

Citation for published version

Ballesté Isern, E. [Eduard]. (2022). Relating activist capital and power relations within social movements: Ethnography of current social movements in Lleida (Spain). *Journal of Anthropological Research*. 78(4), 459-482. doi: 10.1086/721977

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1086/721977>

Handle

<http://hdl.handle.net/10609/150402>

Document Version

This is the Accepted Manuscript version.

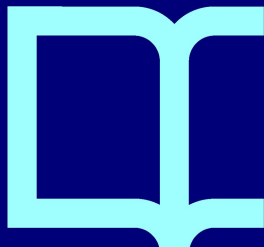
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Relating Activist Capital and Power Relations within Social Movements: Ethnography of Current Social Movements in Lleida (Spain)

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ABSTRACT:

Based on an ethnographic study of the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH; Platform of People Affected by Mortgages) social movement in Lleida (Spain), this article analyzes the role of activist capital within the movement. Detecting the forms that capital takes among the agents makes it possible to delimit the internal power positions occupied by the participants. Depending on who occupies these positions of power, different internal and external formats and strategies are adopted by the movement, which modifies its trajectory. Thus, depending on this variable, we can determine what position the social movement has occupied in each historical moment in the space of social movements. The article applies the theoretical tools of activist capital and the space of social movements to understand how movements function internally and what power relations are produced between activists, and in this way it analyzes and breaks down the formats that this activist capital adopts.

KEY WORDS:

activist capital, social movements, space, Platform of People Affected by Mortgages, Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH), power relations.

The indignados social movement (or 15M, short for May 15) began in Spain in 2011 as a response to the 2007 economic crisis and to the austerity policies and cuts in public services that were implemented (Castañeda 2013; Castells 2012). One of the main demands of the movement was to improve the channels of democratic participation by expanding horizontality in political decision-making (Flesher-Fominaya 2015b).

The commitment to greater social participation was manifested in the forms of organization of the movement itself: encampments in central public areas of the main cities of the country, an assembly model for deciding the main political lines on such issues as the fight against cuts in public education and healthcare, and stopping banks from evicting families from their homes (Sampedro and Lobera 2014; Tejerina and Perugorría 2012; Toret 2013).

The 15M movement in the form of encampments lasted a month. Later this dissolved

into social movements with a more local scope of action. Two examples are the “citizens’ tides” (Mareas de Ciudadanos), which focus on public health and education, and the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH; Platform of People Affected by Mortgages), who fight against housing evictions (Lobera 2015; Pastor 2013). Although these movements had a local organizational and action structure, they were often part of nationwide networks.

These post-15M social movements retained assembly-based forms of organization (Subirats 2015a, 2015b); however, the aim to maintain horizontality in these new movements was not always as successful. They appeared to be leaderless movements that advocated joint decision-making, but in practice certain leaderships and differentiated positions of activists were created that converted these movements into hierarchical spaces (Ballesté 2018).

These 15M and post-15M social movements showed a discrepancy between limited forms of liberal democratic participation (typical of capitalist states) and democratic and horizontal practices that were socially organized and which aimed to overcome these limitations through everyday practices (Butler 2017; Castañeda 2019; Graeber 2013b; Mir 2014). The movements aimed to be an example and a “catalyst for political innovation” (Feenstra et al. 2016:5). These democratic struggles are inserted within global protest processes that include movements such as Occupy Wall Street or that have their antecedents in movements such as the Global Justice Movement or the anti-globalization movements of the early twenty-first century (Aguiló 2017; Bringel and Pleyers 2017; Della Porta 2013; Graeber 2013a; Juris 2007).

Therefore, in order to study these horizontal and democratically broadening political practices, it is necessary to analyze power, its distribution, its differentiations, and the marginalization that the different distribution of power produces. Thus, the emergence of new social movements linked to 15M led to the emergence of new political actors and the reconfiguration of a large part of the Spanish political field (Ballesté 2021; Bourdieu 2000; Flesher-Fominaya 2015b; Rodríguez 2016). To understand the implications of all this in the day-to-day activist life, it is necessary to equip ourselves with “new” theoretical and analytical tools that allow us to determine what position these social movements occupy in the social space, and what power relations there are between different activists. This will allow us to understand the existing limitations in the movements’ search for horizontality and a more democratic participation.

The main objective of this article is to analyze how differentiated power relations are produced within social movements between different activists and what effects they produce, based on a specific context (that of the city of Lleida in Spain). To do this, we will use and adapt the notion of “activist capital” (Matonti and Poupeau 2004), which allows us to bring together under the same analytical category different processes of differentiation that occur within the “space” of social movements and understand what “acquisitions” are valuable for generating differentiation processes within an apparently horizontal space. This paper analyzes (1) how power relations are generated in social movements that are committed to horizontality; (2) how these positions of power enable us to understand the different disputes or internal frictions that occur in social movements; and finally, (3) how these differentiated positions help us to understand the position of each agent in each group and the consequences that this has for the evolution of the movement.

In addition, focusing the analytical gaze on the internal positions that activists of a social movement occupy and the power relations that are created can help us understand the different forms of contemporary activism. Likewise, this analysis allows us to observe how those social movements, born in the past decade and which fight for horizontality and for egalitarian democratic reconfigurations (Castells 2012; Toret 2013), also reproduce certain internal dynamics of oppression or differentiation between activists (Ballesté 2022). Therefore, the tool of “activist capital” (and the different forms it takes) proposed in this study can be used to make a comparative analysis with other social movements that have similar formats of organization and sociopolitical struggle (for example, based on functioning in assemblies), which contributes to the ethnographic view of contemporary social movements.

