



PREGUNTANDO CAMBIAMOS

STRATEGIES  
OF SOCIAL  
MOVEMENTS  
IN BARCELONA  
AND MADRID

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When we spoke to activists in Athens in February this year, two weeks after the election of *Syriza*, the mood was – despite all the differences in their specific assessments – reserved but optimistic. After more than four years of austerity regime with tremendous damaging effects for most parts of the Greek population, the new government was welcomed as the much needed „air to breathe“. But unfortunately, ten months later, it looks like the more feared than cautiously hoped for changes were realized. The air to breathe is getting thinner again. The strategic hope a parliamentary representation of the societal upset would give the social movements as the real actors of social change more space was destroyed. If Tsipras and Co. chose the course of things purposefully from the beginning or if their project was taken down by the enormous pressure of the neoliberal hegemony let by the German government, in the end, doesn't matter anymore.

Of course, now many activists state that this development was foreseeable and its outcome was set from the beginning. We consider this position as wrong, since it always counts: history is made. With an I-knew-everything-beforehand-attitude people ignore their responsibility to shape history's turn and look down on those who actually accept this responsibility.

It is much more important to learn from these experiences and enforce strategic debates. While asking questions, we have to carry on. With this in mind, we packed our backs this late summer and after a short visit in the woods of Skouries made it to Barcelona, Sabadell and Madrid. There we were just as lucky as in Athens this February to be able to talk to those who bring up the amount of courage and passion needed not to resign.

Just as in Greece in the last years, in Spain the societal anger erupted on the 15th of May in 2011, when hundreds of thousands of people occupied the squares of the metropolitan regions. One of their main demands was a real democracy now. *Podemos*, *Ahora Madrid*, *Barcelona en comú* and other leftist parties and regional coalitions emerged and won many of the biggest city-halls. They are the consequence of this eruption on a parliamentary level. Several mass mobilizations with hundreds of thousands in the streets, a strong independence movement in Catalonia and many regional and national campaign against the current politics resembling this “new democracy”. But beyond the visibility of parliaments and central squares the comrades in Spain had many debates about how to steady the moments of eruption in to longterm resistance on a grassroots level.

So with our interviews we tried to get to the bottom of this but also many other fundamental strategic questions. We were driven also by a desire for a debate about the orientation of emancipatory forces in times of permanent crisis and crisis-management. While in Germany the crisis created on the one side a left in comprehensive perplexity and on the other side a right in the uprising – while the one shouldn't be discussed without the other – especially in Spain different forms of solidarity in face of the dramatic developments evolved.

Investigating these forms of solidarity, strikingly often we found ourselves in social centers. Four

out of six of the following conversational partners considered these places as important starting point of their political practice. The two not active in a social center, were part of different local groups of *la PAH*, that organizes most of their work in and with social centers.

From that you can not deduct a homogeneous political „strategy of the social centers“, which is followed by everyone from Barcelona to Madrid. On the contrary, what we saw were very diverse and sometimes even controversial strategies that all in their specific way materialized in the form of a social center. Their commonality probably just lies in their intention to localize and embed their political practice over a long time in a certain space and also to give space to all those are not willing to give it all up but are ready to fight for a better life.

To give this many-voiced resistance and their different strategies an expression and to share it with you, is the main goal of this brochure. Who didn't give up hope yet, has to carry on asking about how we can organize a life apart from domination, coercion and poverty. Within this debate of the left, the political developments in Spain came – from our point of view for the German discourse – a bit short. The reasons for that may be many, an intensified debate about the local developments seem to us even more important.

We chose the interview as the form of presentation, to give voice to activists themselves and contain the variety of positions on different issues they articulated. Our work was reduced to translate and edit these impressions. Many thanks to all the ones participating, for their trust, confidence and hope, that inspired us.

Moreover, too many people to list them all helped us realizing this brochure. All of you, who motivated us, who invested much time in this project, who gave us a place to sleep, who translated, who brought us to places we haven't been before, ... Thank you so much! It would have never been possible without you.

Have fun reading. See you on the streets.

»If you would have told me ten years ago that I would do something like this, I would have never believed you.«

INTRO.  
MADRID'S POLITICAL FAMILIES.

*malaboca: Please, give us a short introduction to your activism and the political landscape of Madrid.*

Sara: I started engaging in political activism when I came to live in Madrid 17 years ago, and since then I was active in several different collectives. At the moment, I'm working in the *Comisión Legal Sol*, the legal support group of *15M*, which is the only still existing working-group born on the square. Also, I'm part of the *PAH Vallecás*<sup>1</sup>, since three years. From my point of view, the social movements of Madrid could be roughly described in three families. The shape of this families, as they appear today, is the result of a process starting in the nineties and, of course, this is a very simplified differentiation. I think, the main difference lies on the ideological axis, since their political practice and repertoires of action are to a large extent very similar.

Firstly, there is the anarchist family. It's quite broad and inside highly diversified. Then, there is the antifascist spectrum, which is oriented towards Marxism. And the third, more muddled, family is the autonomous spectrum, with complex and different currents inside. In this autonomous family, especially within the squatting movement, I spend most of my political time.

The anarchist family is in its political approach and practice probably the most steady one – also, due to less exchange and influence from the outside. At the moment, they have a strong presence in the squatting movement. There are several social centers calling themselves anarchist and their mobilizations often are more combative than e.g. the autonomous ones.

The antifascist movement changed a lot since I came to Madrid. In the beginning they were still part of the autonomous area, highly organized and their actions very confrontational. With the emerge of the anti-globalization movement on the European level, the autonomous movement starts differentiating from the antifascist in term of political practice, and that's still the case.

In the last years the autonomous spectrum undertook the biggest changes – especially since the *15M*-protest. Historically, their practice has always been more symbolic and featured for example public claims, occupations of self-organized spaces and other direct actions. In the last years, there has been a generational change and their practice became once again more calm. Beside the politics of direct action, a part of it is now engaged on the institutional level and working inside the city hall.

*malaboca: Could you further explain how this change in the autonomous movement did happen?*

Sara: The autonomous movement I started in, was very different to the one today. In the beginning I was part of groups supporting neighborhood collectives, campaigning against racist laws and especially into squatting houses. As autonomous feminists in that time we squatted the social center *Eskalera Karakola* in Lavapies. The place is run by women only, anyway since then it changed a lot, had to move to another place, but is still existing.

As mentioned, the political approach of the autonomous struggle in the 90s was open confrontation. There was confrontation with the police in the streets and confrontation with the state on every level. Since 1994, in Madrid's first social centers, the mood was quite militant. Their evictions were horrible, with a lot of arrests and innumerable injured.

This repertoire of action disappears in the end of the 90s and with the anti-globalization movement a new dynamic is entering the autonomous scene. We strongly orientated towards the discussions and practices of the German and Italian movement and were also influenced by struggles from Latin-America, for example from Argentina. We mobilized for anti-summit rallies, against the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, created alternative media-collectives and took part in students protests. We opened up to more topics, our repertoires of actions grew as well as the range of our campaigns. But on the other side, at least from my point of view, the movement lost some of its power to apply pressure.

<sup>1</sup> PAH Vallecás, ist die Plattform gegen Zwangsräumungen eines proletarischen Viertels von Madrid mit dem Namen Vallecás.



Still, there were huge campaigns, networking among the collectives and a lot of actions, but you could see also a kind of fatigue. Often, I remember the autonomous movement in the second half of the 2000s as exhausted and burned out. And then 15M happened.

## 15M. PUERTA DEL SOL.

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*malaboca: You as well as other activists from the autonomous movement were active in 15M. What are your experiences concerning 15M?*

Sara: There were definitely not just activists from the autonomous movement participating, but I do think that it mattered for 15M that already experienced activists were taking part. The six week camp on *Puerta del Sol*, a central square in Madrid, is a fitting example: In the task groups that were formed back then, especially in the tactical domain, a lot of autonomous activists took part – naturally though there were quite a lot of people who participated for the very first time.

I saw a lot of comrades starting to do things new and different – re-inventing the autonomous spectrum. 15M was a different model and had nothing in common with prior social movements. We were used to „mass“ demonstrations with 1000 or 2000 participants and suddenly there are hundreds of thousands.

The political movements weren't clearly definable anymore, no ideological homogeneity. And the way of taking to the streets in protest changed as well. It was mainly about acts of civil disobedience. For some part you'd known them from antimilitary-protest, though new practices of activism developed. New for me as well.

I remember very vividly, how the people acted during one of the first severe and fierce demonstrations of 15M with many injured and detained. They simply sat down before the police contingent. I stayed in the back and looking around I saw a lot of my comrades from the past. We looked at each other and thought: these people are crazy. Due to their lack of experience they couldn't even envision that they could be clubbed and beaten away. They never got hit before so they just sat down. They were brave because they had no idea what would happen. And we were cowards, due to our long years of experience.

I remember exactly that first night on the camp. I sat there, having been beaten by the police, trying to recuperate. In the meantime I saw people starting to build the camp on *Puerta del Sol*. And once again, me and my friends thought, they must be crazy if they believe they can simply stay on the square. We thought that the police would never tolerate it. If the whole thing would have depended on us, it probably would never have happened. Because the damn experiences can hold you back and be an obstacle that sometimes keeps you from considering other options. On the other hand the inexperience of the people took a heavy toll. The repression against us, the number of injured, detained, the fees were a

lot higher than any other recent social movements. No social movement can withstand that. Their inexperience made them an easy target for the police but it also allowed them to do things we never would have done.

On the second day I returned. I would have never dreamed that thousands of people would come to the demonstration against the eviction of the camp. Never. It cost me a lot to try and understand what was happening at that very moment. A completely new political subject emerged there and that was strange for me.

The only common ground was the feeling of indignation – besides that the people there were unbelievably diverse. There were people from the right-wing political party Partido Popular, People organized in the 'Falange' - a fascist party, but also members of the socialist party *PSOE* and the communist party, the Partido Comunista. As well as people that had been committed to social movements for a long time and those that had never been organized before or not even politically interested.

On the first *asambleas*, the gatherings, maybe 10.000 people participated – that dynamic was incredible. It seemed rather impossible to organize a means by which all those people could communicate with or reach an understanding of each other. It was a very complex and difficult work and I still don't know how we actually managed to do it.

In the first weeks there was a full assembly every morning and another one in the evening in addition to the whole meetings of commissions and task groups. It was really crazy and sometimes had the feel of a collective therapy session. People picked up the microphone, saying they had enough of all the shit, what they thought of the government, basically everything. I was surprised by the simple need to talk and how important it was for the people to express their discontent. I still remember that whenever I wanted to just simply relate something to a friend, even something stupid, every time somebody would come to join the conversation. It was impossible to talk to anyone by yourself. Everything that even remotely looked like an assembly attracted people. It expressed the need of the people to participate in the shaping of politics that wasn't limited to handing in a ballot.

Since our political culture had been shaped by 40 years of the Franco dictatorship, this was something completely new. We're talking about a political culture of enslavement and complete demobilization where basically there had been no political practice outside the existing institutional organizations. That is the result of 40 years of dictatorship, silence and fear, the only exceptions probably being Catalonia and Euskadi (Basque region). There was a longstanding tradition of a very active social fabric even during and in spite of the dictatorship and presently people are a lot more active in these regions than in the rest of Spain as well.

As I said, I was shocked how strong the need for simply talking and debating on political issues was.

*malaboca: You talked about the assemblies on Puerta del Sol. On pictures documenting these gatherings it's discernible that the form in which these assemblies were held, are typically known in parts of the radical left...*

Sara: The methodological influence from the activists experience was quite important in this aspect. The best example being the *asambleas* - those gatherings functioned with the methods of the anarchist and autonomous movement. The sign language that was utilized by the people is something we learned in the anti-globalization movement, this was the last time we had to communicate with thousands of people, and again, it enabled us to do so.

## FROM PUERTA DEL SOL BACK TO THE NEIGHBORHOODS.

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*malaboca: When and why did you decided to leave the square?*

Sara: After one and a half month of camping on *Puerta del Sol* the decision was taken to move back to the neighborhood and the *asambleas del barrio*, the neighborhood assemblies, were born. The proposal for this decentralization was a concept coming from the autonomous and anarchist self-organization.

I remember a lot of discussion with old comrades about that staying on the square was no longer sustainable. Actually, my commission, the *Comisión Legal Sol*, was the one especially advocating for leaving *Puerta del Sol*. The most important reason for me was that the camp was slowly changing into a hell and even saying that out loud was a delicate matter.

