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Actors networks in critical urban studies – protest against the subprime crisis in Madrid¹

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Abstract

Europe has been in a permanent political and economic crisis for over 10 years now, which has affected above all the southern countries such as Greece and Spain. In Spain, the crisis followed a period of high economic growth based on real estate speculation, labor recruitment (migration), and the expansion of the service sector, for example in tourism. The 15-M Movement of 2011 attracted attention with public protest, occupations of squares, and symbolic appropriations (street art and graffiti) in big cities like Madrid and Barcelona, ensuring that the street activism of citizens was no longer excluded from the political landscape. Their political message was against the commercialization of public spaces, control and surveillance of the public, and expulsion of dwellers from their homes. In this transnational and urban context, in which the different interests, actors and social movements collide, the social and the collective is reconfigured and finds different forms of expression. The ethnographic investigation of crises and protest therefore, requires innovative approaches that can grasp the relativity of the actors' appearing and the situativity of the protest forms against the background context. Material-semiotic perspectives understand objects and things not only as media for the transport of content and messages. Rather, the urban itself becomes an actor by incorporating socio-economic conditions, political-historical processes and spatial interdependencies. How is agency to be conceptualized and what role do urban space, urban forms, architecture and infrastructure play – in short, the material for protest? Using a case study, a protest situation around an eviction within the subprime crisis in Spain, this working paper shows how an ethnographic approach to protest can be rethought and methodically implemented. Spain's specific crisis within the wider European crisis scenario is particularly suitable for such an examination, because power relations and social orders are more than ever under dispute.

1 Critical research practice beyond scientific reductionism

This research is based on a re-analysis of the study of labor migration, urban development and the production of belonging and citizenship in the Spanish crisis scenario. The research was carried out as an anthropological habilitation project as a part of a larger, regional studies initiative, the Research Network on Latin America. The connected research presented here, which was based at the University of Bonn, financed by the BMBF², used the example of Latin American migration to Spain, Madrid, to investigate how urban coexistence was created through the enactment of citizenship, ritual practices, the mobilization of street protest and creative activism. Ethno-methodological research approaches, surveys, various interview techniques and participatory observation were utilized during several research visits between 2010 and 2015.

The starting point for the argument developed in this paper is the assumption that the focus of urban research has often been confined by scientific reductionist approaches. Before the spatial turn in the social sciences, spatial conceptions were mostly essentialized and social conditions were ontologized (cf. Schroer 2009). Accordingly, a deeper understanding of the complexity and multiple constitution of places, everyday processes and socio-material relationships that form collectives and generate urbanity were often overlooked (Farias 2011).

The overcoming of reductionism is a goal to which interdisciplinary approaches at the interface of research on human-technology and man-nature relations are devoted and which have been implemented in critical urban research for years (Kemper/Vogelpohl 2013). The aim is to break down the "inherent logic of the city" (ibid.) on which classical urban research is based in order to take into account both the historical prerequisites for urban development processes and their present crisis and conflict mediation (cf. debates in the journals *City* and *sub\urban*). Critical urban studies can challenge one-sided social science schools of thought and their opposing forms of knowledge production and methodically reduced and one-sided reasoning. Moreover, the structural characteristics and material conditions of a city do not have to be taken for granted, but can be thought of and analyzed together with everyday social realities. Here, however, creative and circular research approaches do not yet assert against the partially linear models of interpretation within the urban-political economic approaches and meta-narratives of critical urban research. For example, little attention has been paid to the investigation of complex networks of actors in critical urban research, not least because fundamental theoretical positions are obviously difficult to cope with (cf. Färber 2014).

The tracing of actor networks is based on the concept of assemblage introduced into the theory of science debate by Deleuze and Guattari in their groundbreaking book "A thousand plateaus" published in 1980 as the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. In this volume, the authors open a new perspective in postmodern and post-structuralist thinking by stating that action is influenced by deterritorialized occurrences that assemble in certain situations. With the early work of Bruno Latour, John Law and Michel Callon in the context of actor network theory (ANT), assemblage found its way into critical urban research in the 1980s (cf. Bender/Farías 2010, Färber 2014). Assemblage approaches allow the integration of the

² Federal Ministry of Research and Education.

material, and the historical, spatial and potential relationships embodied therein, for the investigation of urban processes. The agency (initiative for action) is attributed not only to social and thus human actors, but also to those objects and artifacts that play an active mediating role. Actions can thus be initiated by heterogeneous actors who operate on different spatial and temporal scales. The investigation is carried out by zooming into situations, moments and urban events, whereby the social and political landscape can be empirically understood.

