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Space Invaders in Barcelona: Political Society and Institutional Invention Beyond Representation

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Abstract: In the contemporary neoliberal urban dynamics, those agencies that are on the margin of society constantly disrupt the boundaries of civil representation and forge new institutional relations within the dynamics of urban governance. I explore how this process was enacted at the turn of the century in Barcelona, looking at two coeval social mobilisations: the lock-in of undocumented migrants in the Iglesia del Pi (2001), and the project of *las agencias* at the Museum of Contemporary Arts (1999–2003), both of which unfolded in the central neighbourhood of Raval. The invasion of the boundaries of civil society emerges here as a double phenomenon—one that develops both within society and in relation to institutions, instituting new modes of urban politics.

Keywords: civil/political society, institutional change, crisis of representation, urban politics, social movements

Introduction

At the turn of the 2000s, Barcelona became a paradigmatic case of an emerging rationale of urban governance, organised in order to protect partial interests rather than guaranteeing collective rights: a neoliberal governance of the city and a new form of citizenship (on the neoliberal Barcelona model, see Harvey 2001; Marshall 2000; McNeill 2005). Since the early 1980s, this new model of economic organisation, based on culture, tourism and cognitive capital, branded the city (Balibrea 2001): Barcelona's growth machine held together by composing financial valorisation, creative and service economies and the regulation of exogenous and endogenous labour markets, i.e. urban speculation, precarious labour and the governance of incoming migration (Boutang 1998; Sassen 2002; cf. Molotch 1976).

I situate my analysis in a wider stream of analysis on the social regulation of production. One that argued how, as early as in the late 1980s, the Fordist governance, that guaranteed low unemployment and social rights in Europe, became an exception in the majority of European cities, giving way to a fragmented but continuous experience of labour casualisation, political exclusion and social vulnerability (i.e. precarity; Lorey 2015; Neilson and Rossiter 2008). By the late 1990s, global urban competition determined urban life in Barcelona: the role of social institutions became that of guaranteeing the ordering of social production, rather than urban rights (Harvey 2001; Salvini 2013).

The rise of this rationale should not be considered as the crisis of modern citizenship, but its most radical affirmation: *citizenship* as a device that disciplines social

life, not in contrast but in continuity with Marshall's industrial teleology (Marshall 1950; Mezzadra 2002), where the access to rights still depends upon the participation of the individual in the cycle of social production of commodities, their distribution and the renewal of the forces of production. This relationship between the *social cycle of production and citizenship*—and how participating to the first conveys (or not) belonging to the second—has been at the core of a critical understanding of the relationship between *society and the state*.

In this debate, I root my reflection in Antonio Gramsci's approach to the Hegelian concept of civil society, defined as the site of mediation in "a society of labour"—and therefore the core of modern economy (Hardt 1995:29). In his critique of the Hegelian concept, Gramsci underlines the differentiation between two modes of relation between society and the state: one is *civil*, articulated through institutional representation and consent, in a circular understanding of sovereignty; the second is *political*, one in which this relationship is articulated in a materialist conflict between the forces of production, a *pure matter of force*. In my attempt at translating the differentiation between civil and political society into our present, I rely on the crucial work of Partha Chatterjee (1998, 2003, 2004) and on the debates his writings sparked since the early 2000s, as detailed in the next section.

Along this limit between society and the state, my effort is to address how the ordered boundaries of civil society in Barcelona were disturbed or "invaded" by the *political society*, that is, a society at the margins of the "legitimate" organisation of social life, immersed in a quotidian experience of precarity, and nonetheless a political society that invades the governance of the city. In contrast to a wide use of this category in the post-colonial debates and in the non-European context (Lynch 2006; Mignolo 2011), my analysis focuses on the emergence of the political society in the context of Europe, as an assembly of internal but unrecognised agencies and acts capable of exploding the tensions once crystallised in the Fordist governance (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Neilson and Rossiter 2008).

In the early 2000s, and especially in the cities of Europe shaped by globalisation (Sassen 2002, 2008), the fracture of citizenship became evident, both in the relationship between the insides and outsides of civil society and in the relation between recognised society and representative institutions. This will be analysed here as a double rupture: one that comes from the outside (*external*), but at the same time one that intervenes within the institutional regulation of citizenship (*internal*). The urban space of Barcelona can help to illustrate this entanglement, when in the same period and in the same city, two different mobilisations challenged the order of public space and public discourse, from outside and from within. My argument is that these emerging agencies prefigured a series of distinctive modes of action of contemporary urban politics.

My first case study analyses the occupation of Barcelona's churches in 2001. These lock-ins were led by undocumented migrants, together with social movements, demanding their legal status regularisation; they revealed the complexity and contradictions along the boundaries within society, differentiating civil and political moments during social mobilisations. The second case study analyses the radical management of public institutions in the Museum of Contemporary Arts of Barcelona (Macba—Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona) between 1999

and 2003, through the lens of *las agencias* project. This curatorial experiment revealed another side of this crisis of the *civil society* in relation to institutions, and the emergence of a purely political relationship between the margins within society and modern institutions.

I argue that analysing both case studies together is important because a dialogue, rather than a comparison, between the two allows one to illustrate the rise of four modes of political action, emerging in the early 2000s and crucial for a critical understanding of contemporary radical politics in Barcelona, but also relevant to understand the dynamics of European cities more generally.

The first mode is the critique of representation through experience; the second, the forging of new forms of organisation based on heterogeneity; the third, the invasion of public institutions as critical inhabitation of politics; and finally, the invention of new institutional forms as a crucial ground to make social change durable. These modes of action are conceptualised through practices, as I explain in the third section, and each case study offers the possibility of focusing on one of these modes of action. The first two will emerge through the analysis of the 2001 lock-ins; while the analysis of the dynamics of the *las agencias* project will serve to investigate the last two modes of political action I mentioned above.