On the one side the camp was one of the most astonishing things that ever happened in this city. It was like a self-governed city: there were two kindergartens, three food-banks, two libraries, even a space to play chess and so many other things. But at night, it was turning into a place of insecurity: there were brawls, sexual assaults and even armed hostilities. Several people were heavily injured in the camp and also me myself, I once became a victim of a knife attack. And, of course, we were worried about becoming a problem in public. We did not want to give the interior minister any reason to blame us as a thread for the whole city. But it was that serious, that we were afraid of people dying at one point.

But also in a political matter the decision made a lot of sense for me. The access to the inner city was more or less limited to a small privileged Elite, which not necessarily had to work or students on their vacations with a lot of leisure time. Moreover, it was very costly to maintain the camp and a majority of people was not even contributing or able to do so. The ones living in the outskirts, maybe passed by for a day and couldn't get a real insight in what was happening. Therefore, politically it was also the right decision to resolve the camp and relocate the protest and self-organization into the reality of peoples life.

*malaboca: How did the thinking about strategy change through this experience in the autonomous movement or in general the social movements?*

Sara: From this moment on, the autonomous movement invested a huge part of its energy in pushing the neighborhood assemblies. These assemblies were a place where many different people met – old resistance fighter against the dictatorship of Franco, experienced activists but also people who just did nothing before.

In the first month of our assembly here, 5000 people showed up, but it did not last too long and in the end we stayed with 40. And basically, that happened with all the neighborhood assemblies. Of course, everywhere some stayed but it was quickly reduced to a minimum.

Still, many people went to the huge demonstrations in the following years. F. e. one million participated in the *marcha pro la dignidad* - the march for dignity - on March 22nd 2014. But the repression took care about it as well.

Then, the autonomous movement participated in the projects emerging from this neighborhood assemblies. One part moved from there to the *PAH* and other parts moved into the city hall to work as a municipal candidate. This reminds me a little of the formation of the socialist party, the *PSOE*, in 1982.

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## IF THE WHOLE THING WOULD HAVE DEPENDED ON US, IT PROBABLY WOULD NEVER HAVE HAPPENED.

This party, at that time very unexperienced, emerged from neighborhood assemblies which gained some political experience, took many activists with them and the movement was disappearing step by step. *Podemos* is effectively doing something similar with the occurred self-organized spaces. They carried away a huge part of the experienced activists, also to fill political offices and that causes practically the dissolution of entire projects.

*malaboca: That doesn't sound like a very positive summary...*

Sara: I'm a little skeptical when it comes to judge about the achievements of 15M. Something especially hard for me was to plan the agenda of 15M together with people I fought against before: with rightists and right-wing radicals. The right-radicals left finally, but a part of the rightists stayed. That was heavily contradicting with my own principles.

And from the beginning we were facing the problem of how 15M could survive and develop on the long-run. The dynamic of mobilizations could sustain for a while, but not for a longer period. We saw the movement shrinking more and more as exhaustion and repression took the place of the initial enthusiasm. From 15M, a lot of collectives emerged, like the squatted centers or the *despensas*, so-called food-banks. Nothing of that was there before and came out of a network, which meant a great change.

<sup>2</sup> The central square of Madrid, which was occupied on the 15th of May 2011.

But when talking about a more global level, there was no specific plan and we were not able to work out such a plan. Also because of that, a part of the movement started to get involved with the institutional structure, while another part just decided to go home.

During the camp, I sometimes thought: Ok, this will go somewhere! Maybe it could be revolutionary. But as time passed, from 2012 on I realized, that this revolution is not about to come and the whole thing is going in a very different direction. The focus on the parliament – also through the emergence of *Podemos* – was very strong and the hope, we could maybe win on the street, dissolved.

PAH

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*malaboca: Wouldn't you say that the results of the decentralization, like the social centers or the PAH, are part of a very slow but revolutionary process on a local level?*

Sara: For me, the only exception from what I just explained, would be the *PAH*. In 2007 I was part of a campaign for dignified housing, called „*V de Vivienda*“ („*V for housing*“), which could be described as the most direct predecessor of the *PAH*. Therefore I see the development of the *PAH* as very important, since from my point of view it is the only example for the successful constitution of a strong social movement.

What played an important role in this development is the direct involvement and politicization of the persons concerned, the politicization of the issue of housing in the societal discourse as well as the formulation of precise demands. These aspects also may describe the advantages compared to the *15M*. And for the state, to attack the *PAH* is hard, since there are many normal people involved, like my mom.

The involvement of the autonomous movement within the *PAH* is very volatile at the moment. For example here in *Vallecas*, we are four activists and 90% of the rest are latinamerican women in their 50s. But then there are assemblies like in Carabanchel with twice as much activists as in *Vallecas* and again other assemblies work without any support from activists.

The practice of the *PAH* itself is in some way autonomous but the big difference to traditional autonomous forms lies in the issue of negotiation. To put it in extreme terms: the politics of the *PAH* is reformist. I mean, the main amount of my political work is to negotiate with the directors of the banks and not dealing with the evictions. We negotiate about alternative ways to handle the debt, so people won't lose their house. If it is necessary we squat a bank and there may be clashes with the police. But in the end it is all about negotiations. I would say, that this clearly was not part of an autonomous practice in the past. So in the end the *PAH* describes a breach with traditional autonomous practices. If you would have told me ten years ago that I would do something like this, I would have never believed you. It would have even seemed wrong to me.

*malaboca: And why do you agree with this form of politics now?*

Sara: I think, because I'm getting old. That doesn't mean that I become more conservative, but that I realize my own contradictions. Suddenly I turn towards a reality, we always wanted to get in contact with: the neighborhoods, the migrants, simple and normal people. At least on the discursive level, we always wanted to reach those parts of the society. Now in the actual practice, you realize that there are some things like urgent needs. I mean aspects of the daily life, like being able to feed your kids. This constitutes a serious dilemma for me. I tried to solve all these problems in the past too, but by a change of the system and a dynamic of confrontation, which in the end I wasn't able to. It cost me a lot of energy to engage in this more direct kind of politics, but now I see a potential for transformation there. In the short term, when we are successful, we win something very specific for the life of one person. In medium term, I think, we can also win on other levels. But then this aspect describes a dilemma again. I have to recognize that this is all there is. I know there are many ways to solve urgent problems and many people urgently needing solutions, because they lose their homes. I decided to focus on that very direct way at the moment but always get in conflict with my ideas and hopes I had in the beginning.

*malaboca: You've mentioned earlier that 90% of the people participating in the PAH in this quarter are women, we've heard similar things from PAH assemblies in other places. Would you say, from a feminist perspective, that there are positive developments concerning this topic and that especially women politicize themselves with this work?*

Sara: I don't know if this women ratio is a general one, but in case it is the same like here in most other places, I would agree. I think that many men don't come for machismo reasons because they're ashamed. Often they were the ones taking the decisions as family fathers to sign the contract for the mortgage. Now they have to realize that this could have been a mistake that brought the family the ruin. To admit such a mistake or problem is often hard for them. Therefore the women often come out of a pragmatic way of thinking, saying: This is my family, my children and my house and we must survive. I think this is something that often leads them here but also to do something that allows them to empower themselves.

In my opinion, people within social movements tend to talk a lot about respecting the feelings and taking care of each other, however in the practice it has always been different. It is overwhelming especially at this level, the level of mutual support, what happens at the *PAH* events in our quarter. I really think that this has a lot to do with the fact that the majority are women. For example, if a woman comes to an assembly with her children, tells her stories and starts to cry, everybody just cries with her. They hug and comfort her, tell her that they have been through exactly the same, that she doesn't have to worry, because they stand by her side. Every

time somebody comes around with bad news, everybody is here and going home with her, cooking together, helping in doing her paperwork or calling her to ask how it is going. This truly is one of the most fascinating thing that I've ever seen in my life. Strange, but they first had to come to teach us that the private is a political space.

Most of the women at the assemblies are the same age as my mother and most of them never thought they would ever do what they do now. Those are the activists I would have always wanted as comrades in the social movements. They are untiring. If there is the need to put up posters, 50 of them just go putting them up; if a bank has to be squatted, 100 of them just go and squat the bank; if anybody needs company to do the paperwork, 30 of them go with her; they get up at 5am if an eviction has to be prevented. And all of this again and again. It is unbelievable how much energy and movement lies behind it. And it is not coming from just a theoretical conviction, but from their everyday practice and their contact with the reality. Hence they become the most valuable activists that I've ever seen in my life.

Along all of these processes there is a huge development among many of them, which they notice themselves. I study law and I know how complicated the whole mortgage topic is. The juridical advice and service is organized collectively. And there you have 60-year old women that might not even have known what they have signed exactly in the beginning, sitting together. And after a few months they solve cases that I can't even follow. We learn so incredibly much.

The practice of the *PAH* here in *Vallecas* is to squat buildings to accommodate the people that got evicted there. This is one of the areas with the most squatted buildings. In the beginning they talked about squatting in a very conventional way: as a delict. After four or five months you can see how they defend the squat. And then they start realizing that squatting is just, that people have the right to live somewhere and when this right is refused, you have to take that right. It is truly astounding how normal it becomes for them to go to unannounced demonstrations or to squat a bank. And all this although it is risky because of the police and although they could sit at home and watch television just as good. The political discourse changes them and they lose the fear of breaking the law and passing this willingness along in a truly impressive way.

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IT COST ME A LOT OF ENERGY TO ENGAGE IN THIS MORE DIRECT KIND OF POLITICS, BUT NOW I SEE A POTENTIAL FOR TRANSFORMATION THERE.

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# »Our task is to build potentially revolutionary subjects.«

## THE PAH SABADELL. ITS HISTORY, PROBLEMS AND TACTICS.

*malaboca: Albert, tell us about your work in the PAH<sup>1</sup> here in Sabadell<sup>2</sup> and the current situation of your struggle.*

Albert: The point, where we are right now is for several reasons a complicated one. First, we have been going on for several years now and there is a sense of a fatigue in the movement. This kind of work is very costly in terms of energy and time. It requires your 100% involvement. There are no weekends. If we are talking about somebody's life, somebody who is your friend, who is also part of the platform and his or her flat is being auctioned tomorrow, you don't care if it's Sunday or 9am or 9pm. If somebody is getting evicted we have to go there immediately – it can't wait.

Second, there are certain cycles of mobilization and we had a high moment a year and a half ago because of a peak of evictions in Spain. There was a moment of high unemployment, when the highest layoffs happened and then probably a year later we had the highest number of evictions and another year later the highest number of squattings. This is the phase we are in right now. So lately the reason why people come to us change. Since a year, we drifted a little away from mortgages exclusively and we have an increasing number of people who can't pay their rent or had been squatting.

This change creates some tensions within the movement. In cases of mortgage, from the start to the end, you have almost two years to work on it. In these two years, you can socialize persons politically. They get involved in the collective, they work, they get to know each other, so we form a sort of community and we have a strongly tied movement. But when you are threatened to be evicted from a place you rented or squatted, the time frame is very different. From the moment

you stop paying to the moment you can be evicted, it might be just 30 days. So increasingly, we don't really have the time as a political movement to work with them in the same way we used to. It is much more complicated to get the kind of political involvement and participation a movement like this needs. Since the law is completely and absolutely against us, the way we can win is forgetting about the law and just being uncomfortable enough. But we can only do this, if we have the full commitment of the people and to get that usually you need more time. And it's time we didn't have for the last year.

*malaboca: How do you deal with these kind of problems?*

Albert: We try to extend this period as long as possible, but usually that's two or three months only. So people can come to some workshops, but are not that interested in going to the assemblies. In any way, they get to know people and can try to have some kind of a socialization process.

In the Obra Social<sup>3</sup> this is much easier, because the buildings "belong" to the platform and there is a direct link to it, they are collectively managed and you are gonna be tied to the collective as long as you live there. But the Obra social is just a portion of the total amount of evictions of squatting right now. There is a lot of autonomous or "private" squatting because people have to. I don't know how successful we've been in adapting these new conditions, but we are trying our best.

*malaboca: Lets start from the day-to-day-work you do here. Tell us about the history, how it all started, how it developed to get to today.*

Albert: It started in the beginning of 2011 with the Moviment Popular de Sabadell (MPS), a coalition of several political

collectives in the city. They heard about the platform being founded in Barcelona and Terrassa and said: we should do this here in Sabadell too, because we have the same huge problem and this platform will be a very significant political movement. So it was a conscious political decision by a political movement to start the platform. This is a little different to other places, where either the political traditions of the initiators are different, or it were more spontaneous initiatives from citizen or neighborhood association who don't have that distinct political connotation or tradition.