Finally, the study focuses on analyzing the PAH social movement in the city of Lleida (Catalonia, NE Spain). Although it began just before 15M, it gained a lot of strength through this movement, becoming one of the social movements with the greatest political and social impact to date. Their main political struggle is against the situation in which many families find themselves due to the economic crisis: they cannot make the mortgage payments on their home so the bank evicts them to recover the property (Colau and Alemany 2013; Flesher-Fominaya 2015a, 2015b). Although over the years the PAH in Lleida has had phases of greater or lesser participation, it has maintained a constant minimum of 30 activists in the movement assemblies. The movement works through weekly assemblies in which its political strategies are decided and the personal cases of eviction are studied. In actions such as demonstrations or protests in front of banks or institutions, the movement has brought together more than a hundred activists and supporters. Among the profiles of the participants we find a substantial presence of working-class people and migrants who are those most affected by these evictions, and also local activists from other social movements or political groups in the city.

CONSTRUCTING AND RECOGNIZING THE CAPITAL AND ACTIVIST SPACE

The position that social movements occupy within the social space (Mathieu 2015) and what relationship they have with the political field are discussed here, based on Bourdieu’s (1979, 1999a, 2000) theory of fields and capitals. Some authors have looked at the relationship between social movements and institutional politics and have created concepts such as the “social movement field” (Giugni and Passi 1997), “radical political field” (Gottraux 1997) or militant field, as opposed to the “partisan field” (Péchu 2004). Mauger (2003) proposed understanding social movements as a subfield of the political field, and Tilly (2004) proposed understanding them as spaces that feed back on each other. Finally, Mathieu (2015, 2019) moves away from the political field and understands social movements as having a greater relationship with the social space. For this author, “the space of social movements” receives influences from different “social universes” that go beyond the political. This constant relationship between the different spheres helps us to understand the existence of agents that, beyond the social movements, have an influence on the space and can come to alter the relationships, agendas, and strategies followed by the movements.

One of the points of disagreement between these theoretical views is the degree of autonomy that social movements have in relation to other fields. In this sense, following

Mathieu in his justification that we are dealing with a space and not a field, Duyvendak and Fillieule also concluded that “the sphere of social movement actors does not appear sufficiently institutionalized, structured and unified to correspond to Bourdieu’s definition. ... The notion of field suggests fixed boundaries demarcating a finite list of competitors” (Duyvendak and Fillieule 2015:304, cited in Jasper 2019:8).

The ethnographic case of the PAH of Lleida has allowed us to maintain this idea that different agents influence the space of social movements and have a direct impact on the decisions taken (or taken into account) by the movement. Bourdieu (1979) helps us to understand that the boundaries of fields are not fixed and that, at different historical moments, different external or internal agents may occupy positions of varying relevance.

This conceptualization of the “space of social movements,” of the different influences it receives, and of the alterations in its functioning, will allow us to understand the evolution that the PAH has undergone, the different positions it has occupied within the space, and how this has also influenced the internal generation of different positions among activists. To understand how this last differentiation process takes place, we will use and adapt a second theoretical tool: activist capital (Matonti and Poupeau 2004) and the different forms/formats it adopts.

Greater or lesser accumulated capital generates disparate and unequal positions among agents within the space—a space that, as in other social spaces, has its own dynamics with languages, specific internal knowledge, and rules. Within this concept is a capital that, acquired through experience and activist practice, adds to other types of accumulated capital (cultural, symbolic, social, or economic) and is recognized within the space. It gives agents different positions within the space of social movements, and within each social movement in particular.

For Bourdieu (1979, 1999a, 1999b), the concept of capital allows us to understand the disputes, rivalries, and confrontations between different agents within the same field. With this concept we are interested in highlighting that: (1) competition in a field is between those who hold power (and have a high accumulation of recognized capital) and those who seek to reverse the situation (Bourdieu 1979); (2) fields and capitals function in a similar way to games, and therefore those who participate accept the rules of the game that are determined by the practical sense that the subjects have incorporated through the different habitus (Bourdieu 1990, 1998; Lewellen 2009); and (3) capitals are not created and destroyed, but rather they are transformed from one to another as a function of time (Bourdieu 1986).

Returning to the case study, these conceptions of capital and its functioning will allow us to understand the different positions occupied, at each historical moment, by an activist within the space. This, in addition to helping us to decipher how this activist capital is shown and under what formats it is recognized, will also allow us to understand the different phases of the PAH (and its changing position within the space), depending on who assumes the positions of power at each moment.

Likewise, the transfer of agents between different social movements in the city, maintaining similar positions in each of them, helps us to reinforce the idea of a specific space of interconnected social movements. As we will see in the case of the PAH, those agents with a high accumulation of this capital who occupy positions of power within this movement also tend to have influence and occupy positions of relevance in other social movements in which they participate.

The idea of “activist capital” (capital militant, in French) was first introduced by Matonti and Poupeau (2004). They pointed out how this capital is learned both through the political spaces delimited by formal organizations (parties or unions- acquisition of political capital) and through the social movements themselves. Razquin (2016) related this capital to other capitals defined by Bourdieu to establish that although these social movements seek broad social participation, access to them is often somewhat restricted. Razquin discusses two of these restrictions on participation: (1) the need for a high accumulation of educational or cultural capital and (2) the need “to be in a position to mobilize skills and technical competencies at a high level of specialization” (Razquin 2016:67). Therefore, activist capital is related to other types of capital (cultural, social, academic, political, among others) that acquire a specific relevance within this space, and also to the necessary and recognized skills and techniques (organizational, discursive, group management, etc.) within social movements and activism. The different accumulation of these capitals and recognized capacities leads to a greater specific accumulation of activist capital within the space of social movements.

Activist capital consists of knowledge and skills that activists apply in the group actions and which they have learned during their activist experience (Poupeau 2007; Razquin 2016). For Poupeau (2007), this capital, like cultural capital, appears in three forms (embodied, objectified, and institutionalized) and can be defined as follows:

The notion of activist capital responds not only to the need to take into account a set of “resources” that designate the fact of possessing various capitals (cultural, academic, social, even economic), but also the practical domain of a certain number of techniques, frequently learned “in the workshop”—knowing how to speak in public, write a pamphlet, lead a group, plan an activist action such as sticking up posters or organizing a demonstration. (Poupeau 2007:10, translated by the author).