Translating Political Society in Urban Europe

In this paper, I look at the political society as a conflictive threshold of civil society: I sketch a general genealogy and definition of the relation between these two concepts and I examine why Chatterjee's approach to political society is particularly useful here; also, I highlight two categories of the European critical debates that serve to enrich political society throughout my text.

Debates around the meaning and nature of civil society have been central since classical Greek philosophy. My use of the term "civil society" starts from the Hegelian conception of the citizen, both as the object represented in, and the subject governed by, civil institutions, in relation to the Gramsci's use of the concept.

In Gramsci's critique, civil society is defined as that part of society entitled with rights and representation. Gramsci refers to a *represented* (civil) society in contraposition to a (political) society that participates in social life but is managed as an object to be governed: one that is ruled through force. In this frame, modern institutions mirror only the civil side of society, affirming its exclusive, or *exclusionary*, legitimacy (Gramsci 1975).

The question is similar to the one proposed by Hannah Arendt (1990), with regard to political emancipation, and the inclusion of the foreclosed in the public sphere as political space. However, where Arendt ends up claiming for a universal inclusion of the citizen through the contractual dynamics, i.e. the constitution (see Negri 1999), Gramsci immediately refers to this governed society as sub-altern, rather than subordinated: a *political* society that is objectified by the state but, nonetheless, one that autonomously exerts its force as *the force of things*, to gain political emancipation (Gramsci 1975:1064).

The difference with Arendt and the following liberal debates on civil society—Thomas Parsons, John Rawls, but also Jurgen Habermas or Anthony Giddens, to

mention a few—cannot be more pronounced. In Gramsci, the ontology of politics lies in the possibility of breaking in, rather than being included, in the public political space. Following this approach, Partha Chatterjee (2003, 2004) defines the political society as the one excluded from the civil society in terms of access to rights, but governed by the state, as well as by a plural set of other actors, with respect to its contribution to social reproduction. Chatterjee addresses the limits of civil society to show how the acting of political society is a disruptive intervention that institutes new relations in a community: new forms of citizenship.

My paper seeks to translate Chatterjee's political society in the canons of urban Europe (and within the everyday life of European cities) looking at those agencies, marginalised but internal to the social cycle of production (or better marginalised but internal to the process of *social reproduction*, keeping in mind the feminist critiques of a solely productivist understanding of the abstraction of social activity into value: Barbagallo 2016; Fortunati 1995; Lorey 2015), that invade the space of modern citizenship (Puwar 2004). For doing so, I correlate two crucial tensions of Chatterjee's conceptualisation, homogeneity and representation, to two other relevant theoretical concepts of European and Anglo-Saxon debates around the crisis of citizenship, namely, outside politics and instituent practices.

First, regarding homogeneity, Chatterjee's (2003) focus on the political society is one that engages with non-integer agents: political actors whose identities are always composed and fragmented and whose acting disorients the civil expectations constituted around homogeneous identities. The public space opened by these actors is a conflictive one, since they have the force to open it, but still are not recognised as legitimate stakeholders to participate in it (Sassen 2008). This break-in configures a different public space not only in terms of agents and demands, but inherently for the languages, the practices and the memories that these (internal) outsiders convey. Outside politics thus help to understand how to translate political society to Europe, by stressing the relevance of looking at the acting of a dispossessed social body in the streets of a European city (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006). In the crisis of Fordist governance (Neilson and Rossiter 2008), these agencies are constantly fragmenting public space, making it intrinsically heterogeneous, escaping from the disciplinary regime of governance, and affirming new modes of politics in relation to institutions. These modes are the focus of my investigation.

Second, in relation to the tensions between representation and institutions, Chatterjee analyses how, in an attempt to represent civil society, the homogenous institutional space became *empty* and incapable of dealing with the complexity of non-integer configurations: "civil-social institutions, if they are to conform to the normative model presented by Western modernity, must necessarily exclude from its scope the vast mass of the population" (1998:62). In Chatterjee's approach, the crisis of citizenship is driving societies not beyond the Nation, founding a global civil society (Appadurai 2001). Rather it is producing cracks within the nation, through a fragmented mediation among different agencies.

Nirmal Puwar (2004) translates this conception within Europe, where she analyses the acting of outsiders through the lens of invasion, not only in the dynamics of labour but generally in the institutional asset of power relations. *Space Invaders*

looks at the experience of inhabitation of the public space by unrecognised, non-male and non-white bodies in public institutions and public space (the parliament, museums, as well as streets and squares), and how their break-ins open conflicting spaces of emancipation and transformation.

Following this tension between outside and invasion, I conjugate the political society with the challenge of institutional invention and the acting of *instituent practices*, as those practices that happen within the institutional framework and at the same time contest its instituted functioning, by generating new modes of operation for the institution itself. Following Gerald Raunig (2010), instituent practices serve here to underline the pragmatic dimension and the continuous temporality of institutional transformation, when institutions are analysed as social modes of organisation to respond to collective needs and desires (Deleuze 2004). The relation between emptiness and invasion is the ground for my approach to instituent practices in the case studies.

Thinking Through Ethnography

This article relies on my doctoral research (Salvini 2013) in which I used a critical approach to ethnography, following contemporary debates about how to avoid reproducing the passive function of informants (De Genova 2005; Spivak 1988), and make research a tool for a collaborative, analytical and political engagement with the present continuation of social struggles (Colectivo Situaciones 2003). My approach to an ethnographic research of social movements for the right to the city was (or at least ended up being) that of *commoning* my practice of research (Malo 2004), by which I mean to use my work as a resource to enrich a collective discussion that was *already* taking place, enriching the practice of my interlocutors as co-analysts, rather than informants.