Here in Sabadell, they started working as a very little platform with very little people. Then 15M happened and that meant in terms of organization, media exposure and people a massive explosion. The year after the 15M we went from assemblies of 50 people to 250-300 people. We had more new people in a week than all the people we were a year ago, so we had to build structures to incorporate all this people. Many other movements under such a stress would probably collapse, but the difference is, since we are not an NGO, every new person who came meant for us a new activist.

We always put a lot of stress into creating political subjects, collective political subjects. And I think in this sense our discourse is a little bit different from others within the movement. We always had a very strong emphasis on class-based discourse and politics, we have used very left-wing concepts and ideas and very open and unapologetic, clear anti-capitalist stands here. It helped us to create a much more – I don't wanna use the word 'aggressive' – a much more powerful platform. And at some point, more people showed up for our actions than they did in Barcelona. That meant that our tactics of actually engaging people politically and not treating them as people who needed help, but as activist and militants, bear fruit.

The problem is, you need time for that, which brings me back to my first mentioned problem. We are suffering now from that, because we are lacking the time and the political momentum that we had. But in those two years it worked wondrous. We had specific cases as examples of people making amazing political and personal transformations. I have a friend for example in the platform and one day she confessed to me, that she and her husband back in the days had thought about voting for *Plataforma per Catalunya*, the far-right and xenophobic party. They had thought about it and after a year in the platform they both had tattoos with quotes from Gramsci. Or another person, who was completely apolitical, in less than a year, she was not only part of the platform but she had started a trade union section at her work place and ultimately ran as a candidate for a local party here. This is very powerful, because this kind of people are actually essential for the movement.

I think that this kind of result is much more longer lasting and solid than just talking about citizens and human rights, which is a lot more abstract and in line with the mainstream discourse. It might make it easier at the start but I'm skeptical of the long-lasting effects. The PAH of Barcelona is such an example: I recognize the hard work that have been done and

all the evictions that were stopped, all the changes in the law and so on. All of this is great, but in terms of the personal and political effects they have on the people going through the collective, I'm not so sure that they have exploited the contradictions some people had. I remember having a discussion two years ago with Andria, the partner of Ada Colau, the cur-

**OUR TACTICS OF ACTUALLY ENGAGING PEOPLE POLITICALLY AND NOT TREATING THEM AS PEOPLE WHO NEEDED HELP, BUT AS ACTIVIST AND MILITANTS, BEAR FRUIT.**

rent mayor of Barcelona, and he was saying: what about the working-class Partido Popular<sup>4</sup>-voter who comes to the platform? If we say we are left-wing and anti-capitalists, he is not going to come. My answer was: 'You got it all wrong. He is not coming, because we are this or that. He comes because he has a problem – he can't pay the mortgages. And he would talk to the devil if the devil promise to solve the mortgages problem.' The important thing is to work on the contradiction he has, because he has the contradiction – I don't have it. He was voting for the conservative party and he is now here. So are we going to exploit this contradiction and give him the tools to realize politically that being working-class and voting for the conservatives is incompatible? If we don't do that, we might have more people coming, but in five years that's nothing. Because we wouldn't have build a political subject which is the most important task of any social movement for me.

*malaboca: Do you read Marx all together to raise the workers conciseness? How do you work day to day with this people?*

Albert: I think it's a matter of practice and discourse. If you see the spokesperson of your platform on the news, which is normally a person you respect, saying that there is an elite of rich people who are extracting money from us and if it goes well for them it goes bad for us and vice-versa and how this is a problem of the capitalist system. You don't have to go into detailed findings, people experience that on a daily basis. That starts creating a certain discourse and a certain political context for this experience. Then you combine that with a practice based on disobedience and confrontation, on actually showing the differences between a hegemonic discourse and reality.

An example: Most people have been told that the police is there to protect them and solve crimes, because they are the good guys. If you take them to political actions and for the first time in their life they see the police not solving crimes, not catching the bad guys, but actually beating the shit out of people who are helping you and the movement, this is a critical moment. People start asking 'why?' and they are not dumb.

<sup>1</sup> Plataforma de los Afectados de la Hipoteca – Platform of the mortgages affected

<sup>2</sup> A 200,000 inhabitants suburb of Barcelona

<sup>3</sup> engl.: Social Act. The Obra Social of the PAH is their program of squatting empty building for the one being evicted from their homes

<sup>4</sup> The conservative party of Spain

I think this human rights and citizenship based discourse is actually quite paternalistic because its based on the assumption, that working-class people can't understand very basic concepts, like: the police in a capitalist state will serve to defend a capitalist purpose. And thats just the way it is – people experience that. We just treat people as equals and assume that they have a brain. We are not their teacher – we just tell them what we believe in. And if they agree with us, we start building political subjects. Of course, its not like that for everyone – I gave you two of the most successful examples. I think one of the biggest mistakes of the left historically is assuming the working class or the 99% or whatever is this pure idealist being of life. And of course its not that way. The working class can be sexist and racist and xenophobic and all the fucked up things you can think of. But you have to deal and work with that. And you can see thinks now, that if you would have told people five years ago, they would never believe that. Two month ago a new guy came to the assembly and we were talking about the case of a Muslim women, this guy started to make racist, islamophobic comment and then the whole assembly kicked him out. And this is working class people from really fucked up neighborhoods. Or, for example, last Wednesday somebody told us, that somebody who came to the assembly for the last month, was a convicted abuser of his family. We checked it and it was anonymously decided that he was expelled – we don't tolerate racism or sexism in this collective.

It is a combination of practice and discourse and putting in hours and hours of working on the already present contradictions of the system. Go to the field, localize them and exploit them. The whole story of dept and housing in the crisis

**IF THE ONLY WAY POSSIBLE FOR YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN IS TO HAVE A HOUSE BY DISOBEYING THE LAW, BY COMMITTING CRIMES – THAT SAYS A LOT ABOUT SOCIETY AND THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM.**

was a huge problem the system had. And there was no solution for that - the state was just washing its hands. And in such a situation the political winner is the one who provides the people with what the people need. The problem with the left here – at least in Spain – but I think we can say in Europe in general is that traditionally we have had revolutionary goal, but we have used very reformist means. But if your means are reformist, you will get trapped in the institutional web and you will never reach your goals. What we have done in the platform is reversing the equation: we have reformist goals, but we use revolutionary means. And this is the much more important thing, because you actually have things you can achieve, you can present real victories to the people: look, we did it! We stopped your eviction. Look, we did it! We squatted a new house with you. And

while achieving specific victories we are constructing a political, class-based potentially revolutionary subject. But thats what most people within the movement don't realize. We are a minority and the majority of the movement unfortunately is aligned more with this post-modernist human-rights discourse.

**THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL.  
THE REFORMIST REALITY.**

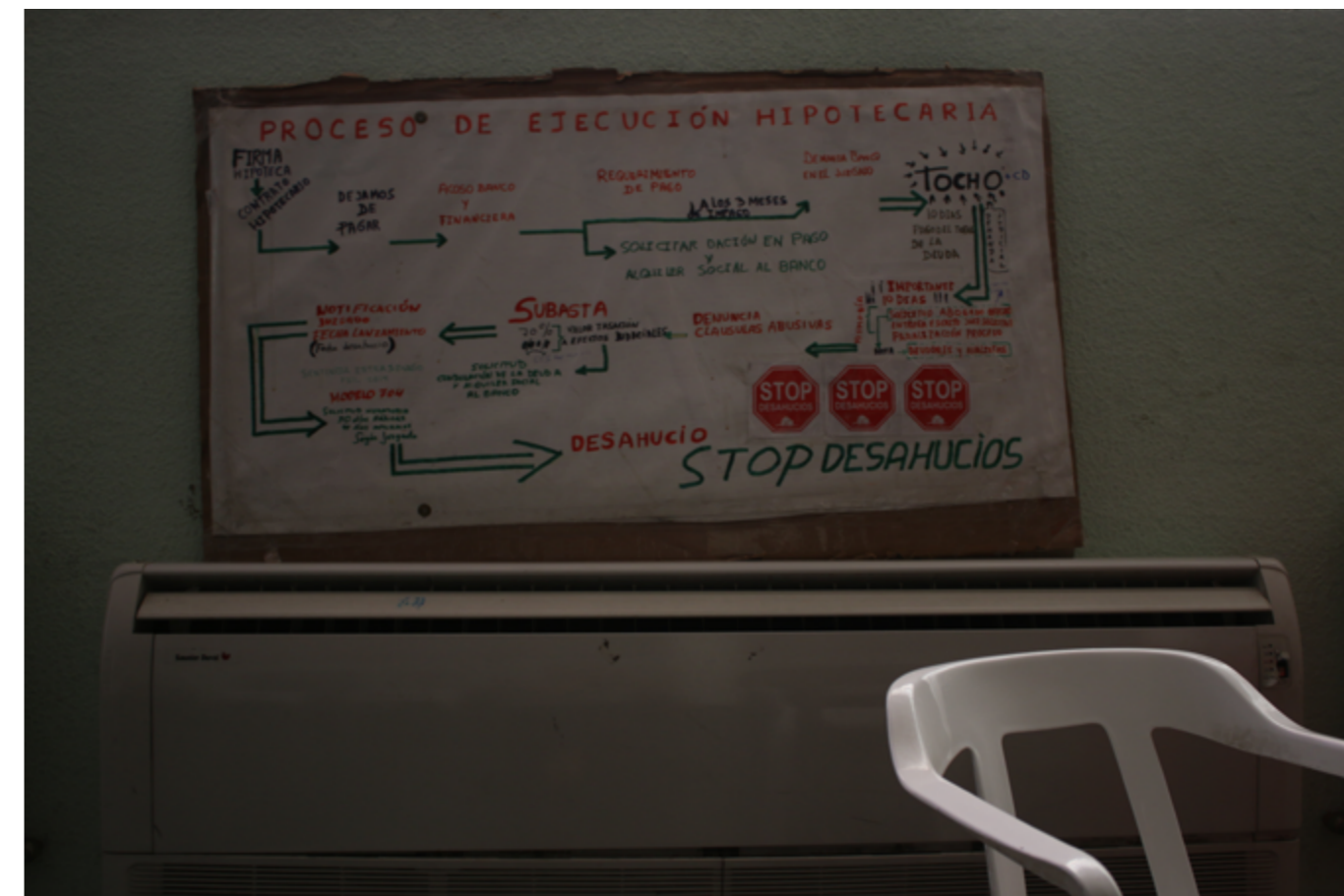
*malaboca: Is the PAH in your eyes a revolutionary organization?*

Albert: Yes and no. The platform has been misunderstood from the outside and from the inside. Objectively, the platform has a core of anti-capitalist principles, it attacks capital in some of its manifestations. It attacks it as a discourse but it also attacks it as a crystallization of social dynamics in housing: what do you pay, who do you live with, where do you buy or attend school – all this crystallized in where do you live and squatting is a way of breaking it. But it also interrupts the capitalist cycle of accumulation in the sense that it decommodifies housing, so it attacks capital in several objective ways.

The problem is, that most people – even inside the movement don't realize, how strongly anti-capitalist the platform actually is. I think being anti-capitalist nowadays is always the equivalent of being revolutionary. I think the discourse of the platform has chosen to focus more on the reformist goals instead of the revolutionary means. Most people have understood of the platform, that we want to change the law or to sign an agreement with the bank. But ironically, the means we are using are actually more of a goal than anything. Its through our means how we are constructing and building a political subject. The goal is like the bait which you use to attract people and I think thats the only way possible. And if the only way possible for you and your children is to have a house by disobeying the law, by committing crimes – that says a lot about society and the economic system. And it doesn't take a genius to figure it out.

