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Untangling the radical imaginaries of the Indignados' movement: commons, autonomy and ecologism

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ABSTRACT

Under regimes of austerity, social movements' transformative eco-politics may appear endangered. What kinds of environmentalism and radical imaginaries can unfold in social movements in crisis-ridden societies? I focus on the 'movement of the squares' during its post-encampment phase, with a case study of three urban projects of the Indignados movement in Barcelona. Observation of these projects reveals the importance of three common and intertwined radical imaginaries embodied in participants' social practices and orienting their future visions: the commons, autonomy, and ecologism. The ecologism imaginary cannot be properly understood if disembedded from the other two: the 'Indignant' projects constitute community structures re-embedding (re)production, jointly covering and generating needs differently, in response to the global capitalist forces that are threatening their social reproduction. Eco-politics can only be plausibly transformative if it is able to articulate a politics of intersectionality linking social reproduction with ecological interconnectedness and struggles against dispossessions and social injustice.

KEYWORDS Indignados; imaginary; social movement; commons; autonomy; environment

Introduction

According to observers such as Mason (2014) and Blühdorn (2017), environmental movements have *implausible* transformative potential. Due to their ideals of self-realization 'liberated' from ecological limits and the purely experiential logic of their activism, they represent a powerful tool for further accelerating the unsustainable consumption of nature (Blühdorn 2017, p. 57). Mason, meanwhile (2014, p. 141) argues that in post-austerity mobilisations, 'environmentalism has taken a backseat, with much activist energy diverted into the UK Uncut and Occupy movements, trade union campaigns, and local justice issues'. Mason's argument is paradigmatic of the watershed that the social movement literature presupposes between environmental and non-environmental movements, and of the compartmentalized (or single-issue) critique made by many social

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movements themselves. This bifurcation leaves us with an unanswered question: how might an eco-politics, if it aims to be plausibly transformative, integrate social justice and ecological sustainability (Asara 2016, Centemeri 2018)? Under what Hayes (2017) identifies as the multiple and overlapping civic, economic, political and ideational regimes of austerity, what kind of environmentalism might have socially transformative potential?

Here, I develop answers to this question through ethnographic observation of the Spanish ‘movement of the squares’. Born with the ‘Arab spring’ at the turn of 2010/2011, the anti-austerity protest cycle spread through numerous European countries, including Iceland, Portugal, Spain, and Greece, as the ‘Occupy’ movement from the USA to the UK and Israel, and continuing in diverse guise in countries such as Mexico, Turkey, and Hong Kong. Putting at centre stage claims for ‘real’ democracy, social justice, and struggles against austerity, neoliberal governance and the commodification of public space (Flesher Fominaya 2017, Varvarouris *et al.* 2020), the movement of the squares took its name from its characteristic repertoire of action: the occupation of cities’ main squares and public spaces, setting up extensive assembly deliberations in the encampments.

The squares encampments involved first and foremost an awakening – or ‘re-discovering’, as Graeber (2011) puts it – of the radical imagination. The new communal spaces and projects created in the squares prefigured a different world through their production of new space, from collective kitchens to community gardens, art spaces, self-organized kindergartens and common libraries (Asara and Kallis 2020). Rupturing the post-political neoliberal consensus, they represented the continuous materialization, in the here and now, of new radical imaginaries (Kaika and Karaliotas 2014, Dikeç and Swyngedouw 2017).

The new political imaginary sprouted in these ephemeral communal spaces needs nevertheless to be ‘embodied and practised within the times and spaces of everyday life’ in order to open up a politicizing sequence following the period of occupations (Dikeç and Swyngedouw 2017, p. 9). Within an incipient debate on the afterlife of this cycle of mobilization (Fernandez-Savater *et al.* 2017), scholars mostly focusing on Mediterranean Europe have recognized the role of these movements in fostering forms of social organization based on solidarity and collective self-empowerment (Hadjimichalis 2013, Flesher Fominaya 2017, Asara and Kallis 2020, Varvarousis *et al.* 2020). From solidarity-economy initiatives, community-supported agriculture, and cooperatives, to community gardens, social centres and other self-organized spaces, these post-square alternative projects spatialized the movement’s radical imaginaries in urban environments, extending and deepening concerns of broad political change over everyday

life, and embodying and promising the sedimentation and further development of Indignant radical imaginaries (Nelson 2003).

What is less clear is what kind of alternative vision these initiatives are enacting, and what role, if any, environmentalism has played in their development. Despite wide discussion of the movements of the squares, their specifically environmental dimension has rarely been investigated (see Asara 2016), whilst as underlined above, Mason (2014) sees environmentalism as fundamentally incompatible with them. Correspondingly, scant analytic attention has been paid in the literature to the alternative projects that developed after the squares; an examination of their radical imaginaries should constitute a pivotal task for an eco-political analysis of these social movements.

Here, I aim to remedy this oversight to contribute to the dialogue between environmental political theory and empirical studies on Indignant movement practice. In contradistinction to the prevailing literature, I find that these projects embody three interrelated imaginaries: ecologism, commons, and autonomy. Moreover, I argue that the ecologism dimension of the movement cannot be properly understood if it is disembedded from the other two imaginaries, because it pre-supposes them within an integrated vision. Conceiving of environmentalism as intertwined with wider socio-political issues allows us to better understand ‘socio-environmental movements’ (Asara 2016) as characterised by a ‘politics of intersectionality linking a variety of problems that have not been deemed properly “environmental” by the mainstream movement’ (Di Chiro 2008, p. 286). This type of environmentalism is closely tied to everyday life and embedded in alternative institutions of (re)production (Forno and Graziano 2014, Schlosberg and Coles 2016, Andretta and Guidi 2017).

