

# Reception through Mobile Commons

## Disrupting Exclusion and Negotiating Solidarity Politics through Brussels' Squats

**Ismail Oubad**

School of Social Sciences,  
University of Genoa, Italy  
Center for Ethnic and Migration  
Studies, University of Liège, Belgium  
[oubadismail@gmail.com](mailto:oubadismail@gmail.com)

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### Introduction

Living outside conventional accommodations is a predicament of many 'undesirable' migrants (Agier, 2016). Recent examinations of migrants' living conditions in urban areas of Brussels portray illegalized migrants as often forced to reside in (in)hospitable makeshift dwellings, where they are deprived of intimacy and agency in the process of establishing a home (Trossat, 2024). While squatting for citizens may signify reclaiming urban spaces to cultivate alternative

communities and capabilities (Bouillon, 2009), for illegalized migrants, it emerges from an urgent need to secure shelter and envision potential settlement in arrival cities (Marchiset, 2020). Contrary to abstract notions of community building, squats are thrust upon illegalized migrants as a means to acquire shelter within the inherent contradictions of a reception system rooted in securitarian approaches and the exclusion of those deemed undeserving (Ravn et al., 2020). Despite existing de-

*This study investigates the complex dynamics of squatting in Brussels, examining its influence on shaping solidarity norms and values in urban settings. Through participative observation conducted within squats, we identify a recurring pattern: the (re)production and negotiation of mobile commons. Analyzing three squatting instances, we emphasize their role as not only spaces for commons (re)production but also platforms for the social becoming of migrants and citizens. We argue that squats are not mere shelters but dynamic spaces where negotiation and social*

### keywords

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*transformation occur, challenging conventional humanitarian assistance models. Ultimately, this research highlights the significance of (re)producing alternative dwelling infrastructures for illegalized migrants in shaping the urban commons and thereby impacting everyday urban politics of solidarity.*

bates often framing migrant squats in terms of their deficiencies, our research is focused on understanding their catalytic potential. The politics, norms, and values negotiated through these dwelling infrastructures lie at the core of our investigation.

Building on these considerations, it is noteworthy to situate our argument within the existing debates on shared resources and spaces collectively managed by migrants and pro-migrant communities. This interest emerges from reflections on urban life and the everyday revolts, strategies, and tactics of migrants, drawing on Lefebvrian and De Certeausian theories. In *Critical Border and Migration Studies*, this approach has led to reflections on infrastructures of migration (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014), the mobile commons (Trimikliniotis et al., 2015), and infra-structuration politics (Meeus et al., 2019). Scholars examining how migrants persist in hostile contexts have highlighted the complex interplay between forms of solidarity, care, and support among migrants and their allies in urban land-

scapes (Della Porta, 2018; Ataç et al., 2021). The city serves as a crucial observation point to (re)examine the management and maintenance of common resources by migrant and pro-migrant communities, beyond rigid notions of formal reception and management. This line of reflection underscores the importance of shared resources and spaces accessible to people who are constantly on the move, such as humanitarian structures and information points—essentially, the infrastructures of arrival (Meeus et al., 2019). These scholars emphasize that sharing and sustaining a common includes those who may not have permanent or stable residence but still rely on shared resources and spaces.

In urban areas where migrants settle upon arrival in a new country or region, the informal dwelling spaces stand as a common, collectively produced by people in motion, be that activist groups and migrants, who continuously generate and expand their ways of appropriating space as they navigate through specific migratory journey (Dadusc, 2019). These dwelling spaces are not static entities, they are continuously shaped and expanded by collective actions of migrants and their supporters. This collective production of space reflects various productions of norms and practices around assistance, sup-



port, and solidarity with and among migrants, where knowledge, resources, and practices transpire from different sources to navigate repressive and exhaustive exclusions produced by migration control dispositive and establish, in the margins of that, a livelihood and social becoming (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013).

In Brussels, the reception of the asylum seekers has been declared in 'crisis' since 2015. The state of crisis served as a primary catalyst for citizen mobilizations in solidarity with migrants in Belgium (Debelder, 2020). Generally, civil society played a pivotal role during crises, irrespective of their intentions and motivations. This involvement manifests either through voluntary participation in established governmental or non-governmental organizations or through the emergence of new informal groups composed mainly of citizens. One manifestation of this solidarity is alternative dwelling infrastructures (i.e. squats) for illegalized migrants in Brussels.

