scale and socio-economic characteristics. The polyvalence of the term has implications for understanding displacement resistance. As noted by Bernt and Holm on defining the urban processes affecting Prenzlauerberg in Berlin, the issue at stake here is not on how to define displacement, but on how the term is mobilised and politicised: it is the "ambiguity in the use of the term displacement that forms the point of entry for politics and makes the definition of displacement a politically controversial issue" (Bernt and Holm, 2009: 314). Political controversy is furthermore caused by processes of transnational adaption from Anglo-American debates and cities to geographically, socially and culturally specific context, where univocal translation of 'gentrification' and 'displacement' can prove elusive. In Spanish speaking contexts, for instance, activists have used humour to popularise the word, such as through the art-activist workshops 'Gentrificación no es un nombre de señora' (in Spanish: 'Gentrification is not a lady's name') run alongside a transnational digital 'Museum of the Displaced' (Left Hand Rotation, n-d). Expanded

definitions of 'displacement' and its adaptation to different contexts appears symptomatic of a lived theorising that seek out material causes to multiple and varied symptoms (see Ferreri, 2017), as well as strategies and tactics of organising for urban social justice. In the following, I examine different forms of displacement resistance through spatial occupations, maintaining a broad definition of 'displacement' as grounded in specific conditions and struggles. From responses to displacement from low-income housing, to the rise of anti-eviction platforms and the shift from occupying squares to 'recuperating' vacant housing, to forms of organised and coordinated mass squatting, an expanded understanding of displacement resistance opens the possibility for a broader politics of emplacement and organising for staking claims to the city.

### **Resisting displacement from low-income housing**

The relationship between limited or dwindling provision of secure low-income housing is a well-known factor in the current housing crisis across Europe. From the perspective of activists on the ground, the "privatisation of social housing is a significant factor contributing to evictions" in Eastern Europe, where nationalised housing was dismantled following the collapse of the communist bloc, as much as in Western Europe, where demolition and privatisation, often in the name of 'urban regeneration' is leading to greater tenure insecurity (European Action Coalition, 2016: 5). The threat of displacement from low income rental housing has recently been growing in part also as a result of insufficient maintenance and neglect of homes historically built between the 1950s and the 1970s. Baeten et al. and others have proposed the term 'renoviction' to define the specificities of the threat of eviction that emerges from rent increases caused by market-led refurbishment of low income rental housing (Baeten et al., 2017), leading to forms of organised tenants-led resistance even in Sweden, which is generally thought of as highly regulated sector (Thörn, Krusell and Widehammar, 2016). In Berlin, tenants of high-rise 1970s buildings in Kottbusser Tor in Kreuzberg became internationally known in May 2012 for their *Protest Camp Kotti & Co* against rent increases. Many affected tenants and members of the campaign were of Turkish origin, occupied the local public square by building a small wood pavilion, or Gecekondu (Turkish word for houses built overnight), to organise meetings, talks and public events (Kotti und Ko, n-d).

In Ireland and the United Kingdom, the threat of displacement from public (council) housing estates has become the centre of intensified and networked campaigning and organising (Lees and Ferreri, 2016; Norris and Hearne, 2016), which often used forms of direct action to raise the profile of estates. Campaigning and symbolic occupations on estates under threat of demolition often start from acts of reclaiming council housing as an object of positive attachment through a recognition of lived experiences, as in the Radical Housing Network's 2016 campaign 'We love Council Housing', which countered the stigmatisation of council housing and the naturalisation of its demolition, in order to generate cross-tenure solidarity (Wills, 2016). In London, between 2014 and 2015, a range of high profile occupations of vacant flats and houses within council estates, such as the Aylesbury and West Hendon, have been used to draw attention to empty flats at times of unprecedented demand (see also Watt and Minton, 2016). The slogan 'these homes need people, these people need homes' was deployed in cases such as the high-profile political occupation of vacant flats on the Carpenters

Estate, in Stratford, East London, during summer 2014. The occupation was carried out by Focus E15, a group of young homeless mothers that came together in 2013 to resist displacement from the sheltered housing association homes where they lived, after the local authority, Newham Council, reduced its funding for homelessness programs due to the central government austerity budget (Gillespie et al., 2018). The Carpenters Estate occupation forced the local government to agree to refurbish 30 vacant homes on the estate to rehouse families on the local housing waiting list; the longer-term future of the estate, however, remains uncertain; Focus E15 and allies thus continue campaigning for 'social housing, not social cleansing'.