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I elaborate the concept of imaginaries, drawing on political theory, social movement studies, and political ecology, and briefly sketch how the concepts of autonomy, commons, and ecologism have been discussed in relation to social movements. I then explain my research design and case studies, before untangling their Indignant radical imaginaries.

The radical imaginary

The idea of imaginaries highlights ways of understanding and giving meaning to the social world, enabling the (re)production of social institutions, practices, and social change (Adams *et al.* 2015). Castoriadis formulated one of the most theoretically developed accounts of the concept, seeing it as the founding pillar of his ontology of creation. For Castoriadis (1975), the imaginary is the capacity to take distance from reality and to create the non-real, that is to create reality endowed with meaning; at the same time it is

what binds society together, and produces its historical development. The two dimensions of the social-historical field, doing and representing, originate from this imaginative capacity, and they are both imaginative creations (Castoriadis 2007). The radical imaginary defines society's identity, articulation, needs, values, and desires, and it is constituted by the *radical imagination* of the singular human being, and the *social imaginary* of the social-historical field. The former is 'radical' because it can create *ex-nihilo* representations, affects and intentions (Castoriadis 1994), as well as 'embodied and corporeal', because doing always implies the imagination of the not yet, which doing can actualise (Castoriadis 2007). Similarly, the *social imaginary* is an 'instituting doing' (Castoriadis 2007, p. 152), as it creates social imaginary significations and institutions embodying them. Society is self-creation or self-institution, i.e. the emergence of a new ontological form.

While for Castoriadis the radical imaginary constitutes the core of his ontology of creation, for Taylor (2004) the social imaginary refers to the ways people imagine and live their social existence, and build expectations underlain by deeper normative notions. Thus for Castoriadis, the 'enslavement of men to their imaginary creations', typical of heteronomous societies, can be questioned and eventually undermined through contestation by groups of individuals critiquing the instituted society (1975, p. 234). Creating a critical distance between the instituted society and the horizon of potential otherness is the precondition for shaping and reshaping alternative social imaginary significations (Carlisle 2017), and amounts to what Castoriadis calls the 'germ' of autonomy (Castoriadis 1997, p. 269). For Castoriadis, as for Taylor, social change can thus be explained by the gradual process of transformation of social imaginaries through the infiltration of new practices developed among certain strata of society (for example, 'the long march' towards modernity). Similarly, for Appadurai (1996), the imagination is 'an organized field of social practices' holding 'a projective sense', which can turn into a fuel for action (ibid, p.7).

Yet, despite the importance of these contributions for conceiving of imaginaries as tied to our understanding and transformation of the world, and for the role attributed to groups of individuals (such as social movements) for societal change, they do not help us understand *how* alternative imaginaries are produced locally in social movement *milieux*. Here, from the perspective of feminist standpoint theory, Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) forge the concept of the 'situated imagination' as an intrinsically social faculty located in the tensions between what is and what ought to be, immersed in the practices and (embodied) experiences of groups and communities, and involved in the construction of the situated subject, both individual and collective. Their approach has inspired the recent important elaborations by Haiven and Khasnabish on the radical imagination animating social movements, shaped by individuals' grounded experiences, political

struggles, and needs (Khasnabish 2008, pp. 178, 180). Defined as the ability to imagine life and social institutions not as they currently exist but as that which might be brought into being, the radical imagination is situated in place(s) and emerges from the process of building alternatives and ‘acting otherwise’ in alternative spaces of social reproduction, spheres of values, and social cooperation (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, Haiven 2014, Khasnabish 2008, pp. 153–157). The radical imagination is a collective, transversal process of bridging multiple imaginations to forge common imaginaries, reshaping subjectivity and everyday life.

The processes of emergence of alternative imaginaries are varied, including emplaced experience or resistance, collective memory, and the diffusion of experience (Peet and Watts 1996, Pride Brown 2016, Centemeri 2018), the intersection of different maps of grievances (Featherstone 2003), or the work of activists connecting the grassroots at international scales (Routledge *et al.* 2006). Imaginaries are sites of contestation with the instituted social imaginary, acting in ways that break with usual habits and positions means re-partitioning the ‘sensible experience of life’, producing different lives (Peet and Watts 1996, Velicu and Kaika 2017, pp. 312). At the same time, being power-laden, they can display ambivalent features (Harris 2014), such as harbouring conflicting imaginaries and hegemonic discourses (McGregor 2004, Kaika and Karaliotas 2014, Argüelles *et al.* 2017).

While the imagination is sometimes explicitly theorised in social movements through discussions about strategy and visions, or expressed in manifestos or guiding principles, most often it is implicit, appearing in the form of unspoken assumptions (Haiven 2014, p. 247–8). While Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) sketch out a powerful ‘strategy of convocation’, a form of research seeking to enliven movements’ inherent capacity to imagine by creating spaces of dialogue with activists in a process of critical self-reflection, most of the aforementioned empirical studies use more ‘traditional disciplinary techniques’ (p.16) such as ethnography and in-depth interviews, amounting to what Haiven and Khasnabish call a ‘strategy of invocation’.