This differentiation between the position occupied within a social movement depending on the degree of acquisition of previous capitals or an agent’s activist trajectory (reconverted into activist capital) is useful for looking at the different positions agents occupy in a movement such as the one studied here. Thus, although accumulated activist capital is essential for an activist to occupy positions of power and leadership within the social movement, not all activists who accumulate substantial activist capital directly occupy leadership positions. Only those activists who, in addition to accumulating activist capital, are recognized as important by the rest of the participants actually become leaders.

The different phases that PAH Lleida has gone through in recent years not only enable us to identify how these forms of activist capital appear, they also make it possible to understand what position the movement occupies at each time within the space of social movements. This is a position that, as we will see, can be linked to which agents are the protagonists of the movement, who holds the positions of internal power, who is recognized as the “leader” by the rest of the participants, and therefore, who “moves” its actions, strategies, and discourses.

DOING ETHNOGRAPHY IN PAH: POSITION, CONTEXT, AND MOVEMENT PHASES

Ethnography is the most appropriate methodological approach for understanding the logics of spaces and capitals presented in this study. Thus, the logics of power relations in micropolitical spaces, such as a local movement, can be recognized through slow, qualitative research over an extended period of time and by relating with the agents in the field (Gledhill 2000). The study focuses on a middle-sized city (Lleida) in the north of Spain. The city, which has a population of about 140,000 inhabitants, was chosen to provide a specific space for carrying out prolonged ethnography so that the political field and the space of social movements could be analyzed in depth. The study has two aims: First, to cover the impacts and consequences in a medium-sized Spanish city,¹ away from the main centers, such as Barcelona or Madrid, and thereby show other dynamics of political activist forms that appeared in all Spanish cities from 15M and post-15M. Second, to construct a more accurate picture of the composition and functioning of the space of social movements (Ballesté 2018).

The study focuses on analyzing the post-15M social movement PAH (Colau and Alemany 2013). This movement, which originated in 2009 (Barranco et al. 2018; Romanos 2014), has become one of the most active and dynamic temporary noninstitutional political groups in Spain in recent years (Flesher-Fominaya 2015a).²

Although the movement is described in more detail below, its forms of organization, protest issues, and ways of acting are highlighted here. First, the movement was created to tackle a social drama, that of mortgage evictions, and to help those families who after the economic crisis could not pay their mortgages. In addition, the social movement also has a collective political claim that seeks to show that the banking system is responsible for the economic crisis, and thus fight to change the current dynamics of real estate speculation. PAH is a social movement that is present in most Spanish cities. Although the social movement is organized in each city locally, having a certain autonomy and working independently, there are spaces for regional or state coordination to establish common general protest frameworks. As an example of this territoriality, the Lleida PAH has organized protests and sought solutions to local problems. In addition, the social movement also attended spaces for coordination with PAHs from other cities in Catalonia and, more sporadically, spaces with PAHs from other regions of Spain.

The participants' profiles are usually working-class families (with a large number of migrants) along with other activists from other movements in the city who become involved to help in the struggle (García-Lamarca 2017). During the period in which ethnography was carried out, there was gender parity among the participants of the movement. Although few women held leadership positions in the movement during that time, they played an important role within the movement both in the assemblies and in political actions. Internally, although this varied over time, it is organized through assemblies that decide the political trajectory of the movement and the strategies to follow (Ballesté 2021; Flesher-Fominaya 2015a). Their ways of acting range between performative actions (stickers and posters, sitting in banks, etc.) and more direct actions (occupations of banks, clashes with banks, painting bank headquarters, etc.) (Di Feliciano 2016; García-Lamarca 2017).

During the ethnographic work, the PAH group in the city went through two different phases. These two phases are related to the decision taken by all PAHs in Catalonia to eliminate spokespersons and leaders. This change modified the forms of action and organization of the movement (Barranco et al. 2018). Although the change was general at

the regional level, its effects in the city studied here had specific characteristics.

First, just after 15M (2011–2013), PAH in Lleida was organized through the figure of a spokesman. The spokesman organized the movement, was the public representative, and exerted a very strong influence on the rest of the group members. His leadership was very marked and the movement worked under the forms that he set out. During the first years with this format, the movement began to have certain specific dynamics. For example, banks always negotiated each case separately, which reduced public mobilization, and the movement focused on these negotiations. However, this format caused the PAH at times to resemble an NGO: It was an assistance space where the affected people came to have their case “treated.” At that time, the voices of other participants (for example, the young activists who came from anticapitalist collectives) were silenced and not accepted. The group had an assembly format and the spokesperson acted as a coordinator.

The second phase began when the spokesperson resigned in 2014.³ His affiliation with a left-wing political party, and running as a candidate for the local elections, did not please the rest of the participants, which led to him leaving the movement. When internal relationships moved with this change, the members of anticapitalist collectives along with other participants who had been critical of the welfare model of the first period took the power of the assembly.

This change in internal power roles meant a change in the social movement. Individual negotiations with banks were abandoned and actions against banks increased. The PAH returned to the public space, somehow repoliticized, and its actions increased. The idea of assistance or an NGO was abandoned. This led to an increase in the repression of the movement by the police and the judicial system, a rejection by members of the institutional policy, and a certain marginalization of the group in relation to other social movements. This internal change also revealed how internal power relations work and what position each activist occupies depending on each context. In addition, as we will see, depending on who leads the movement and what forms of action the movement has (more or less socially accepted), it comes to occupy a more or less central place in the space of social movements and, consequently, in the general social space.

To understand which agents constitute PAH it is important to highlight that within PAH there are two profiles. On one hand, there are those who come to the movement to try to remedy their own situation (loss of their home, eviction notice, inability to pay mortgage, etc.) and who are seen as the affected. On the other hand, the movement involves agents with longer activist backgrounds (and, therefore, with a greater accumulation of activist capital) who come to PAH to help those affected: these are the activists.⁴ This differentiation is essential for understanding the different positions of the agents within the movement based on accumulated capital. At the same time, the two profiles have clear distinctions due to social class, gender, and ethnicity. While those affected are often working-class people, with a prominent presence of women and racialized people, activists are often middle-class white men, many of them young. Finally, the transfer from one profile to another (of “affected” people who resolve their case and continue in the movement as activists) is very rare, and only those with a high commitment and with a high accumulation of activist capital remain in PAH.

