



Opening the urban “black box”.

The role of the local context in the mobilisation of urban movements

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Abstract

This thesis analyses urban protest actions in the context of austerity urbanism in Southern Europe, attempting to better understand the conditions that lead to the mobilisation of urban protestors. To date, the literature on urban movements has tended to analyse the effect of macro-forces in transforming the urban environment, finding in them an explanation for protest. By contrast, local contexts – the political and institutional environments in which urban protest emerge – has been relatively unexplored. This is the case despite the fact that, empirically, we see significant variation in local protest despite similarity in the macro-problems effecting residents’ lives.

Barcelona and Turin are examples of two cities that share many similarities in terms of large-scale processes and phenomena but nonetheless differ markedly in terms of the characteristics of their respective urban mobilisation. Both cities have transformed their economic model over recent decades, moving from an industrial base to the promotion of cultural and knowledge-based economic activity. Recently, both cities have been acutely affected by the financial crisis, suffering severe housing crises and being subject to fiscal constraints and austerity cuts. At the same time, both cities have a strong tradition of urban protest. Taking existing urban studies literature as a starting point, all of these factors would lead to an expectation of similar levels and forms of urban protest in Barcelona and Turin, but this thesis shows that urban mobilisation in the two cities differs in significant ways.

This thesis explores the ways in which local contexts may be important in shaping expressions of urban protest. In doing so, I use protest event analysis and content analysis methodologies to collect, map and analyse 852 protest actions in Barcelona and Turin between 2011 and 2015. Drawing on the broader literature on social movements, I argue that the nature and structure of local institutionalised power are important and under-studied aspects of the dynamics of urban protest. More broadly, the thesis suggests that in order to understand urban protest, it is necessary to look beyond the particularistic qualities and fragmentation of a highly place-embedded activism and consider it in the deeper context of the local political process.

Jury:

Donatella Della Porta, EUI/Scuola Normale Superiore (Supervisor)

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Bio

Anna Subirats Ribas holds a degree in Geography from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and an MSc in Urban Studies from University College London. Since before becoming a Doctoral Researcher at the Department of Political and Social Science at the European University Institute, she has combined academic work with a practical interest in urban issues, working as project developer in urban planning for the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Her current research focuses on the themes of urban governance, the politics of urban planning, contentious politics in processes of urban transformation and urban movements. She has published a book with Policy Press, "Social Movements and Referendums from Below" (2017) together with Donatella della Porta, Martín Portos and Francis O'Connor, and a chapter 'Urban Dynamics in Social Movements' in the Oxford Handbook of Social Movements (2015), together with Massimiliano Andretta and Gianni Piazza.