While both these strategies are legitimate in investigating imaginaries, one limitation of most of the latter empirical studies is that rather than conceiving of imaginaries as embodied in movements’ social practices, they relegate the concept of imaginaries to the status of a cognitive schemata, thus reducing one important heuristic potential and distinctiveness of the imaginary concept which sets it apart from other concepts such as frames, values, or ideologies. In the specific Indignant alternative spaces of social reproduction, what becomes important therefore is how the radical imaginaries of ecologism, the commons, and autonomy become connected, embodied and manifest.

Ecologism

The linkage of environmental and socio-political issues is central to the environmental justice movement, which changed the notion of the environment from ‘an exotic elsewhere’ (Di Chiro 2008, p. 286) to the places where ‘we live, work, play, learn and eat’. In this vision, by means of a politics of articulation and intersectional coalition-building, environmentalism focuses on the enabling conditions for the accomplishment of an increasingly endangered social reproduction. In recent years, an increasing shift from resistance to reconstruction (Schlosberg 2013) has led to the development of ‘new materialist movements’, characterised by an ‘environmentalism of everyday life’ (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, p. 161). Articulated in alternative structures of community organization, these movements embody resistance to the dominant circulations of capitalist power, and reconstruct everyday interactions with the natural world. Concerned that the distancing of production from reproduction and consumption entails ignoring the conditions of production and their social and environmental costs (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999), the efforts of place-based socio-environmental movements go into re-localising (re)production through ‘political producerism’ (Andretta and Guidi 2017, p. 248). This involves transforming everyday life according to the ‘principle of cooperation and responsibility towards each other and the earth’ (Federici 2019, p. 110). Economic decisions focus on meeting needs locally through alternative calculations of value, building a material disconnection from a globalised production and market system (North 2010, Schlosberg and Coles 2016). Through the constitution of ‘spaces of deceleration’ preoccupied with ecological dysfunction and waste (Carlsson and Manning 2010, Tonkiss 2013), place-based socio-environmental movements strive to re-ground human subsistence activities within the territory with a caring approach towards the environment (Centemeri 2018).

Commons

Countering the growing privatization and commodification of urban space, the struggle for the commons was characteristic of the movement of the squares (Harvey 2012, Varvarousis *et al.* 2020). Commons are a social system of resource-sharing through cooperation and non-hierarchical participatory social doing. Decisions over the distribution of surplus are collective, taking into account social and environmental criteria (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013). Cooperatives, community and solidarity economy initiatives are forms of commons that democratize ownership, management, wage setting and surplus distribution (Dardot and Laval 2014), establishing businesses and markets embedded in communities. Putting centre stage social and

environmental needs, ‘emancipatory’ types of commons (Pellizzoni 2018, p. 225) politicize the economy, production and consumption (Laville 1998, Forno and Graziano 2014) and attempt to be alternative to capitalistic markets (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013, Bollier 2014). By pooling resources, integrating the different functions, commons can be conceived as autonomous spaces from which to reclaim control over material, political or cultural aspects of their (re)production (Caffentzis and Federici 2014), and are hence tightly linked with the autonomy radical imaginary.

Autonomy

Autonomy has been the defining element of both autonomist Marxism and class-struggle anarchism, and more generally, numerous movements embracing direct action and social and environmental justice (Chatterton 2005, Garland 2010, Cattaneo and López 2014, Flesher Fominaya 2015). Autonomy is associated with self-management, self-determination, and self-regulating practices, particularly vis-à-vis the state and capitalist social, economic, and cultural relations (Castoriadis 1975, Katsiaficas 2006, Böhm *et al.* 2010). ‘Autonomy from capital’ involves a process of working class self-valorisation through the rejection of salaried work and the appropriation of the production process. Chatterton (2005) calls this level of autonomy ‘material’, entailing the satisfaction of basic needs through the solidarity economy and the redefinition of work. As such, autonomous political organizing is a site of struggle and is always ‘contradictory, interstitial and in the making’ (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, p. 488), especially as complete independence from the state or capital cannot be completely fulfilled (De Angelis 2017, p. 101, Böhm *et al.* 2010). Indeed, for Harvey (2012, p. 73) the state should play an important role in ‘protecting the flow of public goods that underpin the quality of the common’ and a double-pronged political attack should force the state to supply more public goods, while appropriating and supplementing them with commons. The challenges social movements face is connecting ‘the struggle over the public with those for the construction of the common so that they reinforce each other’ (Caffentzis and Federici 2014, p. i102). Thus, instead of a complete disengagement and independence from the state, urban commons should engage in ‘constituent practices’, struggling with the state for the development of commons, in order to go beyond attempts to simply survive dispossessions and exclusions (Pithouse 2014, p. i32). For Dardot and Laval (2014, p. 511), ‘it has to do with transforming the welfare state administration into institutions of the common’; for such a goal, it is crucial to understand how urban commons should ‘engage with the public, contaminate and transform it’ (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015, p. 51). This would need to include struggling against the risk of outsourcing welfare state responsibilities and municipal services to civil

society (Rosol 2012), blending disruptive and confrontational actions with a radical politics of autonomy (Martínez 2014, De Angelis 2017).