In order to overcome reductionist modes of investigation and observation, three basic principles must be taken into account according to Actor Network Theory: an agnosticism (unbiasedness, impartiality) towards the object of investigation and the discipline; generalized symmetry in the choice of the scientific repertoire, synonymous with the assumption that every element within a network of relationships (actors network) must be subjected to the same consideration; and adherence to the principle of free association in order to avoid all *a priori* differentiation between natural, social and technical events (cf. Callon 1986). It is assumed that such distinctions can only be a result of the investigation, but not their starting point.

The ethnographic investigation of crises and protest in urban contexts raises the question of interdisciplinary approaches that can illuminate the relativity of the heterogeneous elements within a network of actors through the analytical disentanglement of protest situations. How and by whom are initiatives to act taken? What role do the historically and organically developed urban spaces, forms and infrastructures play – in short, the material for protest, which also generates urbanity together with its entangled social and political relationships? In what form and with what meaning do previously-invisible actors, located at different spatial and temporal scales, appear? How is power distributed and consolidated, and how are power relations established, manifested, and at the same time contested? The main argument here is that critical urban research can be complemented by the application of assemblage approaches that add a material dimension to the ethnographic portfolio in order to mix up the normative portfolio of critical research.

This contribution to the application of assemblage approaches to ethnographic research looks at the actors-networks of a successful protest movement in the framework of the Spanish subprime crisis. It is argued that the key to the success of a protest movement lies in the sustainability and permanence of its actors' network, which includes not only intentional actors but also those urban actors who inscribe meaning into urban forms and infrastructures that persist over temporal and spatial distances and influence urban relations.

2 The Spanish Crisis Scenario

Spain's largest daily El País (29 May 2018)³ recently described the rapid spread of the Airbnb online overnight service as a domino effect. The portal now offers for rent to short-term tourists every tenth apartment in the center of the Spanish capital. Due to spectacularly rising rents of up to 40%, too few rental offers, and higher prices and an increasingly embarrassing

³ https://elpais.com/ccaa/2018/05/29/madrid/1527607282_038460.html (29.05.2018).

atmosphere in the barrio, many regular residents have been forced to leave the central districts. The bursting of the real estate bubble in Spain, which has affected the entire economy since 2008 and confronted hundreds of thousands of people with foreclosures, unemployment and lifelong debt, has not led to changes in the housing market. The crisis of 2008 followed a period of high economic growth, based on real estate speculation, labor recruitment and the expansion of the tourist services sector. Madrid's development model was based on government structures at the local level that supported progressive tertiarization of the economy; in short neoliberal urbanism in which the city is kept for consumerism, with high rents, business and tourism. At the same time, population pressure, segregation and gentrification processes reshaped the city's socio-spatial structure (Cañedo Rodríguez 2007). An increasing demand for labor, above all in the construction industry, agriculture, the hotel and catering trade and in the domestic sector, led to an extraordinary migration dynamic (cf. Kleiner-Liebau 2008). Between 1998 and 2008 the country counted 4.5 million new immigrants. The demand for housing rose accordingly yet there was a lack of apartments available for rent. Instead apartments became cheap speculative properties, which artificially raised the price of real estate while keeping interest rates low. Economic growth of 3% spurred the construction boom, and international investors were lured to Spain (Köhler 2010).⁴ For residents, the conclusion of a mortgage and the purchase of a home of one's own became unavoidable, which led to an increase in the number of new owners by about 5 million between 1997 and 2006 (Campos Echeverría 2008)^{5,6}. By 2010, 87% of homes were privately owned, which is comparatively high in the European context.

Since the 15-M Movement began in 2011, occupations of squares and houses as well as symbolic appropriations have drawn attention to public grievances against the appropriation of the residential districts. The protesters' political messages are directed against the commercialization or privatization of public spaces, the withdrawal of the state from taking responsibility for the distribution of public goods and social services, the control and surveillance of the public (known as biopolitics), and the expulsion of dwellers from their homes. The demand for living space and its appropriation by capital is of particular importance, which is why it became the starting point for the 15-M Movement. This movement helped provide an initial spark for the Occupy movement, internationally active since 2011, and led to the formation in 2014 of the left-wing Podemos⁷ party. The young party went on to become very successful in winning voters in the 2016 local elections and the post of mayor in many Spanish cities, Madrid and Barcelona included. Why then, was this social movement so politically successful?