*malaboca: Ada Colau, the mayor of Barcelona, is a famous PAH activist. With "the movement in power" now, how does it effect your work?*

Albert: It's not "the movement in power" – it is the emergence of new parties who aim to embody the claims from social movements. Some do a better job than others but what all of them do with the best of their intentions: they take personal resources, from the movements into institutions. We share very limited resources and now basically the same number of people have to do twice the work. And thats problematic, especially because as a social movement you can be a lot more radical, more demanding and institutions limit what you can do, because they are designed to do that. The biggest and the most problematic example is *Podemos*. They changed a lot since they started electing representati-



ves and their discourse has shifted quite significantly. But they have also taken with them quite a lot of movement potential. So we are at risk to suffer from a widespread demobilization due to the hope for an institutional change. But when this change is not happening there will be a massive disappointment and going back to where we were is not feasible. It takes years to build powerful and active social movements and once you switch to something else its impossible to 're-start'. Especially the people who are in the institutions are going to defend what they did. It has happened so many times in the history of parliamentary democracy. They get there, start doing things and then they have to compromise and then they have to compromise a little bit more and then they start defending themselves – thats the trap. It is partly what is happening in Greece with *Syriza*. The problem is, that it demobilizes. And I think here, on a smaller scale, so far we are seeing potentially the same thing. Now, there are several dangers: One is a shift to the far-right - not necessarily, but its an option. The worst option. But there is also just the option of massive disaffection and disengagement of the population and a turn from resistance to resilience. We are always assuming that this idea of saying 'we lost' is not possible, but defeat is real and people can feel defeat as a very real thing. People can just give up and they

do give up, historically they, we have given up many times and it could happen again. So I would be very skeptic, when it comes to this idea that this is a good moment. Maybe it is a potentially good, but we need to step up our game here and I'm not sure if we have the resources to do it.

*malaboca: from the social movements perspective, what would be the steps to take now to prevent or avoid this kind of resignation or the decline of the movements power again?*

Albert: I think there is several things you can do. First, we have to work on the existing movement-party relations. If we look at Catalonia, the three biggest platforms of *la PAH* have ties with one or another party at this point. What we would have to do is: try to rule this parties from outside. We need to build relationships and networks outside the institutions. Within the institutions you need to be as isolated as possible from the other parties. Because they are within that logic and if you start working with them you will be trapped in that logic. Then, we have to prevent the tendencies within the movement that see the institutional allies that we didn't had until now with too much respect and as somebody we have to collaborate with and shouldn't pressure as much as we did before.



For example, if Ada Colau is the mayor of Barcelona now and they evict somebody, some within the movement would say: it is wrong, but they are trying and we should give them some space, because we trust them. The risk is, that this position becomes hegemonic within the movement and that we stop being demanding and being critical because we see allies instead of political institutional figures. They might be more sympathetic and might have their best interests in heart, but they are institutional figures and we have to treat them also as such. We have to criticize, we have to challenge, and the ones in the institutions have to obey in a way. There is this Zapatistas saying people in *Barcelona en Comu* or such use to say as well, this idea of mandar obedeciendo<sup>5</sup>. Well do it! Does this not turn into empty words, actually do it.

*malaboca: Do you think that the new parties are trying to solve or to mediate contradictions between antagonistic parts? Is this helping or hurting your work along the contradictions?*

Albert: Institutions are there to act ideally as mediators, to be problem-solvers in the public sphere: the public sphere is pluralistic and we have to respect that pluralism and we have to mediate between different parties and interests. At least this is what institutions are designed to do, theoretically. A

#### WHAT WE WOULD HAVE TO DO IS: TRY TO RULE THIS PARTIES FROM OUTSIDE.

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very common example is the idea of 'I'm going to be the mayor of all the people in Madrid, or all the people in Barcelona' – but of course you are not and you shouldn't. You should be the mayor for the working-class or the popular classes or the 99% - I don't care. If they are able to break away from this idea, will depend on their basic actual political will, which is something I don't put too much trust in. Not because they are liars, I wouldn't trust myself either. That's what I'm most afraid of. The CUP<sup>6</sup> here, for example, has a long history of municipal governments and trying to establish bottom-up controls and assemblies and still only in four years in the parliament, I see many people just thinking in electoral and institutional terms. So, how *Ahora Madrid* or *Barcelona en Comu* are going to avoid this trap with weaker, much weaker traditions of grass-roots control because they are much younger parties? They didn't have the time to build that structures. And also their political will is weaker, not because it's worse, but because they are large coalitions composed of very different political traditions – not all of them compatible.

And finally, the third thing that makes me skeptical about this: I don't think that they have broken away from this neo-Keynesian framework and not breaking away from this idea

means repeating the Greek experience. You have to break away, because inside capitalism there is no fucking alternative. Thatcher was right in that sense to me. If you don't break away from capitalism, within capitalism there is no alternative. They don't have a clear program that differentiates them that much from the social democrats of the seventies and its not the seventies anymore.

And I don't think you can break away from capitalism by decree. It requires transition, it requires reform. Its a long process and requires to have allies and international context. I'm not blaming *Syriza* as traitors, but we have also to be aware of the situation and what can be done and what can't be done.

#### HOW TO CHANGE IT ALL.

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*malaboca: Look at Spain's and Europe's social movements in this historical situation. What is the strategy then which could transform society in general?*

Albert: That's a big question and I don't think I can answer it. But I think, the problem of the European scenario is that the situation is very different from country to country and its becoming more and more fragmented in the last ten years. The cases of Greece, Spain, but also Ireland, Portugal, maybe Italy in the future – they are becoming more and more peripheral vice a vice the center which is the “banana” - Germany, the Benelux, South England. Its requires different strategies, you can't appeal to the same experiences in different countries because experiences are so different.

For the economic and political periphery I think there is something like a shared experience among the people and one should appeal to these breaking points or tension points where the state is not being able to be. In the case of Spain it was mortgages and it was housing, maybe in Portugal or in Ireland its a different thing, that up to the people to really understand and analyze there specific situation. More than anything the goal of identifying these tension point is to build subjects, political subjects. What I thinks, what is lacking – not just in social movements but in anti-systemic movements in general – is a political subject. What we should do is trying to work on the contradictions of people, trying to articulate this in whatever issue it is – no matter if its mortgages, food, clothing, whatever - and create networks of solidarity that work as a launching platform for a political subject. The problem with the 99% for example was that it was to fragmented. That is this Negri'st thing - the multitude instead of the people – but we have to get back to the people. The multitude is fragmented, the multitude can never be a force again the concentrated and unified power in the hands of a very small elite. The only way to build something against is through shared experience around those breaking points, social political breaking points. And then at some point we can try to build transnational coalitions and try to put some pressure, but I think thats far away. Most people see this as a

window of opportunity, but I don't think that there are any big changes about to begin now. I think we are now starting to recompose from the massive historical defeat that came from the eighties and nineties, we are just starting to recover now and its a long road we have ahead of us.

So for me the really most important political task is to build political subjects based through the actual experience of contradictions on a daily basis on the field, work on that and also be very aware of the risks of institutional politics. If you go into that try to do it through mechanism that allow you to pull the breaks at any point. Try to make the party an instrument of the movement and not the movement an instrument of the party which is also a very common thing to say. But actually think of structures and don't just stay with the beautiful words. Think of how you are going to do that.

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THE REALLY MOST IMPORTANT POLITICAL TASK IS TO BUILD POLITICAL SUBJECTS BASED THROUGH THE ACTUAL EXPERIENCE OF CONTRADICTIONS ON A DAILY BASIS ON THE FIELD, WORK ON THAT AND ALSO BE VERY AWARE OF THE RISKS OF INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS.

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<sup>5</sup> engl.: Governing by obeying.

<sup>6</sup> Candidatura d'Unitat Popular, a left-wing municipal focused party in Catalonia

# »It is about existing in the way we believe to exist.«

Marta: First of all, I don't want to talk as a representative of this place. I will talk based on my experiences.

## FEMINISM IN MADRID AND IN LA QUIMERA.

*malaboca: Could you introduce yourself and the projects you are part of right now?*

Marta: Well, we are sitting on the rooftop of the social center La Quimera in Lavapies<sup>1</sup>. In this area there is a long tradition of squatted centers. About five or six existed before this one. Every new squat evolved out of the eviction of the former one. La Quimera has been squatted two years ago. The building, which belongs to a private owner, has been empty for ten years.

The idea behind the continuous squatting is to have a squatted space for the neighborhood. New about the current project is that people identify more with anti-authoritarian ideas, it has become a vegan space, is meant to be a feminist space and has a clear opinion on negotiating with government institutions: La Quimera will not negotiate.

Me, myself, I started to be politically active in the students movement. From then on I was organized in feminist groups, more specifically women only groups. Currently I am part of an infoshop – we call it distri. By attending different events, markets or festivals we spread anarcho-feminist and queer-feminist content.

*malaboca: Could you tell us more about recent and historical feminist projects here in Madrid from your perspective?*

Marta: Well, my perspective is the autonomous perspective. As in everything else there is a generation gap. Part of the older generation of the feminist movement is a flat in the center of the city. It used to be a very symbolic flat in which a lot of meetings were held, for example to organize the 8th of March demonstrations. This is one part of the institutiona-

lized or recognized part of the history of the feminist movement.

Another historically important place is the eskalera de karakoles. A place squatted by a group of women and lesbians here in the neighborhood in the 90s. After their eviction they negotiated with the council and expressed their need for a space only for women in the city – in the end they were successful. This place is quite well known even outside Madrid and Spain.

Another part of the autonomous movement – but not a visible one – are groups of women, lesbian and trans\* that organize according to their needs in e.g. closed consciousness-raising groups. These are groups where you talk about your issues and the experience you make as a woman, lesbian or trans\* person within society every day.

*malaboca: That was all before 15M, right? How did the feminist movement develop after the occupation of the square?*

Marta: It opened up the spaces of activism. Our spaces were only inviting for us and our friends and excluded many others. 15M broke with this pattern. Many people started to join different initiatives. Most of those people were not politically organized before.

During the acampada, the camp, there was a meeting called feminismo sol<sup>2</sup>. It is still actively working nowadays and is open to all genders and sexualities. This group changed many things. Activists from rather small or closed groups got to know other people. feminismo sol also had a commission working on precarity and economics from a feminist perspective, which can be compared to the strike for all initiative in Barcelona. A feminist strike problematizing the issue of work and labor from a feminist perspective.

Another commission which evolved out of feminismo sol was a LGBT working group called asamblea transmetabolico.

They made the issues of LGBT more visible in the square and autonomous places. Gender and sexuality became linked issues and sexuality became more present in feminist activism.

*malaboca: So the struggle for trans\* issues got stronger after 2011?*

Marta: Yes. And in 2013 there was an attempt to go beyond the traditional 8th of March demonstration in which basically every feminist or so called feminist group participates – from unions and parties to autonomous groups. The idea was to promote more autonomous positions. A whole month of activities, in which Trans\*people were prominently involved, was organized. This was exceptional since feminists often only consider women as the political subject of feminism. During the preparations the groups squatted a space to have a center of activities for this month. After the activities a trans-feminist collective evolved around this space. A whole new set of relations started to work on this issue. Unfortunately they were evicted after a few months. But the collective still exists.

## LA QUIMERA AND THEIR NEIGHBORS.

*malaboca: Coming to La Quimera, how does your self-understanding as a feminist place show up in your daily practices?*

Marta: You can find many women, lesbian and trans\* actively claiming this place. This is a huge difference to other social centers, which are mostly male dominated. In La Quimera, if someone is doing a technical job, it will be a woman. I haven't seen this before or somewhere else. So it doesn't necessarily show up in an explicit way but it is definitely present in our day-to-day practice. And of course there is this whole thing of „lets have a safe space“ and excluding sexist, racist, homophobic statements or behaviors. But as always this is a contradiction of having an open space.

*malaboca: Trying to be an open space, how do you approach the neighbors?*

Marta: We try to be welcoming. One of our projects starting in June was to do gatherings every Thursday called „What is this square talking about?“<sup>3</sup>. Every week we focus on different themes and invite collectives from the neighborhood working on these issues. It is not so much about having a common position in the end, it is more about getting to know the other collectives and being visible on the square. This way, little by little, the neighbors get used to us and our faces. This trust is important, since our political „bla“ itself might be alienating. So yeah – doing things outside is one of the strategies.

Listening to the neighbors is important. One day a woman approached us and suggested to put plants on our balconies, since the facade looked rather ugly. So some people started to plant flowers and now others that before would have never entered the place, come in and water the plants.

*malaboca: Coming more to yourself as an activist, what are the core topics of your activism?*

Marta: Currently, I am interested in doing things that are not feminism itself but are very linked to it, as squatting. I am

## LISTENING TO THE NEIGHBORS IS IMPORTANT.

part of the squatters office. We advise people on a technical or legal level. And we only advise. We wouldn't open a door for anyone. We do not take care of anyone's issues but we accompany them in the process of taking care of their issues themselves.

