

A brief reflection on Conxa Pérez's political commitments

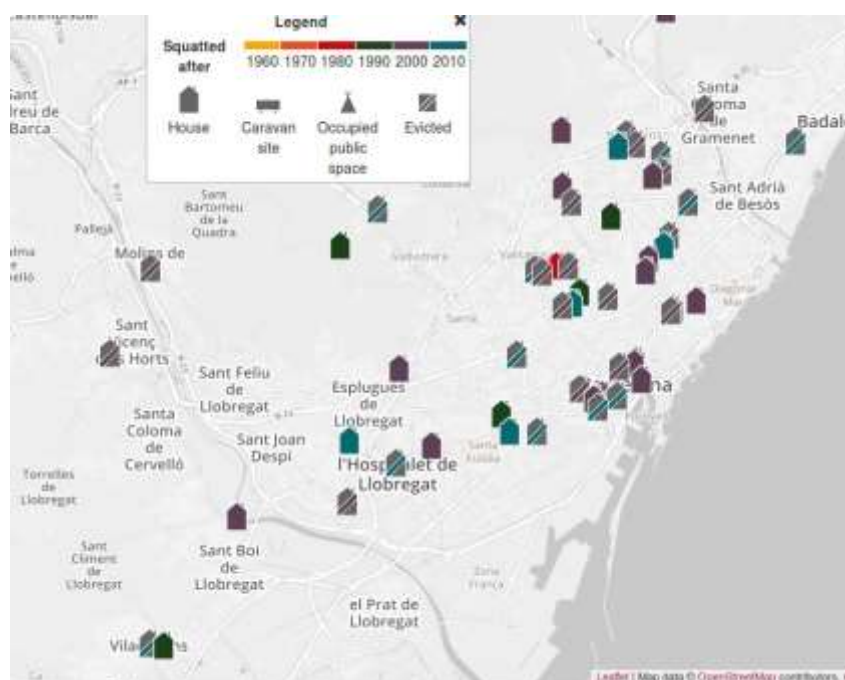
Social Library Conxa Pérez

Introduction

In Barcelona, squatted spaces (and non-squatted ones too) have created real alternatives to the hegemonic capitalist system. Non-commercial relations have been created in spaces where different generations, social classes, cultures and genders live together in relative harmony. Almost everywhere where the crisis hit, popular reactions have come about, usually with splendid results.

As is by now well known, the crisis has left the privileges of the elites untouched. Indeed, before the crisis, Spain had over forty banks. Since then, there have been a lot of mergers that have reduced the total amount of banks to less than ten. Once it became clear that banks were too caught up in events to keep an eye on their properties, the squatting of derelict bank offices mushroomed. These projects are, as the squatting movement has always been, quite diverse. Still, the awareness of bringing about a new model of squats has been acknowledged and discussed collectively. El Banc Expropiat has shown that the strategy of inclusiveness can be reconciled with radicalism, since it is a place where basic libertarian values are promoted by a very heterogeneous mix of people. Other groups found bank offices located in prime locations, and are having similarly successful interactions with their neighbors, as well as with social movements in general.

Figure 1 – Existing squatted social centers in Barcelona by 2016



Source: <http://maps.squat.net/en/cities>

Figure 1 shows that squatting to create social centers is a widespread practice in Barcelona, although for practical reasons we will limit ourselves to the ones created in bank offices. Throughout 2014, six new bank offices have been squatted, mostly in the Eixample neighborhood, the middle class residential neighborhood of Barcelona. It occupies most of the territorial space in Barcelona and was never previously a place where people squatted to create social centres. There have been other new kinds of squatting actions as well but we do not have space to describe them here. First, l'Entrebanc came about in April. Then, came La Vaina, La Porka, La Industria, El Rec, and others. Counted together with El Banc Expropiat and the Casal Tres Liris (squatted as part of the campaign to stop El Banc's eviction), there are now eight squatted bank offices in Barcelona, as well as others in Girona and Blanes. This article has been written by people who participate in the upkeep of Ateneu l'Entrebanc.

