Grassroots practices of citizenship and politicization in the urban: the case of right to the city initiatives in Barcelona

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ABSTRACT
This article aims to produce an analysis of the politicization of the citizens after Spain’s Indignados movement from a citizenship framework. The article suggests that claiming the right to the city involves more than issues of access to urban amenities: it is also about claiming the right to participate in the formation and transformation of the city and the right to appropriate the city center. This positions these rights within the larger issue of citizenship by defining it as a collective practice rather than a state-sanctioned status. Our analysis is based on the empirical evidence derived from the semi-structured interviews, politicians’ speeches, information based on media resources and official websites, and participant observation during three months of fieldwork in Barcelona in 2016.

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Introduction
In the large diversity of scholarly explanations of social movements revolving around different societal issues in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe (Beinin and Vairel 2013; Della Porta and Caiani 2007; Tarrow 2011), repercussions that politicization have on the practices of citizenship need special attention. Focusing on the citizen initiatives that emerged after the Indignados movement in Barcelona, this article explores the potential of these initiatives in creating new platforms for politics as well as contributes to the earlier debates on politicization in this journal, especially in the realm of urban citizenship (Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel, and García 2017).

Indignados movement has been one of the most critical social movements in Europe as it has generated a strand of metapolitical critique addressing existing social, political, and structural problems within Spain. Indignados emerged in 2011 in major cities across Spain as series of protests against the erosion of welfare mechanisms and the political management of the socioeconomic crisis in Spain (Perugorría and Tejerina 2013). The Indignados movement is considered the ‘grandfather of the Occupy Wall Street’ (Tharoor 2011; Castañeda 2012) and has inspired several other occupy movements. Indignados movement used parks and squares as the spaces of protest and quickly evolved to encompass a wider critique, addressing issues of governmental accountability and non-democratic practices while...
becoming landmarks of contemporary socio-ecological and socio-political struggles manifesting themselves as mobilizations against urban transformation. The movement also directly challenged mega-projects that were leading to the enclosure of urban/rural commons, while they simultaneously created spaces of cooperation and enable the reclamation of right to the city against market-oriented developmentalism (see Purcell 2003).

Since antiquity, the idea of citizenship has been continuously reconfigured and has influenced societal organization (Smith and McQuarrie 2012). Behind all citizenship claims lie social struggles and conflicts to seize the right to ‘becoming political from the dominant groups’ (Isin 2002, 2). In this article, we are interested in processes of politicization that challenge dominant ideology, especially in the aftermath of social struggles in Barcelona. Grassroots practices of citizenship in the urban challenge dominant understandings of citizenship, which are commonly framed at the national scale and by the state-centric world view. Such struggles in the urban illustrate the acts of citizenship as well as the practices of ‘becoming claim-making subjects in and through various sites and scales’ (Isin 2008).

In order to analyze acts of citizenship, this article adopts Lefebvre’s (1996) theory of the right to the city and his concept of ‘inhabitance’ and Purcell’s (2003) interpretation of inhabitance in terms of citizenship. Purcell (2003) reformulates citizenship as ‘citadinship’ by bringing together the urban dweller and the citizen. His theoretical framework serves as a basis to better understand the formation of political communities in the context of the urban in this article. It offers an imaginative opening to challenge existing hegemonic structures, which are based on capitalist social relations and the nation state.

By doing so, we explore the potential of the citizen initiatives that emerged in the wake of the right to the city movements to create new platforms for politics of everyday life in the urban for their inhabitants. Among those, Barcelona en Comu (BenC), a common political platform for urban social movements, is distinct as it managed to mobilize an election campaign for municipal elections. We argue that such initiatives give rise to political awareness and increase the visibility of ecological and political practices, which can be interpreted as a specific momentum for transformative change.

To support our argument, we expand on Purcell’s interpretation of inhabitance by highlighting specific acts of citizenship such as the right to participate in decision-making processes and the right to appropriate the center. By reviewing Purcell’s explorations of citizenship and linking these with cases of contemporary post-right to the city citizen initiatives in Barcelona, this article provides an opportunity to re-examine some of the emerging vocabularies around citizenship. In order to explore this further, through this article we seek to answer two key questions:

1. What are the key strategies for social and economic urban transformation of citizen initiatives?
2. How do these initiatives manifest themselves in terms of the new understandings of citizenship?