As a researcher, I carried out ethnography from within the movement (Juris 2007), seeking a certain involvement both in political participation and in the production of shared and situated knowledge with the movement’s agents (Apoifis 2017; Haraway 1988;

Routledge 2013). This point of view makes it possible to produce knowledge that comes from the actual social movements and that, in turn, is debated and questioned before being produced or presented. Finally, this leads to a greater understanding of social movements from within and through their own activist visions and histories.

I knew the movement and the participating agents before beginning the research. Therefore, the ethnographic (re)entry was made by taking a certain distance and seeking to contrast all the information and observations with the views of representatives of the different factions of the movement. I used two tools to try to resolve the possibility of having a biased view and producing “contaminated” knowledge. My background and perspective in the field have been explained in other work (Ballesté 2018). Once the analysis period was over, I went back to the field and held various focus groups to discuss the results. These focus groups made it possible to validate the information collected and, at the same time, make a return to the social movement itself. Although in the ethnographic process I sought an analytical return to the field and dialogue with PAH agents, I am aware of the limitations that this process has had. Thus, once the ethnographic period ended, I participated in the PAH in Lleida far less (although I have always participated in some way). Reflecting on the research presented here, which is focused on analyzing internal positions and differentiated accumulations of capital and power, has allowed me to observe the different phases that I have gone through with PAH. While I was carrying out the ethnography, my position as a researcher who participated in different social movements, and because different activists knew me, automatically gave me high recognition and activist capital. Functions such as taking minutes, writing slogans, or making a summary of the topics discussed in the assembly would often fall to me. At the same time, once my research had finished and I had a smaller presence in PAH, I became aware of the academic capital that this research has generated in me (through the publication of articles, conferences, and by obtaining my PhD). Explaining my role in the movement and the capital that I have accumulated can be used to locate my position in the research.

In the next section, I present the different faces that I have diagnosed to delimit the ways in which activist capital presents itself. Each explanation is accompanied by small fragments of my field diary. Other works have already included parts or totalities of the fieldwork that accompanies the research (Ballesté 2018, 2019, 2021).

THE “FACES” OF ACTIVIST CAPITAL⁵

The analysis of the evolution of PAH has revealed different aspects that allow us to see the formats acquired by the activist capital. In the first phase, the position occupied by the speaker made it possible to analyze and observe how that capital allowed him to be at the forefront of the movement for three years (2011–2013). Andreu,⁶ the spokesperson, was, at that time, more than 35 years old, born in the city of Lleida, and had a high level of academic capital (he has an undergraduate degree and a master’s degree). He had also been a member of a traditional left-wing political party and had held representative positions both in his student and political stages. Although his participation in PAH was preceded by his involvement in the 15M movement, he also experienced being evicted from his home, which pushed him even more to become involved in constituting the social movement in Lleida. In addition, Andreu had accumulated substantial activist capital

through his historical trajectory of participation in other social movements (from protest movements against the war in Iraq to 15M), which was demonstrated in an acquisition of practices that allowed him to guide the movement in its day-to-day operation. Due to his presence and his high accumulation of capital, the power roles in the movement focused on him as a central figure.

In the second phase (from 2014), the departure of Andreu from the movement produced a reconfiguration of the activist capitals present. Other formats of this activist capital appeared due to the changes in power relations and the inclusion of anticapitalist activists. The young anticapitalists had not participated previously because they were against the format that PAH had under that spokesperson. When they had tried to participate in the first phase, the accumulation of power of the spokesman meant that the proposals of these young people were not considered. In general, the young anticapitalist profile is people aged between 18 and 25 years, men and women in a similar proportion, most of whom are studying at university, both undergraduate and master's degrees. Some of them also work in sectors such as agriculture or catering. All of them participate actively and are involved in different youth political groups in the city (anarchists, communists, or left-wing Catalan independentists).

The new PAH formats in this phase also allowed these activists to occupy a central position in the movement and accumulate internal power. The change in the internal power also meant a change in the strategy, action, and organization of the movement. In this second phase, the welfare idea was abandoned and the number of actions and their forcefulness were increased. The movement was reorganized, eliminating the figure of the spokesperson.

Based on my research with the movement, I will highlight some of the formats in which this activist capital appears and becomes visible. It is therefore possible to understand the power structures of the movement in a given phase.

Power to Speak in Public

One of the most important points within an assembly or a meeting of the social movement is the power to speak in public. This is one of the main issues that reveal internal differences within a social movement. When a participant agent within the movement takes on the role of moderator or speaker, they occupy a central place for the rest of the participants. For those who attend less frequently or who participate for the first time, the person who speaks the most in an assembly is usually their point of reference because they interpret it that way. Moreover, this power to speak in public also means a distinction relative to the rest of the participants: they become representatives of the movement, they are those who know or are known by more people inside and outside of it, and they are the ones who usually appear in public (statements in the media, relations with other movements, etc.).

In the first phase of PAH, Andreu, the spokesperson, was the visible face of the movement. Inside the group, he was the one who welcomed the new participants, proposed the topics to be discussed, and decided who else spoke at the meetings. Outside the movement, he was in charge of speaking with the media, making public speeches in the demonstrations or actions and coordinating these actions. For example,

as he explained to me, he led the coordination of most actions and decided how forceful they should be: “When I was the PAH spokesperson in the assembly I always said one thing: ‘our strength is mobilization but we are strategists of mobilization, we do not wear it out. We use it when we really have to use it . . . but if we are already negotiating with banks, it is not necessary.’” This example shows us how the spokesperson established limits for when it is good to mobilize and protest and when it is not. This is significant because it influences the rest of the activists and determines the way forward.

All this supposes certain differentiations that can go from the knowledge other people have of them (a kind of “to occur to know”) to the taking on of larger roles within the group (coordination, execution, etc.). In addition, this gives a certain social visibility to those who speak as “referents” or spokespersons of the group, even though sometimes they are not. They therefore become a reference for the interlocution between other agents, groups, or movements, and also between the movement and society or the media.

