

Chapter 24

The Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Social Movements for Alternative Livelihoods



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24.1 Introduction

The Barcelona School of Ecological Economics has very strong ties with activist movements. In this chapter, I will show some examples of how it fits with social movements for alternative livelihoods. This is an incredibly valuable characteristic of the Barcelona school that owes much to the political dissidence of Joan Martinez-Alier and of many of his colleagues and disciples.

I moved from Italy to Barcelona to do my Ph.D. in ecological economics in late 2001 and have been living almost entirely in the Can Masdeu community, a rurban squat home to about 25 people and with an active social center, located on the hills of Collserola. One day in January 2002, when I was still more of a tourist than a resident, knew no activists in Barcelona and only had few acquaintances, my classmates Jesus Ramós and Miquel Ortega invited me to join them in a talk on climate change they would have offered a few days later in Can Masdeu. To my joyful surprise – I always had a sympathy for occupied spaces that cost me a reputation among family members of me being a rebel with no serious professional future – I could combine my studying career with an alternative lifestyle and radical activism.

What could explain such coincidence has a lot to do with Joan's legacy with anti-Franco republican activism and his eco-socialist ideas, inspired by nineteenth-century Narodnik anarchist movement and the Barcelona Anarchist government in 1936. The book of his memoirs (Martinez-Alier, 2019) is an excellent source of facts of his life and personal visions.

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The reader can learn about his detention on October 12, 1992, when protesting the 500 years of the European invasion of the American continent – and consequent genocide – or about his smuggling through the French border of books forbidden by Franco, who is indeed the most named person in his book. A clear image of his antiestablishment vision, critical of both political and academic institutions, is contrasted by his sympathy for grassroots movements, indigenous people, peasant struggles, and degrowth ideas.

Barcelona, also known as the Rosa de Foc, is a fertile ground for political dissidence. This is due to its enduring essence as a rebel city; as the capital of the Catalan culture has been for centuries in antagonism with the Spanish central state. This is manifested in many antagonists and social movements that flourish in the city from the grassroots up to Catalan and municipal institutions. The largely unnoticed work of Eduard Masjuan (2000) – one of the first Ph.D. supervised by Joan – offers an excellent historical analysis of the interconnections between anarchist and ecological movements in the Iberian Peninsula. The mediatic relevance of Catalan independentist movements is just the tip of a widespread structural nonconformity across Catalan society. Acts of popular and institutional disobedience are frequent in Catalonia while a portrait of Gandhi has always been hanging on Joan's office wall.

Having shown the legacy of Joan's and the Barcelona school with social movements and grassroots practices, this chapter focuses on how the analysis of alternative livelihoods contributes to ecological economics. I look at those that, by seeking emancipation from the capitalist system and its political establishment, set up self-managed communities and workplaces. Joan's seminal work on the environmentalism of the poor shows how the poor do not necessarily label themselves as environmentalists because they depend on a well-preserved local environment and the services it offers, and they rely on their traditional knowledge rather than technological progress. From an ecological economics perspective, one could argue that the poor are good managers of natural capital even if they do not behave as the growth-obsessed managers of capitalist enterprises of the green economy. In the same vein, the alternative livelihoods here analyzed have a great relevance in ecological economics because they have a lower social metabolism – as shown in my Ph.D. research (Cattaneo, 2008) – and because they constitute examples of grassroots action, self-management, and political activism. Even more, they are relevant for the degrowth branch of the Barcelona school as they constitute visible real-life practices and contribute to the imaginaries of the pluriversal project, as explained by Demaria in his chapter.

Since Joan has used history to track the ecological dimension in economics as far back as the school of the Physiocrats in the eighteenth century, for an essay in his honor I am including the oldest case studies of alternative housing that I could track to offer insight on how alternative communities evolve in the long term.

The first is the earliest case of alternative livelihoods in the Iberian Peninsula, at least since the death of Franco, and is based in Zaragoza. The second is the first squatted eco-community of Barcelona, which I consider the most meaningful example of the legacy of the Barcelona school, with its local activists also inspirational for the more well-known example of Can Masdeu. Finally, I consider another

squatted place – to my knowledge among the three oldest examples of political squatting in the Spanish State – which was prompted as an environmental justice conflict at the time of the construction of the Barcelona city bypass.

24.2 Case Studies

24.2.1 *E.L.*

This is an intentional community that is based on radical principles such as mutual aid, horizontal decision-making, and gender equality. For keeping anonymity, I will refer to it as E.L. The beginning of this communal experience (in 1972) is related to the 1968 movement. Although it did not have a strong resonance such as it did in Paris or Prague, the movement offers with E.L. a case of continuity of nearly half a century, something very rare to witness.