This debate was discussing and forging an autonomous understanding of the right to the city as a paradigm for analysis and action in the contemporary urban governance of Spanish urban space, at the turn of the century (Rodriguez 2015).

In this sense, the conceptual construction of the abovementioned novel modes of political action has been forged in the concrete practice of social movements. These four modes of action are conveyed and formalised here as the result of an inductive analysis on my side, or better again, it is the result of a *transductive* practice of abstract production (Lefebvre 1996): one that continuously connects the process of political experimentation to conceptual (although not academic) discussions and analyses.

Through a participatory action research articulated over two years, I used my role both as an activist and a researcher to bring critical knowledges to these debates. This consisted of collecting a large number of face-to-face interviews, but also topic-focused collective conversations with relevant actors, as well as workshops of collective production, and the collection of archival material that could inform those debates and strategies. Finally, based on my academic positionality, I was translating significant histories, tales and concepts from elsewhere (as in the case of the post-colonial movements and categories) that I considered relevant for the collective discussion.

In this article, I rely less on the participatory action side of my research (although in the conclusions I refer to the debates and practices of the early 2010s), and more on a dozen interviews and a few collective conversations that sustained my archival research through oral histories. My thoughts and analyses are also indebted to the workshops I organised as part of my research, and crucially to the audio-visual production of short movies in the “*Postcool*” laboratory, on the postcolonial dynamics of the city (Salvini 2012).

For the first case study, I use four qualitative interviews, plus collective conversations, with different actors of autonomous collectives as well as with members of the Tamazight and Pakistani communities that participated in the lock-ins. Regarding the case study of the museum, I rely on another half dozen discussions and qualitative interviews with two members of the project *las agencias* as well as with workers of the museum and other participants.

In the following sections, I examine in greater detail these experiences and to what extent political society can be a useful category for examining contemporary urban politics in Barcelona, and more generally how they can be useful for a critical understanding of urban dynamics in Europe today.

The Lock-Ins For Migrant Rights: *Los Encierros*

One day in January, in a side street just off the city centre, Mamen and Federico walked into a *swarm* (Hardt and Negri 2004) of migrants marching and chanting. As spectres of non-citizens becoming visible in the streets, this group struck these experienced left activists as a surprise: they decided to follow this spontaneous (to their gaze) mob and got involved in the first wave of lock-ins for the regularisation of undocumented migrants in Spain.

When we arrived at the assembly [before the demonstration], the idea of occupying came from the immigrants themselves, and especially the Pakistanis ... So, we walked with the demo, and once passing the Iglesia del Pi we went inside and we occupied it without saying a word. A mass was going on, and someone started to enter and the priest stopped the praying to talk with us ... and then all of us entered, we hugged each other and we said: “here we are going to stay!” (Yidir Ikabouren)

The contraposition between these two narratives is significant for analysing the crisis in the relation between the activists and the undocumented migrants in Barcelona. On the one hand, two anti-racist activists: the surprise of encountering an apparently spontaneous mob in the streets speaks of how activist civil society was not perceiving those disordering acts, if not happening in accordance with a civil language of political mobilisation, a *demonstration*. On the other hand, Yidir Ikabouren, a Moroccan activist with a Tamazight background, politically active since the late 1990s, recounts how a new sector of society spoke out, outside the pre-configured formal language of politics.

The lock-in performed a temporary space where it was possible for outsiders to speak and appropriate rights. They not only demanded legal status, but also labour rights, access to welfare, freedom of mobility: it was the demand for a different experience of everyday life, while unveiling the real social contract beneath the

European appearance of the Fordist governance. Due to the unconventionality of their language, it is necessary to look outside the canon of politics, at the everyday life of mobilisation, to analyse the emergence of outside politics as the critical acts in the explosion of modern citizenship (Mezzadra 2010).

In order to provide the reader with a general context in which the *encierros* took place, it is useful here to remind ourselves how they started as a response to the new immigration laws of PM Jose Aznar. Along with Barcelona, cities all over Spain were involved, with lock-ins happening in universities, churches and public buildings. In a period of wider political tensions, the mobilisation received the active support of social movements, great attention by mass media and a generalised recognition in the public opinion. After weeks of lock-in, of hunger and thirst strikes, a period of regularisation for migrants was guaranteed (Huerta 2013).

However, rather than an account of the demands, victories or defeats of these mobilisations, I engage here with how the process of a common mobilisation of migrants and locals resulted in a critical invasion of civil society. I refer to the memories that composed the locks-in of 2001, and how, on the threshold between civil and political, a different mode of urban politics was forged around *experience* and *translation*.

Memories, Encounters, and Continuous Experience

Different struggles fed into the lock-in at La Iglesia del Pi, and I focus here on the memories that each actor was conveying in the common space.

First, looking at the European active civil society, the occupation of Saint-Ambroise church by undocumented migrants, in Paris, 1996, had acted as a catalyst for social radical movements to start addressing migration rights. In 1997, the *No One is Illegal* network was created, in Kassel; *No Borders* began to be a common slogan of social movements for organising transnational campaigns. At stake was not solidarity towards the other, but the realisation that undocumented migration was an extreme experience of a generalised status of precarity in Europe. In Barcelona, this process of politicisation around migration was determined by the defence of migrants' communities during the racist attacks of Can Anglada, in the periphery of the city, in 2000, and more generally in Spain, during the Ejidos mobilisation of the same year and along the southern sea border with Morocco.