However, it is not exclusively a question of who are the spokespersons. In PAH’s second phase, when the figure of the spokesperson no longer existed, other participants occupied a central role because they spoke most in assemblies or public events. This is the case of Ernesto, a man in his early thirties who had immigrated from Latin America more than eight years previously and who at that time was working as a commercial agent for a telecommunications company. Once his eviction case was resolved, his involvement in the movement increased and he became a referent because he often spoke in public and because of his accumulated knowledge of housing laws. He is one of the few participants who went from being “affected” to being an activist.

It’s 7:00 p.m. and everyone is sitting waiting for the assembly to begin. It does not start until everyone is quiet and paying attention. It seems that everyone accepts this situation. . . . Ernesto arrives, everyone greets him and he talks about different things with certain people. . . . Thirty minutes after the theoretical start time, Ernesto stands in the middle and greets everyone. He begins by explaining the importance of everyone participating in the assembly and not always hearing the same voices. Then he reads the agenda and starts discussing each topic. . . . His function is to present each topic and organize the turns to talk. At the end of each topic he also makes a final assessment in which he gives his opinion. Many of the people present are guided by this opinion, which generates changes in the apparent opinion of the attendees. (Field diary, PAH assembly, November 20, 2015).

In summary, through the ability to speak in public we can see the differentiated “dispositions” of each activist subject. These dispositions reflect both the correlation between the accumulated experience of the subjects within social movements (based on the occupation and assimilation of a specific position) as well as the acquisition of activist capital throughout the personal trajectory. This dialectic between experience and capital accumulation is what allows us to understand that there are activists with extensive experience who do not occupy positions of power or, on the contrary, activists who have not been participating in the social movement for a long time and who quickly occupy positions of power.

In the accumulated knowledge of general policy issues (related to housing laws, for example), as well as the ways the activist “world” functions, we observe here the second of the variables highlighted to build activist capital. This is also put into practice within the assemblies or meetings of the movement at specific times in which the participants debate political issues that affect the space of specific demand, although in other actions it can also be made visible. In these debates, those who have more knowledge about political issues tend to contribute a large part of the opinions or reasoning. In this way they position themselves relative to the rest as referents in marking the political path.

This issue can usually be explained through different variables. The accumulated activist capital allows us to understand the possibility of agents accumulating greater political knowledge, but, at the same time, it is important to consider previous experiences of political participation. These experiences are what make it possible to combine the accumulated political knowledge with knowing how to develop well in these spaces, mixing the two main aspects of this characteristic.

In PAH, members who have spent more time in the movement (and who generally have already resolved their mortgage case) usually know more about how banks operate and the procedures to be performed. There are also some agents in the movement who, with or without previous knowledge, have a greater understanding of the actions that banks take in mortgage cases and constantly educate themselves to know how to deal with them. These are usually the referents when different cases are dealt with and managed for both newcomers and older members. These people therefore occupy a specific place within the movement and generate the accumulation of a different activist capital. However, as mentioned above, only some of the activists combine experience with the acquisition of activist capital (or convert it into capital) and use this political knowledge as a way to function within the social movement.

Having activist experience is also related to the experiences of political mobilization accumulated in other social movements or similar spaces. Previous experiences make the agent who arranges them more able to adapt and move in a “new” activist political space. Having participated in previous assemblies and knowing how they operate, having organized actions in the past, or getting to know other agents of the activist field leads to a greater facility to move within this space and, with this, the possibility of adopting more functions within it. In this case, there is a clear differentiation between “affected” and “activist” participants since it is usually the latter who have more experience of participation in other social movements.

An example of this capital is found at a PAH meeting. In the second phase, at the time of increasing political actions and judicial consequences for its members, the assemblies became unruly and a space for arguments. The example of Manel, a young man (25 years old) who had participated in anarchist assembly movements for years, shows us how previous knowledge is put into operation.

The assembly falls apart. The moment is tense and arguments begin. Some want to continue increasing the actions while others are in favor of cooling down the political situation. Everyone is speaking at the same time, nobody agrees, and there are very tense moments (people who shout, get up from their chairs in a position of incrimination, etc.). When the older members of the group do not take

the floor and call for some order, Manel begins to speak. With his rather lazy speech, he explains that assemblies do not always require immediate agreements. With some pedagogy, inherited as he explains from other social movements in which he participates, he states that it is best to relax, think over the options, and postpone the decision to maintain political tension with forceful actions until the next assembly (the following week). Everyone relaxes and, as if by magic, moves to the next point of the day. (Field diary, PAH assembly, February 5, 2016).

In this format, the practices and knowledge acquired through previous activism are combined with academic and cultural capitals that would be linked to the knowledge acquired about the functioning of banking dynamics, for example. Of course, the different acquisitions of this capital, when linked to activist experiences, result in a clear differentiation between agents of the group. Those with the knowledge must help and also empower others. Finally, to highlight this distinction between accumulated experience and the ability to transform it into activist capital, we have the example of María, who is a PAH activist around 50 years of age. She has been in the movement since it began in 2011, accumulating extensive experience. Even so, her position in the movement has always been secondary as she does not intervene much in meetings, or get involved in the organization of actions, and always plays a very discreet role. In this case, María would be the opposite of Manel, showing that experience does not automatically become activist capital as she does not occupy a visible position in the movement.

Risk Assumed or Assumable in the Future

The assumed or assumable risk is related to what has been called “presence” here, based on the concept that is adopted in role-playing games (whether board or real games) to define the ability to impact and influence others (either companions or enemies) usually in concepts of struggle and risk. It is appropriate to use this simile to explain this internal form of capital which is related to the ability to “go beyond” in the actions of the movement. That is, the fact that one activist is willing to assume certain risks (economic fines, physical repression, prison sentences, etc.), while others are not, also generates distinctions within the movement and a differentiated position among the participants. This can also be considered part of the activist capital since it ends up generating hierarchies that affect the evolution of the social movement. This position of certain leadership of those who are willing to take more risks provokes two different reactions in the rest of the social movement. On one hand, it positions these activists as points of reference in the movement since this risk-taking is transformed into leadership and can mark the actions to be carried out by the group. On the other hand, this increase in risk can generate a certain amount of fear among the rest of the activists who, fearing the possible consequences of risk-taking, may stop participating, which can lead to the disintegration of the group.

