

**Lessons from the PAH in a volatile political context:
social movements between restoration and rupture¹**

*Lições a partir do PAH em um contexto político volátil: movimentos sociais
entre restauração e ruptura*

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Abstract

The anti-eviction movement in Spain (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, PAH), among other movements, are at the forefront of the social response to the crisis and its effects. Generating a wide array of counter-hegemonic practices and conforming a new disruptive common sense that reflects the antagonist and irreconcilable interests between the elites and the popular classes. In the actual moment, with a convulse and volatile political scenario, and the appearance of anti-austerity forces in the institutions (from the local to the central level), the tension remains between attempts to consolidate and protect social rights and strategies to contain further attacks. This contrast is evidenced by the financial sector strategy to recompose itself around the housing sector, for the continuation of a economic model based on speculation around housing assets as a commodity; characterised by the entrance of international actors (i.e. investment funds) that deepen the emptying of political sovereignty of national institutions to enforce rights-based public policies. In that situation, tensions are arising between the new emerging political actors and social movements, through the defense and contestations of the later for the non-negotiable character of social rights (right to housing, as a central element). This duality of strategies, and multiple legitimacies – on the side of anti-austerity actors –, is currently opening up debates on roles, political purposes and on the eventual complementary/compatible character of those strategies. This article intends to briefly reflect on those political challenges to build effective social counter-powers that would be able, not only to contain, but to revert the democratic and social regressions suffered throughout the last years.

Keywords: Spain, PAH, anti-eviction movement.

Resumo

O movimento contrário aos despejos na Espanha (*Plataforma de Afectados por Hipoteca*, PAH) está, entre outros, na linha de frente da resposta social à crise e aos seus efeitos. Gera uma ampla gama de práticas contra-hegemônicas e conforma um novo sentido comum de ruptura, que reflete os interesses antagônicos e irreconciliáveis entre as elites e as classes populares. No

momento atual, em um cenário político convulsivo e volátil, e com o aparecimento de forças anti-austeridade nas instituições (do nível local ao nacional), permanece a tensão entre tentativas de consolidar e proteger os direitos e estratégias sociais para conter mais ataques a esses direitos. Este contraste é evidenciado pela estratégia do setor financeiro de se reorganizar em torno do setor imobiliário, para a continuação de um modelo econômico baseado na especulação que utiliza bens imóveis como mercadorias; caracterizada pela entrada de atores internacionais (fundos de investimento) que aprofundam o esvaziamento da soberania política das instituições nacionais em sua prerrogativa de fazer cumprir políticas públicas baseadas em direitos. Nesse quadro, surgem tensões entre os novos atores políticos emergentes e os movimentos sociais, através da defesa e contestações do Estado em relação ao caráter não negociável dos direitos sociais (direito à habitação como elemento central). Esta dualidade de estratégias e múltiplas legitimações – do lado dos atores anti-austeridade – abre debates sobre os papéis, os propósitos políticos e sobre o eventual caráter complementar/compatível de tais estratégias. Este artigo pretende refletir brevemente sobre os desafios políticos para construir contra-poderes sociais efetivos, capazes, não só de conter, mas de reverter as regressões democráticas e sociais sofridas ao longo dos últimos anos.

Palavras-chave: Espanha, movimento anti-despejos, PAH.