Second, the mobilisations of *encierros* were determined by the self-organisation of migrants. In the account of Ikabouren, the background of the Moroccan community was clearly political, emerging from the student movements of Fez and the lorry strikes of the 1990s along the Atlas. In the case of the South Asian community, the apparent background of collective organisation was not political but communitarian, where a post-secularist dimension would blur the separations between the two, for example once analysing the movements for the right to pray of the early 1990s (Moreras 2005).

A closer look at this second stream of experiences allows us to begin a critical journey to investigate the encounter between the politically active locals and the undocumented migrants as outsiders. This encounter emerges as a place where

hierarchies and preconceptions came to the surface. If, on the conceptual level, the space of alliance was constituted as an awareness of continuity—between the experience of the illegal migrant and the general precarisation—the everyday positions of locals and migrants were uneven, both being outsiders in the contemporary governance but differently determined by their socio-legal status.

In this space of outside politics, an orientalist logic (Said 1978) emerged in the narratives and practices of the active civil society, one that foreclosed the non-European practices of being political. This logic was still present during the conversations I held, when activists talked about the roots of migrant activism in Spain and in Barcelona. They set the foundation of their narrative of struggles for the rights of migration in the antiracist movements emerging in Barcelona in the 1980s. Once the practices of migrants appeared in the accounts, they were codified according to the politics of the colony: anticoloniality and national struggle and, in a last instance, communitarianism and kinships.

For example, in analysing the transnational communitarian strength of the Pakistani networks in the lock-ins, local European activists referred to Gandhianism, anti-colonialism and traditional communitarianism to explain the importance of the South Asian community in the Barcelona mobilisation, but they would not mention either the transnational (and postcolonial) dynamics of this community in the Gulf and through Europe, or the significant post-secular social mobilisations of the Muslim (and especially Pakistani) community in Barcelona for the right to pray throughout the 1990s (Moreras 2005). This on the contrary emerged very clearly not only in my conversations with Pakistani activists, but also with Moroccan and Latin American interlocutors, more aware of the political specificities of the other.

These narratives made me aware that when the colonial subaltern speaks out in a language not inscribed in the European tongue of politics, their collective practices seem to become imperceptible to the active civil society. Within this unrecognition, the political initiative of migrants exceeds the space of representation configured by the civil European politics. Although, and precisely because they are not incorporated within the representative regime of civil society and institutions, their invasion holds the possibility of generating a temporary heterogeneous time-space of unexpected expressions that affects the political relations within society.

When I discovered the migrants of Morocco, Pakistan, their discourse and everything I thought: these comrades are the mirror of the [Zapatista] indigenous communities in Mexico. They are political actors that are neither recognised by society nor by the state, but they are political actors and they are enacting their decisions, they live their everyday starting by recognising themselves as political actors. But this is something I only understood later on. After a few years. Because when I met them it was just an adventure, starting with me in a meeting of only men, all of whom I took to be Muslim, but actually they came from several different forms of militancy and were not religious at all. (Amarela Huerta, Mexican migrant, activist, and, at the time, PhD student at the University of Barcelona)

In the Iglesia del Pi, this ability of encountering the other as a mirror of oneself, although throughout their irreducible differences, allowed for the production of a common space of struggles: a *continuous experience* among singular bodies, not

constructed through the reduction of differences to a determinant and dominant identity. At the centre of the political experience, there is an encounter among non-integer bodies: singular stories in which many identities intertwine and where there is no homogeneity.

In the crisis of the empty and Eurocentric conception of homogenous history, the spinning of a different political organisation rests upon a permanent dialogue among differences (Papadopoulos et al. 2008), rather than upon a homogeneous articulation of singular experiences (Laclau 2005). A political alliance built not through the vertical discipline of singularities in a floating signifier, but on the trust and contiguity among different agents that shared, in different compositions, similar experiences: migration, privation, precarity, but also and crucially the appropriation of their voices in the lock-ins.

Translations as Practices of Composition

If not through vertical identification, this fragmented and non-integer continuity was composed through a practice of translation inscribed in a set of social relations and determined by different experiences of status, culture, spirituality as well as of class, race, gender and language. Moving towards this second aspect of invasion as translation, Ikbouren's voice again serves to spark the analytical trajectory: "The locals wanted to occupy the church. The Pakistanis proposed to start a hunger strike. In the end, we occupied the church and started a hunger strike" (Yidir Ikbouren). This apparently linear decision is the surface of a complex encounter, where political histories and practices of different groups confronted and intertwined with one another. The composition in the lock-ins was never a smooth transition, but rather a conflictive process of inventing a commonality, where occupying a church is a practice charged with symbolic affects, with memories, with desires and taboos.

Each of these practices calls and moves different elements on every social body. The possibility of such a composition did not depend simply upon the exceptionality of the situation, but rather on the mutual commitment to institute the lock-in in the first place as a common enterprise, in the sense suggested by Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer (1989): a struggle to achieve rights together:

[In Catalan society, due to the occupation of churches during the Francoist dictatorship] ... to occupy a church means that you are making a political claim when you are facing the absolute precarity of your political rights. And this is why this practice can be operative, because it is interconnected with the codes of domestic society ... On the other hand, to occupy a church means to enter into the belly of the other, to connect with the spirituality of the other. For them, the connection with the political, with the meaning of the political or of citizenship is very different. (Amarela Huerta)

The space of the lock-ins did not exist before, and its existence was possible only within the (unstable) composition of an array of different modes of occupying the church. As Ikbouren recalls, this composition of differences was a permanent effort of the political practice. For example, religious practices were not reduced to a unitarian practice of secularity, and individual relationship to one's own spirituality.