The contributions of this article are three-fold. First, it contributes to a deepened understanding of politicization, especially in the aftermath of significant social movements, such as occupy movements. Second, the article contributes to the emerging body
of literature concerned with citizenship practices at the grassroots level at an urban scale by relating to the key aspects of right to city as a way to expand rights. Finally, it discusses how citizen initiatives at different scales and sectors mobilize to upscale their power and influence through municipal politics. Our analysis is based on empirical evidence derived from semi-structured interviews and participant observation that was carried out during three months of fieldwork in Barcelona in 2016, as well as information derived from media sources, official websites, and transcripts of politicians’ speeches.

**Right to the city and citizenship**

Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the right to the city introduces a radical reinterpretation of the content and subject of political community (Lefebvre 1996), one where membership is based on inhabitance rather than as defined by the nation state. The motivation behind the idea of inhabitance relies on the belief that the legitimate right to the city can only be gained through living in and creating the urban space (Lefebvre 1991). Lefebvre’s delineation of three kinds of space – lived, perceived, and conceived space – central to understand right to the city as a ground for political membership. Space is produced by ongoing interactions of social relations that include idea construction, spatial practices, and representations of space (Merrifield 2006). Lefebvre’s concept of lived space, which is a space of ‘users and inhabitants’ (Lefebvre 1991, 39), is a representation of everyday life.

Within existing theories of citizenship, which aim to capture contemporary political subjects in the urban, most scholars (Soysal 1994; Isin and Wood 1999; Turner 2000; Balibar 2001; Dobson 2003) work to expand the narrow understanding of citizenship based on a legal status associated with a nation state to a broader understanding based on social processes. According to that, citizenship can be understood as a collection of social processes through which individuals and groups engage in claiming, expanding, and losing their rights. In this sense, it is more than legal engagements and rights associated with the relationship of the individual to the nation state, but also the practices through which individuals and groups formulate and assert new rights, establish new groups, or fight to extend or maintain existing ones (Isin and Wood 1999). In Isin’s (2008) work, citizenship is understood in relation to historical and social contexts and the concept of ‘acts of citizenship’ is crucial in relation to claiming rights and creating political subjects (Isin 2008, 39):

Those acts that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating or transforming sites and scales of change.

In the urban context, Purcell’s (2002; 2003; 2008; 2012; 2013) works explore Lefebvre’s key ideas in relation to the political community and offers a critical take in understanding the political implications of right to the city. According to Purcell (2002), Lefebvre’s right to the city does offer an alternative to existing neoliberal urban governance, but it is not a panacea. It must be examined and contextualized in relation to urban politics of the inhabitant. By policy makers, right to the city is frequently used
and conceptualized within the broader agenda for human rights (UNESCO 2006; UN-HABITAT 2010). However, this might be problematic appropriation of the concept as its political attention stays squarely on the state, as that is the institution that will guarantee any future right to the city. In this context, Purcell asserts that it is important to emphasize the radical character of right to the city as it is an essential element of a wider revolutionary political struggle (Purcell 2013).

According to Purcell, Lefebvre’s position can be reformulated in the framework of citizenship by bringing the urban dweller and the citizen together. In order to operationalize a radical urban politics, Lefebvre calls for a ‘new contract of citizenship’ by radically expanding the scope of rights to: the rights to information, to difference, to self-management, and to the city (Purcell 2013). The scope of political community is also expanded, in line with Lefebvre’s expanded idea of space:

> Therefore, the process of producing space necessarily involves constructing the rhythms of everyday life and producing and reproducing the social relations that frame it. Control over the production of urban space involves much more than just determining the material spatial structures of the city. It also involves control over urban social and spatial relations more generally. In the right to the city inhabitants have a say in decisions both within and outside the formal state, decisions such as where capital will be invested (Purcell 2003, 577).