A form of reappropriation of space for those excluded by reception and immigration imperatives of deservingness (Ravn et al., 2020). Relevant to this account is a brief contextualization for the squatting initiatives directed to accommodating illegalized migrants.

In 2015, due to the augmented arrivals of protection seekers and their exclusion from reception structures, an improvised refugee camp in the North Quarter of Brussels was built.

The Maximilian Park witnessed a noteworthy humanitarian response from community-based and citizen-led initiatives (Lafaut and Coene, 2019; Vandevorcht, 2019). The open park and the material assistance provided by humanitarian groups, have attracted additional categories of migrants in precarious situations, such as 'transit migrants' seeking to reach another destination country, and undocumented individuals—those either denied residency permits or who did not meet eligibility criteria for asy-

# Illegalized people and solidarity collectives occupying the Maximilian Park in 2017

Credit: Valentina Pop (2017)

Fig. 1

lum application. Around this makeshift camp many volunteer citizens and civil society associations have gravitated, some of whom formally united under the “Citizens’ Platform in Support of Refugees” to address the gap in the reception of refugees. Be that as it may, following two years, the Secretary of State for Asylum and Immigration, imposed a strict ban on staying in the park in 2017 and initiated police raids to evacuate and arrest people with irregular status. This sparked a climate of resistance against this aggressive political action, leading not only to the inception of the building occupation for refugees and undocumented people but also to citizen housing (Clarbout, 2020). While some citizens began opening their doors to park inhabitants facing the violence of police raids, activist collectives engaged in monitoring, occupying and sustaining vacant buildings in Brussels to shelter migrants exhausted by police aggression. Whether driven by political activism or humanitarian aid, these efforts faced a significant setback when the federal legislature responded with the 2017 anti-squat law, criminalizing the occupation of vacant buildings and prioritizing property rights over the housing of excluded migrant people.

The Covid-19 pandemic, however, introduced a new dynamic. Temporary permissions for building occupations were granted, revealing a complex interplay between public health measures and authority’s tolerance to migrants’ support. This temporary allowance aimed to mitigate

sanitary risks and create sanitary corridors, providing vulnerable migrants with essential shelter and care during the emergency. The framing of emergency, crisis, and deservingness thus become the battleground on which temporary dwelling infrastructures of illegalized migrants and refugees are negotiated.

The reception ‘crisis’ (Rea et al., 2019) underscored the inadequacies of official reception structures, prompting a robust response from community-based and solidarity initiatives. Networks such as migrant solidarity groups and the Citizens’ Platform emerged as reactions to these deficiencies. These groups oscillate between a humanitarian logic that maintains a politically neutral stance (Lou Vertongen, 2018) and forms political contestation (Mescoli, Roblain, and Griffioen, 2020). Despite their differing intentions, these initiatives foster interpersonal relations among diverse subjects in support and solidarity contexts. This interaction gives rise to a third posture known as subversive humanitarianism (Vandervoordt, 2019), emancipating migrants from being mere recipients of aid and stimulating their socio-political subjectivities.

The federation of various actors around migratory solidarity and reception generates nuanced subjectivities and materialities. However, existing accounts predominantly center on citizens and their engagements, presuming them to be the primary agents of solidarity and the arbiters of its dynamics. Our proposition broadens

this scope to encompass both documented and undocumented migrants, thus acknowledging the complexities inherent in discussions surrounding solidarity, reception, and broader occurrences. Shifting away from static depictions of solidarity to interconnected circulations that sustain its flow and transformation underscore the integral role of migrant people themselves in shaping and navigating terrain of solidarity and reception in Brussels.

Indeed, squatting serves as a manifestation of solidarity with marginalized migrants, presenting a complex phenomenon that warrants a thorough examination of the politics, norms, and values underpinning the creation of these mobile communities (Trimiklinioti et al., 2015). This study highlights how the (re)production of these dwelling spaces not only shapes nuanced definitions of norms and values concerning aid and solidarity but also influences the social becoming of migrants and citizens within the contexts of emergency, crisis and deservingness.