Three emblematic cases

In order to analyse the radical imaginaries of the Indignados movement produced in the ‘prefigurative experiments in living otherwise’ (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, p. 62) that unfolded during the post-square phase of decentralized action, I focus on three sites of Indignados projects in Barcelona. My aim is to understand the projects’ common imaginaries through an analysis of their material practices, discourses, and unspoken assumptions, as well as their self-reflection and ‘everyday research’ (undertaken by collectives such as *La Ciutat Invisible* or *LaCol*). To do so, I focus on: a cooperative centre (Ateneu La Base, LB, Figure 1); a self-managed project on an appropriated vacant lot (Recreant Cruïlles, RC, Figure 2); and a self-managed former factory (Can Batlló, CB, Figure 3).

The rationale for choosing these sites is threefold: their diversity in terms of social class, activism type, neighbourhood, and land property enables a multi-perspectival approach, taking into consideration different voices (Snow and Trom 2002); their complexity in terms of projects and number of participants enables analysis of the most elaborated form of the movement’s radical imagination; their strong connection to (CB) or direct emergence from (LB, RC) the



Figure 1. Ateneu La Base (LB).



Figure 2. Recreat Cruilles (RC).



Figure 3. Can Batlló (CB).
Source: LaCol.

Indignados movement enables a generalization of findings to the wider movement. The characteristics of the three sites are explained in [Table 1](#), below.

To study their radical imaginaries, I triangulate between methods: participant observation, in-depth interviews, mini-focus groups, documentary analysis, and thematic analysis ([Table 2](#)). These methods were deployed during the period between October 2012 and May 2014, except for documentary analysis, which for CB considered documents since May 2011. However, my research was also informed by my previous research on the movement covering the square occupation and the first year's decentralization to the neighbourhoods (see Asara [2016](#), Asara and Kallis [2020](#)).



Table 1. The case studies.

Start of the project	Location and space	Reason for activation/ objectives	Organization	Participants	Activities organized
<p>LB Conceived in autumn 2012 by the <i>Indignados'</i> assembly of <i>Poble Sec</i> neighbourhood, it was inaugurated in January 2014.</p>	<p>Housed in a collectively renovated rented building, located in Poble Sec, a working class neighbourhood undergoing gentrification.</p>	<p>It answered three needs: for a gathering/social space, for self-employment, and for the organization of political actions.</p>	<p>LB hosts 9 sub-projects sharing a common fund: a consumers' cooperative; a bar; a communitarian canteen and a catering cooperative (both agroecological); a social support collective for female migrants; an IT collective; a library; a co-maternity nursing group; the 'Crafts Ateneu' (carpentry, blacksmith, construction, electrician). Decisions are taken in members' meetings and the General assembly.</p>	<p>LB includes more than 150 members paying €10 monthly. Participants come from the squatting, student, environmental/political consumption, and autonomous movements.</p>	<p>In addition to the sub-projects, LB organizes many socio-cultural and political activities. It runs the first neighbourhood journal, and leads an anti-gentrification campaign against the new neighbourhood plan.</p>
<p>RC Born within the Indignados assembly of <i>Esquerra de l'Eixample</i> neighbourhood, RC started its assemblies in October 2011, and following the space's temporary use lease from the municipality, it began to self-manage the space in November 2013.</p>	<p>The <i>Germanetes</i> space is a previously vacant, 5500-m²- public property (only 580 m² were ceded) located in the middle class neighbourhood of <i>Esquerra de l'Eixample</i>. The place includes a 100-m²-permaculture garden.</p>	<p>Following the municipality's failure to adhere to its 2006 commitments to build public facilities on the lot, RC aims to create a self-managed green public and cultural space, while pushing for both the swift construction of those facilities, and broader planning changes such as pedestrianization.</p>	<p>RC is organized in a General Assembly and the following autonomous committees: permaculture garden, public space and environment, activities, economics, education, art, climbing wall, and infrastructure.</p>	<p>Indignados activists and neighbours. The project also involves the traditional Neighbours' Association, civic associations and environmental organizations.</p>	<p>RC organizes cultural and educational events, permaculture gardening, climbing, and the monthly Market of agro-ecological Peasants.</p>

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Start of the project	Location and space	Reason for activation/ objectives	Organization	Participants	Activities organized
<p>CB In 1976 a citizens' campaign obtained commitments for the public use of CB in the General Urban Development Plan (GUDP), including construction of several public facilities and a green space. Given the failure to implement these plans, since 2009 the CB platform organized a mobilization campaign and, during the Indignados square occupation, obtained the use lease of the first industrial unit.</p>	<p>CB is located in a 14-ha former factory situated in the working-class neighbourhood <i>La Bordeta</i>. CB expanded both to other blocks, through collective refurbishment and modifications of the GUDP, and at the project level. Includes a 150-m² community garden and a park.</p>	<p>CB's core objective is 'to get spaces for the neighbourhood'. On the one hand, it demands the construction of the promised public facilities. On the other hand, CB itself provides some of the facilities/ services planned by the GUDP – the cultural/ youth centre, social housing, and the park – together with new projects, with public support.</p>	<p>Organized in a general assembly and many autonomous committees. CB assumes expenses linked to ordinary management, but the building's refurbishment and infrastructural costs are covered by the municipality.</p>	<p>CB includes more than 300 participants: neighbours, a group of (former) architecture students organized as <i>LaCo</i>/ cooperative, activists from the squatting, neighbourhood, autonomous, and Indignados movements.</p>	<p>Activities are organized within each project: a 15,000-book library; the Bar; the Auditorium and cultural, artistic and sport projects; crafts and construction workshops; a community garden; a food bank; an ecological brewery; a movements' documentation centre; vehicles (self)repair; the ecological grant-of-use co-housing cooperative <i>La Bordet</i>; the social economy incubator <i>Coòpolis</i>.</p>

Table 2. Research methodology of the study.