When I arrived, this group was formed only by women. Currently, we are a mixed gender group. As a feminist it is interesting to be part of this group. Because squatting is something very technical and therefore not often related to feminine gender roles but then most people who come are women. This contradicts the image many have about squatting.

## TO NEGOTIATE OR NOT TO NEGOTIATE.

*Malaboca: The topic of squatting and negotiating came up in the last days as an important issue right now in Madrid with the new city government of Ahora Madrid offering places to political projects that are squatting. Maybe a naive question: Why do you squat? And why do you squat and not negotiate?*

## WE DO NOT TAKE CARE OF ANYONES ISSUES BUT WE ACCOMPANY THEM IN THE PROCESS OF TAKING CARE OF THEIR ISSUES THEMSELVES.

Marta: The current political situation resembles the time of transition- from Franco to „democracy“ - when a leftist party in power started institutionalizing the assemblies of the neighborhoods. After that there was no autonomous movement any more. For me it is about the autonomy of the spaces. If you lose that autonomy in the end you will lose your own political project. In the longterm you become dependent on the institutions since you lose the knowledge on how to be independent – simply speaking on how to open a door.

<sup>1</sup> One of Madrid's innercity districts

<sup>2</sup> „Sol feminism“ - Sol is the square in the centre of Madrid, which was squatted during the 15th of May 2011.

<sup>3</sup> La Quimera is situated next to a big square.

<sup>4</sup> An anarchist social centre in Madrid's working-class district of Vallekas

Rok: From the German squatting movement we learned that governing institutions try to divide squatters by negotiating with some of them. They created the good squatters who are willing to become legal and the bad ones who stay illegal. In the end it is easier to control the good ones and evict the bad ones.

Marta: I agree that this is a danger for us in Madrid.

Sara: Well it already happened in the past. Illegal squats usually do not care about state regulations for example concerning the organization of an event, like the amount of people allowed in a room. They see the law as a instrument of repression and try to find their own regulations in self-management. The state or any of its parts, like the law, is kept outside. About a year ago the city hall used an accident in one of the biggest clubs in Madrid to try to close the squats that ignored newer regulations on parties and concerts. Some squats reacted according to the city's demand and stopped hosting events. Other squats after receiving the threat came together in a Madrid wide meeting to discuss the situation and organize a collective reaction. So in the face of repression different squats of Madrid joined together but others didn't.

Sara: I cannot speak on behalf of La Quimera, but for us in 13/144 it is clear that we do not want to organize housing for others. We want a place for us. It is open to others if they agree with our way of organizing. But we will not supply a service the state neglects to provide, but many other social centers now focus on this area. In 13/14 we focus on our political projects – for me it is my women group. This strategy is based on my belief that there will be no political change of society. To change society radically there has to happen something very horrifying like a war. I am not willing to fight for a change on something that I am sure will never change – I prefer to change myself. This is what we try to organize in 13/14. We prepare ourselves. We prepare for this revolution that will never happen, but then suddenly may be there.

Rok: In 13/14 the goal is to create a space according to our needs. It is a place where we practice the way we want to live. This refers to technical issues but more so on social and emotional levels. And to the outside we demonstrate that there are other options to organize life and the social.

Marta: As a feminist I am not wishing to change the way people live in this city. I am questioning the gender roles that have been imposed on me and if in that process people join, it is fine. For example the distri is not about circling feminist material because we want to change people. I am part of this because there are certain books that I like and I want them to be available if anybody else wants to read them. It is more about existing in the way we believe to exist. If in that process other people become interested in our ideas and practices, we can talk about it and we can share the knowledge but it is not about convincing anyone about anything.

#### FOR ME IT IS ABOUT THE AUTONOMY OF THE SPACES.

*malaboca: Sara you made a point in saying that the state or the municipality stays outside of the squat. Then again there is the moment of eviction, which shows that the state and its institutions are able to violently intrude and destroy these places. So one argument of those who rent is to say that paying rent and having a legal status is guaranteeing a continuous political work. What do you think about his argument?*

Sara: Squatting is a way of struggle. If you want to have a stable project, you can rent. For example Magdalena, an anarchist place, which has a huge archive, needs a legal guarantee – so they decided to rent. But the problem for me is: If you are within the squatting movement and its discourse and you start to negotiate you are changing the idea of squatting.

Rok: The squatting movement has this slogan; squatting is not the goal, it is the tool. Our goal of squatting is not simply to have a place. It follows a political understanding on how these places should be provided and organized – not by asking but by taking what should be ours.

*malaboca: Could you elaborate more on the longterm strategy. How can these moments of squatting evolve in the long run into a broader movement, which could create a situation in which private property or patriarchy would be abolished?*

<sup>5</sup> Squats ist die englische Bezeichnung für besetzte Räume und wird in verschiedenen Sprachen umgangssprachlich für deren Bezeichnung verwendet.





# »Our style of politics: out of the ghetto, with different people, very open and very democratic.«

## PATIO MARAVILLAS AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS.

*malaboca: Can you describe, what Patio Maravillas is about, how you started before 15M and how it's going right now?*

Lucia: Patio Maravillas is a squatted social center that was started in 2007 in downtown Madrid by 15 to 20 people from different social movements. Some of us came from the squatting movements, others from the students movements, others were Christians and some from ecologist movements.

After the eviction of the important social center Laboratorio there were no social centers of that kind in Madrid for around five years. So we sat together and decided to open a social center in downtown Madrid, which focused its activities not just on the neighborhood but on the whole city. We wanted to be a metropolitan center.

We also wanted to change some of the „traditional“ characteristics of a squatted social center. First of all the idea, that a squatted social center is just infrastructure for movements. We wanted to add something to that. So, of course, Patio is a place all movements can use, but we also do politics from here - we want to be a political entity and act politically as a collective. We also want to break with the stereotypes of punks or squatters as young people doing concerts, taking drugs and encapsulating in their ghetto...On the contrary, we opened the social center to the whole city.

And from the beginning we declared, that our objective was to negotiate with the city hall about a place where we could stay without squatting. So from the beginning we said: We are a squat. We use squatting as a tool to point out the speculation and gentrification in downtown Madrid. But: Squatting is not our goal. Our objective is a political process, is a political project. This would be better off in a place, where we are not in threat of an eviction all the time. So this is what makes the project a bit different from others.

Currently, after three evictions, we are space-less for the first time in our history. Our last eviction was this August. So now we are negotiating with city hall to get a public space.

*malaboca: How is your collective composed? Is it a goal to include people who formerly weren't politically active?*

Lucia: The organization of Patio is pretty complex. Of course what we want is that anyone who wants to take part in the work of the collective can come to the assembly and be part of the decision making process. But, we have some buts. To do that you have to be part of a collective or be working on the space on a daily basis and we have to see that. So no one can just come once and say what they want – no, you have to be part of the daily work of the place. All the people who are part of the assembly, which are around 60 to 70 people, are part of all those collectives I just mentioned.

You could also be part of one of our different working groups – legal group, now we have a negotiation group, communication group, welcoming group, gender group.

We also have an assembly for the collectives that only want to use the Patio but do not want to get involved in the political process. There are different levels of involvement but you have to come to one of those assemblies.

If you just want to use the space as a group you have to do the bar, clean your space, come to the monthly cleaning days, and participate in the assembly. Yesterday we had one. There were about 100 people of 61 collectives in the assembly.

Apart from that we pay the work of four people: Two are in charge of the coordination of the place and they deal with the schedule of the rooms, answering mails, ordering beer and so on. Another person is working in the book store. And someone from the neighborhood, a formerly homeless person, is working in the community garden.

But yeah, it is a very complex structure, in which it is not easy to get involved and empowered. Last year we tried to deal with that, since our collective is not very young. We are all in our thirties. We managed to get around twenty younger people involved by closely working together with the youth initiative. But it is hard. We are a project with strong commitment and important decisions being taken. So it is not always easy to participate. We realize that.

## PATIO MARAVILLAS BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER 15M.

*malaboca: Patio Maravillas started before 15M. Please tell us more about the initiating idea and how it changed through the occupation of the square in 2011?*

Lucia: There were some projects, that helped to make 15M happen. I think Patio Maravillas was one of them. We did not know it back then, but our style of politics – out of the ghetto, with different people, very open and very democratic in a radical way – it helped 15M to evolve.

Before 15M, Patio worked on youth precarity. Juventud sin futuro, which was one of the main collectives that started 15M, started working in Patio. That affected us a lot. Other important topics were migration and social rights. The work on social rights in the oficinas de derechos sociales – the offices of social rights – was very influential for many people, who later on joined the Plataforma por les Afectados de la Hipoteca (PAH). So now with some distance, I think that there were a lot of things in Patio – not just in here but in other places around the city and in a lot of places all over Spain – that finally led to 15M.

When 15M started we closed the social center for three months and went to the square – not as the collective, but as citizens. We didn't want to be an organized entity in a disorganized space. We thought that that would put too much pressure on the square. So we participated in some of the commissions of the square.

After the end of the camp, we opened the social center again. For almost one year it was filled by the commissions and the work of the 15M. For a year and a half Patio was the infrastructure for the movement – the place was open for everything. It was as if the 15M movement went through the Patio Maravillas and transformed it – but in a very nice way. We felt as part of the movement and the movement felt that Patio Maravillas as a collective was part of the movement.

After that, when this whole new movement towards and into the institutions started, we as the collective of Patio partici-

pated very actively in Ganemos, which is one of the parts of Ahora Madrid<sup>1</sup>. So in the last year we have been focused mainly on Ganemos and PAH.

*malaboca: Place and topic of your political work is the city. What do you mean, when you refer to "the city"?*

Lucia: I mean the city that we are trying to build. The movements that are trying to change the city. Those are the ones that we are trying to push and to reinforce. The collective against the ley mordaza<sup>2</sup>, the PAH, Ganemos, the mercados sociales – who work in the area of social economy and are trying to create cooperatives to generate alternatives for young people who don't have a job. All of us together we are creating a different city, an alternative Madrid. This alternative is now much more visible, since we have a different mayor and a different city hall, but this other city, this different Madrid; it was already there before that.

*malaboca: How does a metropolitan center in an already gentrified area of downtown Madrid work on a daily bases? Are you actively involved with the neighborhood?*

Lucia: Malasaña<sup>3</sup> was always an underground culture scene neighborhood. In the last decade it was intensively gentrified. Most of the people now living here are middle and high class young liberal professionals. But there are also different communities of migrants and many old, rather poor people. So we should not think that this is already a totally gentrified place. There are different cities in the same city.

But we ask ourselves the question: „Is Patio Maravillas gentrifying the neighborhood?“ And in a way yes, of course. We are attracting young, educated people. We have an open bar with concerts and cultural events, which are not focused on the people that used to live here.

Our work with neighbors is not our main focus. We were part of the strong neighborhood assemblies after 15M. Together we squatted an empty bloc and installed a community garden. Now this place is organized by the assembly in cooperation with Patio. Currently we are negotiating with the city hall, since the bloc is theirs. But we are pretty sure it soon will be ours.

## NEGOTIATIONS AND THE NEW GOVERNMENT.

*malaboca: As you describe Patio Maravillas, it has a very important position within the movements of Madrid. So I guess there are some critics within the movements as well.*

<sup>1</sup> Leftist coalition of parties and political association, at the moment in power of Madrid's city hall.

<sup>2</sup> New law, in charge since 2013, limiting the freedom of expression and freedom of assembly

<sup>3</sup> District in the center of Madrid

Lucia: We are the reformists. We have always been the reformists and we are happy with it.

*malaboca: Why are you happy with it?*

Lucia: It is a stereotype that doesn't mean anything. In our eight years of practice we showed that we can sometimes act very radical and other times very reformist and sometimes a mix of both. We act whatever our objective asks us to be. Of course within the limit of our ideological spectrum. But Patio – one of the things I like to say – is not ideological.

We want to change the city, fight for the rights of the citizens, fight for their right to self-manage their spaces. So our objectives are very radical. But if we have to sit down with the mayor, we will do so to explain our point.

The people composing Patio are ideologically very diverse. You can find people calling themselves anarchists, communists or squatters next to those that don't like squatting, because they respect private property. This diversity is the added value of this project. So we are reformists, whatever. Who cares, it doesn't mean anything.