### Methods

This paper is informed through participative observation and direct engagement, as conceptualized by Routedledge (2013), to provide an in-depth analysis of squatters' collectives and undocumented squatters in Brussels. Our approach builds on immersive techniques such as shadowing (Quinlan, 2008) and direct involvement with the subject communities. By actively participating in monitoring, occupying and

sustaining some squats, the case study gains a multi-sited perspective of the processes of infrastructuring these spaces. Comprehensive qualitative methods, including in-depth conversations with both documented and undocumented squatters, activists, and other stakeholders enable the collection of nuanced insights into the establishment and maintenance of squats, particularly among migrant populations grappling with legal challenges. From November 2023 to the present time, ethnographic observations and life stories were collected with subjects who are directly implicated in migrant squats—whether as residents, supporters, or organizations attempting to manage these spaces. This criterion ensures that the research is informed by those with first-hand experience and knowledge of the complexities involved. The multiplicity of observation points—ranging from organized collectives to undocumented squatters operating independently—provides contextualized accounts of lived experiences. These stories and observations illuminated ways solidarity politics are (re)produced and negotiated through squats.

### Contentious intentions, norms and practices

In the following, I will then delve into three situations observed in the heart of Brussels' urban center. The aim is to gain deeper insights into the nuanced forms of producing and maintaining squat. The intention is not an analysis of squats per se, but rather an analysis of the



## Squat-support gathered in front of an occupied building to prevent the expulsion by the federal police in Brussels

Credit: Rock'in Squat (2024)

Fig.2

norms and practices produced through squats. We consider squats as an observation point to these occurrences.

In Brussels different activist groups linked to urban movements of squatting have engaged in solidarity with illegalized migrants excluded from reception structures. The idea is to arrive in a vacant building left to abandonment and to redevelop a living environment for the excluded migrants. As Fadi, a Palestinian spokesperson of the Squat S collective, defines it: "to bring life back where there was none". These collectives have started their projects of squatting and framing occupied spaces through different associations. At first, they were gravitating around the Maximilian Park, later on they have

developed activities oriented towards framing and informing individuals and collectives about temporary occupation. Squatters, as they occupy buildings, aim to pressure the owner and public authorities to sign an 'occupation convention'. This agreement allows squatters to stay in the building until the owner decides its use. It initiates negotiations about ownership and the societal obligation of property owners who keep their buildings empty rather than offering shelter to homeless migrants.

The laissez-faire occupations in Brussels are shaped through practical norms (De Sardan, 2021) of emergency, vulnerability, and security in the neighborhood. A priori federal authorities levy taxes on owners who leave their

buildings vacant, citing concerns that such situations attract drug users and criminals to abandoned properties. However, squatters play on this partition, emphasizing the vulnerability of marginalized migrants and the urgent need to house them in empty buildings. This approach is deemed to address both neighborhood security and the accommodation of homeless migrants through organized squatting. If the squatters assert the vulnerability of the occupants, citizen support is mobilized to prevent eviction ordered by the courts in favor of the building owner, often seen as prioritizing private priority over public welfare.

Through squatting, people produced norms and practices around vulnerable migrants, protection, and private property. The general credo defended by the squatters and their allies is that «public authorities cannot evict single migrant women with their children to the street just to preserve private property». As Victor, a lawyer supporting squatters argues «property owners cannot exert absolute control over their properties. They assert that owners have a social and societal responsibility to prevent their properties from remaining vacant, as it damages the neighborhood's reputation, impacts the living conditions of residents, and fosters feelings of insecurity». In contrast, the lawyer maintains that occupying vacant buildings through housing excluded migrants and bridging their integration in the city of Brussels revitalizes neighborhoods and fosters social cohesion. The

production of meaning on vulnerability, protection, private property, but also the preservation of the Common serves as the battleground where the production and the maintenance of squats is negotiated and contested.

Once squatters successfully secure temporary occupation, what negotiations ensue? In the following we will explore three cases. (1) a collective of squatters led by people with migrant backgrounds with temporary resident permits. (2) a collective composed of European activists, positioning themselves as 'citizen-support' and (3) undocumented migrants who have engaged in squatting houses aside from organized collectives. Through the three cases we will explore how different groups gravitating around squats produce nuanced norms, practices, and directionalities through squats.