Research Method	Main characteristics and rationale
Participant observation	Theory-driven participant observation with very limited <i>active</i> participation (Lichterman 2002), which requires that the researcher comes to a field site informed by a general theme, namely the movement's vision and creation of alternatives. Participated in assemblies, main events, celebrations, and activities, as well as neighbourhood assemblies from which two of the projects stemmed. I kept ethnographic notes of everyday practices and discussions.
In-depth interviews and focus groups [Interviewees]	29 in-depth interviews and 2 mini-focus groups (3–4 participants) with project participants, maintaining gender and age balance, as well as diversity in terms of type of activism. 8 interviews with LB participants, 13 interviews and two mini-focus group with CB participants, 9 interviews with RC participants. All interviews were anonymised.
[Content of interview]	I asked participants about the origins, motivation, goals and common visions, organizational structures and development of the projects, activities organized, relationship with the Indignados movement, how and why participants became involved. The two focus groups offered the opportunity to observe participants' natural interaction, as well as deepen understanding of specific issues.
Thematic Analysis	Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed through a thematic analysis methodology. Themes can be defined as a category identified by the analyst that links expressions found in texts, and relates them to the analyst's research focus and (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). I analysed the transcribed interview texts by: identifying themes and subthemes; sorting the data so that themes are clustered into a manageable number and understanding relations among themes; identifying the radical imaginaries by examining the prevailing themes related to the radical imaginaries theoretical model.
Documents analysis	Documents and literature produced by the three projects between May 2011 and May 2014 were analysed. Documents included: statutes; manifestos; minutes of meetings/assemblies; flyers; websites of the (sub)projects; mailing lists. Also analysed movement's research outputs such as books, articles and journals of some collectives/projects.

In the next section I will untangle the three imaginaries of ecologism, commons, and autonomy which are common across the three projects, but are also modulated with different shades in each project: *situated* imaginaries are shaped by movement groups' specific types of alternatives, grounded experiences, struggles, and needs.

Untangling Indignados radical imaginaries

In the socio-natural practices of these projects, the ecologism imaginary emerges as linked to the places and materiality that participants produce and shape through their living, consuming, producing, working, and community building. Participants struggle for the liveability of their

neighbourhoods, for environmental and public goods and a less polluted environment. Their ecologism re-imagines habitation and urbanism. For example, RC participants want to create a green public space in the vacant lot, and long for ‘a completely different model for a city, another model of mobility’ (Interview #69, age group (AG) 2,¹ male), foreseeing the multiplication of (green) public space, pedestrianisation, and the use of participatory planning criteria. As this interviewee put it:

Since the start, the struggle did not limit itself to the *Germanetes* lot, there is a whole dimension of claiming a healthier neighbourhood, which requires pedestrianization, generating public spaces in the neighbourhood. (Interview #69)

RC’s Public Space Committee is part of the Urbanism Committee of the Neighbours’ Association,² pressing the municipality for these urban planning changes. Similarly, LB leads a neighbourhood campaign against the city’s new plan for the neighbourhood, which it accuses of further privatisation and gentrification. For CB participants, ‘co-operative urbanism’ means horizontally building another model of living, based on the ‘dissolution of the paralyzing dichotomies between technicians and users’ (Interview #76, AG1, male). With expertise from LaCol, participatory architectural design is implemented in CB. Cooperative urbanism is ‘very slow: this is about converting, building a neighbourhood with a human scale, which means with the precarious means that we have, which are hands and available material’ (Interview #76). These are ecological spaces of deceleration with an economy of means: CB carpenters donate their wood shavings and sawdust to the dry toilets of the *Can Masdeu* urban squat; materials used in daily practices or in construction work are either recycled or ecological³; self-repair workshops are organized for bikes and motorbikes; solar panels are being planned or implemented in CB and RC; greenfield building construction is avoided in both RC and LB.

Their ecologism re-imagines what green space means, with alternative calculations of value. In CB, the urban garden and park committee contest the very design of the park as it had been planned in the General Urban Development Plan, that of ‘a lawn park, like a football pitch, that is very sad’ (Interview #64, AG2, female), ‘a [deforested] park imagined and conceived in order to serve the luxury towers’, i.e. the luxury housing planned to be built in the lot. In the words of a participant, to this type of environment

we said no. Instead how do we imagine a park for the neighbourhood? Well we imagine it like a Mediterranean wood, that regenerates the earth. A wood where people can come to have a picnic, where it is possible to walk, to organize assemblies, meetings, and community gardens for the future school that will be built. (Interview #65, AG3, male)

The committee started to classify the trees (age, species) to show their value, claiming that they should not be destroyed.