*malaboca: But let's focus on the issue of negotiating. Do you see a danger in the current situation, where on the one side you have a strong(er) squatting movement, with a lot of social centers created after 15M, and on the other side you have the new situation of negotiations, which could weaken this movement...*

Lucia: Let's make a difference between squatting movement and a social center movement – it is not the same. A social center doesn't need to be squatted to be strong or independent.

*malaboca: Well but the point of this critique is that if some social centers that are squatted right now, try to get legalized in the future, it could be used as an argument against occupied spaces in general ...*

Lucia: First of all, we are not trying to get legalized. A political practice can not be legalized. Squatting is illegal, but it is a tool. It is not your political practice as a whole. You can win a space and in that fight against the institution you can win this little or this big. So that is what we should be talking about. How much autonomy can social centers win in the

I am pretty sure that with the new mayor squatters are not going to be more prosecuted than they were before. Come on, worse than we have been? That is not going to happen. So this is a perfect moment for people that want to squat to squat. For people that want to squat and negotiate to negotiate.

*malaboca: The last eviction of Patio Maravillas was in June, so after the election of the new government, right?*

Lucia: Yeah, it was two days before official inauguration. It was the last thing the former mayor did, the last order that the PP, the Partido Popular, did in the city was to evict us. And then there was the eviction in August, which was under the new government.

*malaboca: So how is your relationship with the new government?*

Lucia: The relation with the new government is that they can not to anything about a legal process. It is not the governments that evicts social centers or squatted houses in Spain, it is the court. And that can not be stopped by the city hall – no way. What they can do, is to offer alternatives. Governments can not stop evictions. It is a legal process and there is the independence of powers.

*malaboca: So what do you hope for? Do you see a window of opportunity?*

Lucia: We think that we have a historical possibility to change Madrid. We are in a very good position and hope to be able to cooperate with this new government. We keep on doing our politics in an autonomous way. That is untouchable. Even if we receive a place by the city hall, the mayor won't be able to say a thing about what we do in that place. That is the bottom line.

Apart from that Patio Maravillas is also working on rights to the city strategies, where we will cooperate with the city hall. Right now in Madrid each district has to choose nine people to be part of the government of their district. Patio is placing two candidates in the primaries for the district of downtown Madrid. We want to be a part of that. We want to cooperate.

Of course there is a lot of risk to it. That they don't do what they said they will, that they can't do it, that they change, that the socialist party takes over the government. Everything can turn to a nightmare from today to tomorrow. But it is a risk that we have to take.

HOW TO CHANGE MADRID.

*malaboca: In this situation you just described. What is the best thing to achieve for social movements right now?*

Lucia: What is important to say about the processes in Barce-

lona and Madrid is that the people that won the election - Ahora Madrid and Barcelona en Comú<sup>4</sup> - include many people from the movements. So we have a specific weight in those governments against *Podemos*, which we are fighting internally. Ahora and en Comú come from the movements, so we feel as part of the governments. In the past the city hall did politics and we did contra politics. We always went against the power. Now we have to act together on a local basis.

On the institutional level we have to try is to decentralize the government of the city into the neighborhood. To create platforms of participation. So that the politics of the city are decided by all of us and are done by all of us. Not only by the city hall. There needs to be a change of the concepts of how we do politics.

For now, we have to define what is the governments responsibility and what is our responsibility as the movements. Stopping evictions against the national police is our tool, that is what we will do. But you will not send the local police. And you will try to help us to negotiate with the banks. And you are going to sit down and try to find empty houses of banks and put it into our dispositions. But we are going to be the ones to choose the families moving into these flats, because we are the ones dealing with the families.

So those are the negotiations that we have to do, which is very interesting, it is incredible, it is wonderful.

*malaboca: Now that we are talking about visions what is your personal vision? What would be this other city, this other Madrid that you talked about before?*

Lucia: Well, on one side what we have to do is change the institutions so there is a real democracy in the city and citizens can participate. Let's say, we need a new contract between institutions and citizens about how to decide. This has to be in a radically democratic way.

On the other side we have to be able to involve a lot more people. This party won an election but we are still very little as movements. So we have to raise the spirit of participation and the sense of the city as something that is yours.

We also have to deal with the issue of social rights. The crises massively affected the housing, health and education. So there is a lot of politics that do not happen on the local but on the national level. But even on the national level the political process has to go bottom up.

Now, the movements have to believe in this process and have to get involved. I don't want them to hope or have faith in it. Just try to give it a little bit of work. Open up a little bit. Listen to it. Be radical. Criticize, if you have to criticize but also cooperate, if you have to cooperate. Create a different city, a city

where rights are guaranteed, where we can create a more social economy. To do that we need all of the city behind it.

For all that to happen, Patio, PAH, La Morada, all these collectives have to be in cooperation and keep working on their projects. This change is happening, because we have been doing these projects. So we have to keep doing them. We cannot leave all our projects to work for the city hall. We have to keep working in our own projects to reinforce the grassroots networks.

## A POLITICAL PRACTICE CAN NOT BE LEGALIZED.

face of the institution, with these institutions that we have now in Madrid.

Those not negotiating are going to be in the same position as they always have been – they will squat, get evicted and squat again. As they are doing it now. Nothing is going to get worse, because it is a legal process. It is not a political issue.

<sup>4</sup> Regional coalition of leftist parties and associations in Barcelona



»It is literally a Base, translating it, it has the sense of a foundation on which it is possible to build, but also in the sense of a military basis.«

INTRO.  
LA BASE, IDEAS AND STRUCTURES.

*malaboca: So, please tell us, what do you do in La Base?*

Marco: First, I'd like to talk about the ideas that stand behind *La base*. The main idea of *La base* is to build up a sustainable autonomous force in the neighborhood that aligns with other autonomous forces in order to prepare for the insurrection, for a revolutionary moment. That's what our heart beats for. But in itself, the idea of *La base* is rather processual. We thought about bringing together three strategic dimensions, that are always somehow present in a revolutionary project, in one place.

The first dimension is the material one, such as machines, places of stability, or practical knowledge. The second dimension is located rather on a spiritual level; it's about things like collectivity, theory, or the imaginary. The third one is the military dimension, it's the dimension of confrontation and political struggle.

So, at the beginning, we recognized that we didn't have control over the material dimension, which enables the development of collectivity and struggle. So, we started carrying out construction work on this place. Amongst other things, we built a kitchen and a workshop.

*La base* is located in El Poble Sec. That's an old working class neighborhood in Barcelona, which is relatively central, but where it's still possible to live. The idea of a structure that is open towards the neighborhood came up during the „peak“ of the crisis, the evictions and occupations. Here, we saw the possibility of creating a collective struggle.

THE IDEA BEHIND IT IS TO HAVE CONTROL OVER OUR OWN TOOLS, OUR OWN PRODUCTIVE SPACE

ATENEO DE OFICIOS.

*malaboca: Could you further elaborate on which structures you organize in La Base?*

Bruno: I think, the Ateneo de Oficios, that's some kind of craft or artisanry association here in the workshops, is very important for our whole project, which is why we want to further fit it out. The Ateneo de Oficios came into being after the idea came up together with the people who did the construction work here.

The idea behind it is to have control over our own tools, our own productive space, where we can, unlike in the normal labor market, learn and work in different ways. So, the workshops are there for learning, growing, and maintaining this place. But there is also, let's say, the side of solidarity. It's about supporting people from our neighborhood who only have few or no money to realize their projects. So sometimes we produce things at an especially low price, or even for free. The Ateneo de Oficios is also supposed to become some kind of an apprenticing place; this could enable people to get trained and contribute to the emergence of other projects and things in an autonomous way, so people can do this stuff on their own. We keep on dealing with that issue. For one and a half year, we've been having this workshop, and we are searching for new forms and paths. It's a project that needs plenty of time to mature and to become exactly what we envisage. A particular difficulty is to harmonize the different contradictions that come up, I mean, although the capitalist mode of production is unjust, it is also efficient. Hence, it is difficult to accomplish the same things in a fair way. We are looking for a form, in which our life is not taken up in labor, and in which it should be possible to do the things we want for free. Nevertheless, we want to make money for a living

and our collective housekeeping. As a result, we often give our labor force for free.

Carlos: Such workshops can be found in other parts of Barcelona as well. For instance, there are wood workshops, a car and motorcycle workshop, and a workshop for energy infrastructure. There are also some sort of vocational schools to be created at other places. In Gracia, another district in the North of Barcelona, they are just starting. There, they rather move into the direction of craft such as shoemaking. This process of technical learning and being able to work in a different way, this is part of this movement.

Marco: Yes, we thereby get back to gaining knowledge about how to make things on our own. So that we do not have to go to shops or companies anymore but to our comrades.

Carlos: This is where the idea of the fondo comun, that is collective housekeeping, comes from. One part of the collective money, which is made with the bar, with the kitchen, or with the construction works, as well as a monthly dues of 10 euros by all the 180 members, goes into that collective cash box. With all this money, we pay the rent for this and another space. What is done with the rest of this collected money – the fondo comun – is decided collectively, for example during the large assemblies that are carried out twice a year. During these assemblies, both strategic decisions and decisions about the use of the money will be made. Last year, for instance, one part of the money was put into the Ateneo de Oficios, which has rented a new location.

SINDICATO DE BARRIO.  
THE RELATION TO THE QUARTER.

*malaboca: You said that La Base is different from the squats that have existed before, arguing that the previous squats were basically for young people, rather subcultural, and less open to the rest of the neighborhood. So, you said you wanted to change something, what exactly? And how do you attempt to include the neighborhood?*

Marco: OK, many people who are active in *La base* live in squats. So, it's not like that we disappear from the squats. But some of us who are active here wanted some kind of change in place and form. In contrast to squats and occupied social centers, this place is legal. We rent this place and this entails some kind of security. The fact that this center is not occupied does not mean that we break with the squatting movement. But it enables us to channel much energy into this project and establish a structure that might endure for ten or twenty years to come. It is literally a Base, translating it, it has the sense of a foundation on which it is possible to build, but also in the sense of a military basis. This stability and the possibility to put much work into this project also makes it possible to arrange things differently, so that this place can have a more friendly effect on the neighborhood. I mean, it's a question of strategy.

People from different occupied social centers and numerous collectives come to us in order to meet and discuss. But as I think, the people in the neighborhood know *La base* as well. So, *La base* is well-known not only for those who are part of the movement. For this we participated for example at the street festivals of this neighborhood. People came by in order to join in some activities we offered, such as the races with those small carts which we built in our workshop. But all in all at this point we still have lots of work to do. However, there is this group called Sindicato de Barrio, that is to say the neighborhood defense committee or the neighborhood syndicate which is active in *La base*. With this group, we want to intervene politically in the problems of the

THE FACT THAT THERE IS BARCELONA EN COMÚ CAN BE HELPFUL FOR US IN ORDER TO APPROPRIATE AS MANY STRUCTURES AS POSSIBLE... THEN THEY WILL GO THEIR WAY AND WE WILL GO OURS.

quarter – something that still confronts us with great difficulties. It's not easy to find a space where we can come together with the most precarious people of the quarter or the migrant communities. As I said we are still at the beginning, but to advance on this topic there are two major threads this group wants to work on.

The first one will be the topics of housing, that is, the topic of evictions and occupations. The other one will be the comite tecnico, the technical committee. This committee deals with those who have been cut off from the access to gas, electricity or water. It's about the idea of organizing and expanding all this in the form of collective self-defense.

Carlos: However, you can see there is a lot of experimentation. But we've also learned to acknowledge situations in which something goes wrong. Then, we have to start all over again, reconsider, discuss, rearrange. So, there is always something like our imagination, some kind of a plan, but also the given situation.

THE CRISIS, PODEMOS AND THE REVOLUTION?

*malaboca: Given the recent development during the crisis and austerity policies in Greece, Spain, Ireland, Italy etc., the life of many people has changed within a short time period. In the past, people have put trust in the ability of the respective party or union to solve social problems – now they see that those organizations lack that ability. Do these doubts make your work easier? Do people start to look for exactly such alternatives in order to solve their problems?*

Marco: Well, in some cases, yes. The most fitting example is 15M. However, just because the social status of people changes, doesn't mean they suddenly adhere to a revolutionary practice. There's a lot of nostalgia in retrospect to what was



before like a good health system - concerning unemployment, that there should be more work and a government that is able to support you and such things. A lot of people coming to the social center don't necessarily have a revolutionary vision at the back of their mind. Often we tend to think things like 'oh they took my future from me', but what kind of future are we actually talking about?