3 Moments of resistance. Who or what makes the difference?

⁴ During the boom phase, Spain also benefited from the European regional and structural funds, which are becoming increasingly scarce in favor of the new Central European member states and thus, according to Köhler (2010), represent a further structural and financial problem.

⁵ The availability of housing was a political condition for migrants to legally secure family reunions, another reason that drove them to buy.

⁶ During the boom phase, Spain also benefited from the European regional and structural funds, which are becoming increasingly scarce in favor of the new Central European member states and thus, according to Köhler (2010), represent a further structural and financial problem.

⁷ This is not an abbreviation. Podemos means "we can".

In response to the real estate and mortgage crisis, the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) – the Spanish affordable housing movement – was set up in Barcelona in 2009 by mortgage holders affected by the financial crisis with the aim of exercising civil disobedience and organizing passive resistance. In addition to its demands for broad social debate about abusive real estate transactions and for legislative changes, one of the central tasks and objectives of the PAH has been its campaign *Stop Desahucio* (Stop Evictions). Organized locally by informal (non-state) neighborhood associations (*asociaciones vecinales*), they meet regularly in district assemblies (*asambleas del barrio*) in order to prevent the practice of forced eviction with the help of multiple supporters. After its nationwide spread, PAH has remained a pillar of protest against the speculative projects coordinated by banks and the real estate industry and legitimized by state institutions.

If we now, as social scientists in the sense of an ANT, face the investigation of this movement without bias (agnosticism) and describe and analyze the driving forces within it with the same scientific repertoire (generalized symmetry), without *a priori* evaluating their contribution and significance in protest events, we can identify (non-human) actors who are significant but not present because of their distanced position within the network of actors.

3.1 Intentional Actors in the *Stop Desahucio* Campaign

Each organized event of the *Stop Desahucio* campaign, involving heterogeneous actors, shows a recurring course from the original idea to the mobilization of sympathizers and to the obstruction of eviction. The preparations for the obstruction of eviction take place on multiple levels: actions are initiated by a European and Spanish-wide network, public relations and lobbying work are successfully carried out, and concrete street protests are organized. On the evening before each eviction, a rally with a march to the residential property threatened by eviction is convened. As a rule, up to several hundred participants from various interest groups including the neighborhood in solidarity, activists, the press, television and other media representatives attend such rallies.

The *Stop Desahucio* campaign event that I observed took place in San Blas-Canillejas, a workers' district in eastern Madrid. Created in the 1950s and 1960s by the immigration of rural populations, it now has more than 150,000 inhabitants.⁸ A single mother of two children aged 3 and 5, threatened with eviction, took part and played a central role in the campaign event. Through her and her older child's presence, and a poster pillorying those responsible for the crisis, the eviction protest effectively gave a human face to the suffering and fate that underlies every eviction. The direct contact with this young family emotionally charged the event and triggered a collective affectivity that immediately unleashed itself in an audibly powerful dynamic and willingness to act. On the one hand, the young mother, threatened by eviction, became an intentional actor who stepped out of her victim role and very concretely seized agency. On the other hand, her role in the network changed from that of a principal actor to a mediator of her personal case. With her presence at the evening rally, the mother gathered and activated distributed elements in the network, bundled them and thus gave the network of actors cohesion and permanence.

⁸ https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Blas-Canillejas.

CONADEE (Coordinadora Nacional de Ecuatorianos en España) and its national spokesperson Aida Qinatoa, is another intentional actor in the *Stop Desahucio* Campaign. CONADEE forms an important pillar of the representation of migrant interests within the platform PAH, which is justified because of the large proportion of migrants affected by forced eviction. CONADEE mediates between its members and the Spanish and Ecuadorian governments. For years, the two states have worked together in an attempt to find solutions for the so-called voluntary return of immigrants to Ecuador; with rather dubious success. One of their goals is to ensure that the mortgage claims of Spanish banks against mortgage holders are not lost. The state-owned bank Pinincha in Ecuador, for example, has offered to assert claims by Spanish banks even after the return migration of mortgage borrowers to Ecuador (Youkhana and Jüssen 2015).