Rather, different spaces were collectively agreed and organised in the church for the different religious groups to pray, for the routine public masses to be realised, and for each group to feel comfortable performing their own spiritual practices in a shared space. A mosque, a church and Hindu spirituality in the same place.

Another aspect of this composition clearly emerges through language. Ikabouren recursively mentions which *lingua franca* he was speaking in each moment—Spanish in the assemblies, French in the cooking, Arab when speaking with an old Pakistani comrade, French again in the press conferences, and so on—underlying in this way the importance of the step towards the other that the lock-ins implied, and showing how the production of verbal (and non-verbal) utterances determined the space of the occupation as a collective act of translation.

A second element of the political society emerges: these politics are a space of translation among irreducible differences. This translation is never homolingual: it did not move linearly from one code to another. It was marked by gaps and fractures, producing a space where every singularity was connected to the following, but separated from it. These discontinuities among singularities were not necessarily the sign of segmentations or absolute differentiations but rather it expressed the unpredictable fragmentations through which different practices and memories could interact, cooperate and often clash, through negotiation rather than negation (Bhabha 2004).

The politics of translation were in this sense heterolingual (Sakai 1997): the politics, and the *labour*, of translation was not that of representing with fidelity the meaning of each experience in a common code, therefore in unified and stable signs and signifiers (see Mezzadra [2010] commenting on Laclau [2005]). The labour was rather that of permanently adjusting the mobilisation of one's own experience through *langue*, resembling the transferral of meanings through words, negotiating common decisions within a constellation of singular experiences.

It was the invention of new common speech through translation (Rossi-Landi 1983): a labour of friction and negotiation rather than one of negation and articulation, because it is on these conflictive thresholds of translation where differences can be more generative. This is the case of the hunger strike that happened in the last weeks of the lock-ins (and helped to achieve important results in the negotiation with the government).

Hunger strike indeed was a practice related in a different and conflictive way to the diverse political backgrounds inhabiting the Iglesia del Pi. In the hunger strike “there is a negotiation among [different] political cultures but also among [different] memories of struggle” (Amarela Huerta). For the Pakistani, who proposed the hunger strike, this practice was coming from the legacy of the South Asian anti-colonial and nationalistic struggles; “for the Moroccan the legacy of this practice had been very negative, because they did many hunger strikes, and lots of people died, but they didn't achieve any result” (Amarela Huerta); for the local activists, this practice was deeply problematic, interpreted as a sacrifice and inscribed in a “pre-modern”/“pre-political” set of practices, outside of the modern European canon.

Contrary to the experience of the local *civil* activists, however, the battlefield for this movement was not discourse—the injustice of law—but the functioning of

governance on the social body of the political society. The discursive *critique* (or judgement; Butler 2001) against the hunger strike, as a passive practice of sacrifice, did not acknowledge that this practice was rather an active one: one invading the space of governance.

The hunger strike allowed undocumented migrants to impose a direct political relationship to the government, to law, to the media, to the state:

If you do a thirst strike you are going to have a shock, and if you do it collectively, massively, [the state] – which is not listening to you as a migrant – will have to listen to you as a user of the emergency ward or as a public scandal. (Amarela Huerta)

Or, using Gramsci, the state has to listen to subaltern as things obstructing the normal functioning of the state.

At stake in the *encierros* was not only an alliance between migrants and locals to claim universal rights from the state, but rather a radical critique of civil society itself, and of its role in reproducing exclusion in urban governance—one that changed the modes of urban politics. By invading the crisis of civil society, these mobilisations affected the practice of the state, but also generated a new culture of political mobilisation. The struggle of Iglesia del Pi affirmed continuous experience as a limit where outside politics can happen, breaking the mirror that would make the civil society believe to be represented by modern institutions.

In the *encierros*, the apparent homogeneity of civil society was broken. I now turn to another coeval urban social mobilisation that interrogated this disruption, looking at the internal relation of civil society with institutional politics.

The Experiment of Macba (1999–2003)

The critical management of Macba between 1999 and 2003 faced similar processes of translation and composition as the ones I analysed in the *encierros*, forging new agencies and new speeches in the political life of the city. I construct in this article a dialogue, rather than a comparison, between the lock-ins and the museum: a dialogue in which each of these practices contributes to critically engage conceptually and pragmatically with the acting of the political society in the streets of Barcelona. Where the lock-ins have shown the crisis of civil society in the everyday process of mobilisation, here I consider the practices of a group of politically aware precarious workers of arts in a public cultural institution, in order to analyse the relation between political society and the institutional practices of governance.

Heterolingually, as we have seen, I keep translating the category of political society into (southern and urban) European society. I do this following not only Partha Chatterjee, but also Antonio Gramsci in their focus on what happens when a foreclosed agency claims her voice within an *institutionally* established asset. The one under focus is a *sui generis* political society: the attempt is that of not provincialising Chatterjee's approach to political society as one referring to the formerly colonial space, or to the formerly colonial subject. Rather I consider political society as a global category of post-colonial analysis, one that invades the belly of the metropole; one that disrupts the enlightened

“representations” of civil society: its modern institutions (Chatterjee 2004). Here, concretely, the museum.

This possibility of stretching the category of political society to analyse institutional politics in Barcelona lies upon the specific relation between a political collective of precarious workers and the institutional life of the museum, within the aforementioned paradigm of governance. The relation between this collective and the museum, I argue, was never civil, but significantly *political*: one that developed through invasion and through the affirmation of autonomy, contesting and negotiating the institutional relations of production in a general context of permanent urban dispossession.