### **Squat S Collective**

For Squat S collective (hereinafter SSC), squatting is seen as a strategic tool for political advocacy and the production of alternative solidarity with excluded migrants in Brussels and in Belgium at large. «About 10 years ago, the idea to squat buildings not only for housing but also to push political agendas for migrants or shed light on regularization-related issues took place. But now, it's slowly losing its significance. For many collectives, squatting is oriented to a banal direction. Take V (collective) for example. They claim to be an independent political voice, doing small actions...But V. is getting co-opted

by certain militant movements, by the authorities, and now they're basically a dormitory. V. isn't any more self-managed. Relying on hand-outs from citizens' support and donations made them dependent». Says Fadi, nuancing their position to that of other collectives. Fadi questions the evolution of squats, exemplified by the case of V., once a site of political activism but now primarily focused solely on housing as the goal. To Fadi, this puts the V. collective in a vulnerable position to appropriation, either by authorities or other politicized collectives. «In Brussels all migrant groups are pushed to get political. Some anarchist crews want to use other people's misery to fuel their own activism. It is what keeps them going, you see? Either you politicize yourself on your terms, or they will do it for you without asking», maintains Fadi. Indeed, in a situation where migrant groups are in need to often mobilize other collectives to stop evictions, they are often framed under larger political claims. People from SSC opt for defining their own political line and directionality. A matter of choosing the lesser of two evils. In the face of two options, defining one's own claims and mobilizing other support collective around it, is deemed better than being modeled by others. A concern to aspire to and exercise one's own circumscribed autonomy. This also stresses specific co-option dynamics where collectives mobilize other vulnerability for specific political orientation of antagonism against larger structures of control. Whether intended or not,

many undocumented migrants end up politicized without their consent. Absorbing and assimilating the vulnerability of undocumented migrants serves here as a resource to keep the political struggle going, aiming at larger structural changes for the 'oppressed'.

Indeed, without the constitution of a larger dynamic with a collective intentionality (Swerts, 2021), concerned people only get temporary and precarious solutions. What is to be nuanced here is the ambivalence, consensus and consent among people involved on 'who belongs where' as undocumented people are required to be politicized and perhaps extracted in their vulnerability and used as a fuel to larger struggles. Even if potential regularization is seen in the favor of the undocumented, the risk is rendering undocumented migrants at the 'guardianship' of politicized collectives who claim the necessity of maintaining a contentious dimension to squats. «A squat is not made to be comfortable! If occupants are too comfortable, they will sleep. A squat is not a hotel, it is a place where we make struggle and visibility of migrants' problems and the exclusions done by the state. We cannot always wait for the police to expel the occupant. We must create a struggle and claims meanwhile... A squat is not a permanent residence, it is a springboard in the direction of regularization and autonomisation of excluded people». Maintains Khadija, a Moroccan squatter within SSC.

Following Khadija, squats must maintain their



political dimension, it is crucial not to make occupants too comfortable, ensuring that the squat remains a space of struggle and visibility rather than a permanent residence. Also, the precariousness of undocumented individuals is also highlighted, with a lack of existential anchorage resulting from evictions and frequent changes in housing situations. Even sustaining squats for a few months or a year does not alleviate the risk of expulsion. So to deal with the susceptibility to expulsion and the incapacity of the undocumented to sign a lease agreement, SSC struggle for regularization and autonomisation of the undocumented. Indeed, a distinctive aspect of the socio-political condition of the undocumented migrants is their precise juridical status within the larger immigration system in Belgium. While lacking necessary documents or being in the wait of those documents, they find themselves 'enforceable', wherein authorities can enforce legal measures, including expulsion, detention and deportation. Moreover, while the degree to which individuals are subjected to expulsion varies, without the mobilization of politicized collectives undocumented migrants are at higher risks of expulsion. However, to keep solidarity collectives gravitating around a squat, the politicization of the latter and its situation within the larger rhetoric on regularization is deemed inevitable. Specific to the SSC, both documented and undocumented people are sharing the same shelter. Together, they aim for autonomy and to move away from im-

personal aid, often seen in practices where citizen-support provides assistance expeditively to only-undocumented squats. Their (re)definition to paths to regularization and autonomisation transpires from the way they occupy squats. Arranging temporary housing infrastructures to weave meaning and direction toward their aspirations. It is this ephemeral settlement with its discomfort that urges the occupants to think, to plan and to act. Moving from one squat to another, they negotiated and (re)defined senses of dependency and autonomy. In nuancing mixed squats to those functioning as humanitarian corridors, where citizen-led collectives channel their material and logistic support to undocumented migrant-only squats, Adiou, a Congolese undocumented-squatter states the following: «Everyone here does something for others. It's not like some social workers who bring you leftovers at the end of the week. It's not a human zoo where the whites throw a few scraps of food to those trapped in the cage of distress. Getting out of the zoo is entering the cage and deconstructing the dynamics from the inside out».

