Saila–Maria Saaristo

LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

Transgressive Participation: Housing Struggles, Occupations and Evictions in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area

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ABSTRACT

A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent, members of the audience,

One day in 2018, I was in one of the council housing estates in Lisbon, together with activists from the Habita and Stop Despejos collectives, demanding that the eviction of Tita and her children should be stopped. Three months earlier, Tita had decided to occupy an apartment that she had identified as vacant in one of the social housing blocks. Since 2017, I had participated in the actions of a social movement organisation, Habita, which fights for the right to housing in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. At Habita's open-door sessions, I had met many families like Tita's, who had reached the conclusion that their only viable housing alternative was to occupy one of the abandoned apartments in the social housing estates. I was personally struck by the high number of occupations, and by the fact that single mothers constituted a clear majority of these occupiers.

These constatations led to a process of one-and-a-half years of field work, with the primary objective of trying to understand the reasons for and consequences of occupations, analysing them as an experience pertaining to the everyday sphere of housing exclusions. The common thread that runs through the whole thesis is the exploration of diverse kinds of actions that seek to promote social change and transformation in terms of challenging and reducing inequalities, dispossessions, and social exclusion. I sought to understand why so many women were occupying and why they could not access housing through other means. I also studied the management of council housing estates, the practices of occupiers—meaning, how do they proceed when they wish to occupy a house—as well as the role of social movement activists in defending the occupiers' right to housing.

The data analysed in my dissertation (Saaristo 2022) were collected from December 2017 to April 2019 through a process of multi-sited and activist ethnographic fieldwork. I call

the process multi-sited because, in contrast to a traditional ethnographic case study that focuses on one selected geographical area, I followed people, connections, associations, and relationships across space, across the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. On the other hand, I consider the study 'activist' because the whole research process was aligned with Habita's struggle: it was decisive in defining the main focus of the research; it was through Habita that I first established contacts with occupiers; and, throughout the research process, I participated in Habita's actions as one of its members, debating with the other members both the theoretical and practical questions related to the struggle for the right to housing in Lisbon. In addition to fieldwork notes, the core of my data consists of life history interviews conducted with occupiers; interviews with local politicians and municipal employees responsible for social housing policies or for managing social housing; and interviews with activists and nongovernmental organisation (NGO) workers engaged with housing questions.

Before moving on to discuss the results of my study, I contextualise the research for those not familiar with the Portuguese housing situation. Examining housing exclusions and their contestations gains relevance in the current global context, in which homelessness is growing and evictions are increasing in number. Housing exclusions are quickly becoming an important factor causing poverty. The housing struggles in Portugal, as in so many other cities, are inseparable from the increasing financialisation of the Portuguese economy and the Portuguese housing sector. In this respect, Portugal has been in line with the global tendencies of recent years, with housing policies currently based on the creation of stronger and more comprehensive market-based housing finance models, and on the commodification of housing, including the

use of housing as an investment asset within a globalised financial market (Rolnik 2013; 2019). This has resulted in rising rental and real-estate prices and the constant increase in the expenditure of Portuguese families on housing since 1980s. Considering the inability of states to provide or guarantee adequate housing for all, the various improvised tactics through which the urban poor and the 'urban majority' (Simone 2013; 2018) seek to secure some form of housing for themselves become increasingly important.

The results of my study were fourfold. Previous analyses of urban neoliberal governance and the production of space have pinpointed how neoliberal housing policies have shifted resources away social housing production and inclusive urban development policies. In this context, as well as in wider capitalist processes, poor women workers have often been the major scapegoats. Interviews with occupiers, especially with single mothers, quickly showed me that the main reason for occupation was the lack of other housing alternatives. Single mothers who received a minimum salary of €600 per month found paying €400 or €500 for rent completely unfeasible. They also had little chance of accessing council housing, in which priority is given to the unemployed or to people with disabilities. These women told me how, for years, they had been moving from one house to another, always being forced to leave because of unaffordability, the inadequacy, or the insecurity of the housing situation. For many of them, occupation was the last available alternative: if evicted, they and their children had nowhere to go.