3.2 Intermediaries and mediators in an actors network

When investigating a network of actors, special attention should be paid to the actors and spaces that are located between the intentional actors (cf. Heeks 2013), the so-called intermediaries and mediators that actively support the network. Intermediaries are objects and artifacts that pass from one actor to the next or connect them with each other, transferring content without reinterpreting or changing it (Latour 2005). A more active role is played by the mediator, whose presence triggers a translation process⁹ and thus changes content and meaning. The mediator can emerge from an intermediary and again become an intermediary if the active part of his/her task in the network is fulfilled.

The PAH homepage is an important intermediary within the network of actors of the *Stop Desahucio* campaign. At the request of the apartment owners threatened with eviction, the homepage announces the locations of the rallies and the object itself – the house where the evictions will take place. A daily updated public space in which all those affected and interested can obtain the latest news about pending or successfully disabled evictions, the homepage also includes the history of the PAH, recent debates, legal situations and legislative initiatives, internationally relevant events, publications and contacts. The effective maintenance of the homepage allows networking and solidarity beyond neighborhood, urban and national borders. For example, joint activities with the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City are announced. Important debates on the deregulation of the housing market and the destruction of social housing are discussed in detail and protests are organized. The PAH homepage can be described as a boundary object because of its function to improve communication and exchange. This includes elements of joint planning activities, dissemination of information and visualization of the problem. According to Star and Griesemeyer (1989), boundary objects are intermediaries that act at different points in the network of actors, allow different interpretations, but generally facilitate communication between social actors. In urban planning and design, planning programs, concepts and maps can also be considered as possible boundary objects.

⁹ The sociology of translation is an analytical tool presented by Michel Callon (1986) using the example of Fischer's domestication of scallops in the Bay of Brieuc to accompany transformation projects and processes through the investigation of the relativity of the heterogeneous actors involved.

Intermediaries that leave their passive position in the actor network and actively appear as mediators also become apparent during a *Stop Desahucio* campaign event. The barrios, the residential districts on the basis of which the neighborhood associations operate, and the corresponding infrastructures, public squares and parks that appear as meeting places, are all intermediaries. These places become mediators during forced evictions. The district is no longer just a place to live, but a venue for street protests and street battles. In addition, the location, form and infrastructure around the district or the property itself can have an effect for or against the success of a *Stop Desahucio* campaign event. Centrally located residential properties, where mobilization potential is high, allow many actors to be involved in the protest movement. Distant and isolated dwellings can be defended less vigorously because there is no critical mass to oppose a forced eviction. Housing threatened by eviction thus transforms from a passive intermediary to an active mediator. Only at the moment of threat does the house unfold its role as a mediator in the network of actors. It no longer offers the indebted owner only a place to stay, but is the pivotal point of the eviction and the *Stop Desahucio* campaign itself. The property is bought, inhabited, indebted with mortgages that are reclaimed from the banks, fought over, defended and in most cases its residents are evicted. Many initiatives for action (agency) emanate from the residential object, even if it is not a social or intentional actor.

3.3 Mobility and immutability of things and practices

The neighborhood associations (*asociaciones vecinales*) are also constitutive for the formation of an actors network. These show once again the complexity and relativity of the actors with an effect across scales. In the ANT debate by Bruno Latour (1986), such actors are referred to as immutable mobiles and given the characteristics of immutability and mobility. Immutable mobiles were conceptualized as powerful players for explaining the predominance of the West against the 'rest' of the world by Bruno Latour (1986). Cultural techniques such as book printing, optical consistency, cartography, book keeping techniques, and other processes and forms of organization do share all one characteristic – they are mobile and their signs are immutable. It is postulated that meanings are so strongly inscribed in these cultural techniques that they can circulate across temporal and spatial boundaries without losing their characteristics. The concept has been discussed several times and the assumed characteristics of mobility and immutability of signs have been critically examined (cf. Schüttpelz 2009). However, the application and extension of the concept for urban and protest research is worthwhile in order to visualize the historical processes at work in an actor network .

The grassroots movement of the *asociaciones vecinales* has been a supporting pillar of street protest, not only during the period under study. In the times of the Spanish dictatorship and the transición, neighborhood associations formed a political opposition, the strength of which can still be seen today in the unity, planning activities and culture of the social actors residing in infrastructurally deficient districts. The *asociaciones vecinales* highlight the complex processes of urbanity and urbanization that are constitutive for Madrid.

