

Resisting 'Austerity Gentrification' and Displacement in Southern Europe

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Abstract

This paper discusses 'austerity gentrification', austerity eviction/displacement, and resistance to them in Southern Europe during the current crisis. We focus on three cities, which until recently have barely featured in gentrification studies: Athens, Madrid and Rome. We show that eviction/displacement is being framed as a collective problem by anti-eviction/gentrification movements in Southern Europe but that more inter-class solidarity will be needed in the future. Northern European cities would do well to look at the resistance practices operating in Southern European cities.

Keywords: *Gentrification, Eviction, Displacement, Resistance, Southern Europe*

Introduction

1.1 In Southern Europe austerity has been marked by 'a shift towards a starker version of neo-liberal doctrine' (Kennet et al. 2015:28), but the crisis has not led to the reforms we might have expected, at least not in the field of housing. In this paper we focus on three southern European cities during a time of austerity, cities which until recently have barely featured in gentrification studies: Athens, Madrid and Rome. For more than five years now, all three cities have experienced conditions of prolonged austerity and recession, yet despite this (or as a result of this) processes of gentrification and displacement (even if not identified as such) are continuing apace. Here we discuss the link between crisis-related eviction and gentrification, detailing the anti-eviction practices and platforms fighting this form of 'austerity gentrification' in these three cities and show how they can inform wider practices of anti-gentrification resistance per se.

1.2 The data we draw on is the preliminary data from an EU-funded project titled 'Exploring anti-gentrification practices and policies in Southern European Cities'^[1]. The research has been ongoing over the past 18 months during which time contemporary gentrifications and displacements have been observed in Athens, Madrid and Rome. Sixty in-depth interviews have been undertaken with anti-gentrification groups and anti-eviction platforms, alongside ethnographic work involving participation in anti-gentrification resistance (Figure 1). We have followed a grounded approach which is open to different practices from those discussed to date in the gentrification studies literature, which has long overly fixated on northern cities such as London, New York City and Paris. Not only have Athens, Madrid and Rome barely figured in gentrification debates, neither have experiences of austerity vis a vis gentrification.



Figure 1. The authors meet with an anti-gentrification group in Rome 2016

1.3 The link between crisis-related evictions and gentrification is not obvious and needs to be unpacked. We begin that process here. The crisis has assumed different forms in the three cities, impacting different groups of people in different ways. However, a common thread has been an increased number of evictions, processes of dispossession tied to indebtedness and austerity. Significantly, in Madrid and Rome contemporary evictions are most apparent in gentrifying areas, where speculative behaviours are reinforcing displacement pressures. Gentrification in many cases has been policy-led causing the massive privatization of public housing and the transformation of public space into a place of consumption and tourism (Annunziata 2014; Sequera and Janoschka 2015). In Athens, 'gentrification is rising like a phoenix from the ashes of inner-city "crisis"' (Alexandri 2015:31; see also Vadris 2014), with land value extraction playing a key part in the exploitation of the crisis. The result has been variegated forms of displacement (eg. evictions for mortgage insolvency, rent arrears, social cleansing, etc) occurring simultaneously and impacting different categories of people. Displacement in these cities has become a crisis in of itself, constituting 'an urgent threat to core community values and structures' (Boin et al. 2009:83). These displacements are tied up with indebtedness, permanent austerity and a lack of housing reform.

Towards a broader and more inclusive definition of displacement in gentrification studies

2.1 The Euro-American literature on gentrification-induced displacement is both dated and contextually-specific, and is unable to deal with the variegated displacements happening in Athens, Madrid and Rome, and indeed beyond. The bulk of the definitional work in gentrification studies on displacement has focused on the US (mainly New York City) and the UK (mainly London) in the 1980s and 1990s (see Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008). But C21st gentrification and displacement play out differently around the world (see Lees et al. 2015, 2016; Janoschka and Sequera 2016). More recently, the effects of the global economic crisis – manifest in evictions, foreclosures and institutional dispossession – has produced new forms of displacement. A reinvigorated critical gentrification studies must explore these new forms of austerity-fuelled dispossession and document ways to resist them.