The environment they shape and imagine is the places, materiality, and conditions that enable their social reproduction and their collective ‘provisioning’ including social, emotional, and physical needs. For example, the community gardens serve productive purposes of growing agro-ecological food, as well as pedagogic, convivial functions (e.g. in the monthly popular *paella* in RC), and to promote social integration for migrants from the nearby Church solidarity association (CB). In CB, the community garden is ‘a social thing, a solidarity work because it is a work of social support’ (Interview #57, AG2, male); for the migrants, ‘the garden is central, the neighbours are also enthusiastic, they really like it, they come here, they talk to you, they say “I have a plant, or I can bring you a plant”’, or the activists donate harvested vegetables to neighbours (Interview #59, AG1, female). The garden ‘brings all the neighbourhood together, and this is really important, it is the fundamental thing’ (Interview #57). Further, a part of the garden has been adapted for a group of disabled people because ‘it is very therapeutic for community relationships’ (Interview #59).

In CB and RC, the garden ‘can be thought of as a small project of food sovereignty, [claiming] that we have to eat local products and that they should be the least costly, that is without petrol in the middle’ (Interview #67, AG1, male). In LB, participants are leading a campaign to lease a community garden. Activists aspire to ‘ruralize the city’, to recover contact with and basic knowledge about nature, while ‘becoming conscious about your footprint’ (Interview #59). For these reasons, (agro-ecological, peri-urban) peasant farmers’ markets are held in RC (monthly) and CB (weekly), while in LB four out of the nine sub-projects are built around alternative networks for agro-ecological food consumption.

One of LB’s five key principles is ‘permaculture’ intended as the adjustment to, and the harmonic connection and integration with nature, ‘establish[ing] rhythms [...] and a life form able to co-habit with the territory and with life present in this territory’ (Interview #48, AG1, male), overcoming a domination relationship over nature. Their ecologism cannot be decoupled from social justice issues. As participants said, with regards to the key principles of LB:

we prefer to talk about concepts such as agroecology or permaculture [rather than ‘organic’], because they include other components, it is not just that there are no chemicals in the production, but also how people who produced it have worked, right? (Interview #48)

Their ecologism is not reduced to green, ‘responsible’ consumption, perceived as co-opted by ‘green capitalism’ (Interview #48). As one LB participant stated, ‘it is quite a poor vision, if everything depends only on

consuming better'; instead 'we should do *something more all-embracing*' (Interview #51, AG1, male). This 'something more all-embracing' includes the constitution of place-based communities involved in (re)production. Re-embedding production in communities would enable people to 'value different means of needs generation and satisfaction, through other means that do not imply uncontrolled energy consumption' (Interview #70, AG3, male). Participants establish economies of alternative desire through commoning:

it is very difficult to change your habits if all the people surrounding you do not change their habits too, but if you are in a place where there are many people that say 'let's make a small change', it's different. (Interview #59)

Commoning production means, as reported by a CB participant, establishing 'structures like in cooperatives, which establish different, more egalitarian norms' (Interview #70).

This 'something more all-embracing' also involves an inter-sectional politics, connecting several life spheres; it involves the political, and *the common*:

if we only are to consume better, we will never reach a real transformation, but if, in addition to this, on the one hand, we are going to produce, and on the other hand, we should not abandon the political field, no? That is, connecting various people, and not doing it from an individualistic perspective – indeed *ecologism* can be individualistic ... because of course, if I consume something, I go to a green supermarket so that I can clean my consciousness, and that's it. But it's not about this, it is about entering the political, which is *the common*, and from various spheres, not only from ecologism, but also from housing, from gender ... for this reason it is all-embracing for me. (Interview #51)

The common as it emerges out of Indignados practice is therefore 'the idea to build ourselves something managed by us, for the neighbourhood, in order that people appropriate it too' (Interview #64), and it involves 'creating communitarian structures to cover needs jointly, and generating or taking rights jointly' (Interview #50, AG1, female). Across the three projects, the common fund 'is something in common to enable us to create something for the common' (Interview #50). It is financed by remunerative activities (and members' fees in LB) and spent on social reproduction activities, neighbourhood needs, and transformational objectives. Moreover, the allocation of funds is decided collectively, as are decisions over salaries in LB. As an LB member put it:

we are generating a common fund in order to invest in our neighbourhood and community, in projects in which we believe, such as the *Ateneu*, the shared nursing group, the library, in order to generate infrastructures. This is our bet, this is what gives us a long trajectory, the space [LB] should be able to maintain itself through the projects of the space, and the members' fund has to promote and support other initiatives, expanding the project itself. (Interview #50)

In RC and CB the commons imaginary intermingles with ‘the public’. These projects have an intentional public openness, they are ‘public like non-state and belonging to neighbours, and as everyone’s space’ (Interview #58, AG1, female), ‘claiming public space from a different perspective or philosophy, incorporating elements of self-management, generating spaces in common’ (Interview #69). The commons imaginary here is perceived as a springboard to ‘the struggle for the public’ (Interview #76): participants reclaim public services (e.g. schools, housing, or the healthcare centre recently built in CB) as a common that has been subtracted from them through austerity’s multiple regimes.

While claiming that some public facilities such as schools be built by state authorities, CB participants recognize that they are themselves creating new public services and facilities: ‘we are covering some of neighbours’ needs such as the library, which is the real public library that is in the neighbourhood’ (Interview #60, AG3, male). Through their situated social practices, they forge the new concept of ‘*public from the common*’, redefining public services (see also Asara 2019): here, ‘the programming, management and everyday financing of our infrastructure is completely self-managed and self-sufficient, it is the neighbours who decide, design, employ, program, build, modify everything’ (Interview #60). This democratically managed public good is counterpoised to the usual meaning of ‘public’, conflated to ‘state’, where citizens are passive users, and where ‘the management of what is public by a part of the administration end up being private’ (Interview #61, AG1, male).