I do think, as I said before, that the search for alternatives or change has become more of an issue. However, I think there's still a lot to be done, especially on the subject of theory, and

## OUR PROJECT IS NOT TO BUILD UP ISLANDS BUT LOCAL FORCES.

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also concerning practice, in order to transcend this society. Bruno: I agree, that the people have lost faith in certain institutions. But I think there's a technical dimension to governance, in terms of infrastructure, logistics, police or surveillance. And there is a theological dimension of governance, meaning the feeling of safety, that the order protects you, even if it's not doing so in the very moment. I think this feeling has been shattered. With 15M, the crisis and the current situation in Spain and Greece there's been a breakdown of this feeling of security that the order has conveyed until then. The answer *Podemos* and *Syriza* give, is the directest and simplest answer. It's pretending going back to that safety, as I think, you could see in the negotiations between *Syriza* and the ECB. Although the situation remains instable.

Carlos: The other point is, how can you establish a real connection to the people in the neighborhood? And I think that is far more complicated. In moments like these, where there is no social movement you don't know on which side the population stands. It is in those moments when there's a movement, with ideas being part of that, you see where the which side the people really stand. I think in Can Vies it was pretty clear. This was a social center in the neighborhood of Sans, evicted in 2014. Here people supported a violent form of protest, the defense of a squatted place. That happened because the neighborhood was organized.

Marco: Another aspect is, I think, to recognize how important it is to have a strength and a voice in social movements. The anarchist and autonomous sphere realized that they had problems in this aspect. Partly because of their way of organizing after the 70's that was rather isolated from the population. Following this the Federacion Anarquista de Catalunya (FAC), in Madrid apoyo mutuo as well as nation-wide anarchist Organizations were formed. We are considering to become part of Embat, an anarchist network in Catalonia. I think there's still a lot to do.

*malaboca: You mentioned Syriza and Podemos. What do you think of the new regional governments of Barcelona, Barcelona en comú? Or even a possible new federal government? Do these political parties contribute to social movements or rather harm them?*

Marco: There's a book by Raul Zibechi „Descolonizar la Rebeldia“ (Decolonizing the Rebellion) dealing with South America. The debate there is much further along. Zibechi shows, that with the new left governments in South America new modes of repression and dominance are developing. It is the implementation of new form of neoliberalism. The government is formed by academics and they may install social programs but loose sight of fundamental economic development.

They proclaim that the economic development is moving toward „the good life“, but the economic development they talk about is capitalism. This is a shift within neoliberalism – not breaking with capitalism. We don't know yet what's going to happen with *Podemos* or *Syriza*, since there has not yet been a change towards a new form of capitalist governance. However it is likely to happen. At the end it's the political left that forms new modes of ruling and a re-shaping of capitalism in times of changes. You can take an exemplary look at the role of the communist party in the 70's in Italy or the socialist party here. I think that in the interval between the rising of *Podemos* or *Barcelona en comú* and the development of a possible and therefore new mode of governance and ruling, there could be a point, with important strategic relevance for us. It's the moment where there's a break from the neoliberal attack, and the pressure to act due to the acute crisis decreases, that develops a certain openness.

I think the fact that there is *Barcelona en comú* can be helpful for us in order to appropriate as many structures as possible, for example open spaces, in order to gain some time to reflect and contemplate. Then they will go their way and we will go ours.

Bruno: We'll have to see to what power they eventually rise. I mean *Barcelona en comú* having taking over the city government, isn't that much. I think that the party politics are also about playing with the hope of the people. People that otherwise would potentially believe in a destruction and a rebuilding - in new forms of existence - relapse into nostalgia. From that point it's just about restoration, a more just and fair capitalism. There's again a perspective for stability and good work. However this is, especially from a global perspective, impossible. I think that it's still to be seen if this is useful for the current social movements, or the revolutionary movements that might emerge. It's still to be seen if there's really going to be a moment of peace in which we can build. So far I don't see that - they are unlikely to restructure the whole institutions and won't disband for example the police or the prisons. They're not revolutionaries, they are reformists. If anything.

## I BET... STRATEGIC DISCUSSIONS.

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malaboca: In contrast to revolutionary areas as parts of Kurdistan or Chiapas the state is quite present in cities like Barcelona, Athens or Frankfurt. So if you say, the upcoming new parties will not renunciate capitalism, but they will lead to a new form of domination and keep social movements down, how do you think is a transformation of society through the

organizing of autonomous islands possible? I mean, a strong state will not let itself be hollowed out by autonomous spaces. So I do not really see another opportunity as war to burst the power of the state and I would question if this is really an option.

Marco: Well yes, but Chiapas or Kurdistan are also the result of civil war.

Bruno: In my opinion our project is not to build up islands but local forces. To constitute a local force is something different as creating an island. We are connected to other neighborhoods in Barcelona but also with people outside from Spain, form for example France oder Germany.

I think the revolutionary strategy has a lot to do with the question in what direction the current situation is developing, and which strategy you can rely on. I mean, in the end it's always a bet. Some of us think that capitalism will not move into the direction of stability, but will instead create a higher degree of instability. And all those new parties will not be able to stabilize capitalism. And when something is going to happen, it is our interest to be strong in the respective situation, both locally and in connection with other places. You neither make the insurrection, nor do you set it in motion. The insurrection happens. I mean, let's look at the developments in Tunisia or Egypt. Both Tunisia and Egypt appeared to be the most stable countries in North Africa. But when the insurrection comes, it's decisive what forces are existent. So, the question is: When the government is overthrown, what are the organized forces? In Egypt, those forces were the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. It show us that we have to convert us into organized forces.

Carlos: I agree, I think we aren't ready to take the offensive, nor do I think that this is worth striving for in the present situation. There's no mentality for an armed struggle. Most of them who are active in social movements today are not those who have nothing to lose. Unlike in past times, such as during the working class struggles in Spain in the 1920s, or here in Barcelona. At least it seemed that they didn't have anything to lose, and incredible courage. Looking back to the 1920s, it was clear that there wouldn't be any future in this State. Especially in those regions like here in Barcelona, where the anarchist movement became stronger a somehow simple thought functioned: Nothing works and nothing will work in this State, which is why we have to get rid of it. And especially people from the rural regions – those who still had some kind of autonomy, and who then came to the city and were confronted with this plight and repression – were open to that formula: I am suppressed, hence I have to destroy what suppresses me.

Marco: Yes of course, we aren't in the 20s or 70s anymore. But when something is happening, then the mentality of the people also changes. When it starts with being shot in the street, then it leads to different actions. It's nothing that is in your blood or so. Instead, you actions are based on what the situation demands.

Carlos: Ok, yes. But for now we could say our currently we are pursuing a strategy of growth and defensive, no? I think this is a good moment for our structures to grow. In order to, let's say, get more material and infrastructure, and be able to use it in a concrete moment, if needed.

## MAYBE THE WEAPONS HAVE CHANGED FOR OUR SITUATION.

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We are not planning to arm ourself and to go the mountains. I mean, that's why we not begin with putting together weapon arsenals like the CNT, one of the anarcho-syndicalist unions of Spain, back in times. Or in relation to Kurdistan: Yes, those people also fight with arms, the PKK, the communist Kurdish workers party, fights since the 80s and has a well-organized guerrilla in the mountains, that is, a certain military structure. With the EZLN, the armed wing of the Zapatistas, it's quite similar. There is this mentality: everything or nothing. Killing or dying. Here right now, we don't have that kind of mentality.

Marco: Maybe the weapons have changed for our situation. I think they also exist in a different form, such that would enable us to send this „first“ world to hell without spilling much blood. But let's see.



# »The people don't need a flag to follow.«

## FROM THE SQUARE TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

*malaboca: Since 15M, everywhere in Madrid and other cities of Spain, neighborhood-assemblies, community gardens, social centers and other local political projects emerged. Explain to us, along the example of La Morada<sup>1</sup> how this movement evolved from the square into the social centers.*

Hugo: Me and many others, coming from the autonomous movements, for example the Casa Blanca<sup>2</sup> and its peers, were part of the comisión de barrios<sup>3</sup> on the square. After analyzing the current status of the occupation, we all agreed that the only option in that specific moment would be to decentralize the movement.

## IT WAS A CRAZY IDEA THAT SOMEHOW WORKED OUT.

At first the idea wasn't very popular - it was just a crazy thought. The first thing we did was to put up a big poster in the middle of the square, asking people to name and date their neighborhood-assemblies. After a few days over 100 assemblies were named. Shortly after, thousands of people gathered for these assemblies, of which maybe 90% showed up only once or twice, but still the first impression was amazing.

As the movement saw the drive - by movement I mean the people squatting the square - , this idea developed and it was realized that decentralization might be a good idea. But nonetheless it took two more weeks to persuade the people sleeping on the square to actually leave it. Of course, the camp was a powerful symbol and some were determined to stay forever, but in the end most of the people agreed with our idea to leave the square and move into the neighborhoods.

Altogether it was a crazy idea that somehow worked out. Even though we were many different people with diverging opinions in that commission, we all agreed that leaving the place was the only feasible solution. There were no other options since more and more problems in the camp developed and it got impossible to find solutions and have decisions with 500 - 1000 people, who were completely strange to one another. For the movement and its appearance, the camp was very important but at a certain point we had to change something. And history showed we were right.

*malaboca: That sounds very pragmatic. Were there other reasons to leave the square? What were the political ideas?*

Hugo: From the beginning we had this anarchist way of organizing in mind but could not realize it. Some of us thought - and there are many texts written about it - that a continuation of this movement is supposed to have certain characteristics: it should be based on assemblies, its foundation should be the quarters and it should be a network without hierarchies. So we needed a strong network to develop means of coordination. Politically this idea was orientated along the thoughts of the CNT, one of Spain's anarcho-syndicalist unions, or the Zapatistas. And after years of reading, this is what we understood of their idea and what we were able to successfully translate into actual practical work. So the idea was to found small local groups that shared one common ideology: If you want to have a revolution you have to be organized in your quarter with the people who live there.

All sorts of people from the different social movements, foremost from the squats and social centers but also from other leftist groups, went to these assemblies. There was an enormous transfer of knowledge, which was most profitable for those who were organized for the first time in their life apart from traditional structures like unions or political parties.

They started something new - they started to organize with whom they were living together.

## NEW POLITICS. NEW PEOPLE.

*malaboca: This type of organization was already practiced in the Casa Blanca - a social center you were part of - before 15M. Where did your ideas come from and how did they affect your discussions on the square?*

Hugo: From the first day in Casa Blanca we learned from actual experience. We were certain not to give people this „magical master-plan“ on how to change the world, but to believe in their capability to self-determination and to change their own life and society towards the better. And this had to be open to everybody. This is hard when you have a clearly defined aesthetic, a subculture, which you are part of or not and when these forms are structured by preconditions.

For example when you are expected to read certain literature, to talk in a certain manner or bring along tons of free time, which mostly depends on your age and economic situation. So we said to ourselves: This has to be way easier. Our minimum standard was the method of assembly to reach decisions in groups, the will to get together and coordinate with others - along traditional tactics of libertarian movements - and the exclusion of types of oppression like racism, fascism or machismo.

All of this is rather easy to communicate and in medium term should allow everyone to be part of according a movement to their possibilities. The interesting thing was to connect different people in very different societal positions and to realize that there is a common ground and then, based on this collectivity, to define common political goals. Crucial for this to happen is that persons are not defined by being an anarchist, marxist or whatever, but that you can be a political activist because you are a resident of your neighborhood.

*malaboca: Today you are part of the social center La Morada, which developed out of the 15M-protests and the following neighborhood-assembly in Chamberí. Describe your daily work within the project.*

Hugo: On the first glance, La Morada is currently resembling traditional social centers: there are different collectives, there is an assembly of the collectives and different working groups. Indeed, nothing special. The original neighborhood-assembly, where the decision to squat this social center originated, is not directly related to La Morada anymore. But there are many initiatives in the center that began in the political process of 15M. They met during the camp and came together in neighborhood-assemblies where they worked together. Now, there are many different projects all congregating in the center: those focusing more on political activism, some related more to cultural issues.

What changed, is that now everyone in Madrid understands the importance of social centers. When somebody talked about squatting before 15M, you were discredited. The work in the assemblies and in the neighborhood created legitimacy for this kind of political practice - a legitimacy for squats. Now everyone gets that La Morada is an important political project in the quarter. We overcame the former negative connotation of this practice.