2.2 Lees (2012) has argued that gentrification studies should look at the work on displacement in development studies (from the global south) and that both can learn from each other. Development studies has focused on the massive direct and indirect displacements induced *by* and *for* development (eg. Penz et al. 2011; Robinson 2002), encompassing many different contexts in which people are forced to move (and not always urban) (e.g. Vandergeest et al. 2007). These studies link displacement to many forces, mainly related to authoritarian government-led development schemes and infrastructure projects, urban renewal, property market forces, and so on; processes that Lees et al. (2016) show to be examples of 'planetary gentrification'. This development studies work anchors displacement in a conception of land-use as the 'exclusion of people from one or more current crucial uses of a particular area of land or other territories' (Penz et al. 2011:16). This definition provides a broader and more inclusive understanding of displacement and the ethical implications of access to land. Politically it has value in that it links to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which frames the issue of forced eviction as a violation of human rights. Moreover, the United Nations recognizes large development projects, such as the Olympic Games, as well as political conflicts, ethnic cleansing etc. as causes of eviction (AGFE 2007; du Plessis 2005). The link with human rights is valuable for scholars and lawyers recognizing the ethical implications of eviction (Barbero 2015). Significantly, the European Court of Justice declared the eviction of families with children a violation of article 8 of the European Declaration of Human Rights and required member states to specify what domestic policies and measures are in place to avoid homelessness before eviction gets

enforced, opening up new legal ground for housing rights (ECHR interim decision 15 October 2015).

2.3 Eviction, is here interpreted as a sub-category of displacement, providing a stronger legal and juridical base for considering broader processes of dispossession. The *International Encyclopaedia of Housing* describes it as the permanent and involuntary expulsion of people from their place of residence. An eviction gives effect to a stronger claim on the property than that of the occupier' (Slater 2011:129). This definition highlights the unbalanced power relation which frames the political economy of housing (Aalbers and Christophers 2014). The superiority of property over occupancy uncovers the hierarchy among those who own and those who do not own a property. Thus, the risks of eviction are unevenly distributed with the urban poor, the vulnerable, undesirables, including ethnic minorities and immigrants, most at risk of eviction. The invisibility of the problem and the lack of data has rendered eviction as a 'hidden housing problem' (Robinson and Hartman 2003). Being given access to anti-eviction practices and platforms in Southern European cities has meant working within a privileged observatory in which the conceptualization of those displacements caused by austerity gentrification and of resistance to them has been paramount.

Variegated displacements in Southern European cities

3.1 In Spain, Italy and Greece different forces are acting simultaneously with different intensity, producing different types of displacement impacting different groups of people. Among the variables shaping this are: forms of tenure, the bundle of rights which govern access to housing or to a space in a given context, the housing laws and public policies existing in each country, and so on. Madrid, Rome and Athens share some commonalities with respect to housing regimes and tenure: a large percentage of property ownership rooted culturally in society as a means of class reproduction, the importance of family networks for the provision of welfare and housing, a severe shortage of public housing and social rental alternatives (less than 5% in Italy, 4% in Spain, almost 0% Greece) compensated for by indirect public interventions in housing (e.g. housing allowances, state-subsidized homeownership, land and construction laws in favour of building works, etc). Before the crisis, homeownership had been pushed towards private indebtedness, post-crisis the repossession of homes by banks has become an everyday occurrence.

3.2 In Madrid, the symbolic and heritage-related gentrification of the historic city centre (*casco antiguo*) and the related practices of symbolic, direct and indirect displacement are being worsened by the effects of the economic crisis. The 2008 subprime crisis caused evictions for mortgage arrears and those most impacted were the aspiring middle classes with precarious jobs, for whom access to housing was linked to long term indebtedness (Cano Fuentes et al. 2014; Garcia 2010; Garcia-Lamarca and Kaika 2016). Among them are a high percentage of immigrant workers from Latin America, but also creative workers and freelancers. Although eviction for mortgage arrears cannot be completely explained by gentrification theory (the process is rooted in the financialization of housing and the collapse of the real estate bubble in 2007), perhaps not surprisingly, in Madrid, a large number of the evictions for mortgage arrears (and indeed rent arrears) are concentrated in the gentrifying historic city centre. Here a whole set of practices of rent extraction began with the sale of publicly-owned residential buildings to financial institutions encouraged by 'urban regeneration' schemes - including the rehabilitation of Madrid's city centre in 2012 (Janoschka, Sequera and Salinas, 2014) and retail gentrification to boost Madrid's night, leisure and tourism-related economy. The magnitude of the evictions in Spain have resulted in one of the strongest and most effective anti-eviction movements in Europe, the PAH (*Plataforma Afectados Hipoteca*). In Madrid many of the so called *grupo de vivienda* that formed after 2011 converted into PAHs in the following years. For this reason, most districts now have their own local PAH. What began as a movement to fight evictions due to mortgage arrears joined the fight against the sale of public housing to hedge funds and the struggle against the privatization (gentrification) of public housing and tenant eviction.