For SSC, mixity is key. Intended to make-gravitate resources around the squat. It is primarily meant to manifest a prefigured community of different resources. They direct their squats towards norms and values of personal inclusion and solidarity by proximity, as nuanced to institutional integration and impersonal assistance. More than struggling for regularization, they al-

so aim at injecting resources in the squats, attempting to reinforce the autonomy of the dispossessed.

### **Citizen-support collective**

The Citizen-support Collective (hereinafter CSC), an intricate web of collectives and individuals, mainly citizens of Europe, struggling for the rights of undocumented migrants. Central to the network's activities is its engagement in direct actions that consist of monitoring and occupying vacant buildings for unsheltered migrants. Occupying vacant buildings to advocate for regularization campaigns is one of their main vocations. More than logistic support they provide for squats, they often mobilize needed social and institutional resources drawing on their coalitions with individuals holding positions of influence within governmental bodies. This strategic collaboration facilitates access to crucial information and resources such as contact-persons in relevant institutions to act on a given situation or lists of vacant buildings to be used for squatting campaigns. However, unlike SSC, members of the CSC rarely live in the squats where they offer support to migrants.

The citizen-led support has taken center stage since the beginning of the 'reception crisis'. Their knowledge of the context and understating of institutional expectations and their social capital give them an advantageous position in negotiating the upkeep of occupied buildings. More than providing logistical and materi-

al assistance, it is essential for them to convince public authorities of their reliability in maintaining the squats they establish. This is because public authorities typically view undocumented individuals or those operating outside civil society frameworks as unreliable parties to maintaining the convention of a squat. «We cannot rely on the undocumented to manage the squats. Often, we have public health problems, violence and drugs. We prefer to create conventions with citizens' support and allow access for doctors, for social workers and to create security and make sure that the squat won't turn into ruins» says a director of a regional representation in Brussels. Even though SSC and numerous other groups, primarily led by non-citizens and less-established associations have been crucial since the onset of the 'reception crisis', there persists a perception that non-citizens are less reliable compared to citizens operating within established associations and collectives. CSC, with connections to elected officials in multiple municipalities and regional authority, have accumulated resources to take and lead initiatives in supporting undocumented migrants. «Before making squats a living space, we have to play the game of harassing the authorities, using their rhetoric on protection and mitigation of precarity. Illegalized migrants are the case to which we can direct the attention... that is the reason for our existence. Undocumented people are already exhausted! looking for work, overloaded with stress and uncertainty... We take

charge of the mental burden of these negotiations because we have been doing this for a while and we know how to do it... at least we try says Magali, a Belgian citizen, member of CSC.

In CSC's history of action, initiatives carried were mainly the result of the proposition and the implication of the collective members. The involvement of these groups focuses on the concept of 'support'. This stems from their position as predominantly citizens of Europe not directly concerned with exclusion from housing and regularization. Individuals of the collective discuss these relations recurrently. Taking action 'for' the others or 'along with' the others triggers questions on the "white saviorism" among members of the collectives and people directly concerned.

This peculiar solidarity configuration is indeed generative to positions and expectations. The citizen-support collective doesn't necessarily pursue guardianship of the migrants. However, permissiveness toward squats often depends on how well squatters align with administrative expectations. As front-line activists (citizen-support in this case) have contacts to municipalities, alliances with elected officials, and expertise in legal rhetoric regarding protecting vulnerable populations, tolerance for squats appears significantly higher. CSC retains an exclusive position over direct negotiation with authorities, complying with existing expectations on reliable civil society. Citizen-led initiatives' to autonomise migrants often fall short due to