Resistance to displacement from social rented and other low-income housing threatened with demolition and rebuilding is not a phenomenon circumscribed to Central and Western European cities. Increasingly, literature is emerging on resistance to privatisation of public housing estates in countries where such provision has always been marginal. In Spain, where public housing accounts for less than 2% of all housing stock, neoliberal frameworks for the management of public resources led to the privatisation of some of its limited social rented housing, and have encountered resistance. In Madrid, for example, the 2012 campaign 'Yo no me voy' (I will not go) has been resisting the privatisation of public housing, belonging to the city's municipal housing company, located in the centre of the city. The campaign prevented the sale of 130 flats and enabled tenants to continue living with existing, more secure, rental agreements (Annunziata and Lees, 2016). In Milan, Italy, neighbourhood-based cross-sector organising has been able to stop the demolition of municipal housing for rental and successfully demand public funding for refurbishment (Turolla, 2017). In Rome, the occupation of publicly-owned social rented housing has been a tactical tool of city wide movements for the right to housing since the 1960s, but have seen a resurgence since the 2000s, in an effort to make visible the need for mobilising existing vacant public housing (Mudu, 2014; Davoli, 2018).

### **From anti-eviction platforms and occupying squares to 'recuperating' housing**

Since 2008, the effects of the global financial crisis and ensuing political response have been felt by the rise in evictions and increased insecurity of tenure for low income groups, migrants, women and the elderly. In response, a number of anti-eviction groups have emerged across most main European cities, constituting what social movement scholars see as a 'new wave' of urban mobilisation. Groups such as 'Abitare nella crisi' in Italy, the 'Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca' (PAH) in Spain, and the 'Droit au logement' in France have all been active in resisting evictions by picketing homes to prevent displacement and by making visible the increase in eviction proceedings and the greater risk of homelessness among low income urban residents. In Berlin, the Bündnis Zwangsäumung Verhindern (Platform to stop evictions) was created in 2012 in response to a steep increase in the number of evictions, with official estimates pointing to a 19,5% increase between 2013 and 2014 (Ordóñez et al., 2015; Mietrebellen, 2014). In the post-2010 cycle of networked social movements, continued occupations of squares and streets through protest camps have become prominent (McCurdy et al., 2016), and have intersected with anti-eviction organising and the spatialities of occupations of residential buildings for living and communal uses.

Examples of convergences between ‘occupation-based campaigning’ (Gonick, 2016) and anti-displacement movements have become particularly established in Spain, the country in Europe that has experienced both the largest and most intense wave of housing evictions as well as the most organised waves of protest (Colau and Alemany, 2013). Due to a combination of economic recession, rising unemployment and mortgage arrears, according to official statistics between 2008 and 2013 there were nearly 320,000 evictions (Barbero, 2015), a number that has since more than doubled. In this context, the ‘15M movement’ which started in March 2011 played a particularly important role in the development of and legitimisation of urban spatial occupations as part of a wider repertoire of social movements. The camps and occupations organised and promoted by the 15M have transformed a tool of protest into a shared model for self-organisation and direct democracy, in a historical ‘virtuous convergence’ between the ‘movement of occupation’ and the ‘movement of political squatting’ (Martínez and García, 2015). Drawing on research in Madrid, Martínez and García have analysed both personal and infrastructural exchanges between pre-existing activists from the political squatting scene and the new political subject emerging from the crisis of representation that emerged in the wake of the global financial crisis and beginning of the austerity regime in the country. The structural homology between the occupation of squares and of buildings, as well as the novelty of a largely horizontal form of political organising, sustained the conditions for ‘chains of accumulation of activist exchanges’ (Martínez and García, 2015: 164) that filtered from main public squares - notably, Puerta del Sol in the capital - to neighbourhood and local assemblies that enlarged and transformed their former functions, giving them new meanings as forums for public debate and being in common. Concretely, between May and December 2011, a high number of occupations of vacant buildings across many Spanish cities offered spatial as well as social resources to guarantee continuity in the movement ‘after the square’.