A good example of this can be seen in an internal argument over the fear of continuing to take direct actions and the criminal consequences that these actions could have. The position of the young participants was that they were willing to continue acting for a good cause, even though prison sentences were possible. Jordi, a 29-year-old communist militant who was participating in PAH as an activist, led this campaign to ramp up actions

notwithstanding the consequences. In the assemblies he put pressure on the group and insisted they continue taking actions, and thus the movement took on a more forceful and constant way of acting. As he himself explains, the movement in the first phase with the spokesperson had acquired an assistance function to help those affected, and “it seemed like an NGO. . . it was unbearable.” Instead, in this new phase he worked to change the direction of the movement, “we [communists] convinced the anarchists to get involved and . . . more of us want to go a step further than before. I was in PAH before, now it’s better.” We can see this situation in the following notes taken during an assembly:

[A debate about how to face different situations begins.] We are in a difficult time with an increase in actions, the appearance of collective trials. . . . This has resulted in a smaller presence of PAH members in certain actions, although in the total number of people it has not been noticed, since they have been relatively “replaced” by young people. The recent experience with the trials and the (bad) treatment received from the banks and the security forces causes the young anti-capitalists to opt for increasing the stakes. The assembly is confused. At that moment, the most determined members begin to take turns. Jose, Manel and Nil present the need to continue increasing the forcefulness of the actions, but in turn, Nil explains that everyone has to commit to what will be done. It is therefore necessary to be aware that these actions can lead to legal problems. Faced with this, some members are doubtful. . . . It is necessary to know how many people would be involved in the action in order to see how far to go. Jordi asks to speak. Jordi’s and Manel’s participation in the assemblies has increased greatly. Jordi, in an attempt to encourage the rest, explains that he is already sentenced to two years in jail. That, if he has one more judicial problem, and he is condemned even for one day, he will go to jail.⁷ Even so, he explains, he believes it is necessary to fight for a just cause, and therefore he is not afraid. Again, they ask how many people would be involved in the action. About 20 people raise their hands. (Field diary, PAH assembly, February 5, 2016).

In this short fragment we observe how the two young people, Manel and Jordi, try to establish their position through their personal involvement and the risk they take in the entire social movement. We see how they find allies in José and Nil, two “affected” people who continue with open cases of evictions and who have been participating in the movement for several years. José and Nil, born in Lleida, just over 40 years old, and in a very precarious economic situation, also believe that the increase in number and form of actions is one of the last resources left to find joint solutions (their cases and others). Thus, in these moments when the movement is stressed by the involvement of young people and their political commitment, we see that alliances are generated between other affected participants who are in extreme situations.

In this case, the differentiation between participating agents is evident, based on the degree of risk to be subject to repression that an activist is willing to take on. This directly translates into activist capital and, sometimes, intersects cultural capital or economic capital due to differences in social class, age, or ethnicity. For example, the possibility of increasing actions and facing repression in the form of financial fines does not imply the same “effort” for all participants. However, as mentioned earlier, some participants in an urgent economic situation join these young people’s initiatives because they do not have

much more to lose.

Involvement in and Ability to Carry Out Actions

Another of the ways in which activist capital can be shown is the experience or the capacity of the agents to develop and carry out the actions of the social movement. That is, the ability to perform satisfactorily both in the creation of these actions and in the correct realization of the actions. This usually depends on the networks established in previous actions that allow certain logistical issues to be moved forward more quickly, such as creation of informative leaflets (involving the knowledge of where to print them and how to prepare them), elaboration of banners (and the material that this entails), or creating protest slogans. Beyond the logistical issues, part of this is also the ability to face the critical situations that can happen in an action: police fines, peaceful resistance, knowledge of what is a crime and what is not, how to react to police harassment, and so on.

Likewise, this skill (ability) is closely linked to the level of involvement. In this case, reference is made to the level of involvement or measurable commitment as documented ethnographically. This can be exemplified by consistent attendance at assemblies or events, involvement in acts and actions (logistic, material, or ideological levels), attendance at coordination spaces between political protest groups, and taking on commitments beyond going to a meeting (this would be like “taking work home”).

Although the ability to develop actions is measured specifically in public acts and actions, and is not visible in assembly meetings, people with activist capital have a differentiated positioning as the group seeks help and resolution from these agents in different situations.

In the following case of an action by PAH (occupation of a bank headquarters), it is the young anticapitalists who belong to other groups in the city who support the occupation and make it visible.

Outside, at the doors of the bank, we found about 20 people. The profile has changed completely. You could say that anarchists (or a good part of them) have come in groups to give support. . . . As the situation seems to be at a standstill, in a similar way to the two previous bank occupations, from inside they ask those who are at the doors for a lot of visibility and mobilization. Normally, the actions that were carried out from outside were chanting, whistles, or the distribution of leaflets. This time, this is not seen as sufficient and, pushed by those who are locked up, they are asked to go one step further. The people of PAH who are outside do not know what to do and it is the anarchists (especially Edu) who end up proposing different actions. First, they bring a large banner which says “Evictions are State terrorism.” They propose weaving through the traffic across each of the lanes with the banner. The PAH members, along with other solidarity groups that approach, follow them. . . . A lot of police arrive, but the participants continue to cut through the traffic. Edu encourages them to continue doing it without fear, since, according to him, the police cannot do anything. (Field diary, occupation of Banco Santander by PAH activists, March 3, 2016).

In this example, we can observe two consequences linked to activist capital. On one

hand, Edu and his young colleagues have a large repertoire of actions to put into practice, which distances them from other participants who do not know these ways of acting or do not know how to carry out a political action. On the other hand, the situation also highlights activist capital linked to the risk assumed (described above) and which shows us the limits that exist for some participants when it comes to getting involved in certain types of actions.