Purcell (2003) calls this Lefebvrian inspired citizenship: the citadinship. The right to the city includes two set of rights that inform this new citizenship imaginary: the right to participate in the production of urban space and the right to appropriate the urban space in the course of everyday life (Lefebvre 1996, 179). The first right encompasses participation in decision-making processes that affect the interests of the urban space with a multi-scalar approach. This scalar diversity means that the right to the production of urban space would include citadins’ rights to participate centrally in the decisions that affect their city regardless of which scale they are discussed at. The second right refers to the right to define and produce urban space regardless of its use value (Purcell 2003). In support of this view, Purcell gives the example of investment for transportation systems, which are typically discussed at a federal level, and argues that the right to appropriate urban space implies that discussions should include the citadins of the city who might be affected by such a decision. In this context, centrality is crucial. Under the right to appropriation, citizens of the city position themselves at the center and in a position to reclaim the center of the city (Merrifield 2003). The idea of centrality in right to the city can be understood as a challenge to capitalist social relations as it confronts capital’s ability to commodify urban centers.

### Methodology

Our analysis is based on empirical evidence derived from in-depth interviews, politicians’ speeches, media resources, official websites, and participant observation during three months of fieldwork in Barcelona between April and June 2016. This period corresponded with BenC’s first year anniversary in office, which allowed us to ask questions about both the movement’s expectations and their one year evaluation.

In qualitative research, ‘the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon,’ which is best achieved using purposeful sampling strategies (Creswell 2011, 203). We used a purposeful sampling
strategy to select our informants. In order to provide a comprehensive picture, we conducted in-depth interviews with 12 people who played different roles in the community and held diverse positions such as citizens, representatives from the LGBTQ community, members of food and energy cooperatives, the director and Founder of BCNecologia, Urban Ecology Agency of Barcelona, as well as key actors of the city’s municipal platform, BenC. In order to understand the differences and similarities at the level of politicization, grassroots practices, and relationship with BenC, we chose to speak with active citizens from three different neighborhoods that are characterized by different income levels. These are, namely L’Eixample, an upper-middle class neighborhood; Horta, a middle-class neighborhood, and Nou Barris, a lower-middle class neighborhood. Most interviews were conducted in Spanish except with two individuals who were comfortable to give interviews in English.

Furthermore, during these three months we used participant-observation methods in eight different public activities organized by the municipal government, different neighborhood initiatives and committees. These events included four neighborhood meetings, the annual celebration of the BenC with the involvement of all sub-groups and neighborhoods, one conjoined political rally of BenC, En Comu Podem, and Podemos, one formal political event of DiEM25 (A Pan-European, cross-border movement of democrats) with the participation of Ada Colau, Xavier Domenech, and Yannis Varoufakis, and an informal neighborhood gathering of Ada Colau with the residents of Nou Barris, where they shared a ‘Paella Popular’. In the annual celebration meeting of BenC, Ada Colau held a 2-h section in which she answered the questions asked by inhabitants of Barcelona. In addition to our interviews, participating in these events allowed us to get a comprehensive understanding of practices in terms of the right to participate in the decision-making and right to appropriate the city center.

We also relied on media sources, due to the influential role of social media and digital activism in citizen politicization. We used social media accounts of BenC, alongside the official websites of the Municipality of Barcelona and Som Energia to further collect data. The data were organized according to central categories in line with the elements of the right to city framework, such as participation, public space, public services, right to information, housing, and decision-making.

