

## **Okupa Barcelona: Solidarity and Difference in Autonomous Squatter Communities**

key words: *Squatting, Social Movements, Activism, Housing, Unemployment, Immigration*

**Introduction:** For over two decades, Barcelona's *okupa* (squatter) collectives have lived a form of direct action, challenging social exclusion through the appropriation of abandoned land and buildings. Within neighborhoods, *okupas* function simultaneously as sites of political contestation, centers of cultural production, homes and even as "rurban" farms. They bridge local issues (such as housing, immigration and Catalan autonomy) with commitments to global social justice movements. As an ethnographic research project, I would be interested in investigating how activists have built and maintained heterogeneous communities, in order to explore what alternative modes of sociality autonomous spaces make possible and to reflect on how these novel forms of co-existence can help us re-examine the politics of difference. This research would build on my continuing interests in community self-organization, activism and migration, and contribute to the larger anthropological study of both squatting and social movements. The two main research questions I will address are:

- 1) How do the residents of *okupas* develop norms and practices to address social division (ethnic, linguistic, gender) while building and sustaining autonomous social centers?
- 2) How do *okupas* engage with the local history of struggle for a recognized Catalan autonomy, while maintaining affiliation with global activist networks?

**Background:** By recent UN estimate, over 1 billion people worldwide are now living as squatters, building and residing in homes without any form of land tenure [1]. Already a global phenomenon, squatting has become increasingly visible as a tactic of recent urban demonstrations, such as the M-15 *indignado* movement in Madrid and the continuing Occupy Wall Street protests abroad. Despite this, squatting and the mechanisms by which established squatter communities are able to sustain themselves remain under-theorized within the social science literature. While recent studies have sought to show the ways in which informal communities use squatting as part of a strategic toolkit to meet their material needs and even further various social goals, this scholarship has mostly focused on the political and economic contexts in which squatting takes place, and less on the inter-subjective dynamics within these communities themselves [2]. Building on the ethnography of social movements and the anthropological literature on squatting, this study proposes to look at the ways in which squatters conceive of co-existence, or in the Spanish/Catalan context: *convivencia*, and the practices through which potential conflicts are encountered and addressed – both within and between collectives. Through engaged, long-term research, I hope to better understand what kinds of alternative socialities are made possible through the autonomous spaces which oppositional politics sustain. To this end, Barcelona's *okupas* offers an especially compelling site for analysis. As politicized spaces within the historically oppositional Catalan region of Spain, Barcelona's more than 60 squatted social centers are located at a unique intersection of political affinities, bridging a local history of struggle for Catalan autonomy, with ongoing commitments to various global, social justice movements (including: anti-militarism, environmentalism, feminism, antiracism) [4]. In addition, decades of migration into Barcelona, from other parts of Spain and abroad, have resulted in a substantial migrant population whose aims and interests may come into conflict or convergence with native, Catalan squatters. As Spain's unemployment levels have risen to 21.5% nationwide, and 45.8% among youth, Barcelona's *okupas* offer a compelling

case for looking at how some immediate material needs are being met through activist practice, the tensions which emerge between groups of people, and the ways in which they are addressed [3].

**Research plan:** The three key methods I will use to collect data are 1) participant observation, 2) ethnographic interview and 3) content analysis of *okupa*-produced media. Participant observation will be conducted in the form of long-term engagement within several *okupa* social centers. By attending regular events and taking part in organizational activities, I will observe directly and note the ways in which people use these spaces and interact with each other. From ongoing participant-observation, I will identify individuals to approach for semi-structured, ethnographic interviews. The flexibility in adaptive hypotheses which an ethnographic interview methodology facilitates is extremely valuable for studying how squatters analyze their own praxis as activists. Finally, by examining the representation of *okupas* and *okupa* activities within self-produced literature such as magazines, event advertisements, and online message boards and music, I hope to identify, in triangulation with the observed and discursively-elicited data, emerging themes and concepts which speak to my main research questions. In order to conduct this research, I would draw on the resources and faculty expertise of several programs unique to the University of Massachusetts Amherst. These including: the Department of Anthropology's European Field Studies program, the National Science Foundation-funded Culture Heritage in European Societies and Spaces project, and the nationally-distinguished, Spanish and Catalan language programs.

**Anticipated findings and significance:** In examining the concrete examples offered by Barcelona's enduring squatter communities, I anticipate that this study will add to the conceptual vocabulary of what is possible and what is practical for addressing the needs of a rapidly growing and shifting global population. At all stages, research will be geared towards identifying potential sites for extended, future participation, in the support of either pre-existing or newly emerging social centers. Potential, long-term research collaborators will also be sought out from among *okupa* residents and international scholars in order to develop further community-driven research projects and intellectual partnerships. As economic instability and urbanization continue to coalesce, finding innovative ways of imagining community which address inequality, promote social inclusion, and rely less on state intervention are of paramount importance and value for both social scientists and policymakers alike. I will make any findings from this study accessible through both scholarly and public venues, with the hope of furthering dialogue and engagement between academic and activist communities.

*I, Justin Helepololei, do certify that this proposal is my original work*

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**Citations:** [1] United Nations Human Settlements Programme The challenge of slums: global report on human settlements. (London: Earthscan Publications, 2003) [2] Pruijt, H. *Dónde están las llaves?* pp.35-60. (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2004); Sanchez, R. *Seized by the Spirit: the mystical foundation of squatting among pentecostals in caracas today.* Public Culture 20,2:267-305 (2008); Cattaneo, C. and Gavalda M. The experience of urban squats in Collserola, Barcelona: what kind of degrowth? Journal of Cleaner Production. 18, 6:581-589 (2010); Dominguez et al. *Okupaciones en movimiento: derivas, estrategias y prácticas.* Ciempozuelos: Tierradenadie (2011); Sanyal, R. Squatting in camps: building and insurgency in spaces of refuge. Urban Studies. 48,5: 877-890 (2011); Wutich, A. The moral economy of water reexamined: reciprocity, water insecurity, and urban survival in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Journal of Anthropological Research. 67,1: 5-26 (2011). [3] Frayer, L. In Spain, low wages become increasingly common. National Public Radio, November 8: accessed online (2011). [4] Info Usurpa. Community Message Board: <http://usurpa.squat.net/> November 12: accessed online (2011).