This form of activist capital is directly related to the experiences and knowledge accumulated through activist trajectories. In the case of PAH, the distinction between activists and those affected, in this sense, is clear again. Therefore, we can say that it is a kind of wheel that does not stop turning. The more a person participates (and the more extensive their trajectory), the more activist capital they accumulate; therefore, clear hierarchies are generated among activists according to the amount of time they dedicate to the movement.

Legitimacy and Political Field Relations

The network of contacts and relationships that each agent has within the space of social movements (and that, sometimes, goes beyond it and is also inserted within the political field) is a materialization of the activist capital that, in most cases, is closely related to the previous examples. It is a form of capital that materializes through contact or relationships with other political actors (social movements, unions, party politicians, among others). All this allows the agent with said capital to be visible as a recognized and valid person for interlocution between movements or other groups. At the same time, they become a valid agent for planning actions, giving them knowledge beyond their own group and the possibility to coordinate actions with other agents.

Following Bourdieu, relations between agents within the political field would be closely linked to more general social capital. Even so, here it is shown as one more form of activist capital because the position that each agent occupies within a social movement has considerable weight. As we will see, meeting people from different social movements and maintaining contact with them has at least two consequences. On the one hand, it generates a certain respect or recognition in the group. On the other hand, in a space where people arrive alone (in the case of PAH, and of those affected, very clearly), people with a previous network of contacts with other participants tend to occupy a more visible position.

I meet some people at the door of the bank Catalunya Caixa. The door is guarded by police who take two PAH members into custody. Over there I see Gemma. I talk with her for awhile. She is from White Tide [another social movement of the city], but I see that she knows everyone at PAH well. At one point, she states that it would be good to go to the police station until the two detainees are released. Three people drive there and we meet the rest there (about 12 in total). . . . At about 2 o'clock in the morning the two people are released. Gemma hugs them and makes a joke. Everyone laughs, but that gesture seems very important to me. Gemma, who during all the time I have been working in the field has not appeared at any of the PAH assemblies, knows them all, and everyone has great respect for her. Her words are important and, at a critical moment (such as police detention),

she is positioned as a reference to follow and listen. (Field diary, occupation of Catalunya Caixa by PAH activists, November 14, 2015).

This form of activist capital is often constructed through the previous trajectory. Thus, the activist trajectories, especially in different social movements, make it possible to have contacts and relationships with agents of other movements. This leads to a greater knowledge of the space of social movements, and that other agents know them and come to them for different reasons (from carrying out joint campaigns between movements, participating as a representative in these other movements). This generates an increase in the legitimacy of activists with contacts in the field, which translates into greater internal respect in the social movements where they participate. Gemma's case demonstrates this well. She is a woman in her sixties who participated very actively in 15M and in most of the post-15M movements (prior to 15M she had not participated in any political "space"). At the time of the ethnographic description provided above, PAH was not the social movement in which she had participated the longest (she was linked to other groups). Even so, most of PAH's activists (mainly those with a longer history or who participated in more than one social movement at the same time) knew of and respected her continued involvement. Thus, the fact that she was well-known with contacts within the space of social movements, who also had some contact with local politicians, gave her legitimacy in local social movements. This legitimacy can be understood as a recognition of her as a person and as an accumulation of activist capital. However, this legitimacy is not produced exclusively by the contacts and the network of activists known per se, but must always be "used" and highlighted (with extensive participation, with the acquisition of relevant positions in the movements, or with continuous and strong involvement).

This knowledge of the activist space is easily transformed into political capital, which is used later within the institutional political field. Both Gemma and Andreu (the first PAH spokesperson), after their participation in these described social movements (in different years), became part of institutional politics and ran as candidates in local elections for different political parties. Although it is not central to this study, their legitimacy and their network of contacts within the space of social movements were the main assets on which they each built their electoral commitment.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The idea of activist capital and the social movement space allows us to generate a specific analytical framework for understanding what happens internally in social movements. Understanding the space of social movements as a place with certain autonomous aspects shows that the agents' capacities or differentiated roles give them different positions. This theorization evidences that the forms and formats of each movement are shaped by the participants' profiles and the power roles that exist among them. This internal accumulation of capital, which determines how the group acts, relates, and works, reveals the political, social, and symbolic position that PAH (in our case) occupies in the space of social movements, in the political field, and in the social space at each given moment. This vision of social movements suggests that their forms and formats are not subject exclusively to general political changes but rather are determined by internal power relations, profiles, and different accumulations of activist

capital.

Through local fieldwork, we have been able to specify how a social movement such as PAH changed depending on who holds power in it. These internal power distributions can be measured according to the internal distributions of the activist capital among agents. This capital, as we have seen, is constructed based on accumulated knowledge and experiences, as well as other capital acquired throughout the life of each agent. The ethnographic analysis in this work has highlighted the forms or faces by which activist capital is shown in the case of PAH in Lleida. At least five formats have been detected: (1) ability to speak in public; (2) previous knowledge and experiences; (3) assumed or assumable risk; (4) ability to carry out actions; and (5) legitimacy and political relations.

Horizontality and the aim to expand participatory and democratic channels are some of the principles of many contemporary social movements such as 15M, Occupy Wall Street, the Arab revolutions, and Nuit Debout (Pleyers 2018). Therefore, focusing on the differentiated power relations that exist within current social movements allows us to reflect on the practical difficulties these movements have in applying this desired horizontality in their day-to-day functioning.

At the same time, ethnographic examples show how the positions of power in the movement are related to the accumulation of activist capital. In addition, as has been seen in the theoretical argument, this capital is based on the accumulation of other capitals (academic, cultural, symbolic, or economic) that become activist capital within the space, and also on the acquisition of knowledge and experiences through the personal activist trajectory of the person. This relation of activist capital with the accumulation of other capitals denotes a clear differentiation of the positions of the agents in the movement for reasons of social class, gender, age, and ethnicity, to which the PAH struggle is closely linked. Immigrants, working-class people, and women are usually the most affected by the problem of evictions (Di Feliciano 2016; García-Lamarca 2017; García-Lamarca and Kaika 2016). As explained in the description of the movement, PAH is made up of two groups (or two types of participants): the affected and the activists.

