Stop the evictions! The diffusion of networked social movements and the emergence of a hybrid space: The case of the Spanish Mortgage Victims Group

Eva Álvarez de Andrés [a,1], María José Zapata Campos [b,c,*], Patrik Zapata [d,2]

[a] Grado en Fundamentos de la Arquitectura, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Camino del Molino, 28943 Fuenlabrada, Madrid, Spain
[b] Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School, Kilevej 14A, 4, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark
[c] Gothenburg Research Institute, School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Box 603, Sweden
[d] School of Public Administration, University of Gothenburg, P.O. Box 712, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Over 350,000 families have been evicted from their homes since Spain's property market crashed in 2008. The response of Spanish civil society has been the emergence of a networked social movement, Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH; the Spanish Mortgage Victims Group), to stop the evictions and change applicable legislation. This paper uses social movement theory and the travel of ideas metaphor from organization theory to understand how the PAH movement and its practices and tactics, originally born in Barcelona in 2009, have successfully spread to over 160 cities and stopped over 1135 evictions throughout the country. We argue that the ability of networked social movements to quickly replicate has fuelled their power to resist, protest, and induce change. We contend that the fast growth of networked social movements in Global North and South cities, is fuelled by its ability to create a hybrid space between communication networks and occupied urban space in which face-to-face assemblies and protests take place.

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Introduction

In the last few years, networked social movements, such as the Occupy Wall Street (OWS), Indignados, and Taksim Park protests, have emerged based on mobile or wireless communication networks. Most of these movements share political non-affiliation, distrust of mass media, horizontal organizational structures, and reliance on the Internet and local assemblies for collective debate and decision-making (Castells, 2012). Based on the case of one such networked movement, the Spanish Mortgage Victims Group (PAH), and informed by social movement theory (e.g., Castells, 2012) and the travel of ideas metaphor from organization theory (e.g., Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1996), we argue that the ability of these movements to spread and grow rapidly is what has fuelled their power to resist, protest, and induce change (Schneiberg, 2013). We also argue that the fast growth of the PAH is underpinned by its ability to create a hybrid space (Castells, 2012)

between communication networks and occupied urban space in which face-to-face assemblies and protests occur. Inspired by Robinson's claim for more comparative studies among 'ordinary cities' - beyond confined categories such as Western, third world, developed, or developing (Robinson, 2006: 1) we suggest that the transferability of this paper's findings can contribute to a better understanding of networked social movements beyond anti-eviction and housing movements, as well to other cities in the Global North and South sharing similar conditions (Álvarez de Andrés, 2013).

Over 350,000 families have been evicted from their homes in Spain since the property market crashed in 2008. In the event of inability to make mortgage payments, Spanish law forces homeowners not only to return the property to the bank in partial repayment of the mortgage but also to continue repaying the part of the loan estimated to remain after the property has been liquidated. The response of Spanish civil society has been the emergence of a networked social movement, the Spanish Mortgage Victims Group — Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) — to protest and stop the evictions and to lobby for change to existing legislation.

The PAH, originating in Barcelona in 2009, has spread to over 160 cities and has stopped more than 1135 (May 2014) evictions

through Spain. With the help of social networks and alliances with neighbourhood associations and Indignados, PAH "flashmobs" block the evictions of people who have failed to make their mortgage payments. The anti-eviction movement also supports householders in negotiations with banks to prevent evictions and has succeeded in negotiating hundreds of "payment by account". Moreover, it provides help and shelter for evicted families, arranging for over 1180 people to rent some of the vacated houses for an affordable price. The PAH has also led protests and campaigns to change the eviction laws and has succeeded in presenting a popular legislative initiative with over 1.5 million signatures. In only four years, the PAH has gained the trust of Spanish citizens, as 80% of Spanish citizens claim to share the demands made by this movement (Metroscopia/El Pais, 26/03/2013).

Next we briefly review the literature on urban social movements and present the theoretical framework based on the hybrid space concept and the travel of ideas metaphor. The methodology used to gather and analyse the data is then introduced. The history and practice of the PAH are then presented. The paper concludes by discussing the case through the lens of our theoretical framework.

Networked social movements and socio–spatial change

Social movements such as the PAH are social actors making claims for and against certain practices in order to resist and transform oppressive institutional arrangements (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008) and, ultimately, to change values (Castells, 2009). Organizations and groups embedded within institutions attempt, and eventually succeed, in changing these institutional arrangements, drawing on contradictions to introduce new practices, assert new visions, and contest existing arrangements, evoking legitimacy crises and making sense of new practices. Social movements emerge from and exploit contradictions, or multiple logics, to forge new paths or produce change.