Introduction

The Spanish state finds itself amidst a process of deep political crisis that affects the credibility of the prevailing economic and political institutional order. A major breakthrough took place in May 2011, with the 15M/*Indignados* movement, when thousands contested in the squares and in the streets the management of the crisis and the decomposition of the representative mandate (“they do not represent us”). The 15M decentralized itself and mutated into different forms and movements against the effects of austerity, generating a network of resistance experiences connected to the claim of real democracy and social rights: the PAH (Platform of the Affected by Mortgages), the colorful *mareas* (movements in defense of public services), localized struggles against repression (gag law, political prisoners, etc), citizen movements against ecological degradation throughout the territory (fracking, open pit mining in Galicia, oil explorations in Canary Islands, conflicts against privatization of water, etc...), strongly symbolic indefinite labor strikes (i.e. Panrico, Coca-Cola, Telefónica-Movistar, etc...), feminist movement mobilizations against the abortion counter-reform and gender violence, etc... All of them present a vibrant map of social self-organization, democratic experimentation and consciousness rising in the last years. Additionally to that, the defiance towards the state by the independentist movement in Catalunya has been escalating since 2011, and represents nowadays one of the biggest challenges for the prevailing territorial and political model upon which the Spanish governance system rests. Since May 2014, the discontent starts to materialize in the electoral scenario too, with the appearance of Podemos and the breeding of popular unity candidatures that take over main city governments across the country (with Barcelona and Madrid at the head); crystallizing that society in movement identified with the 15M claims of democracy, participation and social justice.

In the last two years, the political scenario draws an unstable window of opportunity that oscillates between a potential restoration of the regime “from above” (elite directed) or a democratic rupture (from below) that the first institutional assaults of the regional & municipal election envisages. This

confronted options also evidences in the elites' will to carry a constitutional reform, which clashes with the claims for the opening of constituent processes (multiple and non-subordinated, like in the case of Catalunya). This unstable scenario is unconditionally tied to the endeavors of recomposition and regeneration of the Spanish financial and real-estate sectors (enforced through concrete policies by neoliberal parties 'of order'), removing any possibility for future rights-based public intervention and eventually rendering ineffectual the institutional capacity to execute redistributive - or social justice - measures. On the other hand the opening of constituent processes, participated by the citizenship and shove by active social counter-powers, intend (according to forces like Podemos, and referents in the municipalist experiences, the so-called "governments of change") to constitutionalize basic social and labor rights, redefining and sealing a new social Magna Carta. With all certitude, the rupturist option fits hardly within the actual European neoliberal institutional architecture, and a debate over the implications of claiming back political and economic sovereignty is still to come.

The PAH in the frame of the actual political and economic crisis

In that context the PAH, as the main actor in defense of the right to housing, assumed a predominant role in the struggles throughout the last years in the Spanish state. With its radical discourse and practice it managed to mark the political agenda, bringing to the light the drama of evictions, the human suffering behind it, as well as the responsibility of the banking sector and the collusion of the ruling political parties in the *estafa hipotecaria* (mortgage swindle). It managed to gather around its demands astounding levels of public opinion support². The movement adopted as its central chanting the best antidote against the neoliberal TINA, "si se puede" ("yes we can"); spreading active solidarity and mutual support, symbolically shaping spirits and

² The 2013 ILP (Popular Legislative Initiative) presented by the PAH against evictions and for lieu of payment had, according to opinion polls, levels of support up to 90% of spanish population (elpais.com, 17/02/2013). Source: http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/02/16/actualidad/1361053281_008924.html

discourses, framing counter-hegemonic imaginaries and shaping practices demonstrating that victories were possible, evidencing the necessity to create social and popular counter-powers.

The PAH, and other similar movements, played a crucial role amalgamating the discontent and condensing it into popular power dispositives. Throughout these years, the PAH represented the space and the tool, for all those affected by the real-estate bubble and by the financial engineering swindle, to fight their cases and claiming the right to housing. A transversal movement that connects citizens affected by the mortgage fraud, bringing together diverse layers of the middle and the working classes and fomenting communities of practice, care and resistance; thus activating individual and collective processes of radical politicization. The PAH also constitutes a gathering point between affected people and activists from different backgrounds (squat movement, autonomous and anticapitalist left that found converged in the squares through the *Indignados movement*), where processes of joint and mutual learning take place and collective action is induced. This generates empowerment processes and the awareness (by the affected) of their effective political agency capacity. The strengthening of the neighborhood movement and the weaving of ties between associations can also be explained by the urban decentralization that the 15M impulsed, and the protagonism that the PAH assumed thereafter in proximity contexts where solidarity takes shape and real needs are met. The “cycle of protests” (Tarrow; 1991, 1994) unleashed by the 15M – *Indignados movement* – in May 2011, with its natural oscillations, constitutes a flux of creative forms of every day resistance and struggle against the effects of austerity. In that respect, the fear of the elites can be exemplified in the recently approved Gag Law, which is only one example of the authoritarian statist drift trying to impose tailored legislations to deter initiatives and movements – like the PAH – that imply a real risk for their recomposition strategies.