In 1968, far-left communist parties – some of which of Maoist inspiration – and student activists with no party affiliation took control of the Physics Faculty at the University of Zaragoza. They were self-managed and offering seminars on topics forbidden by the Franco dictatorship, such as questioning the mononuclear family, and published a bulletin.¹ Formal teaching was suspended by the State in 1971–1972 and the faculty became self-organized by students: a truly revolutionary spirit was permeating it.

Meanwhile, interest in alternative livelihoods was rising and several student communities were set up, whose political lines got inspiration from communes abroad such as those in Germany. E.L. was established in October 1973 by a group of 11 recently graduated students moving into two apartments – first rented and later bought – in a working-class neighborhood. In contrast to the acratia tendency of the rest of the students' communes – which also did not last too long – E.L. has been since the beginning a highly organized project with a very strict working schedule. It progressively increased the reach of the communal aspect: initially limited to sharing the cost of rent and to mandatory participation in few house chores, it evolved towards a more comprehensive communal organization. Family boundaries were extended and personal income from work collectively shared. Its members were mainly employed as teachers, with a preference for the private sector. In any case they stayed away from the university system – against which they had fought a lot – and that in turn avoided employing former conflictive students.

Their pragmatic capacity to shape ideals into real practice was also evident in the choice of the community location: a working-class district where they could reach more easily the proletarian mass and work towards raising their class conscience. In the beginning they were highly criticized for their anti-conformism with respect

¹ See for instance those copies in the deposit of Autonomous University of Barcelona: <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/56757> (last retrieved on October 12, 2020).

to socially established gender and family norms. For instance, men and women were equally involved in care tasks. However, thanks to their capacity to create good relationships and to work hard towards the common good, they soon got accepted. Simple actions such as cleaning the corridors and stairs of their block of apartments, actively participating in the creation of an adult school or, in later years, offering care support for the ageing parents of the community members are all examples that have contributed to their social acceptance.

Experimenting with new family relationships could be perceived as one of their most revolutionary acts – the personal is in first place political. In 1974, the first of eight community children was born; they would all be raised collectively. As a matter of fact, E.L. members nowadays still differentiate between their biological and their non-biological children. As the community grew in population, more flats were rented – reaching a maximum of four, all in the same neighborhood – and children would move and live together in one of these apartments from a very early age; between 1978 and 1980, two couples left the project and later one woman joined it. Throughout its history, the project has maintained family arrangements that are explicitly opposed to the bourgeois traditional family, and a recurring debate has dealt with how to combine such a challenge with children education that is not sectarian. For instance, while severely limiting the use of television and convincing children that *Mazinger-Z* (a popular cartoon) was a fascist and a macho, children were going to schools in the neighborhood. In addition, E.L. did not follow the leaning of intentional communities of the time towards open relationships and no couples.

In 1989, they bought land and built one collective house for the seven adults and five children still living together, which reduced the previous dispersion of the community in different flats. They, however, remained in the neighborhood in which they had already set up good relationships; the children were schooled, played, and had friends in the neighborhood while the adults worked a lot in networking, fomenting adults' schools, and avoiding the elitism that their university degree would have allowed them to generate. Throughout its history the project's mutual aid principles have allowed house members to maintain a good quality of life, with enough free time to invest in local activism and the privilege to still have a coherent lifestyle with the initial principles, 50 years down the way.

24.2.2 *Kan Pasqual*

In part, this essay is a praise to Marc Gavaldá: among those without a Ph.D., Marc is probably Joan's favorite student, with whom I share some publications and teaching at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), both of us as precarious professors. Marc lives an eclectic life between research, journalism, permacultural house building, and activism (see for instance Gavaldà, 2003).

If the genesis of the Barcelona School of Ecological Economics is associated to the launching of its Ph.D. program in 1997 – with Eduard Masjuan and Fander

Falconi as the first doctors – its gestation can be related to the meeting – organized by Joan – where the idea of the International Society of Ecological Economics and its academic journal were discussed and the consequent launching, in 1992, of the undergraduate degree in environmental science, with Marc Gavaldà in the first cohort of students.

In the heyday of the Barcelona squatter's movement – fall 1996 – Marc witnessed the brutal and spectacular eviction of Cine Princesa (Batista, 2002), a short-lived social center in via Laietana that was using the premises of a former cinema to offer countercultural activities at low cost, provide a visible example of a self-managed alternative to capitalism right in the heart of the city, and serve as the hub of the Barcelona squatter's movement. The movement was like a rising star and posing a serious threat to the city's political establishment. It is in those post-Olympics years that tension between anarchist and anti-nationalist movements on one side and capitalist and institutional ones on the other was culminating into astonishing actions, such as the substitution in the palace of the Catalan Generalitat of the squatter's flag for the Spanish one. However, there were strong protests and political repressions, such as the one against the 500th anniversary, which Joan reminds us very well in his *memoires* (2019).