The political background of Catalonia, the Indignados movement and its aftermath

The urban imaginaries are highly contingent upon their historical and political background. Catalonia, particularly Barcelona, has always held a specific role within the political history of Spain, one characterized by its ambitions for autonomy. Catalans have always looked for means to defend their existence and independence against the central Spanish governments since the Catalan independence declaration of 1714 (Rubner Hansen 2017). Catalonia gained its increased autonomy, along with the other regions in Spain, in the post-Franco period with the implementation of the Spanish Constitution of 1978. During this period, the right to become an autonomous region and govern themselves within the limits of the designated authority was given to the communities that wished to have it and was called ‘optional autonomy system’ (Ruiz Almendral 2002, 467). Depending on the demands of the community, the
autonomy level that the community wanted to entail was available within the options given by the constitution; but, in case of a conflict the state still holds hierarchy over autonomous regions (Ruiz Almendral 2002, 467). After the amendments in 2005, The Generalitat of Catalonia holds jurisdiction in various matters of culture, education, health, justice, environment, communications, transportation, commerce, public safety, and local governments. Catalonia has its own police force, the Mossos d’Esquadra, although the Spanish government keeps agents in the region for matters relating to border control, terrorism, and immigration. Despite this, most of the justice system is administered by Spanish judicial institutions. The legal system is uniform throughout Spain, with the exception of ‘civil law’, which is administered separately within Catalonia (Statute of Autonomy Catalonia 2006). Therefore, although Barcelona has authority over municipal decisions and Catalonia over their autonomous regional decisions, the central state might still intervene on areas such as housing policies, migration policies, and areas of conflict (Irgil 2016; Villalta-Puig 2013).

Like many other Southern European states, Spain underwent neoliberal changes in political and economic structures of the country, which influenced the socio-economic formation of the society. Since 2008, triggered by worldwide economic crisis, Spain faced major economic imbalances that prompted different strands of citizen movements, mainly in response to two problems: welfare cuts and a growing housing crisis. The austerity program that was introduced after the economic crisis was referred to as ‘the biggest fiscal consolidation of the democracy’ (Johnson 2012). It included budget cuts, tax increases, as well as new modes of regulation especially in the housing and energy sectors. The combination of austerity programs with plummeting employment alongside the disclosure of corruption among economic and political elites created a major political opportunity structure for the emergence of Indignados movement (Asara 2016; Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel, and García 2017).

The housing crisis left many people ‘desahucios’, a term that is used to describe people that have lost their houses as a result of the crisis without the ability to pay their mortgage, but continued to be held accountable for paying their debts (Colau and Alemany 2013). This was exacerbated by increasing unemployment particularly amongst youth, which resulted in wage cuts, shrunk the middle class, and aggravated the work and life conditions for lower-middle class people, which continued until 2013 (Barbero 2015, 271). As a result, the Platform for People Affected by Mortgage (PAH – Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca) emerged and gained significant attention, then later played an important part in further political developments in Barcelona. Established in 2009, the platform aimed to initiate a grassroots process to unite and collectively find solutions for homeowners facing foreclosure, eviction, and debt for life (García-Lamarca 2017). The current mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, was the spokesperson for PAH since its founding. According to Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel, and García (2017), PAH had a significant impact on society, as it introduced innovative methods to deal with the housing crisis. First, the movement defined the housing crisis as a collective problem rather than an individual debt problem. Second, it forced governments and financial institutions to find new mechanisms to negotiate housing debts with grassroots movements.
Triggered by the aforementioned circumstances, in May 2011 the Indignados movement, also known as 15-M Movement, began in Madrid and later spread throughout Spain. The movement was composed of people with different backgrounds who opposed the current political system; however, it was predominantly formed by unemployed, well-educated youth (Castañeda 2012, 309–11; Dhaliwal 2012, 255; Tuğal 2013, 150). The Indignados movement’s activities in Barcelona contributed significant activities of the movement, particularly because of the synergy with Barcelona’s long history of neighborhood associations (associaciones de vecinos in Spanish) and long-lasting engagement with urban spaces. With Plaça Catalunya as their base, protesters occupied public areas and public spaces, both in the city center and within their neighborhoods, in order to increase both visibility and their capacity to protest with the ultimate aim to offer solutions to the existing political structure (Castañeda 2012, 311). Tuğal (2013, 161) states that protesters in Indignados 'experimented with direct democratic ways of formulating these demands through park assemblies'. Therefore, the Indignados movement and the PAH movement have had a crucial role in contributing to alternative citizenship agendas, as they activated a collective political identity in the defense of social rights, as well as pushed governing institutions to respect formal citizenship rights that are put on hold by austerity programs (Garcia-Lamarca 2017; Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel, and García 2017).