their position in regards to the administrative expectation of them. The line of initiatives have been operating for long as 'providers'. This is due to their incorporation and possession of certain resources and privileges. Transpiring from that is the reinforcement of the institutional stereotypes of the unreliability of migrants in up-keeping a squat. The limited participation of migrants in negotiations with public authorities regarding their personal situation may perpetuate a guardianship dynamic, rendering migrants as annexed individuals whose fate is decided by others. Without a seat at the table, their voices are always lost in translations and echoes. With little capacity to shape the becoming of their squats and, by extension, their own social becoming through squats, illegalized migrants are not seen to prosper beyond the public authority and the citizen support's vision of them. A prevailing intermediation of the citizen-support is crystallized. For non-politicized undocumented migrants involved in this fashion, without this channel of support they risk expulsion as they lack – in the eyes of the authorities – credibility and legitimacy to autonomously negotiate and commit to an eventual convention. This setup questions the practices and the rhetoric of migrants' autonomisation within the larger solidarity landscape in Brussels.

Being caught in the expectations of the migration and reception system is not only the predicament of illegalized migrants. Activist groups with anarchist political orientation sometimes

operate under this umbrella term of citizen support. They are expected to speak conventional rhetoric through their participation in social structures and institutions. Power dynamics with public authorities and illegalized migrants influence the prevailing norms and practices regarding advocacy on issues of vulnerability, urgency, and solidarity. Thus, activist groups often comply with the hegemonic narrative on citizen participation, just as some illegalized migrants adhere to rhetoric emphasizing protection and solidarity towards them.

### **Undocumented squatters**

Illegalized migrants are not only lost in translation and negotiation between the public authorities and citizen support, but they are also subjected to selective support. «Before we had the Blacks, and then Ukrainians and now the Palestinians... It is people who are seeking refuge that deserve priority to squats while they are waiting for their procedures. Like when you go to the emergency at the hospital doctors prioritize patients with cardiovascular issues before addressing those with minor concerns like an infected toe», says Alan, a volunteer in an association in support of squats. This uneven distribution of assistance based on deservingness and scarcity of resources to sustain squats creates a sense of sorting and ranging between those in urgency and those who are not. This is done based on some apprehension of the lived ordeals and selective moral imperatives (Ou-

bad and Mouna, 2023). In practice, this uneven assistance triggers frustrations and tensions among illegalized migrants and established actors of solidarity.

Two cases can illustrate this situation. That of Wadie and Adam. The two are undocumented squatters who navigate the configurations around squats. Since 2016, they have been trapped in irregularity in Brussels, having previously sought asylum and subsequently fallen into undocumented status because they are deemed ineligible to protection as they are coming from Morocco, a so-called safe country of origin. They have lived in occupation along with several collectives and activist groups. Their socio-political condition of uncertainty, lived precarity and attempts to overcome guardianship oriented them to try squatting building aside from vertical assistance-ship and politicized organized collectives.

Accounting for an episode, Wadie testifies «the whites wanted to open a squat for the Palestinians. Us with some Algerians were left aside. We asked for their tools to open a building, but they kept giving us excuses. I knew that they wanted to open the same house I showed them. The same day, I brought a group of people and we forced ourselves in. The whites did not like that. They wanted the Palestinians to be by themselves because they are refugees. At the end they left, and we took the house. When the police came, we had women and children with us. It is winter, they cannot take us out». Wadie and

his group have earned the tricks of the trade. If you have people considered 'vulnerable' and in 'urgency' for shelters such as children and women, then you have a ground on which to temporarily counter expulsion. In fact, the women and children are also undocumented, and they were dwelling temporarily in different places in Brussels. They delegated their wish for a family-only squat to Wadie and thus he engaged in doing so. This was sought both to provide shelter to the mothers and their children and to shield himself and single males seeking a situation in which they can enact their autonomy aside from the political struggle of and vertical assistance. While all undocumented and illegalized individuals are potentially subject to expulsion from squats, not everyone is expelled to the same degree. Those channeling elements associated with norms and values of protection can temporarily oppose expulsions. Channeling their vulnerability and that of others, Wadies and his group managed to make-gravitate other families, women, and children to build a sense of 'urgency' and thus sustain in the squat till the end of the wintertime. Yet, they remain vulnerable to hostile interventions of authorities as they are perceived lacking credibility to sustain a squat.