At the economic level, these projects are self-sufficient for ordinary, everyday management and for the financing of activities, but, especially in the CB case, receive state resources for infrastructure and maintenance works because ‘we are covering a public service, and *the administration has to pay for it*’ (Interview #60). In RC and CB, a basic, common level of political autonomy, meant as ‘being independent from any other entities or powers, not being tied to anyone above you, conditioning your action’ (Interview #73, AG1, male), does not therefore imply disengagement from the state: here ‘the idea is to keep claims for public services alive’ (Interview #68, AG3, male). As a CB participant explained:

we accept money only if it does not have as a condition that they will take some freedom away from us, or some compensation in return, and if it allows us to manage this investment ourselves. (Interview #58)

An example of this ‘autonomy-cum-state-finance’ is the CB Auditorium, designed by the CB collective *LaCol* and approved by the General Assembly, but financed by the local state.

This type of autonomy is a result of a twofold process. On the one hand, a confrontational struggle with the local administration in which advances

or gains such as use leases are the result of a ‘deal’ made from a position of power, itself conditioned by the strength of the movement. On the other hand, it is a result of a continuous internal debate between activists’ diverse positions. While some (anarchist or autonomous) participants ‘would prefer that really, at the economic level, we could be autonomous, in order not to depend at all from any type of institution’ (Interview #61), for others ‘to the extent that this movement institutionalizes and receives some type of funding to strengthen itself, there is no reason for this to be negative or a problem’ (Interview #58). The heterogeneity of positions is valued as an inevitable feature of a neighbourhood project: as one CB participant said, diversity is

‘both a strength and a limit, because you have to come to agreements, and this takes time, effort and devotion, but you cannot turn away from a situation that affects you, no? Otherwise, you will generate a *ghetto*. (Interview #61)

Or else, it is important to ‘build autonomy from a diversity standpoint because doing it from an affinity standpoint is doomed to failure’ (Interview #60)

Autonomous political organizing is often interstitial, limited and contradictory, because commons are entangled with both capital and the state. For the Indignados, these limitations should not be overcome by carving out a ‘pure’ enclave for themselves: only by assuming diversity and certain contradictions can activists build a space for autonomy capable of challenging the hegemony in which it is embedded, building alternatives that do not encumber their lives but rather serve or enhance their social reproduction. In LB, the decision to rent (rather than squat) the locale, and participate in the capitalist market, was motivated by the will to create an enduring space whose ‘rhythm is not conditioned by the legal situation of the space’ (Interview #50). One activist clarified:

this is a contradiction that we have all taken responsibility for [...] but we opted for this contradiction in favour of other things, it is not possible to be the perfect anti-capitalist, as we live in a capitalist world . . . We could go to a forest and only eat berries, but well this is not our choice because we live in Poble Sec. (Interview #50)

Internal decision-making processes continuously define the meaning of *autonomy*, as a CB activist explained: ‘sometimes we decided not to accept some type of support and maybe because of that we went slower with some things because we did them ourselves’ (Interview #58). By participating in negotiations with the city council, CB participants experience the difficulties of building a ‘public from the common’: ‘the city council plays a double game’ creating uncertainty over some of the projects (Interview #76), while administrative decision-making time differs from that required by ‘a truly

worked-out consensus', hence it is important that we 'ourselves set the rhythms' (Interview #61).

While RC and CB's imaginary of the commons interrelates with the question of 'the public', CB and LB share a commons imaginary in which the economic dimension is crucial, 'allowing you to live according to those values [agroecological, anti-capitalist, social co-operation], in a space like this which builds relations with its surroundings' (Interview #61). In these two projects, the imaginary of commons is further moulded into 'co-operativism', as either the 'co-operative neighbourhood' or the 'common/co-operative city'. 'Co-operativism' means not only a form of (common) ownership and work organization, but values such as solidarity, mutual support, and direct participation of all in a common project; using the commons terminology, we could refer to it as commoning. 'Co-operative neighbourhood' is the imaginary of a solidarity economy infrastructure where neighbours self-organize and co-operate to give solutions to their vital needs, without individual appropriation of common resources, gradually constituting a political counterpower (Córdoba-Mendiola and Dalmau 2013). Similarly, the concept of co-operative city revolves around the imaginary of the common, as it involves:

engaging in another type of relations, different from those promoted or derived from the market economy. So this has to do with the common, with this idea of associating ourselves in order to generate services in common [...] generating an economy, but not the usual economy. (Interview #56, AG1, male)

This meaning of commons is intertwined with the imaginary of material autonomy (from capital). Autonomy is one of LB's five key principles, defined as 'the capacity to directly determine our way to be in the world [...] against state and market forms [...] we should endow ourselves with the necessary structures and material means to do it'. Both LB and CB reclaim the legacy of the Catalan tradition of workers associationism from the mid-nineteenth century to the Civil War, more particularly of *Ateneus Populars* as crucial cultural and political centres for the working classes, and of mutualistic consumers' cooperatives as institutions capable of partly satisfying workers' necessities autonomously from the market.