Few months after the eviction of Cine Princesa, the squatter's movement decided that it was better to decentralize into the neighborhoods and so a group of students in environmental science at UAB joined forces with other activists and decided to occupy an empty farmhouse whose aim was to “open the rural frontier to the squatting practice” (<https://radar.squat.net/ca/barcelona/kan-pasqual>).

Kan Pasqual is among the five oldest squats in Barcelona and has served as a bridge between urban squatting and rural squatting in the Iberian Peninsula. Until the early 1990s the squatters' movement was more related to young punks who looked for abandoned places to be used for playing their music concerts with no hassles (Jony, 2011), while reclaiming spaces for social interaction and enhancing the right to housing. The earliest squats were mainly located around the districts of Gracia and Guinardó; in working-class belt towns, such as Cornellà or Terrassa, and in Sants – a district with a blue-collar heritage of cooperatives. With Kan Pasqual, opening the rural frontier meant introducing the environmental agenda into countercultural squatting with activists finding a common heritage in the university degree that had been recently created under Joan's leadership.

Concern for the environment did not take too long in turning into action: among the squatters' movement the customary approach to energy supply was, and still is, getting an illegal connection to the electricity grid – granting access to free energy, which is often abused. Contrary to that custom, the Kan Pasqual collective heroically cut the electricity connection and turned candle lights on, spending the early winter months nearly into darkness until the first recycled solar panels and batteries were installed.

A quarter of a century later, Kan Pasqual is still a vibrant radical eco-community (Gavaldà & Cattaneo, [forthcoming](#)) that, conserving a strong anti-capitalist spirit, remains disconnected from the electricity grid, inspires new generations of activists, and represents one example for degrowth into practice.

24.2.3 *Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris*

The origin of Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris (Ateneu 9B) is an early case of environmental justice in the Nou Barris district, Barcelona. In the 1970s, environmental racism awareness was raising in the United States (Bullard, 1983) but not yet in Europe. Nonetheless, the case of Ateneu 9B even if still quite unknown in the environmental justice framing, deserves a mention. In the occasion of its 40th anniversary, a historical recompilation of its trajectory has been produced (Tudela, 2018), here briefly summarized.

Barcelona's population was rapidly expanding at the time, with migrants flowing in from depressed areas of the peninsula and infrastructures being built quickly, often without care for environmental standards. To the north of the city, in a forgotten peripheral neighborhood standing next to the building site of the city bypass, the municipality installed an asphalt plant that immediately raised neighbors' concerns who reclaimed cleaner air for their lungs. In early January 1976, after receiving false promises from the municipality, 200 people invaded the premises of the asphalt plant and sabotaged it. These were times when, after 40 years of dictatorship, the anarchist movement was flowering in Barcelona; meanwhile, the municipal administration was also failing in the provisioning of basic cultural services so that, few months after its sabotage, the neighbors squatted the place, organized a cultural festival that lasted 30 h, and was attended by more than 50,000 people: the sociocultural project of the Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris was born.

After the first 2 years in which a lot of activities and performances were held, both in the space of Ateneu and in the neighborhood streets, participation decreased dramatically in 1979 and 1980 and the first problems arrived. On the one hand, many activists were co-opted by the new institutions of the democratic government; on the other hand, the abuse of heroine destroyed the lives of many young people of these peripheral areas (for an account of the general sociopolitical context of those years, see Tudela & Cattaneo, 2016). With renewed strengths, activities picked up again in 1981. Since then, Ateneu 9B has been characterized by a long and steady trajectory marked by artistic and cultural performances, circus and theatre education, community work in the neighborhood – which remains one of the most marginalized – and participation in local politics and cultural manifestations.

The project was originally managed via informal processes and voluntary work. As it became more established, it formalized its relationship with the municipality, which granted some funding – so that paid work positions could be opened – and in late 1984 conceded access to another building, up until then not used, and where a restaurant and a bar was opened. In late 1985 the reformation of the building begun – which had been reclaimed for a while. In 1989 the project was constituted into a legal entity, more workers were employed, and in the early 1990s, with further reforms to the building, Ateneu de Nou Barris became a core cultural project in the neighborhood first and then in the city. Since then, it has balanced the high-quality cultural activities with community work aimed at improving social conditions in

the neighborhood. Its capacity to remain a self-managed institution inspired by anarchist principles, however, is put under constant pressure by its increasing institutionalization and the need to square its financial budget.