3.3 In Athens, the types of displacement can only partially be explained by looking at the gentrification literature. The process of gentrification in Athens encompasses the silent clearing of public spaces and the Othering and marginalization of Gypsy communities who are being pushed to the margins of the city (Alexandri 2015). Moreover, the eviction of tenants (legitimated by an express eviction law) remains, for the most part, invisible and lacks public recognition (interview with *Athens Tenants Union*); with the shame of losing one's home re-phrased as 'a movement back to the parental home'. In the absence of any preventative measures, local organizations advocating against homelessness and anti-poverty platforms (*Praxis, Arsis, Klimaka* and *Anthropinoi-anthropoi*.) estimate an increase of homelessness in the city directly related to the loss of home. Before the crisis, mortgage holders were protected from loss of their prime place of residence by National Law. However, this was abolished with the introduction of the Third Memorandum and the lower middle classes have found themselves unable to pay debts and are consequently at risk of losing their prime place of residence through public auction. In Greece, an anti-eviction movement is now emerging composed of several networks

(such as *Plestiriamostop*, *SOS Katoikia*, *Hellenic Anti-auction Alliance*, *Kinima den Plirono*) that are all part of the broader anti-austerity movement. The risk of losing private assets (such as housing) demonstrates the shift from public debt towards private indebtedness (Janoschka and Alexandri, *in press*) and a generalized process of dispossession from land, buildings and even businesses.

3.4 Unlike in Spain and Greece, in Italy evictions due to mortgage arrears have been mitigated by the introduction of law n. 3/2012 approved by Parliament in 2012. However, new measures are under discussion with respect to mortgage insolvency at the present time which will likely introduce a six-month insolvency after which a house will be repossessed by the bank. In Rome, contemporary displacement is mainly state-led (linked with the sale of city owned public housing) and related to rental arrears. The cost of housing increased exponentially in the years before the crisis, producing an affordability crisis. With the advent of the crisis, besides an increase in unemployment, the credit crunch pushed the housing demand previously absorbed by easy access to mortgages towards a prohibitive rental sector. This has resulted in the skyrocketing of evictions, worsened by the interruption in 2015 of the anti-eviction *moratoria* enforced previously by the Prefect to protect the most vulnerable tenants. The skyrocketing of market rents, evictions and cuts in funds for public housing have resulted in one of the largest squatting movements in Europe which encompasses: *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa*, *Action - Agenzia Comunitaria Diritti* and *Blocchi Precari Metropolitan*. Besides using squatting practices as a means of political negotiation, the housing movement in Rome has historically developed its own anti-eviction discourses. After the crisis these anti-eviction discourses resurfaced. Eviction is a city-wide phenomenon in Rome; however, the majority of evictions are concentrated in the eastern axis of the city deeply impacted by gentrification and inhabited by a high percentage of immigrants. In this area, new anti-eviction platforms have emerged (eg. the *Antisfratto Roma Est*) which explicitly connect the evictions to 'gentrification' (see <http://www.inventati.org/macchiarossa/> and <https://stopsfrattiroma.wordpress.com/>).

3.5 Among the variegated forms of displacement, Rome and Madrid's squatters are now also experiencing displacement, legally defined as evacuation (*desalojo* in Spanish, *sgombero* in Italian) (see Figure 2). The criminalization of squatting is, we would argue, a new practice in state-led gentrification (cr. Pruijt 2013). Recently, austerity measures have criminalized squatting in Rome. Art. 5 of the New National Housing Framework impedes city council registration for those who are currently squatting and Decree n. 140 approved by the city of Rome criminalizes occupations and self-organized spaces which have claimed unused spaces. In Madrid a squatter does not have the support of institutions in their claim for public housing.



Figure 2. A squat in the face of commercial gentrification, Rome
2016

Resistance to austerity gentrification/displacement/eviction

4.1 It is difficult to investigate resistance to gentrification in Southern Europe where conceptualization of gentrification itself is limited. Gentrification has, however, become a 'commonsense' label used by citizens and urban social movements in Madrid and Rome who show a strong awareness of the causes of displacement, particularly its origins in the global financial crisis and privatization. Understanding the causes of displacement has enabled movements to choose pertinent strategies.