Not all the undocumented squatters decide to enter in conflict with the organized collective, some seek tactical alliance with these collectives, recognizing the resources these collectives possess. People like Adam have gravitated

around occupations for years and volunteered in eventful moments as intermediators with migrant communities. An incident recounted by Adam involved him discovering an empty house and attempting to squat with his friends. Upon arrival, they encountered Palestinian asylum seekers already present. Although the Palestinians didn't mind Adam and his friend's presence, the collective providing logistic and material support in the squats requested Adam and the others to leave. The argument was that having both asylum seekers and undocumented individuals in the same squat at the moment of the opening increases the risk of hostile evictions by anti-squat police. This is because undocumented people, unlike asylum seekers undergoing determination processes, are not considered deserving of protection of the citizens. Adam left the squat indeed, but he sought to accompany the Palestinians in their daily quest in asylum administrations. With his capacity to speak fluent French and his knowledge of the reception and support landscape he gained significance in being in proximity to the Palestinians. He managed to secure a room in the squat. He is now dwelling there and making his room a sort of 'help desk' where he activates SIM cards, open bank accounts, and interprets asylum related communications and monitors and plans to open other squats for incoming Palestinians. «You know Samaoui, he has done the same. He was in good relations with these associations. He used to lead groups of 60 and 100 people. Now, X asso-

ciation proposed to take him in charge and give him a work contract... he has papers right now.... They (associations) sometimes use migrants for funds, yes! But let's also use them to have papers».

People like Anas and Wadie being themselves undocumented and facing the permanent threat of expulsion either by authorities or by the discretion of the citizen support, they starve to pave their incorporation within the solidarity landscape through revolving around squats. Coupled with frustration linked to impersonal assistance, dependency, and non-consented politicization, they attempt to develop their ways of dwelling, according to their own norms, vision and needs. The result is squatting with a peculiar accent. An accent that cracks the established order (Khosravi, 2024) of solidarity configuration.

### **Producing squats... mobile commons and politics of solidarity negotiated**

The infrastructuration of squats underline that; to quote Papadopoulos and colleagues (Papadopoulos et al., 2008, p. 210), "migrants' material becoming does not end in a new state of being; rather they constitute being as the point of departure on which new becoming emerges". When migrants and their supporters occupy squats, it marks a starting point of their efforts to subvert the exclusion exerted on them through new ways of becoming (Carling and Collins, 2018). They engage in a negotiation process

not only with the migration system's machinery of power and expectation (Foucault, 1975), but also with the foundational principles underpinning assistance and solidarity. The occupation and sustainability of squats defines the terrains on which both undocumented squatters and their allies revolve around the access to right and support. It is through the occupations that norms and practices are negotiated. The nuanced directionalities we identified earlier, underscore how intentions and practices towards specific becomings are shaped within squatting trajectories. While some scholars maintain that precarious migrants' housings are used as an exclusionary mechanism, in the imagination of the neighborhood as well as the nation (Dadusc, 2019; Martinez, 2020), we argue that in our context, squats, with the capacities of their occupants, (re)define and negotiate the praxis around the urban space and who holds agency in its governance. It is through the subjectivities (re)produced within squats and frictions among the inhabitants and their supporters that a critique to the exclusion executed by the migratory system and society at large is asserted. Squatters and their allies often bounce between political and administrative expectations. Citizen-led initiatives, despite applying with reducing hierarchical structures in aid provision, align with the rhetoric of citizen involvement in managing migration, thus playing on the administrative expectation. However, squatters, whether documented or undocumented, residing in

squats embody a prefigurative political stance (Fians, 2022), demonstrating not only struggles for regularisation but also reflection on the praxis of autonomy and assistance. As a result of accumulated frustration linked to vertical assistance and non-consented politicization, some undocumented squatters attempt to function aside from pre-defined collective intentionality (Swerts, 2021). They engage in squatting with a peculiar accent. That of channeling their own vulnerability and that others reduce the risk linked to occupying buildings without citizens' or organised support. Vulnerability rhetoric is their resource. They mobilized it to (re)appropriate a seemingly arranged assistance and solidarity configuration, primarily characterised by expectations regarding migrants' credibility, deservingness and perceived capacity to manage themselves. Their accent is a crack and a critique to the established order (Khosravi, 2024) of solidarity. As we consider these contentious intentions, norms and practices around squats, we see that involved subjects produce mobile commons (Trimiklinioti et al., 2015). While these commons are not marked by coherence and harmonious coalitions, they serve as infrastructures through which broader issues linked to assistance, solidarity and autonomy are negotiated. Indeed, encounters in migratory context are never coherent and harmonious. They are often characterised by frictions and impediments. This is due to the existential predicament of individuals and groups involved. Pro-