24.3 Discussion and Conclusions

These three examples show early cases of movements for alternative livelihoods that have persisted over several decades. One is linked to the Barcelona School of Ecological Economics, one is an early case of environmental justice in Barcelona, and one is an early example of politically inspired alternative livelihoods that is still alive nearly half a century later in Zaragoza.

First, by observing some examples from the early times, we learn that the Barcelona School of Ecological Economics is directly or indirectly related to activism for alternative livelihoods. Its genesis and gestation have coincided, in the 1990s, with the establishment of Kan Pasqual and the heyday of the squatters' movement in Barcelona. The school and Joan's activism are related to the anarchist character of Barcelona and Catalonia, which has its roots in the glorious experience of 1936, as first-hand documented by George Orwell (1938). Zaragoza has a similar but less well-known history, with many grassroots experiments and social movements appeared in the city since 1975 (Vari@s Autor@s, 2009). In both cities, beginning with the 1968 movement and the end of the dictatorship, these new practices and movements could flourish in a social context that favored their development. To this extent, the school is set on the fertile ground of Iberian and in particular Catalan dissidence reinvigorated by the end of 40 years of dictatorship and the centuries-old struggle for Catalan independence and against the Spanish State.

Second, a continuity in politically inspired and alternative livelihoods can be established between the present and 1968, which is a date nearly one decade earlier than the first examples of squatting in the Spanish State (Aguilera et al., 2017; Debelle et al., 2018). E.L. has not been analyzed before and constitutes an example of how ideas travel across borders. Like the first countercultural squatters in the Barcelona of the 1980s got inspiration from the Anglo-Saxon context, early intentional communities connected with the 1968 ideals took inspiration from abroad and then they shaped – in the case of E.L. – their project adapted to the local neighborhood context and the coupling preferences of their members.

Third, these cases have been enduring quite enough to offer valuable insights into how alternative political projects evolve. The case of Ateneu 9B, established in 1977, took the momentum of the early years of the Democratic Transition and succeeded in turning what today could be considered as a terrorist act into a project that, in its fifth decade of existence, is trying to keep a balance between different aims and challenges. One challenge is to keep working as a space at the service of the neighborhood, while at the same time offering a high-level cultural

program – sometimes at not-so-popular prices; lately there has been a shift towards the latter and there is an ongoing discussion on how to strike a better balance. The other challenge is of an institutional character and is related to the space being governed by a horizontal assembly open not only to formal members and waged employees but also to common people with no formal link to the project. Within it, the work of waged employees is paired with that of volunteers and activists, but at times conflicts arise between the former who are more empowered than the latter. In turn, the obligations of a formal institution tied to budget agreements with the public administration allow for the project to function as a self-managed workplace that employs several workers; however, the institutionalization of its practices has crowded-out some volunteers in the past years.

E.L. has lasted much more than any other community born with the spirit of 1968 ideals. Although they could break with many of the social norms related to family structure, economic organization, children education, and gender division of care work, they kept a very disciplined work schedule with members contributing equally to common tasks. At times, E.L. had been mocked by other more acritic communes for such a formal organization; however, unlike most of these, it did not collapse when the voluntary distribution of community workload became too unequal and unsustainable in the long term, neither when open relationships between members became unbearable. To a certain extent, E.L. has been able to anticipate what in more recent times eco-communities are achieving, by balancing between sustainability – also known as duration in time – and the number of social norms to break, –which tend to be less ambitious and more realistic than what used to be in the 1970s. For a comparison of how intentional communities have organized family relationships in different decades in Barcelona, see “Familia no nuclear”, a video documentary by Lopeç Lloret (2019).

Kan Pasqual has managed a long-term supply of electricity from renewable sources and autonomy from monetary expenditure, contributing to the low-impact lifestyle of most of its members, and is the first case connecting the urban squatters’ movement with the agroecological practice. It has been a referent in the rural and urban squatters’ networks, has inspired the more well-known project of Can Masdeu, and the connection between squatting and gardening – since the early 2000s, many squatted gardens have emerged in the city, constituting now a common phenomenon in the use of social spaces. Open spaces are more visible and offer to the passers-by an easy image of what squatters do, which is not distorted by mass media’s disinformation that tend to criminalize them.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown the presence of a legacy between the Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and social movements for alternative livelihoods in Catalunya and Spain. In turn, by analyzing three cases of the most long-lasting ones and still existing up to now, a connection between the 1968 movement and the present has been established and some insights have been offered on how such projects evolve and the impact they have.

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