4.2 In Madrid, a city which was declared a non-eviction zone, several groups assumed an *explicit* anti-eviction and an *implicit* anti-gentrification discourse. *Yo no me voy* (<http://www.yonomevoy.com/>), for instance, is a group of former public housing residents, composed mainly of elderly people, working against the privatization

of public housing belonging to the *Empresa Municipal de la Vivienda* located in Madrid's city centre. *Yo no me voy* prevented the sale of former public housing belonging to the *Empresa Municipal de la Vivienda*, allowing about 200 tenants to continue living in the city centre at social rent under their 'old' contract - a small but significant victory in the face of the sale of public housing to international buyers. PAH Centro (<http://pahcentromadrid.org/>), the local PAH working in the central district, is closely monitoring evictions in relation to other variables such as the fact that those under eviction in the historic city centre are mainly immigrants. Their core actions are: mutual help and empowerment of those impacted by eviction, building awareness of the causes of eviction, seeking eradication of debt in exchange for the house (*dacion en pago*), a mortgage to rent transition or a demand for social rent from financial institutions, the recuperation of empty buildings (*obera social*) to re-house those impacted by eviction, and - last but not least - national housing reform. At the same time, they explicitly support local actions against gentrification. For instance, recently PAH Centro supported Lavapiés in the struggle against the construction of a hotel in their neighborhood, considered a symbol of the future commodification of the area which is already experiencing strong real estate pressures. At the same time, they advocate for the conservation and re-use of historic housing (*corrala*) as a co-housing laboratory. Another group, *PAH Vivienda Pública* is bridging anti-eviction discourse with the struggle for public housing embracing the squatting of private and public buildings.

4.3 In Rome the squatting movement has become, to some degree, an anti-gentrification movement, resisting practices of gentrification *in situ*. Several squatted buildings in which people have lived for decades are located on gentrification frontiers, for example, the former barracks in via del Porto Fluviale, Ostiense. The housing movement in Rome is also advocating for a *self-rehab* programme and a city driven rehabilitation programme aimed at recuperating the social housing quota within the existing fabric of the city. However, these strategic programmes lack the necessary implementations and financial support to fulfil their objectives. The anti-eviction platforms are part of the housing movement in Rome, and their attempt is to postpone eviction with legal action and pickets. Due to the chronic shortage of public housing, however, those under eviction either go into temporary accommodation (which turns into permanent accommodation since there is no public housing for them) or they become active in the housing movement and get re-housed within its structures. This is occurring because local authorities lack the wherewithal to respond to such emergency housing situations anymore and the state-run National Anti-Eviction Fund for those evictees where it is not their fault (*morosità incolpevole*), has not reached those in need due to the restrictions imposed by the allocation criteria.

4.4 One of the core differences in the case of Rome is the role played by Tenants Unions, lobbying for tenant's rights in public housing, e.g. *Asia* (see http://asia.usb.it/index.php?id=20&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=81366&cHash=53b69075db&MP=63-875 and *Unione Inquilini* (see <http://www.unioneinquilini.it/index.php?id=7522>). They have a strong critical mass and have been able to stop the privatization of public housing in a number of cases, such as in Privalle (interview with Tenants Union, 2016) and to set up a *de facto* anti-eviction free zone. Significantly, the housing movements and social centres have recently formed a citywide coalition, *Roma non si vende* (Rome is not for sale) which is resisting displacement and claiming the right to use and self-manage urban commons which are affordable, autonomous and self-organized; facilities for which Rome has long been well known (see the video of a 80 year old evicted and re-housed by the Action Housing Movement <https://www.facebook.com/157381365951/videos/vb.157381365951/10153557370095952/?type=2&theater>).