When we compare the profiles of these two types of members with the role played by activist capital within social movements, we can see that it is difficult to reverse that relationship and modify internal positions. Generally, activists will keep their status because the more they participate, the more activist capital they accumulate. On the other hand, those affected, who in many cases would be new to activist politics, will always have specific determinants that in most cases place them in a different position. We have seen how most of the forms that activist capital acquires entailed a clear differentiation between activists and affected people, which also has a background linked to the social position occupied by the subjects. Those affected are mostly racialized and working-class people who have difficulties speaking in public (often due to language issues, for example), who cannot participate in high-risk activities (for economic and judicial reasons), who generally have less knowledge of the functioning of social movements, and who have a limited network of contacts in this area. Often, these difficulties, added to a lower acquisition of cultural, political, or social capital (which can be transformed into activist capital), explain the few cases that exist of the transfer from “affected” to activists. Gender-related issues also show an internal differentiation in the participants’ roles as well as a specific positioning within PAH. Without the intention of drawing large conclusions, because, as I mentioned previously, the situation in other local

social movements was different, in PAH the continued participation and involvement of women (both activists and affected) did not usually translate into an acquisition of positions of power (nor, therefore, into high levels of activist capital). Although some women were usually present in most assemblies and actions, they were not recognized by the rest as leaders, nor did they appear to seek to place themselves in this position. Even so, the normal functioning of the social movement was based in large part on their participation (they were usually in the majority) and on their commitment to attending meetings.

Thus, the two phases that PAH has gone through in Lleida (from a welfare model to one of greater action) did not directly imply a modification of the roles and differences between those affected and the activists. Activist capital, and therefore internal power, changed hands (from the spokesperson to groups related to young anticapitalists), which changed the movement's ways of acting and the strategies used, but somehow maintained the differentiations between agents. In the second phase, with the entry of young people and the loss of the welfare function, the aim was that the "affected" would become more actively involved in the operation of the movement (planning actions, campaigning, etc.). Even so, as the ethnographic example related to "assumable risk" shows, when actions and their forcefulness are increased, the differences between agents become evident again (in this case, among those who are willing to face fines and jail, and those who can't).

Finally, it is necessary to highlight what position PAH has occupied in the space of social movements in each phase. Thus, in the first phase, where a less critical action strategy was followed and the actions were smaller (at least in the local area of study), PAH occupied a central position in that space. In addition, this centrality was transferred into a certain harmony with political parties and unions, opening relations with the political field and, in a certain sense, a more or less general acceptance and solidarity of a large part of the citizenry (Ballesté 2022).

However, in the second phase, with the restructuring of internal power, the appearance of the young anticapitalists as protagonists, and the changes in action and strategy formats (more direct action), PAH came to occupy a peripheral place in the social movement space. Its relationships were increasingly exclusively with other groups of young anticapitalists, and relations with other social movements were put on hold. Finally, this led institutional politicians and parties to distance themselves from the movement; there was an increase in negative news in the media, and an increase in repression (both police presence and fines and collective trials), which positioned the movement in what we could call the periphery of the space of social movements and distanced it from what is accepted within the social space.

Ultimately, this study verifies the persistence of leaderships in assemblies and horizontal political groups, and we can see how outward movements are developed. That is, depending on the agents that accumulate more power inside, the movement's dynamics and forms of action will have certain characteristics, which will position the movement in a specific place in the space of social movements. Therefore, the idea of establishing a basis for understanding the positions that activists occupy in a social movement based on the idea of activist capital can be applied to determine how these movements work, which agents participate, how the movements are organized, the political position they occupy in each phase and, finally, provide us with a tool for

understanding these movements from the inside out.

This theoretical tool applied to the case study also demonstrates that in both phases, the internal differentiations between those affected and the activists, far from being modified, continued to be maintained, and the evolution of the movement and the accumulation of activist capital perpetuated this unequal relationship.

NOTES

This work was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's HORIZON 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No. 742705. I thank the JAR reviewers and the editor for their detailed and helpful comments. Their comments have greatly contributed to improve the article. I also thank Catherine, the native English speaker who proofread the article. Finally, I thank the activists of the PAH Lleida for their involvement throughout the study. They shared their knowledge, experiences, and time, always with the best disposition. Without them, this research would not have been possible.

1. An average city (which would exhibit very different characteristics, depending on the scale of observation) would be defined mainly by demographic factors (means); however, other variables such as environmental qualities (less pollution) also play a mediating role between different scales (in Lleida, between rural and urban, or between it and larger Spanish cities), etc.

2. The movement in many middle-sized Spanish cities (such as Lleida) was born from 15M. It had the reference of previous movements, such as V de Vivienda, found in Madrid and Barcelona, but its appearance in most cities in the country and its consolidation as a reference social movement occurred because of 15M (Di Felicianonio 2016).

3. I began the ethnographic research presented here in 2014, coinciding with the change in the format of the social movement, although I was present in the field (and within the social movement) previously as a result of other studies and personal interest.

4. The differentiation between those affected and the activists has been pointed out by García-Lamarca (2017), but it appears consistently in all my fieldwork. The agents themselves (both in interviews and in the day-to-day activities of the movement) refer to this profile differentiation (Ballesté 2018).

5. Part of this section is related to what is presented in my doctoral thesis (Ballesté 2018).

6. All names are pseudonyms.

7. In Spain, in the absence of a previous criminal record, by fulfilling certain requirements established by the judge, and with an accumulated sentence that does not exceed two years, a person found guilty of certain crimes does not usually go to jail (although it is always left to the discretion of the judge). Jordi, at the time of the situation described here, had accumulated a sentence of two years in prison for insults to the king and for terrorism. One more conviction with jail time meant he would automatically be sent to prison.

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