In 1998, Manuel Borja was appointed as the director of Macba. His arrival marked an important shift and Macba became a space for the concrete configuration of a new institutional practice, situated in a complex dynamic: on the one hand, the gentrification of the centre of Barcelona; on the other, the emergence of a new mode of social organisation of labour, led by cultural production and disciplined through precarisation.

First, the city centre of Barcelona was living a profound *strategic beautification* (Benjamin 1969). As Jorge Ribalta, director of Macba Public Programmes, analyses, this beautification of the Raval was the counterpart of a strategic impoverishment of its population in which cultural institutions played a crucial role: *fine art of gentrification* (Deutsche and Ryan 1984). “But the struggle continues, since the neighbourhood is also the most culturally complex in Barcelona and the arrival of new immigrants has enormously increased in the last few years. This is the second force in this struggle” (Ribalta 2004:243). This second force was composed by *precarians* (Lorey 2015; Raunig 2010): an urban precarised social body that was becoming aware of the specific process of social alienation and exploitation at stake in the global city. A social body contiguous to the one that, in the same period and in the same neighbourhood, was locked-in at the Iglesia del Pi, a few hundred metres away from the museum.

In other terms, these social forces were beginning by then to intervene antagonistically on the global chains of social production appearing in the urban space. Within the same social milieus, these agencies started to organise struggles around migration rights, around labour conditions and cultural economies, as well as on the environmentalist struggles and generally in the alter-globalisation movements, to *break the spell* of global capital (Pignarre and Stengers 2011).

The question for Borja’s team was how to disrupt the role of the museum in the hegemonic neoliberal narrative and experiment with the institutional management of cultural institutions (Borja 2006). In the following paragraphs I show how the activities of the Department of Public Programmes from 1999 to 2003, and especially the curatorial project *las agencias* (whose name was intentionally recalling the Foucauldian critique of actors and agents, and considering the multiple assemblage of a capacity of acting), tried to transform the museum, both affirming difference and expression as critiques of aesthetic representation and deconstructing the traditional forms of institutional management; but also, I will address the limits and legacies that these *instituent practices* have left for our present, in interrogating institutional change.

The Invasion of the Museum, or, The Fine Art of Instituting

Once appointed at Macba, and after his critical management of Fundació Tapies, Borja aimed to produce an explicit connection between institutional management and the dialectics of the spatial production (Lefebvre 1991). Museums must produce “new forms of intermediation” between cultural artistic practices and society, considering “the spectator not as a passive subject or a consumer, but as an agent, a political subject” (Borja 2006:15; Ribalta 2004).

Challenging its own agoraphobia and the modern homogenous representation of arts, the museum has to inhabit public space as a political and contested sphere where “the task of democracy is to sustain, rather than settle, conflict” (Deutsche 1996:270). In Borja’s conceptualisation, the museum must be a workshop for the city, not a showroom for the elite. Throughout this leap for change, Macba involved both critical theorists and organised precarious workers of arts in rethinking the role of the museum in the urban life of Barcelona.

On the side of the activists involved, the attempt was that of building an “alignment among critical social forces of production” (Marcelo Exposito): between the critique of neoliberal governance and the new labour forces of the cultural economies. Artistic networks and urban social agencies should no longer be considered as passive actors in the process of capitalist expropriation, but as political agencies capable of contesting these processes, instituting alternative practices of inhabitation in public space.

“The function of public art becomes, as Vito Acconci put it ‘to make or break a public space’” (Blanco et al. 2001:371): the critical instituent practice should act as an absence capable of emptying the role of the museum and leave open a temporality for invention. This was the “social contract” between the radical management of the museum, personated by Manuel Borja, Jorge Ribalta and others, and the group of Jordi Claramonte, Marcelo Exposito, Nuria Vila, and many others who later constituted the core of *las agencias*, the Macba project at the core of this section.

The temporality of the instituent practice was the one of a constituent power, as Marcelo Exposito stressed in our conversation, referring to the concept of Negri (1999): “[our aim was] constituting an articulated political action capable of drawing links between different wills, different emancipatory practices, never aiming to reproduce consensus or social pacification, but contribute to articulate conflict and antagonism”. The rupture of Macba opened a temporality that did not exist before and made it a new space in the city: a space where, with the words of Achille Mbembé (2001:38), the political society could perform another “*experience of time*”.

The possibility of expression emerges here through the recognition of the civil society as a *separate sphere*, borrowing from Mbembe (2001:39), and the institution as one that “articulate[s], autonomously and publicly, an idea of the general interest”. The capacity of recognising this separated and partial representation of the general interest (Chatterjee 2004) and the rupture of institutional autonomy of the institution configure the agencies at play in Macba, *las agencias*, as political society: they invade the institution, in the attempt to invent another form of intermediation between society and the state, in the attempt to disrupt and forge a

permanently unfinished institution—as instituent practices are defined by Gerald Raunig (2010).

These instituent practices started in Barcelona in the late spring of 1999, when the initiative *Direct Action as one of the Fine Arts* (DAFA) constituted a space for actively contrasting this embedded tendency of the museum to exert the “fine art of gentrification”. Activist and artists designed an exceptional programme for the museum: a social laboratory in which to assemble different agents and produce alternative practices for urban life.

As recalled by Jordi Claramonte (in *La Fiambrera Obrera* 2000), the attempt was that of connecting:

people from *Reclaim the Streets* ... with some people from Barcelona who wanted to set up *Indymedia*, *No One Is Illegal* would work with the network involved in the *encierros*, *Ne pas plier* with unemployed workers in the Besos [my note: a particularly deprived neighbourhood in the city].