Figure 2 – Entrance of Ateneu l'Entrebanc the day of its 2nd birthday



Source: authors

The project to create Ateneu l'Entrebanc had been thought through carefully before the place actually got squatted. The space was a former office of a bank and was chosen because it stands right next to Germanetes, which is a 5000 square meter space of which 500 square meters were temporarily leased free of charge to the community. Some neighbors related to the 15M assembly of Eixample Esquerre made a proposal for a public project called Pla Buits [TN: "Plan for the Empties"]. Just after the City Hall finally gave access to the people, we opened this bank office in order to strengthen the infrastructure available to the neighbors. We've had all kinds of activities: guitar classes, English classes, yoga, gymnastics, tattooing, etc. There have been study groups on medicinal plants, child abuse by state institutions, anti-technological thought, critical economics, to name just a few. A network that coordinates self-managed study groups often meets at Entrebanc. There are also some collectives who come regularly, such as the neighborhood's 15M and feminist assemblies. We also participate in community events such as an cooperative market that happens nearby once a month. There is a weekly assembly that manages the space and an irregular assembly that allows collectives who are active in the social center to coordinate.

As Conxa Pérez died in February 2014, just a few months before Entrebanc got squatted, the library collective decided to give her name to the library. Conxa Pérez was 98 when she passed away, after living most of her life in the neighbourhood. It is precisely because she was committed to the struggles of our neighbourhood that the library of Ateneu l'Entrebanc became a tribute to Conxa. Furthermore, the library project is part of the Social Libraries Network, a collaborative initiative. The idea is to gather and lend books that are hard to find in public libraries. Thus, the focus is on books that speak about social change, critical theories, radical projects, and so on. Besides adopting the name of Conxa Pérez, the library collective did some research on her personal history. This article summarizes the findings of this collective and the opinions of those who had the opportunity to know her in person. As we chose to present the integral fragments of text provided by the neighbors, the narrative below oscillates between a geographical and a chronological description of Conxa's biography.

Some inspiring episodes of Conxa Pérez's life

Right next to the space where Ateneu l'Entrebanc is located, one can find the market of Sant Antoni. There, Conxa sold jewelry and underwear during the fascist regime of Franco (1939-1975). Conxa's stall became a hideout for anarchists, who found shelter in her stall and held political meetings there. According to Laura and Salva, neighbors of Ateneu l'Entrebanc:

"When Conxa returned from France, businessmen did not hire those who had collaborated with the republic and the stall she installed at the market was the way she found to earn a living and get something to eat. Yet again,

her way of being explains why she hid anarchists and held political meetings there” (21/07/16)

But Conxa Pérez's ties with the neighborhood of Sant Antoni-Eixample Esquerre go further. Advancing into Sant Antoni, at Avinguda Mistral, Conxa Pérez was active in Ateneu Faros, which existed throughout the Second Republic (1931-1936). Like other Ateneus, “Faros” was divided in several sections: hiking, Esperanto, theater, culture and commented readings. Ateneus are popular cultural, social, and political centres that started to multiply in the late XIX century, to then become central to the people's self-organization before the Civil War. Back then, Conxa didn't live in the neighborhood. She lived in the neighborhood of Les Corts, but she felt attracted by Ateneu Faros, maybe because it was more active than places in her own neighborhood. In any case, Conxa Pérez and twenty other youngsters regularly left their neighborhood to participate in Ateneu Faros.