Post-right to the city initiatives in Barcelona and BenC

Constructing the basis of our argument, the post-right to the city movements emerged as diverse and strong citizen initiatives which create new platforms for politics of everyday life in the urban for their inhabitants. Although there had been citizen initiatives prior to Indignados movement, its momentum enabled more initiatives to be visible with space to voice their demands. Indignados promoted a scalar diversity in their approach that enabled the establishment of relationships with the state, with other citizens, and with various public spaces. Social interaction within public spaces offers long-term gains that heavily contribute to the transformation of citizenship perception and citizen participation (Degen and Garcia 2012, 1025).

In Barcelona, neighborhood associations were established to develop solutions to the daily problems of neighborhoods and were built on the shoulders of the urban movements that happened parallel to the urban transformation in the early 1970s (Calavita and Ferrer 2000, 798). It has been argued that the Indignados movement created a momentum, which re-vitalized neighborhood assemblies and urban initiatives by politicizing citizens, especially those who remained politically neutral after the Spanish civil war. Asara (2016) characterized the post-Indignados period as a combination of rich activity at the neighborhood level and continuous deliberation in the assemblies, as well as an increase in the number of initiatives that support alternative economy and society. Economically, in the last decade the number of barter markets has increased from two to 132 and the number of consumption cooperatives from 10 to 120 (Asara 2016; CRIC 2013). Moreover, initiatives such as the Catalunya Fair (and Network) of Solidarity Economy, free social canteens for people who are disadvantaged, self-organized alternative neighborhood celebrations, and communal urban gardens have also been emerged.
According to Feenstra (2015, 15), ‘from assemblies to current proliferation of new political parties, there has been constant movement through a wide range of technopolitical actions and experimentation with means and political tools used by civil society and activists’. Tormey and Feenstra (2015) state that post-Indignados political parties have used the party format and elections as a strategic arena to facilitate political transformation and defend the claims of the Indignados movement. BenC is one example of this kind of political experimentation in the form of citizen municipalism. BenC can be considered a political platform of urban social movements or a ‘movement-party’ of Barcelona. The proposal to launch this platform came from a group of activists who were in the anti-eviction movement (PAH) and the Observatory of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (DESC), a non-profit organization that gives legal advice and training to social movements. Both groups are well connected with social movements and advocacy groups, and played an important role as facilitators for networking. Led by the spokeswoman of PAH, Ada Colau, they launched the BenC political platform in June 2014 (Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel, and García 2017). The aim of BenC was to win the municipal elections and expand their influence in society by reclaiming key political institutions. As part of their strategy, they used building a solidarity economy to mobilize an election campaign where regular citizens contributed with their skills, labor, and resources in order to realize the basic needs of the election campaign. These were wide range of activities that address all different necessities, such as designing the webpage and logo of the party and helping out with distribution and logistics.

After winning the municipal elections, BenC is transformed into unique establishment which serves both as an elected institutional body in the municipality and a platform for different social-ecological movements. The platform represents different constituencies, for instance, its steering committee for the campaign consisted some of the most visible spokespersons of the 15M, neighborhood activists who participated in the social struggles of the early seventies, key figures of the federation of the Catalan Communist Party, Catalan Unified Socialist Party and Green Party (that governed Barcelona and the Catalan government in the tripartite coalition and eventually decided to dissolve into the new formation), prestigious academics and promising researchers from the four public universities of Barcelona, renowned environmental and gender activists and some figures from the burgeoning Catalan independentist movement (Russo 2016, 15). Moreover, other political parties that emerged after the Indignados movement, such as Candidatura d’Unitat Popular (CUP) and Escanos en Blanco (Empty Seats), are also represented either in their claims or by their members.

Discussion of post-right to the city initiatives in the aftermath of the Indignados movement

In this section, we discuss the strategies for transformation of a variety of initiatives that came out of the right to the city movement and the extent to which these movements lead to politicized citizens. To do so, we rely on Purcell’s framework of ‘citadinship’ and two sub-rights that are encompassed within the concept of the right to the city.
**Right to participate in the decision-making process**

Historically, due to the existence of neighborhood associations, Barcelona has been characterized as a ‘city of neighborhoods’ (Russo 2016, 7). These already established neighborhood groups helped facilitate the re-politicization of citizens with the momentum enabled by the Indignados movement, which acted as a ‘call’ to take part in the production of urban space. Carmen from L’Eixample en Comu, who was politically inactive in the years leading up to the formation of the Indignados movement, stated:

> I am a good representative of the people that are not young. I was politicized, my parents were immigrants during the civil war, I was born in England and studied in France, and I was very politicized in the university. But there was a moment, my activities in the university were more important for me, I worried a little. I was not stimulated, I voted, but that was it... This movement called me. And then I have become an activist, it is a new situation and very satisfactory.