Figure 3. Resisting eviction/gentrification in Rome 2016

- 4.5** In comparison to in Madrid and Rome, in Athens there are no explicit groups who are directly resisting gentrification. The anti-eviction movement there overlaps with the wider anti-austerity movement and historic neighbourhoods' obduracy to gentrification is determined by endogenous factors such as the proprietary structure, high rates of vacancy and low housing demand. However, a set of emerging platforms have converged in an anti-auction protest whose core action is to stop the sale of auction property (see <http://pleistirasmoistop.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/stop.html>; <http://sos-katoikia.blogspot.co.uk/>; http://grecesolidarity.org/?page_id=1112). In addition, NGOs and solidarity movements in Athens have started projects to re-house the homeless who now encompass ex-middle class citizens, testifying to the severe impact of austerity on the middle classes^[2]. In Athens, one of the most significant outcomes of the prolonged crisis, evictions for rent arrears, is now being partially mitigated by the decline in housing prices and by the introduction of an informal 'landlord-tenant's agreement' through which the tenant gets to stay in the property paying the increasing cost of the housing bill. This informal agreement, however, is not a protection for tenants as much as a protection for the property owners who are threatened with the loss of their property due to severe taxation and indebtedness. This testifies to a sort of interclass solidarity that is for the most part absent in other cases.
- 4.6** It is interesting to note that, despite the specificities of the cases of Athens, Rome and Madrid, there are convergences between them. We can then talk about the rise of a new anti-displacement movement in Southern Europe, which uses discourses of anti-eviction, anti-speculation, anti-privatization and anti-auction and puts many strategic alternatives on the table. This new anti-displacement movement is enacting both a long-term strategic view and small, short-term steps. The main goal is to achieve a permanent and stable right for housing (whether in the form of social rent or ownership). In Rome the focus is on public housing provision as a way to re-house the tens of thousands of people squatting; in Madrid on anti-eviction measures and the protection of mortgage holders (many of them now occupiers recuperating empty property that belongs to financial institutions); in Athens on the re-adjustment of the debt to current market conditions. All of these practices challenge neoliberalism and its premises in the commodification and financialization of housing.
- 4.7** Moreover, this anti-displacement movement also underlines the need for the 'right to the city', something Marcuse (2009) argues for when he sets out his radical agenda: *expose, propose and politicize!* The anti-eviction platforms discussed here expose in the sense that they have built awareness of the causes of displacement and thus enacted informed resistance. They describe a crisis rooted in debt and a lack of housing affordability. In the short term: they act promptly to solve urgent housing needs, delaying and temporarily stopping evictions via legal bricolage and court actions, re-housing the evictees, etc. Squatting, as a means of negotiation, is often the last resort for anti-eviction platforms and occurs when all other attempts have failed. In the long term: they advocate for access to permanent housing and they directly challenge the premises of a proprietary society. They propose a number of alternatives: a transition from mortgage to rent, the conversion of empty properties belonging to the state/financial institutions into social rent, rehabilitation plans that explicitly include an anti-displacement approach, new tenant-landlord agreements that nurture interclass solidarity, prompt re-housing when eviction is unavoidable, and financial aid to mitigate eviction with the flexibility to include the wide range of households impacted. These groups politicize eviction as a collective problem, they make it visible and claim collective responsibility, they call for the cancellation of debts and public engagement in this 'new'

housing question.

Conclusion

5.1 Displacement before the 2008 economic crisis was not framed as a collective problem, at least in urban areas. This is no longer the case, for today at the global level, scholars recognise the emergence of a 'new logic of expulsion' (Sassen 2014:3), which encompasses diverse forms of gentrification and injustice around the globe (Lees et al. 2015, 2016). Anti-gentrification scholars/activists could learn from the political space of Southern Europe where anti-eviction platforms are mobilising, re-framing their strategies, adjusting themselves to different manifestations of austerity and enriching the repertoire of solutions and alternatives that are feasible in a time of scarcity and in the face of austerity gentrification. Anti-eviction platforms also stress the moral obligation of the state to rehouse those evicted/displaced from their homes. The state should be the interlocutor not the facilitator of displacement.

5.2 However, there are some limits to the way anti-eviction discourses and practices are performed today. Anti-eviction platforms in Southern Europe show different rates of engagement and collaboration with institutions, different awarenesses of displacement and eviction, and consequently different capacities for resistance. What is also notable is that in the current economic crisis in Southern Europe the 'urban poor' are not alone in fighting eviction: the impoverished middle classes who believed in the promise of social mobility through the process of 'property ownership' are now having to fight eviction too. The possibility of an interclass coalition to combat the housing crisis and gentrification is on the horizon. However, movements in Madrid are struggling to affirm an inter-class discourse on the right to housing, in Rome housing movements remain highly fragmented, and in Athens the displaced are still invisible and a proprietary society fears loss of its assets. What this means for gentrification in the cities of Southern Europe remains to be seen.

Notes

1 FP7-PEOPLE-2013 Marie Curie Action Fellowship 2014-16. 'AGAPE: Exploring anti-gentrification practices and policies in Southern European Cities' (PI: Lees,L. and CoI: Annunziata,S.).

2 From interviews in 2015 with *Solidarity for All and Human Humans and Klimaka*.

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