The collective action forms in the struggle for housing and the current predominance of electoral politics

From the individualization of shame to the collective reclaiming of dignity, the PAH (and other movements) contributed to the creation of material counter-hegemonic practices slowly leaking through the fractures of the political statu quo. As Mir García (2015) highlights, “the importance of beginning from below, conforming a base and knitting relations and complicities”, that “transform what would otherwise be privatized social problems into collective demands” (Clua-Losada et al, 2013). In that sense, the PAH seems to address one of the main problems at the core of the productive model that fueled the bubble: speculation around housing as a commodity. Spanish popular capitalism for the last decades, and the accumulation regime inherited from Franco times, directed its efforts to build a society of “owners instead of proletarians”³. With its strategies, the PAH challenges the material core of Spanish financial capitalism and demystifies the idea of private property. As an example, in 2011 ‘Manual of Civil Disobedience’ presented by the PAH, the two principal claims were: relocating the families in the houses from which they were evicted and taking back empty block of houses, in the hands of the banks, to relocate evicted families (the latter known as the *Obra Social* campaign).

The protests since the beginning of the crisis, led to a profound crisis of legitimacy of the institutions of the state due to lack of division of powers within the state, widespread corruption, rampant unemployment, etc... In that context, Podemos storms in the political scenario connecting to the existing common sense in May 2014 European elections, and opens the way for a long electoral wave and strong political volatility until the coming general elections at the end of 2015. In this new phase, the electoral battle (‘electoral war machine’⁴, in words of Podemos leader Iñigo Errejón) predominates over the affirmation of the need for social mobilization, popular self-organization and struggle; as the materialization of real social power. In that situation the PAH

³ Words of José Luis Arrese in 1959. Arrese was Franco’s Housing Minister between 1957-1960. Source: <http://www.march.es/ceacs/biblioteca/proyectos/linz/Documento.asp?Reg=r-73814>

⁴ Público.es, 23/10/2014. Source: <http://www.publico.es/actualidad/construir-maquinar-guerra-electoral.html>

activates new campaigns and direct action strategies targeting both politicians and bankers; the ‘*escraches*’ campaign⁵ publicly approaching politicians as a “moral repudiation and condemnation” (Flesher Fominaya, 2015: 2) for their collusion with financial interests. And respectively the ‘*Trial and Punishment*’ campaign, demanding to judge those bankers responsible of the *estafa*. The platform also pushed through in regional parliaments Popular Legislative Initiatives in defense of the right to housing and against energy poverty (the Parliament of Catalunya recently approved theirs in July 2015), providing city councils with concrete tools to pressure the banks; while keeping on occupying bank branches to demand solutions for the affected. Hence, public visibility campaigns build affinity and contribute to shape a disrupting common sense. Public shame and denunciation strategies, as the recent #laSarebEsNuestra (the SAREB is ours), points at the “bad bank”, as an artificially created public entity that collects toxic assets and allows the swapping of the private debt of the banks into public one. In this campaign the PAH, carried a mapping of all the empty housing of SAREB’s property across Spain, and made it public for these spaces to be taken by the citizenship (“*we payed them already, they are ours*”), facilitating at the same time a guide for occupation. This occurs in a moment where we witness the sale off of the best assets of the public housing stock by municipal and regional neoliberal governments, to international vulture investment funds (i.e. Goldman Sachs, Blackstone). With the aim of creating a future “professional rent market” in which these funds will be in control of an important share; enabling speculative practices conditioning the fixation of rental prices, as a contention strategy against any coming fair public housing policy. The PAH, maintaining its autonomy and distance in relation to political parties also intervenes electoral campaigns with full autonomy and independence, for the interpellation of all political actors and consequent public shaming actions.