Similarly, Sergio from Nou Barris en Comu states ‘They were saying what and how they will do things, this convinced me... I was never inside politics, now I am inside’. Additionally, Lluis, member of Horta en Comu, stated ‘Barcelona has always had people in the neighborhoods with socio-political interests and with activity... the Indignados movement started in the squares, it expanded more because most people join the movement in their neighborhoods.’ In addition to incorporating new members, Indignados enacted re-politicization of citizens in the neighborhoods and encouraged participation and visibility of the political practices. Neighborhood committees and activities represent a crucial example of Lefebvre’s idea of relational space that emphasizes the importance of attachment and responsibility for the city.

For neighborhood assemblies and their members, BenC serves as a common platform which provides them virtual and social spaces for participation at the municipal level. To access its virtual resources, becoming a member to BenC only requires online registration. Afterwards, the members can start stating opinions on topics of interest. Similarly, the Municipality of Barcelona formed an initiative called ‘Decidim’, which means ‘we are deciding’ in Catalan. Their slogan is ‘Let’s decide on a Barcelona that we want’. Members are allowed both to participate in the decision-making process and participate in developing suggestions to be voted on directly by other members of BenC. Suggestions vary in scale and scope, for example: from deciding where to put a street lamp to developing various ways of welcoming refugees into Barcelona.

Virtual space for participation is also used for voting for crucial organizational decisions. For instance, in order to expand its influence in the municipality, as they were a minority government, BenC consulted their members about building a pact with PSC (Socialists’ Party of Catalonia in English) so that it could become a bigger minority within the municipality. Our informant Ampar a member of Horta en Comu neighborhood assembly explains how BenC reached out to neighborhood assemblies for their decision: ‘At the latest plenary, BenC Executive Branch informed us about the pact in detail, they inform us about everything, there had been some interventions, and currently we are voting (online) yes or no for the pact’. Three days later, the poll ended, where the turnout was 27.59%, and was approved with 62.5% (Sust 2016).

Regarding the social spaces of participation, which we observed in meetings of Sants en Comu, Horta en Comu, Nou Barris en Comu, as well as other neighborhood
meetings; BenC district members gather in bi-weekly district meetings in every neighborhood, where each representative of the neighborhood has an opportunity to voice their suggestions and concerns at the monthly citywide meetings. During the discussions about the potential pact with PSC, we observed horizontal methods of decision-making and deliberation, as the members sat in a circle and took turns in stating their opinions, suggestions, and criticisms regarding the potential pact. They end each meeting by deciding what to bring to the monthly meeting of BenC and to the councils of BenC (Ejes in Spanish). Specific projects were discussed in the councils, in which representatives of neighborhoods, committee members, and experts in the field participate. This was a common practice in all the neighborhood meetings that we participated in. Moreover, during our fieldwork, we observed that BenC neighborhood members distribute flyers and stickers to apartment buildings in the jurisdiction of each neighborhood in order to notify residents about their upcoming events, planned topics of the meetings, ways to participate, how to get more information, and how to become involved in the decision-making process. Incorporating different platforms, BenC demonstrates different alternative practices for meaningful participation by arranging meetings at common spaces of the city rather than administration offices and by including practices that emphasize sharing, solidarity, and communal values. For instance, at the informal neighborhood gathering in low-income neighborhood of Nou Barris, paella was served and the event was open to everyone that felt like sharing a meal while discussing daily problems with Ada Colau – mayor of Barcelona and BenC board members without facing any administrative bottlenecks, like the need to fill out a form. In this particular meeting we observed that people, both active participants in the association and residents of the city took turns asking Ada Colau about their concerns, making suggestions and posing questions about their neighborhood and the city politics. Creating these social spaces of participation demonstrates both horizontal and vertical levels of incorporation of citadins to city’s decision-making processes.