Figure 3 – An old photo of Conxa Pérez



Source: libcom.org

Conxa was also a member of the Graphic Arts group of the major Spanish anarcho-syndicalist organization, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT, "National Confederation of Labour"). This labour union "became the beacon of international anarchism in the 1930s. During the early stages of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), its membership reached almost two million and it engaged in the organization of a social revolution in the form of industrial and agrarian collectivization" (Romanos, 2013, 3). Conxa stated that she would bring young women like her to the syndicate, but that they usually dropped out quite fast. On the contrary, she soon discovered that women tended to feel more comfortable in the Ateneus, and usually ended up finding a space of their own there (Prado and Rodrigo, 2013, 380). The aforementioned facts also demonstrate that Conxa Pérez was quite active in the neighborhood of Entrebanc, Sant-Antoni-Eixample Esquerre. We know that Conxa Pérez was the daughter of a well-known member of the CNT and that during her youth she participated, first, in the conflicts over the Second Republic and, later on, in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). By 1933, and as the economic situation deteriorated, the social conflict rose to unprecedented levels. Several uprisings take place throughout in Catalan cities with a strong presence of the CNT and elsewhere throughout Spain, such as in Bajo Aragón, Rioja Alta, etc. According to Prado Esteban and Rodrigo Mora (2013: 380) Conxa "participated in an active fashion in the armed uprising of January 8 of 1933, handling weapons and grenades to assault military barracks. Her gun was found on her when she got arrested." Although these authors correctly identify her militancy in the Graphic Arts group of CNT, Conxa's version of what happened during that uprising sheds some doubts on their narrative:

"In 1933, the dockers initiated a generalized strike. Pickets were formed, and we went to help them disrupt work. At a workshop, they told us that they wanted to finish a job. We left with the impression that they were trying to deceive us. And when we got back there in the afternoon, they were still working normally. So we got a little rough with them, and started breaking windows and things. The police finally came and managed to arrest almost all of us. A comrade was carrying a gun and told me "Conxa, hide it". So once I got to the police station I asked to go to the toilet, to try to get rid of it. But the police had figured me out already and a woman searched me. They wanted to know who owned the gun. Obviously, no one believed me when I told them that I had found it in the countryside. They were pressuring me to tell them that it was my brother's gun. Finally, the real owner of the gun confessed it was his gun. Both of us were convicted, for unlawful possession. Still, we weren't charged for the broken windows. Anyway, that led me to the women's prison." (Pérez, 2006, 5)

Thus, Prado and Rodrigo's claims seem very much exaggerated. In any case, Conxa stands out as a virtuous person who was very much engaged in the political struggles of her time. Later on, Conxa did go to the front with the militias in July 1936 at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. According to her

friend Llum Ventura, she went to the front of Belchite, where she was shot in the leg. Thus, Conxa only stayed around six months at the front, and then went back to Barcelona. She felt that she had more to offer at the rearguard of the armed conflict. First, she worked in a bakery. Then, she participated in a maternity hospital. Further on, she worked in a collectivized ammunition factory. A comrade from Ateneu Entrebanc, Nani Miras, recalls the impression Conxa left on her:

I met Conxa at the retirement home of Barceloneta, her friend Llum was also with us. I went there with a friend of mine that wanted to ask her about the ammunition factory she had worked in many years ago. Conxa had worked in a factory of a hospital that initially produced lipstick and then became a factory that produced bullets. I was surprised at how little she was, and the energy she unleashed. She talked about many things. She talked about how the uprising in Plaza España was organized [to face up to the fascist coup]. She talked about the trucks they used, on which they installed metal plaques. She got on one of those trucks with two comrades, and went towards Via Laietana, where the trucks were riddled with bullets. She let us touch her leg, that still had some shrapnel in it... Ken Loach also touched her leg when he came to shoot "Tierra y libertad". Her eyes sparkled when she told us how emotive it was to open the doors of the city jail. Indeed, she had spent some time in jail, because she had been arrested once while carrying a gun. It was very exciting to hear her tell all those stories. I don't recall what she said about the factory. We didn't tape the interview, because we had planned to come back another day, but I ended up not going to this second meeting. She was a woman of action that transmitted her energy. I was deeply impressed by her courage and her anarchist experiences, such as the uprising of July 1936 (30/03/16)

Figure 4 – Propaganda poster saying “the militia needs you!”