Contexts (at the national, regional, and global levels) shape contestation and collective action, creating openings for challengers and shaping their capacities and resources to produce change. Social movements often emerge via a sequence of shocks, disruptions, and deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization processes (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008). Shocks such as economic crises or new laws evoke uncertainty, so sense-making and new groups emerge to define the situation and establish their solutions as new bases of order (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008: 653). Regardless of whether or not social movements succeed in establishing their new practices, their legacy remains in the collective memory of the community, producing meaning either through history or a changed built environment. This also shapes the emergence of new social movements, since paths may emerge in multiple waves (Castells, 2004).

The capacity of social movements to bring about cultural, political, and social change relies on an array of events, arrangements, infrastructures, contingencies, and practices. One of these factors is the capacity of movements to recruit members and organizations, connect to networks, mobilize resources, and gain political support to pressure states and other powerful actors to adopt new practices, laws, and policies. Their strength is often based on the use of protests, boycotts, and even direct action to dramatize problems (in what are called event-mediated social movements; Castells, 2004, 2009) and disrupt daily operations and routines (e.g., Hoffman, 1999). More specifically, in the context of the network society, mobile and wireless networks facilitate the creation of networks of trust and resistance: messages spread virally though these networks and always rely on a nearby source (Castells, 2009). Communication is therefore central to social movements and lies at

the heart of the fast growth of many of them (see, e.g., the Zapatistas movement and its use of media, the Tahir protests in Egypt, or the OWS movement). It is important to understand that the emergence of these networked social movements relies on the diffusion of their messages online through info-actions from home. Movement supporters and sympathizers who are not activists in physical protests or actions can still help virally spread the movement's message through their social networks. An informational ecosystem for conversational flows is created by connecting mutually interacting applications and spaces (Fuster Morell, 2012).

Movements need to negotiate a balance between the openness of their claims and the connections needed in order to spread and gain access to additional militants and supporters (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2012). For example, movements such as OWS spread globally because their claims and messages were "global in … [their] causes, implementation and planning" (Castañeda, 2012: 318). While the use of similar symbols and narratives to magnify resonance in the public sphere remains crucial, these movements also largely depend on how they are connected to local social and political networks (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2012).

Furthermore, social movements rely on their ability to frame and reframe issues and to theorize, transpose, translate, and recombine institutional logics (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008) to increase acceptance of their claims and foster a favourable public opinion climate for diffusing alternative practices. As a result, social movements become agents of theorization, classification, and diffusion. In practice, social movements devote considerable energy and time to theorizing their claims and framing them as ranging from thematic-specific to meta-political in a broader context (Fuster Morell, 2012). For example, community-based recycling movements in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s framed their recycling efforts as part of a broader project to restructure capitalism and reframe the social order of the consume-and-discard society (Lounsbury, 2005; Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003). Their success often relies on combining new elements with prevailing models, myths, and concerns (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008) by weaving a coherent and credible narrative (Chu, 2008). They also devote considerable energy to disseminating their approaches via conferences, manifestos, mass media, and social networks. Certainly, a favourable public opinion climate enhances the prospects of social movements, for example, during economic crises when citizens are more sensitive to issues such as home evictions or during general protests against a socio–economic system that has led to high inequality and unemployment.

Of the many possible factors explaining the success of a movement, this paper focuses on the emergence of hybrid space (Castells, 2012) in contemporary networked social movements, informed by social movement theory and the ability of new movements to grow rapidly, based on organization theory.

The emergence of hybrid space in networked social movements

Contemporary social movements have been described as networked (Juris, 2004, 2008) since they are organized as autonomous and decentralized networked local cells, each movement constituting "an amorphous nebula of indistinct shape and with variable density" (Melucci, 1996: 113). These new movements are less hierarchical, more participatory, and based on more interactive and self-configurable communication networks (Castells, 2012). Even so, they are characterized by the ability to be strongly embedded in other networks (Juris, 2004) as well as in territory and place (Halvorsen, 2012). In other words, despite the indisputable relevance of networks (Juris, 2004), place and territory continue to play a significant role in the emergence and development of networked social movements (Halvorsen, 2012).