The beginning of a nation-wide ‘anti-eviction campaign’ (in Spanish: Stop desahucios), which spread to cities across the country and which by 2014 had successfully stopped over 1100 evictions (de Andrés et al., 2015). The campaign strengthened the gathering of political experiences and collectives around the issue of housing and increased the legitimacy of occupation-based protests, as well as of actual occupations for living. The PAH played a pivotal role, with the establishment of Obra Social de la PAH, which organised the occupation of empty housing, owned by financial institutions and whose vacancy derived from processes of mortgage foreclosure and eviction. Martínez and García understand this shift as one of ‘mutual hybridation’ between traditionally political occupation-based protest groups and forms of social occupation by groups that did not have previous experiences of activism (Martínez and García, 2015: 175). By 2016, the PAH’s Obra Social Campaign had rehoused 3,500 people throughout the country and maintained 49 occupied blocs of flats.

The widening of practical solidarity accompanied a greater legitimacy to forms of reclaiming – *reapropiación o recuperación* – of vacant buildings for housing as “the collective recuperation of vacant housing that is owned by financial institutions has converted into a distinguishing mark of the contemporary housing struggles” (Pavón and Janoschka, 2016: 113). Resistance and recuperation of vacant homes has been analysed as transformative and empowering, both on an individual and a collective level (García-Lamarca, 2017), For this dimension of

empowerment, as well as for its role in generating municipal citizens platforms which gained control of key Spanish municipalities during the administrative elections of 2015, the Spanish movement continues to be a point of reference for activists throughout European cities. It must be noted, however, that despite the mass mobilisations, evictions and eviction threat continue to be an everyday reality for many, whose changing position demonstrates a shift in the housing crisis towards greater precarization: if around 2011 nearly the 90% of all evictions concerned situations of home repossession due to mortgage arrears, in 2015 more than half (53%) derived from rent arrears in the private rented sector (Gutiérrez and Delclòs, 2017), leading many to prefer squatting to facing street homelessness (Obra Social PAH, 2016; Obra Social Barcelona, 2018).

### **A resurgence of squatting between protest and deprivation**

A significant, if little known, consequence of the 2008 financial crisis, has been the rise of squatting, the unlawful occupation of land or buildings for shelter and protest, across many European cities, from a marginal and undetected practice to a mass and organised phenomenon. As with other forms of precarious housing, it is a “product of recurring cycles of creative destruction and accumulation by dispossession, which have repeatedly condemned significant numbers of people to misery and prompted many to seek informal forms of housing and shelter” (Vasudevan, 2015: 29). In social movement scholarship, squatting that originates in and responds primarily to housing needs has been described as ‘deprivation-based squatting’ (Prujit, 2013), and has generally been distinguished from other forms of ‘political’ occupation of spaces. While deprivation-based squatting is understood as “an action that interrupts phases of homelessness, or of living under degraded housing conditions” (Mudu, 2014: 137), its increasing politicisation has been an important characteristic of the movements of convergence mentioned above. In the Ile-de-France Region (Paris), some estimates argue that by the early 2010s there were approximately 2000 “invisible squats”, a percentage of which had been mapped by official institutions and whose causes could be directly linked to the housing crisis (Aguilera, 2013). In this context, the French Droit au Logement movement has supported ‘deprivation-based squatting’ as a tool to negotiate secure housing. In Rome, where coordinated mass squatting has seen an important increase since the early 2000s, the peak of the economic, housing and migration crisis post-2008 led to an intense period of coordinated occupations known as the ‘Tsunami Tour’. In 2016, an estimated 6,000 households were living in occupations in the capital as part of intersecting organised political networks for the right to housing (Davoli, 2018). In Catalonia, a recent questionnaire of 600 households living in occupied properties recorded that in over 75% of the cases the occupation was a result of a lack of affordable housing relative to income, and in at least 29% of the cases the occupation was the direct result of an eviction (Obra Social Barcelona, 2018). Organised occupations are increasingly reclaimed by neighbourhood housing collectives as a legitimate response to any form of real estate speculation [fig. 1].

<FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>



Caption: Graffiti 'Occupation against speculation', Barcelona, March 2019. Source: author.