Source: Bllibertari.org

Conxa had first hand experiences of the Spanish Revolution, in which many workers took over factories and collectivized the land (Garrido González: 1979; Pérez Baró, 1970; Ranzato: 1977). The spontaneous character of the collectivization-socialization process implies that it was not the result of some instructions given by a party, a syndicate or a state agency. It was the result of the decisions of workers, and it was made possible by their own organizational structures, such as the aforementioned CNT, whose neighborhood committees had an important role. Thus, workers put into practice their ideas and conceptions about how society and the economy should be run. These ideas were the result of the libertarian culture that had been shared through ateneus, syndicates, cooperatives, etc. (Castells Duran: 2003: 22; Gomez Casas: 1969). The experience of the Revolution of 1936 has become a reference point for all those looking for historical cases where anarchist ideals were applied (Carrasquer, 1985; Leval 1972, 1974). Moving on, Llum Ventura adds some

detail to Conxa's engagement during the Civil War, and tells us a bit more about the dark period that followed:

Conxa used to tell us a story that happened to her when the war began. She was at a bar called “Los Federales” with some comrades. As the uprising began, they went to the barracks of Pedralbes to get weapons. It was only after leaving the barracks that they realized that they had forgotten to get ammunition, so they had to go back. After the war, she passed through several concentration camps in France. In one of them, she fell in love with a doctor of the camp, and got pregnant with her only son, Ramón. Then, the doctor went to Germany to fight against Hitler, and Conxa never heard of him again. She got back to Spain without suffering too much mistreatment from the fascists because she was carrying her 8-month old son. Once she got back to Barcelona, she met her first boyfriend again, who had just become a widower. They got together, and he became the step-father of her son. This is when they set up the stall in Sant Antoni, where at first they sold underwear. Conxa was very fond of her stall, and later on she also sold jewels. The stall was also used as an hideout for dissidents of Franco during the dictatorship. She was a virtuous woman who never gave up on her principles. I feel lucky to have known her. (11/04/16)

After the death of Franco and the fall of his regime, Conxa Pérez participated in the organization of the first neighbor associations and in the restructuring of CNT. She was also a founding member of the association of Women of 1936, a collective that was created in 1997 for women who had participated in social and political movements during the Civil War. This association had the goal to promote the experiences of Republican women and organized, for example, talks in public schools. This group came to an end in 2006, as the members of the groups were impeded by their increasing age.

Figure 5 – A recent photo of Conxa Pérez



Source: datecuenta.org

Conclusions

This text is only a brief summary of the turbulent life of Conxa Pérez, who was a member of the anarchist militia and a tireless agitator. She is an example amongst others of the people that made possible this Revolution, a revolution that was brief, yet real: the brief summer of anarchy, as it had been called. Thus, the failure of the revolution was followed by the dark period of the dictatorship, which lasted almost forty years. But those who struggled didn't surrender, indeed they found new ways to transform reality through their actions.

It is very important to remember persons such as Conxa Pérez, and to make an effort to understand the world through her experiences. We know that times have changed, and that the society we live in today is not the same as the one that existed during the Revolution. But this doesn't mean that their point of view loses validity. It simply means that we need to update it, and adapt it to the current period, discarding those things that are not useful, while learning from the ones that can make a difference. "Anarchism is movement", Tomás Ibáñez once said. Ibáñez was born in Zaragoza after the war, in 1944, and was involved in French libertarian movements until the death of Franco allowed him to return from exile. Ibáñez means that we shouldn't understand anarchism as a rigid and inflexible ideological theory, but instead see it as a series of ideas (such as the struggle against all kinds of domination, for instance) that can be adapted to each time period. Factors such as globalization, the digital era or the energy

crisis seem to be crucial strategic factors nowadays. But this should not eclipse the testimonies of the past, such as the one of Conxa Pérez, which can still serve as an example to us nowadays.

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