Additionally, the right to participate in the decision-making process is articulated through co-design and co-production of policies regarding public services such as water and energy as well as gender rights. By moving from the traditional, paternalistic relationship between municipality and citizens, these kinds of collaborative approaches illustrate a radical act in urban citizenship, as democracy works in such a way that it expands people’s own power to act, as they question ‘how can we develop our ability to manage our affairs for ourselves?’ (Purcell 2017, 693). One example of this is the collaboration between SomEnergia (Spanish Renewable Energy Cooperative) and the Municipality of Barcelona in creating a model for municipalizing energy distribution networks and encouraging sustainable energy resources for Barcelona (Capellán-Pérez, Campos-Celador, and Terés-Zubiaga 2016). Som Energia emerged to counteract existing injustices in the Spanish energy market, such as corruption and high tariffs (Pizarro-Irizar, González-Eguino, and Arto 2016; Rasó 2017). Akizu et al. (2017) refers to concept known as ‘revolving doors’ in explaining how large electricity companies act as lobby groups to limit the renewable energy transition in Spain. Like BenC, Som Energia also offer alternative forms of organization with greater participation rights, awareness in energy consumption, and increased renewable energy options. The collaboration between municipality and Som Energia expands the right and scope of participation in energy decisions, such as the right to choose more environmentally friendly energy models for the
city of Barcelona. However, our informant from Som Energia pointed out that there are also challenges in practice: 'High level of participation through membership means more demand on renewable energy in the urban. We have more members than the renewable energy we could actually produce'. This also poses a limitation related to the scalar diversity of right to the city frameworks and illustrates the importance of engaging with urban political economy literature, as urban centers often depend on the resources of rural regions for achieving, for example, food and water security and providing various types of energy resources (Islar and Boda 2014).

The right to appropriate the city center

According to Purcell, the right to appropriate the city center refers to the right to define and produce urban space regardless of its use value (Purcell 2003, 582) and can be seen as a counter movement to the ongoing neoliberalization of cities. In Barcelona, the democratization of urban space is made possible by the opening of neighborhoods to the rest of the city via public festivals and cultural events, in addition to the parks and plazas that serve as gathering places for residents from differentiated areas of the city on common ground, enhancing social cohesion and citizen activities. Gradually, the model of a compact city that was socially and spatially segregated between the bourgeois and the proletarian gave way to greater social diversity and a more diffuse urban identity organized around 'Barcelonity'; ‘a discourse of class was replaced with one of municipal citizenship’ (McNeill 2003, 83) with a common democratic culture (Mascarell 2007, 90; Degen and Garcia 2012, 1025). As a symbolic move, after BenC came to power, the privately sponsored ice-skating area at the city center during Christmas was replaced by artisanal stands where old and young people got together without having to pay a fee. Also, collective activities such as theatrical performances, art workshops, and free dance sessions at popular centers are great examples of grassroots activities of citizenship that work toward the appropriation of the center.

Re-imagining central spaces as community spaces, citizens of Barcelona aim to expand their right to the center, facilitated by the transformative movement that BenC provides in the municipality. During the first anniversary meeting of BenC with the mayor Ada Colau, we observed that inhabitants of Barcelona could easily approach with their demands and questions. One of the inhabitants, a café owner, asked about new regulations, as he was fined when they expanded the area of their café by putting tables in the public square. In return, after explaining the regulation, Ada Colau responded by emphasizing the collective nature of the right to the city: ‘Although it is your right to earn money, your expansion of the designated area is an invasion of public space and our fellow city members’ right to enjoy that public space freely’. In several neighborhoods of Barcelona, there are demands to convert unused buildings into community spaces. Notably different from earlier governments’ plans, one of BenC’s priority areas is to commonize some of these unused buildings located at the city center by allocating them for cooperatives or neighborhood councils in the city (Feenstra 2015). In line with this, our informant Carmen from L’Eixample en Comu assembly emphasizes their plan to recover an old jail in the neighborhood: ‘Now we are pushing to regain the space, because it is a municipal space. The construction of the prison belongs to the government but space is local. We want to recover it to establish a park, a school...’. Similarly, Lluis from Horta en Comu shared their proposal for BenComu:
‘There is a plan to recover some parts of our neighborhood by turning them into “green lungs” (green spaces). We offered this plan to two earlier governments but they were not interested’. BenC offers a participatory path for its members which their predecessors did not provide: they start political transformation, in parallel to their goal of ‘street politics’, with increasing the communities’ access not only to common spaces in the city but also to the political power at the municipal level (Feenstra 2015).