The operated connections, however, never produced consequences beyond this one-week long event: DAFA was not capable of escaping the intrinsic discursive dimension of seminars. Nonetheless, elements of innovation emerged on other levels and affected social practices. DAFA questioned the gallerist autonomy of arts in the museum as pure aesthetics, abstracted from society. At the same time, it instituted the groups involved as artistic *and* political agents, intervening both materially and symbolically in the institutional representation (Borja 2006).

As a result, it became clear that the disruption of the representational practices of the museum could not only rest on guaranteeing liberal expression in the modern institution. During the DAFA and within the limits of this experience, the productive engagement among different agents was determined by the production of autonomous spaces like *El cuartelillo*, a café where people could meet and share not only the spaces of exhibition or political production, but everyday life (*La Fiambrera Obrera* 2000).

Following this first experiment of autonomy inside the institution, one year later, people proceeding from the different local political collectives involved in organising the DAFA seminars, constituted *las agencias* as a radical institutionality within Macba. The reference was to the critical theory debates in feminisms, post-colonial theory, autonomous Marxism, and critical environmental movements, around the failures of political organisation structured according to a masculine and discursive rationality. And in this direction, *las agencias*—the agencies—started to assemble bodies, identities, memories and practices as a set of parallel machines working together to “giv[e] publics power and autonomy, [keeping] with the idea of a plurality of productive forms of appropriation in the museum” (Ribalta 2006:234).

The first device was a graphic agency: a photography workshop producing agitation materials for counter-summits (as in the case of *Dinero Gratis* and *Está Tot Fatal* during the World Bank summit in 2001). Another agency was a media centre: a node in the network of independent media collectives emerging at the global scale, and instrumental in the development of *Indymedia Barcelona*. Third, a laboratory for the production of public art devices and direct action: *Art-Mani*. Furthermore,

the Show Bus, a tuned double-decker bus, was used as a “mobile exhibition space” during demonstrations (Marcelo Exposito). Finally, the management of the museum café was appointed to *las agencias*, with the idea of contributing to produce other forms of everyday life in the institution itself:

Las agencias took ideas that were not our own illuminations, but ideas that were working somewhere else in a different way, depending on the context, and composed them with the flexibility of being capable of connecting with the Disobbedienti, Indymedia, okupas and so on. (Nuria Vila, Journalist and Activist, now Executive Member of Podemos)

It was a matter of translating and assembling processes of production: the production of subjectivities, tools, spaces. A cooperative production of the commons. Through the complex interaction of these machines, the accent in the word cooperative shifted onto the second part of the term, with the intention of intervening in the politics of the city, activating imaginaries, opening debates and showing contradictions. This is the case of the Art-Mani practices during the World Bank counter-summit in June 2001:

[we produced] ... graph-plotted images and use[d] them as shields [against the police during the demonstration]. On the one hand, they protect[ed] you from the rubber bullets and at the same time [they acted as] a mobile exhibition/demonstration in the city space. They were images of kids and the global south, so that we were trying to produce the image of the police attacking these images. (Nuria Vila)

The aesthetics were borrowed from the unemployment campaigns of *Ne pas plier* and their use of images in the public space, proposing a contemporary translation of the use of collage in Soviet productivism to make visible the singular experiences behind the statistics of inequality (of unemployment in the French case and of globalisation in Barcelona). This practice was crossed with that of the Italian group *Disobbedienti* that intertwined conflict, communication and consensus in the critique of global neoliberal policies.

The laboratory of DAFA and *las agencias* experimented with inhabiting and appropriating the museum for reinventing its role. One where the practice of the institution was not curating exhibitions; where the artist was not representing her own interiority in the public space; and where the public was not listening. On the contrary, all these actors displaced themselves from their traditional roles, the museum being an open space, the artist being an activist, the public being an active agent in the institution.

Inventing and Instituting in the Crisis of the Museum

However, Macba was not independent from the urban ecology in which it was immersed: rather it was in a decidedly ambivalent position as site for active democracy embedded in urban financialisation. The possibility of shifting the dynamics of institutional production from representation to expression in the museum depended on a wider capacity of emancipating the production of urban space from the abstracting force of capital valorisation (Lefebvre 1991; Sassen 2002). This

temporality of experimentation had a dramatic ending that lasted from 2003 to 2005: a disagreement that not only involved the discursive level, but also institutional management and the practices of social movements. Looking at this divorce, I analyse the institutional invasion as a limit of possibility, a limit that forged new modes of urban politics beyond the sterile double bind that frames change in terms of failure or success.

First, two events show the complexity of this legacy within the institution: one was the development of *Desacuerdos* (Disagreements; Carrillo and Noriega 2005): a programme that aimed to expose and discuss the disagreements taking place in the institution, through a series of publications and seminars—and that still constitutes the most critical debate about cultural management in Spain and Latin America. In the same stream, a second process to be highlighted was the creation of the Programme of Independent Studies in, a radical course for curators that aimed to transfer the counter-knowledges accumulated in those years in a formal pedagogic format for the artistic institutional milieu. This curriculum of studies was—and is—independent from the university and with a high level of institutional autonomy within the museum.¹

These discursive disagreements encountered and clashed with the rising uneasiness of precarious workers within the museum. A group, *Ctrl+i*, issued a public manifesto denouncing labour conditions in the museum and started to intervene in public events confronting artists and speakers, especially the more political ones, with the labour precarity in Macba: the externalisation of services, the casualisation of labour and the use of free internships as labour force.

This led to growing tensions, among different stakeholders in critical projects like *las agencias*. These tensions serve here to analyse the legacies of this cycle within social movements. At stake was the legitimacy of each side in developing autonomous practices, in claiming authorship on the projects, but also significantly in using, in the public debate, concepts and artefacts that had been produced in common.