According to Wikipedia¹⁰, the district of San Blas-Canillejas is known for its *Stop Desahucio* campaign, which was launched in the 1960s and 1970s by a citizens' movement committed to improving infrastructure, education and parks. A community of solidarity was established in

¹⁰ https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Blas-Canillejas. 28.01.2019.

the neighborhoods, supporting one another in the construction of slum settlements in order to prevent the expulsion of immigrant families. Some of the residents – technicians, architects, lawyers – were highly trained in planning and designing the housing estates. They also supported the city authorities in the construction of water pipes, electricity supply, asphalt and street lighting, schools and meeting places (Castells 2008).

The first neighborhood associations developed from these solidarity communities in the 1960s. Not only were they the greatest oppositional force during the dictatorship, but they contributed to the upgrading of the new districts and later in the 1970s, developed into an essential supporting pillar for the shaping of the *transición* – the transition from dictatorship to democracy. This was made possible, above all, by the cross-city networking of the neighborhood associations in the FRAVM (Federación Regional de Asociaciones Vecinales de Madrid), which achieved a mobilization potential that could have an effect beyond the individual barrios. The emergence of the 15-M Movement in 2011 is also directly linked to a protest march by the FRAVM on 15 May 1976. At that time, a trip to Aranjuez was organized to celebrate the patron saint of Madrid, San Isidro and to strengthen the cohesion of local neighborhood groups. The event was suppressed by the Guardia Civil. The 15th of May is therefore of symbolic importance – historically and currently – for the protests of the neighborhood associations.

Even during the mortgage crisis, the neighborhood associations met regularly in parks and squares, where they were convened as district assemblies. These weekly and public *asambleas del barrio* offered the opportunity for residents to inform one another about further evictions, to plan activities, and to formulate concerns and criticisms. Today, as before, the neighborhood associations are networked with each other and thus effective beyond the district in which they operate.

The historical working-class district of San Blas-Canillejas and the principle of neighborhood groups have traveled through the decades remaining unchanged in their significance for the resistance culture of the Spanish capital. The overlapping of the urban forms, the architectures and infrastructures in the working-class districts with the social practices can be conceptualized as mobile elements that circulate in the actors' network. The neighborhoods and their movements are historically linked and have not lost their characteristics as central moments of resistance over the decades. Former protest cultures and deficient urban planning have been interwoven to such an extent that the related practices are kept up till today. Nevertheless, I would like to point out that cultural techniques and practices, however much meaning may be inscribed in them, can never be unchangeable. They can only be viewed in their interdependency with the things and people that surround them and continually reshape them (cf. Schüttpelz).

4 Concluding consideration

The research approach or analytical perspective presented in the paper requires the zooming in to relations in a very concrete and time-bound situation. By identifying the heterogeneous actors it unfolds a socially interwoven landscape that extends far beyond the boundaries of

the city, a protest movement or an eviction as the object of investigation. The consideration of such relationality is not new in the ethnographic investigation of protest. The integration of objects, artifacts, cultural techniques, infrastructures and the visualization of the interaction with social practices by human and intentional actors shows how the urban is configured. The temporally and spatially distanced levels of action gain influence in protest events through boundary objects (urban planning, homepage) and mobile elements (infrastructures, protest cultures, May 15) charged and inscribed with meaning. If these heterogeneous elements switch from their passive role as intermediaries and become mediating actors (residential objects, urban districts), their function in the network is increasingly important. The principles of agnosticism, generalized symmetry and free association proposed for all social science research seems to be good signposts for overcoming social science self-evidences such as the teleological characteristic of modern theories of action. By describing the observable relations while simultaneously integrating widely distributed references, contexts are no longer hidden in the background. The observed protest events are thus located within historical and global interdependencies.

For the past and present, the investigation of processes mediated by crises and conflict shows how power relations emerge and are defended, but also how they can be contested and finally shifted. Whether and, above all, how residents can counter the consequences of post-Fordist urban planning and neoliberal urbanism will depend not least on their creativity, their assembled agency and how they positionize themselves in the urban actors networks. An ethnographic and knowledge-anthropological approach to protest can identify and make use of the spaces of possibility required for this.

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