The co-operative neighbourhood and city concepts express the projects' vision of building commons ecologies:

it is vital that in all the neighbourhoods there would be generating *ateneus*, networks of mutual support and of spaces of solidarity economy and work alternatives, creating an economy whose objective is not profit but the satisfaction of real needs of people with some environmental criteria and valuing work above capital. (Interview #153, AG3, male)

This commons social infrastructure would create a ‘social’ or ‘common’ market (Interview #76), satisfying basic necessities and covering diverse aspects such as food, housing, culture, energy, and care, ‘creating economic cycles relatively autonomous from capital’ (Interview #76), and building ‘a base for revolution’ (Interview #49, AG1, male). A CB participant clarified:

autonomy is autonomy with respect to the system, to its economic cycle, its cultural cycle, its invasion into how we must live, how we must organize ourselves ... in this sense we talk about autonomy, it embraces all this. (Interview #60)

In all three projects, commoning involves an incredible amount of communal work in different forms: most of it is unpaid, but in CB and LB self-employment emerges. Here participants search for a different relationship to work, attempting to integrate it coherently within their activism and values (I49:10). For one participant, ‘collective work is the only form of non-capitalist social relation, a social work, for the good of the community, to improve the life of everyone, within the frame of class struggle’ (Interview #65). Self-employment is ‘an alternative to work precariousness’ (Interview #54, AG3, male) and an important tool for building material autonomy:

the real propaganda force in capitalism is the fact of having to go to work, the fact that they have taken your life ... it is difficult to change anything if they have this capacity over your life, so the idea was to create autonomous structures which make us a bit freer, no? (Interview #51)

These autonomous structures are linked to ‘the topic of the material construction of things, it is about how to produce, where to produce, what life conditions you give yourself’ (Interview #51). In LB, a campaign for the lease of a community garden was being led because ‘food is one of the basic necessities we have to cover’ (Interview #48): the ‘strong networks with farmers that are cultivating close to here’ would enable them to ‘access food in an independent manner and at the margin of the capitalist state’ (Interview #49). Similarly to material autonomy in the food domain, where agroecology connects autonomy with ecologism, in other domains such as energy, autonomy is ‘linked to self-sufficiency’ (Interview #76) or self-reliance, and thus again to ecologism. As one participant of CB commented on the construction of solar panels: ‘in order to complete this perspective we have on self-sufficiency, we had to confront energy self-sufficiency’ (Interview #60).

This vision of material autonomy is therefore grounded in the territory as a site of commoning and empowerment: ‘when you become attached to a place and with the people living there, this is what really gives you strength, in a communitarian sense, spiritually and materially’ (Interview #48). Autonomy as self-determination of needs is based on relocalization, and it

entails a caring approach towards the surrounding environment stemming from one's dependence on it, again interweaving with an ecologism imaginary:

That people directly self-determine our lives implies also relocalization, implies [...] linking with a territory, being part of that territory, understanding it, being familiar with it, setting your roots there. So this implies that the resources that you need for life be close to you and if you depend on your territory it means that you can take care of it, you can manage it, because in the end when everything comes from far away it is very difficult to see the externalities, for example of food production. (Interview #48)

Conclusion

What therefore are the radical imaginaries developed in the post-square projects of the Indignados? Far from turning away from or neglecting an environmental dimension, as Blühdorn (2017) and Mason (2014) suggest, the social practices of these projects explicitly link commoning and autonomy – two of the central ideas of the Indignant movements – with a powerful imaginary of ecologism. Moreover, this imaginary is located at the heart of the Indignados project: it is shaped by the materiality, needs, and conditions that enable activists' social reproduction, itself increasingly endangered by austerity's multiple regimes of civic, economic, political, and ideational enclosure. Activists strive for a different relation with nature by 'ecologising' their neighbourhoods, reconfiguring urbanism and constituting ecological spaces of deceleration, building commons that establish a relationship of co-habitation with territory and nature. In this way, the Indignados' radical imaginary of ecologism is not reduced to 'green' consumption; instead participants strive, to put it with their words, to 'do something more all-embracing', which includes the constitution of community structures re-embedding (re)production, jointly covering and generating needs differently, creating an economy whose (prime) objective is not profit, but the satisfaction of people's real needs, including work and environmental goals. The projects' common funds create a vision of a long, expanding trajectory. Participants seek to build another type of economy which is relatively autonomous from the capitalist market, covering diverse aspects such as food, housing, culture, energy, and care.

These projects are neighbourhood commons, part of a wider commons infrastructure at the neighbourhood and city level through their porous boundaries. They reclaim and redefine 'the public' – jeopardised by neoliberal governance – as a (democratically managed) common, through 'autonomy-cum-state-finance'.

Even though their autonomous politics are not immune from contradictions, it is these same contradictions that make these projects possible. Through coalition-building among diverse movement-groups and actors, they build a nascent politics of intersectionality combining social justice and ecological goals, in response to the global capitalist forces that are threatening their social reproduction and displacement. These projects are thus incipient examples that an eco-politics, even with all its inevitable limits and contradictions, can be *plausibly transformative* where it is able to articulate such an integrated vision and practice.

Notes

1. Age is categorised (AG): 1) from 20 to 35; 2) 36 to 50; 3) 51 to 75.
2. These associations result from the struggles of the neighbourhood movement during the Francoist and transition periods (see Castells 1983).
3. For example, for LB's collective refurbishment works, participants used ecological materials such as lime mortar, plasterboard, and ecological paint.

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