For example, the name *las agencias* disappeared, even if most of the group was still participating in social mobilisations. The ownership of Indymedia computers and servers became a controversial issue and their fate is not clear. The Show Bus was instead used for a project of communication-guerrilla that aimed to deconstruct the media simplifications around the use of violence during alter-globalisation demonstrations: *New Kids on the Black Block* became the most important fake not-only-boys-band, and this created a series of conflicts with the Department of Public Programmes.

More interestingly, it was the experimentation of codes and modes of actions of these years that became the ground for other social movements in Barcelona: in 2004 against the World Cultures Forum and in 2005 against the new local legislation on the use of public space, against Civic Ordinances (Salvini 2013). In 2006, *V for Vivienda* (housing in Spanish) became a mass counter-cultural movement in which, for example, the today Mayor of Barcelona, proceeding from the experience of *las agencias*, acted as a superhero defending tenants' rights, a task requiring superpowers in times of neoliberal urban dispossession (Fernández and Gibaja 2004).

As these examples show, the *sui generis* political society of *las agencias* inhabited the threshold of institutional life and allowed different expressions to change the relation between society and institutions, both within and outside the museum.

Conclusions

At the turn of the century in Barcelona, invasions were performed and the modern conception of civil society was broken apart. The political society was the protagonist of new modes of politics in the city. In this sense, I hope my article contributes to the contemporary critical studies of citizenship by translating the concept of a political society, towards the Western societies. My aspiration is that these reflections can contribute to a novel use of political society as a concept to engage with new modes of political action emerging in urban politics, not only in the specific case of contemporary Barcelona, but more generally in a wider dynamic that invests Europe and that constitutes it as an ulterior space of the postcolony today.

In the *encierros*, the complexity of the social and political representation of modern society in Barcelona exploded through *experience*, not only challenging the segmentation of rights and statuses imposed by the state, but also exposing the orientalism of the active civil society, and recomposing, to a certain extent, the segmentations within mobilised society, through *translation*. In *Macba*, the function of the institution in urban politics was challenged through *invasion* and a new conception of the public was *invented*. Differences were the constituting ground for affirming expression over representation and for producing public (space) as a fragile but durable instituent practice, against the foreclosing logic of institutions.

Throughout these processes, the political society emerged as an agent not only relating, affirmatively but passively, to the attempt of being governed, but also acting to bring-into-being a new world. An agent capable of enacting a radical critique of governance, from the outside of civil society: making not-recognised experience relevant in the production of political statements; and shifting the paradigm of management of public spaces and public institutions.

The threshold on which these instituent practices were enacted was the one that divides society and the state, posing a challenge not just about change, but about the durability of institutional transformation. In order to analyse this durability of change, that is the way in which the prefigurations of the early 2000s have remained as distinctive elements in the contemporary modes of political action, I analysed two transversal dynamics that interested both *encierros* and *las agencias*, and that constitute distinctive aspects of contemporary urban politics.

These two dynamics can be resumed in this way: first, how the crisis of representation determined novel forms of expression within heterogeneity; second, how the invasion of public space and institutions set the basis for a radical challenging of institutional practices.

The first dynamic develops in spatial terms, where the *encierros* and *las agencias* experimented with forms of inhabitation of public space that have been central to the continuous experience of square occupations in 2011 (the so-called *Indignadas* movement) (Perugorria and Tejerina 2013). Second, they prefigured a different

way of organising, crucial to the understanding of Spanish social struggles during the financial crisis, where the individualisation of the crisis was broken through heterogeneous alliances that would not reduce differences to homogeneity (Suárez 2014).

The second dynamic is a temporal one, one of translation: a labour of negotiation and production capable of instituting new forms of urban life. However, the instituent practice lives within the tendency of the institution to crystallise. *Encierros* and *las agencias* were prefigurative interrogations, anticipating the contemporary institutional challenge of acting within and against the urban neoliberal command on public institutions, faced by the actual City Council government of Barcelona (and many other Spanish cities), whose members actively participated in the aforementioned movements.

In conclusion, *las agencias* and *encierros* have been surfaces of emergence of new modes of political action that shook the foundation of civil politics in Barcelona, and should be considered as prefigurations of the contemporary urban politics in Spain. The invasion of public space and debate and the composition of different urban actors are leading principles for the actual government of Barcelona, as I have analysed elsewhere (Salvini 2017).

This approach allows one to *operate* in the institutional assemblage as a porous space: one where the processes of political emancipation aim not to separate the insides and the outsides of institutions. The problem around the autonomy of institutional politics is assumed and reversed. Institutional change is addressed as an active rupture within the institutional protocols and within the institution as a social body: a rupture that aims to include society not only as a deliberative actor through representation, but also as a multiplicity of agencies that intervene from outside and from within the institutional space. A call for democracy *against* the illusions of modernity (Chatterjee 1998).

In the permanent experimentation of contemporary radical spatial politics in Spain, these two tales cannot be merely considered as objects of study, on the pain of reducing their disruptive acts just to the cynical ability of governance to renovate its power. At stake in these experiences is an epochal atmosphere, neater today than 20 years ago: the affirmation of a transversal political society that transgresses the civil agreements of modernity and invades social institutions. Their critiques to modernity pose concrete questions to our contingency, to the contemporary. Not only how change can *last* but, more importantly, how can transformation *keep continuing*?

Endnote

¹ The programme has an independent budget and its curriculum is negotiated directly with the Director of the museum, rather than being subjected to other internal hierarchies, as in the majority of cultural institutions.

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