Migrant and ethnic minorities are generally more susceptible to living in insecure or precarious housing conditions; at times of so-called 'migrant crises' (Mountz and Loyd, 2014), the intersection of new migratory waves and housing issues has created the conditions for alliances and new solidarities within anti-displacement movements. In Madrid, the 15M square occupations in 2011 have been noted as key inflection points for a widening of intersectional solidarities between political protest movements, and more informal, 'occupations for housing', where shelter and mutual aid among migrants were dominant (Martínez López, 2017). In Berlin, since 2012, high-profile political occupations of buildings and public spaces have been deployed to provide self-organised spaces for refugees and supporters to meet, share knowledge and resources, and organise against policies of dispersal which were experienced as isolating. The 'Refugee Strike House', which occupied a vacant school in *Ohlauer Straße 12*, and which included a self-organised women-only floor, and the 'Refugee Protest Camp', a tent city which occupied the public square Oranienplatz in Kreuzberg, from October 2012 to April 2014, were particularly high profile examples. Refugees and anti-racist organisers deployed the occupations to challenge two specific form of displacement: the first, was the threat of deportation; the second, the legal requirement (*Residenzpflicht*, or mandatory residence) for applicants of refugee status to reside within boundaries defined by immigration authorities, which many migrant and refugee advocacy organisations oppose as a violation of fundamental human rights (azozomox, 2014). Research in Southern European cities such as Rome and Athens has found an exacerbation of discriminatory discourses against

ethnic minorities, such as Roma communities (Annunziata and Lees, 2016). Despite greater marginalisation, however, Roma people living in informal settlements under threat of eviction participated in building alliances with organised squatting practices and social movement, providing grounds for the emergence of new solidarities. As noted in the case of Rome, activist movements and some NGOs attempted to frame the exclusion of Roma communities in terms “socio-economic status rather than through their ethnic identity” (Maestri, 2014: 819). This reframing has generated convergences between mobilisations that come from evicted informal settlements and wider social movements deploying occupations to struggle for the right to housing.

## Conclusions

Displacement from a place of home has sadly become a common phenomenon across both Northern and Southern European countries, and has been felt with particular intensity in urban centres. Although already socially and economically vulnerable individuals and social groups have been most affected, the number of those in insecure housing has swelled to include private tenants and mortgage holders, making eviction and the threat of eviction a reality across a wide set of subject positions in contemporary European cities. The conditions of people at risk of displacement are socially and geographically varied, as have been the responses by civil society and activist groups. The intersecting of multiple ‘crises’ – financial, economic, housing and of refugee – has made ‘displacement’ an overarching organising issue related to a diversity of causes, from forced to gentrification, the financialisation of housing and austerity policies. In this chapter I have examined the multiple forms of displacement at play in austerity Europe as seen through the different strategies and practices of resistance that have emerged since 2008. I have drawn on scholarly as well as activist accounts to blur the line between sanctioned and unsanctioned knowledge production, and to highlight the important work of activist and militant-investigative writing.

Displacement resistance occupies streets, squares and buildings to enact an embodied interruption of processes of home dispossession and homelessness, towards a collective reclaiming of space and emplacement. Attentiveness to geographical and historical divergences shows that displacement has been and continues to be resisted through occupations, undertaken for different aims and through varying strategies, from short-term emergency responses and established tools for negotiation, to the establishment of self-organised alternatives. In contrast to individualisation, marginalisation and stigmatisation, ‘taking place’ through forms of occupation has become an important tactic for empowerment and emancipation, and for generating and sustaining intersecting solidarities. From anti-eviction platforms to anti-gentrification neighbourhood committees, from self-organised homeless women to anti-racism and refugee support, displacement resistance on the local and global scales is re-imagined in the intersectional practices of a multiplicity of collectives and groups. Resistance to displacement through occupations is thus both a response to material, immediate issues, and a prefigurative reclaiming that exhibits the possibility of a different co-existence. Rethinking displacement from practices of resistance means to foreground the



significance of collectively staking a claim to place, be it a building, a neighbourhood, or a city, often across different subject-positions. In austerity Europe, the practical and political convergence of anti-displacement practices is beginning to intersect with solidarity organising, towards a place-based and intersectional politics of radical emplacement.

**Grant acknowledgment**

The writing of this chapter has been made possible by the H2020 MSCA programme (grant No 665919) for the 'Commoning Housing' project.

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