The analysis also revealed the gendered nature of occupations that can be partly considered a 'feminised' strategy of resistance to homelessness (Motta and Seppälä 2016). While lone, homeless men might choose sleeping rough or occupying public spaces, homeless

women tend to avoid this solution, since they are even more prone to violence and abuse on the streets than men. In particular, mothers with children avoid the street for fear of their children being taken away from them. They, thus, prefer relying on informal support, looking for other solutions, or depending on their friends and acquaintances to keep them accommodated. Yet, the outcome of this is that they are not recognised as homeless in policy responses, and can, thus, not access state or municipal support directed to the homeless. In my dissertation, I analyse these constraints and restrictions as forms of subalternisation, a dynamic process through which a 'contract' (Das 1989) is established between the subalternised and the wider society.

Another angle to housing struggles explored in this thesis was the analysis of the practices of social housing managers in Lisbon and Loures, and their interaction with homeless council residents. In this study, I focus on the interface of two distinct conceptualisations of neoliberalism. On one hand, neoliberalism can be seen as an elite project that promotes market-based regulatory responses and commodification to expand capitalist profit-making (Harvey 2005; Brenner et al. 2010). On the other hand, it can be seen as a mode of government, a form of governmentality (Foucault 2007), which promotes political subjects that conceive themselves as responsible for their own wellbeing, functioning through the logic of competition. I show how, in the narratives of the council housing managers, the idea that housing is something that people need to compete for becomes naturalised, justified by the notion of scarce resources. In this study, I argue that much more could be done in terms of securing an efficient use of existing council housing resources, instead of presenting the shortcomings in the management of council estates as arising from the wrongdoings of the

council housing residents. Council housing managers also tend to focus on the perceived 'illegality' of occupations, ignoring that, when they themselves evict occupying residents without providing housing alternatives, they are themselves directly producing homelessness.

I then shift my focus into the specific practices of occupiers, examining their actions from a perspective that highlights the limits of their possibilities to participate in urban policymaking. To examine the practices of occupiers, I apply the concepts of quiet encroachment (Bayat 2013) and 'improvised lives' (Simone 2019) because they highlight some of the key characteristics of the process of occupation that emerge, namely, improvisation, networking, adaptation, and negotiation. To effectively realise an occupation and defend it, many small steps are required that allow for the characterisation of this process as quiet encroachment.

However, in the literature, the notions of quiet encroachment and improvised lives are considered an 'everyday' practice, not a direct form of resistance. Occupations, too, are not necessarily forms of direct resistance, but rather practices through which the subalternised urban dwellers seek to secure their housing needs—even if temporarily—which is fundamental to enable the organisation of other spheres of life, such as work and children's schooling.

Yet, the classification of occupations as an 'everyday' practice hides the conscious decision to occupy, which has usually been preceded by a careful analysis of existing options available. In this thesis, I argue that all occupations do involve a seed of resistance since they constitute an effort to try to counter the state of homelessness and to question their subalternisation. Occupations do not, thus, emerge as a mundane activity, but rather as a conscious, transgressive act. As a result, I suggest that 'needs-based' occupations—contrasted with

collective occupations that are explicitly pursued using the language of politics—are more aptly conceptualised as a transgressive, invented form of participation.

The final empirical chapter of the thesis focuses on social movement actors. While not only analysing collective action, this thesis considers this form of action as a particularly prominent practice to force state agents to recognise diverse housing problematics. I explore the role of Habita as an example of an educational site of resistance (Caciagli 2019), providing examples regarding how Habita's activities have the potential to break the notion of housing problems as being the responsibility of homeless persons. In Habita's counselling sessions and family assemblies, the guilt families tend to feel for their homelessness is challenged. Therefore, social movement engagement promotes alternative forms of political subjectivities that emphasise the wider causes of housing exclusions and frames housing as a human right. This helps to promote the socialisation of housing activism, triggering participation in collective action.

And, now, Professor Martinez, I respect-fully ask you, as the Opponent appointed by the Faculty of Social Sciences, to present your comments on my dissertation.

SAILA-MARIA SAARISTO
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHER
INÂMIA'CET
ISCTE—UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE OF LISBON
maria.saaristo@iscte-iul.pt

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