*malaboca: Where does this legitimacy come from and why are these new political practices necessary in the first place, e.g. in contrast to already existing political institutions?*

Hugo: They are part of something that could not exist without them. Of course, for some they are legitimated, since their existence presents a radical offense on private property, but the practice is way easier: people understand that they have the right to do things together and that this affects their lives, their neighborhood and the whole society positively.

When people want to get together and develop something collectively, the social centers are the places where this is possible. An example: Short time ago, we had a dance battle in La Morada. It was a battle between the Hip-Hop-class and the Swing-class, which are both meeting here. We organized a huge fiesta with people from the quarter. There was a lot of funny dancing and the diversity, this mixture of people all coming here was amazing. All of this is completely self-organized and revolutionary. Self-organized since there was no money, no profit generated or any support from the outside. Revolutionary because of the people coming here, the new relations and networks that develop during such an occasion. This would never happen in spaces organized by the state. And of course political actions against the state or the municipality and their recent politics would not be organized in these spaces.

## WHEN SOMEBODY TALKED ABOUT SQUATTING BEFORE 15M, YOU WERE DISCREDITED.

Looking at La Morada today, it is a public space and the social centers are the last real public spaces. There are many „public“ spaces that are just a little public in the end. You may enter or use them if you are lucky and abide to certain rules and conditions. This constitutes the difference and the magic around this building: a place with no laws and where the rules made by everybody. This makes these places and the processes within unique.

<sup>1</sup> La Morada, located in Madrid's inner-city district of Chamberí, was born as a social center in September 2012

<sup>2</sup> The social center Casa Blanca, located in the neighborhood of Lavapiés, was evicted after two years in September 2012

<sup>3</sup> engl.: Commission of neighborhoods

## ORGANIZING AROUND PRACTICE.

*malaboca: How are traditional ideologies like anarchism or communism related to this form of politics?*

Hugo: In the projects I am part of they do not play a major role. The people don't need a flag to follow. The moments where this comes out or gains importance are when we talk about practical issues – not in the abstract discussions. For example, when we talk about what to do with the money we earned or how we distribute the productive or reproductive work that keeps the center alive, of course it might help if you have read about Anarchism or Marxism. The question of your flag, your ideological label however, is a question of the past. If people enter our center for the first time, we explain to them how everything works, how to be part of it. If you come, because you are interested in self-organization, support our minimal principles and being part of something common, it doesn't matter if you're an anarchist, marxist, trozkist or whatever. Of course it is important to read and to be informed. But labeling yourself along these discussions because you want to create another society, in my opinion, is a mistake.

*malaboca: In past times ideology was something holding people together within a project or organization. If this changed, what is closing the ranks today?*

Hugo: The common practice is holding the people together. If people understand that they can change things as a collective and others think we have to live in competition with one another, this is – in abstract terms – a discussion between Anarchism and Liberalism or Communism and Liberalism. Concerning these ideas it is important to stay informed and educate yourselves, but this works the best through common practice. A well-going assembly solving problems by direct actions, reaching practical goals and approaching many people through that is a very important aspect for our political work. It sounds simple but it describes our experience here in Madrid: with a common practice within a collective we achieve a lot more than by traditional propaganda. And I was distributing anarchist and marxist pamphlets over years. People may have been reading them, maybe they were interested in them, but that only resulted in only a small amount of them actually taking part in struggles. The idea of Communism offers the opportunity for real participation, and in that process people change their way of thinking. Personally, I see the social centers mainly as practicing schools, as places where things that didn't exist before are developing. Neighborhood-assemblies are one of these new things. And out of that, we developed the social centers, which have not been there before as well. Here we have ideologies that you could find anywhere else – an anti-capitalist ideology, a communitarian ideology, a strong assembly-focused ideology. But the most important thing is that all of these come together here, which wasn't happening before. In the past we had frontiers and disputes between these different ideas. Now the most important thing is to find out what our com-

mon interest is and to fight for that. No one is responsible for their own socialization or class-background. For many different reasons people were thinking it is enough to vote every four years, even if that doesn't change anything – 95% of the society thinks like that. Therefore we want to work with the 95% of the society and not with the 1% of politicized academics. It is challenging, often very slow and with minor successes. But when everyone is contributing to the collective what he or she can bring, the collective can become very strong. And if the collective is strong, things can be changed.

*malaboca: What effects do the social centers have on their quarter?*

Hugo: There are some activities having no effect on the quarter. Many groups meet in the center and prepare activities focused on somewhere else. But cultural initiatives for example are very effective in reviving the cultural live of the area. And this as well is a sort of neighborhood-politics, since they offer cultural activities apart from the capitalist logic. Also they are very interesting for many people, since they open up space for a new type of socialization. Without these spaces it would be way harder to develop these new kind of relations. But these new kinds of relation then become necessary for different types of projects.

Other initiatives have a more direct effect on the quarter. For example the despensas solidarias<sup>4</sup>, which are projects existing in many parts of Madrid. They support thousands of people, who are struggling to provide for their daily live. There are many projects trying to offer this basic support in a self-organized way. They calculate the amount needed, define how the work is distributed and the conditions for those using the service. You receive support but you also have to take actively part in the work of the collective. These contacts create the space for an alternative socialization, where people learn about mutual support and solidarity.

Another example: Some girls created a space within a social center during a very big street-festival here in Madrid. There you could get help in case of a sexist aggressions. They were very visible during the festival and could be approached around the clock. Both projects are examples for initiatives with a clear impact on the neighborhood. But it would be a lie to say that it always goes like this. There are many activities you go to, do your stuff, but are not really in contact with the quarter. The cases, where you create an effect, are those where you relate to actual problems of the quarter. There are actual things, actual persons and actual problems. Many people here live under bad conditions and their way of thinking was liberal or capitalist-egoistic: If I am OK, everything is fine. They voted for the right. But this way of thinking changes with certain experiences you make. And the social centers make this change possible.

## AGAINST HISTORICAL POWERLESSNESS.

*malaboca: Why did the movement chose this form in particular? Why these new ways and not the traditional principle of organizing, like political parties or unions?*

Hugo: Because of the structural limitations of these traditional organizations and movements. Historically these movements were destroyed due to the civil war and following dictatorship. Then in the seventies, there was an agreement between the franquist and the new so-called parties of the "left"<sup>5</sup>. Together with this agreement a new type of union evolved, which wasn't oriented along class-lines anymore. The struggles about distribution and revolutionary aspirations, which were strong in the resistance against the dictatorship, were demobilized. So in the case of Madrid – in other regions a very different story will be told – politically there was nothing before 15M. The Izquierda Unida (IU), a coalition of left and radical left parties, was irrelevant on all levels. The major unions took the workers money and in the end only negotiated the same old bad conditions for them. And all of those, who weren't related to PSOE<sup>6</sup>, IU or the unions, represented such a small minority completely detached from the reality of most of the people. In the 70s, 80s and 90s we had Marxist groups with sometimes brilliant analyses but generally not so brilliant practices.

Then, with examples and experiences from Germany and Italy in mind, an autonomous movement focusing on the actual political practice developed. During 15M these structures then massively cooperated with other groups in different struggles. Alternative networks developed and the social centers became the places of networking. If an alternative union wants to get in contact with a small revolutionary, marginalized group, a neighborhood-collective or a small ecology-group, the social center is the place to go to. There, new subjects, networks, common ideas and projects can develop. With 15M thousands of people, who were involved in genius but very small projects, which had no effect on society, came together in their quarters in neighborhood-assemblies or social centers and joined forces. This created an enormous potential. And of course, there is a difference if your group is called a funny name or neighborhood-assembly XY. With the new name people quickly knew what you were talking about and wanted to be a part of it. There are many revolutionary assemblies, others aren't so much revolutionary and the social composition is always different, but in general they created new and collective political dispositions.

This then has effects on the traditional organization of the left. If you talk to any organization that existed before 15M, be it a political party, a union or a small radical group, they

all adapted a part of this new political dispositive and discourse. The discourse of the new social movements.

Many people felt politically powerless after the experiences of the dictatorship and the following transition. One of our main discussions within the social centers is to tell people again and again, that this isn't just „their“ project, but „our“ project, that not just „they“ are doing things, but „we“ are doing them. And this is a complicated thing, since we live in a society of delegation. The union solves my problems, the parties rule for me, the police takes care of how we live together. To change this perspective into one, where you are the politically active subject and change things together with others, is a hard thing to do. Books can help along this way, but first of all it is a common practice, the actual life and experience, which changes peoples mind.

## GOVERNING BY OBEYING.

*malaboca: This form of politics is quite locally and regionally focused. Will that be enough if your actual demand is the transformation of the society as a whole?*

Hugo: This is a difficult, but also very pragmatic question in Spain. I think the only way is a combination of this politics of self-administration and the classic politics of representation, e.g. with a party like Podemos or at least the democratic ideal, that Podemos embodied in the beginning, that follows the Zapatista ideal of mandar obedeciendo<sup>7</sup> and is combinable with modern methods of participation. Nevertheless, it is clear that the neighborhood assemblies and the social centers have an incredible impact on the local level. However, there just was and is not enough time to build a long-term federation of Madrid's neighborhoods. The task is nearly impossible: a general assembly in which hundreds of different neighborhoods are represented, that want to discuss over 150 different topics, and then have to get feedback from their local assemblies, is just not viable. Therefore we need to find a different mode to find the answer to the big questions, because in the end we all want to share the wealth with each other and not the misery.

But at the moment this wealth belongs especially to the capitalists. Therefore I think at this point we need to fall back on classic methods of politics and while doing so still don't forget that it concerns merely delegates. They are people, that are being elected to fulfill a task. When this is done, it will be rotating again. This way we minimize the power one individual has. I don't want a Chavez, that solves everything for me and sits on his chair for years. Latin America showed us that there are certain things, that we can solve as social movements. Whereas other things in the current situation have to be solved with mechanisms, that arose from the bourgeois

<sup>4</sup> engl.: food-banks

<sup>5</sup> This agreement from 1977 is know as the Pactos de la Moncloa

<sup>6</sup> Partido Socialista Obrero Espana – Spanish Socialist Workers Party

system. We need to modify and adapt them to the circumstances, but in the current state there is simply no other option in certain questions. There are children starving in Spain. When I get out of my house in the morning, often the first thing I see are five or six people searching for food in the trash. This is a social emergency – how can you change this? First of all with social programs to spare these people the search in the trash. But you reach this by building the government of this city. This is not the solution of the problem, but the way to get a handle on the problems created by this society in the first place. When the social movements are not strong enough they will disappear quickly. What remains, is the bitter taste and we have to start all over again. Therefore we need a mixture of 90% social movements and, for a limited time, 10% institutional politics to open doors for other developments.

*malaboca: Can new parties like Podemos or regional election alliances like Ahora Madrid help with that?*

Hugo: Yes, this actually was their initial idea. Many people got involved in Ahora Madrid instead of *Podemos* because it is much easier to achieve actual success on a local level. But

However, all this can only work out when these forms of representation are pressurized by a political basis. Like *Syriza* in Greece, *Podemos* could govern here. But in order for this policy to be successful, it requires the political pressure of the street to check that the representatives do what they have promised. Only if the people get organized, they will be able to build this pressure and not get fooled. Our task is to make sure that they don't forget what they got elected for: to enable more and more collective self-administration by the people, in order for a collective subject to develop itself.

ELECTIONS ARE NOT THE PRIMARY PLACE OF POLITICS

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THEREFORE WE NEED A MIXTURE OF 90% SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND, FOR A LIMITED TIME, 10% INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS TO OPEN DOORS FOR OTHER DEVELOPMENTS.

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now it is about national elections. This is about marketing, about selling yourself, the whole fuss – that's a different story. But there are many people participating in Ahora Madrid while being part of the social movement as well. And there are many things they do, which are very interesting, e.g. in regard to the public services support, debt audit, the recognition of squatted social centers or the removal of fascist and franquist memorials. Also there are plans on how to prevent evictions. Nevertheless, still the most important thing for me is to work from the base. *Podemos* is something like a harvest, the result of a process lasting for years in which the society said: the Izquierda Unida, the classic unions, the form of representation we have, don't get us anywhere. So we are doing something new which symbolizes *15M* and then, *Podemos* evolves from this. But the actual work is on the basis, the work in social movements. Elections are not the primary place of politics, even if it is good to vote for good ideas. In this sense, *Podemos* is at the moment the only tool, which gives us the possibility of structural change concerning national legislation and the economic circumstances. This tool is necessary since many things can be achieved on a local level but others only work on a national level because many things are regulated by national legislation.