After the regional and municipal elections in May 2015, and the winning over of seats by Podemos, and popular unity candidatures in which

⁵ A campaign that showed a support up to 89% according to opinion polls (elpais.com, 16/03/2013) Source: http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/03/16/actualidad/1363470095_882443.html

Podemos was taking part, the demands of the PAH achieved a qualitative jump. Many activists of the PAH are now present as councilors (or highly influential) in the new municipal “governments of change”. These governments are taking concrete measures to stop evictions, give concrete solutions to affected persons, covering basic needs (i.e. energy poverty, food coupons for families in social exclusion, etc...). Nonetheless, we can observe different tendencies in relation with confrontation strategies with financial entities (within the restrained municipal competencies). One that uses all the tools in its hands and pushes for the banks to assume their responsibility in the crisis, and another that relies on social dialogue and conciliation between two sides with antagonistic interests. The two cases can be best exemplified in the new ‘governments of change’ in Barcelona and Madrid, respectively. The first one openly confronts (rhetorically and with concrete measures) the bank institutions, enforcing fines to banks that speculate with stocks of empty flats, and forcing them to hand these over for its social use. While the second one appears reluctant to acknowledge the conflict holding to an idea of a viable win-win situation. What seems to happen in the case of Madrid is a partial release of the banks’ housing stock, in exchange of the city assuming the costs; a manoeuvre that the PAH denounces as new indirect subsidies to banking entities. The case of Greece (as the most recent painful lesson for the left), seems to evidence the shrinking margin for reformist logics and for conciliation attempts with the elites, in a moment of acceleration of class offensive from above. The dramatic costs of not acknowledging the real character of this incompatible antagonism has been evidenced with the capitulation of Syriza to new austerity memorandums. As Huke et al. (2015: 745) puts it, a “growing antagonism between an ensemble of state apparatuses ‘hardened’ by austerity measures and supporting capitalist interests, and the everyday needs of wider parts of the population articulated through new social movements” appears to be hardly compatible.

Conclusion

The PAH shows us the importance to observe and analyze the creative processes of self-organization and struggle, that “crafts new situations, new worlds, new ecologies of existence” (Tsianos et al, 2012: 449) beyond the state. The magma of social and political change is connected to the rebel subjectivities engendered in the process of claiming for rights and dignity. The radical pedagogy of the PAH, that dissolved all guilt and embarrassment of the swindle’ victims, showed to have a tremendous effect both in therapeutically and in collective empowerment terms. The strategies of the PAH, by targeting the core element of the restructuring attempts of Spanish financial sector, makes it difficult for the state to assimilate, neutralize or take captive its demands in order to demobilize and deactivate the movement, without considerable material concessions. To put it clearly, there is no possible protection of the right to housing within capitalist logics, considering the actual historical phase of Spanish and European capitalism marked by class offensive. The combination of the urgency for a roof, the full awareness of the swindle, and the pedagogy around the inalienable – and non-negotiable – character of basic human rights, makes it hard to conceive any state’ strategy not based on pure coercion and repression (as we can observe nowadays). The struggle for the right to housing is far from being over. The interest now lies in observing the ways through which new forms of disruption and resistance are being breaded and reimagined around the claim for the right to housing. And to which extent these can condition and subdue any rupturist electoral strategy to the need for building up democratic grass-root, bottom-up and popular power structures, capable of sustaining mobilizations and endorsing any program of real social transformation.

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