Another important finding in our study concerns the intersectional aspects of the right to the city. During the Indignados movement, several assemblies were formed in line with an intersectional reading of various dimensions of inequality. The presence of the Indignant feminist assembly, Transmaricabollo-LGBT assembly enforced some specific rules in the square aimed at combating structural inequality by advocating for short speaking times, gender balancing in speaking, in access to streaming in general assemblies, scheduling, rotation of dynamic facilitators to avoid creating leadership hierarchies, and the establishment of consensus as a decision-making mechanism (Cruells Lopez and Ruiz Garcia 2014). After the Indignados movement, these assemblies continue to expand their influence in the city. The collaboration between BenC and the city’s feminist movements and LGBTQ groups was finalized with a well-articulated and comprehensive policy at the municipal level recognizing the importance of intersectional strategies in formulating inclusive policies for urban mobility, housing, and green spaces. This represents a progressive approach to further developing the right to the city framework and adds diversity and inequality as an element to the conceptualization of citadinship. Feminist scholars have long argued that the right to the city framework neglects the gendered relations, particularly in relation to claiming the right to centrality. Although Lefebvre’s framework includes the right to difference as complementary to the right to the city: ‘the right not to be classified forcibly into categories which have been determined by the necessarily homogenizing powers’ (Lefebvre, 1976[1973], 35 in Dikec 2001; Fenster 2005), gender related aspects are not emphasized specifically. As Fenster (1999; 2005) argues, the ‘public’ is perceived by some feminist critiques as the domain of the white upper-middle class heterosexual male, and not always a safe place for minority groups such as LGBTQ communities or women. In that sense BenC’s recognizing the gendered relations of exclusion in claiming the right to the city, like those caused by issues of fear and safety is an important enabling factor for all citizens’ right to participation and practice right to the city. According to our informant Maria, who is an academic and also the representative of a common platform for city feminist movements: ‘Feminist politics are the best thing that BenC is doing... Ada Colau’s position as the first female mayor opened up new symbolic domains as she openly declares she does emotional politics’. Such symbolic actions also include erecting a digital monument in the middle of city’s most crowded beach counting the number of refugees that have died in the Mediterranean; or activities such as stopping metro lines for a few minutes after a women is killed in the city to make ‘domestic violence’ a political subject and issue of every citizen in the city. These can be considered physical examples of a site that has ‘a strategic value for the struggle for rights that is the basis of enacting citizenship’ (Isin 2008, 133).

Conclusion

Analyzing the post-right to the city movement in Barcelona through Purcell’s interpretation of inhabitance from the citizenship perspective, this article aims to contribute to the literature on politicization of inhabitants and its impact on exercising the right to
the city in terms of participation and centrality. The Indignados movement created a major change in the participation of citizens as it facilitated the politicization of the people and the emergence of municipal movement.

We found slightly different patterns of politicization in different neighborhoods depending on their income level. The relationship of low-income neighborhoods with BenC is stronger, and their priority areas mostly relate to housing and transportation issues. Poorer neighborhoods are also BenC's priority. They have proposed an extension in the metro network of Barcelona in order to include low income areas. The right to centrality is operationalized by these kinds of decisions at the policy level. However, high income neighborhoods like L'Eixample emphasize their needs mostly at general levels, such as problems associated with increasing tourism in Barcelona. Our research also shows that a municipal government that maintains close relationships with social movements – in this case by recognizing their demands as policy goals – is crucial in exercising right to the city as a collective right. This kind of co-production of policies also legitimizes municipal politics on an ongoing basis and not only during election times.

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