ducing a common in such configuration implies negotiating boundaries of practices, as well as giving the possibility to people involved to assert their identities and disruptive intentionality according to their affiliation to the world as (un) documented migrants and as allies and supporters. (re)producing the Common, especially in an abolitionist fashion towards exclusion and segregations "entails world-making processes" (Tazzioli, 2023, p. 14). Hence, (re)producing the Common is about destitution as much as it is about constituent power (Negri, 1999). Squats, as a manifestation of solidarity and of (re)production of the Common are not only spaces allowing migrant liveability in arrival cities, but also stimulate nuanced visions on individual and collective becoming. They question access to right and justice within society at large.

Our account enables us to shift away from solely considering migrants in urban settings in terms of migration control. Instead, it directs our focus towards exploring how migrants make-gravitate assistance, care and solidarity around them as they navigate the city. This emphasizes the transformative power of migrants' agency in shaping social and political cityscapes. A clear manifestation of the autonomy of migration thesis (Mezzadra, 2010; De Genova, 2017) would be our account here of the ways different groups and individuals assess the outcomes of their present position as well as the process of attempting to actualize direction into an uncertain and changeable situation such as occupation

and squats. Rather than being passively controlled by institutional power, migrants alone or with their allies assert agency and autonomy in their squatting practices, sometimes through coalition and some others through friction and contestation. This challenges traditional narratives that portray migration as a problem to be managed or controlled, instead highlighting its role as a dynamic force in the formation and transformation of urban subjects. From here we go towards the relationship between migration, management of urban spaces, and sovereignty, pointing to a shift in perspective that centers the agency and autonomy of migrants in shaping the urban landscape and thus redefining social and political boundaries.

Thus, we raise the question: how the account of the (re)production of alternative dwelling infrastructures for illegalized migrants could contribute to knowledge on the urban commons?

Our research demonstrates that in a context characterized by hostile exclusion of migrants and the delegation of responsibility for their management, numerous alternative and unconventional processes occur to challenge and undermine the perceived injustice. Beyond the issue of the personal interests, political orientations and humanitarian reasons, squatters starve to fill the gap of the reception 'crisis'. By shaping squats, these actors infrastructure a counter-assistance and support in contrast to the conventional actors of the reception and migration system, who rely on institutional notions

of deservingness. To quote Nancy Fraser; they shape a counter-public space that operates as an underlying arena where squatters and their supporters invent and circulate norms and practices of solidarity, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs (Fraser, 1990:67). These dynamics lead to the formation of alternative directionalities about ways solidarity is produced, articulated, and mediated. Instead of merely operating within the established relations of assistance and support, squatters and their allies craft their own politics of solidarity. They actively forge and shape new forms of acts, and produce a specific circuit of access to accommodation and to regularization, with attention to verticality, guardianship and impersonal assistance. Through squatting vacant buildings the asylum and immigration management in the city is contested. These acts open alternatives and cracks within such selective machinery of eligibility determination. The status quo is challenged, offering a tangible alternative to the dominant institutional narrative on deservingness. Squatting emerges as a response to the exclusionary policies that often accompany migration. These spaces become sites of common resistance (Cañas, 2020) where individuals assert not only their right to housing and livelihood but also to emancipation and autonomy. By reclaiming physical spaces, squatters also reclaim the social and political dimensions of everyday life. The encounters of citizen-led support col-



lectives and (il)legalized migrants around squats opens on various commoning practices, and thereby a (re)definition of politics of solidarity employed to create, manage and sustain informal dwelling infrastructures in Brussels. Squatted spaces become incubators for alternative forms of community and organization, where diverse individuals negotiate new possibilities for collective becoming.

While the infrastructuring of squats is told often through rhetoric of altruistic support or politicization of subjects without personal interests, in practice, both citizen-led initiatives and migrant collectives, comprising both documented and undocumented squatters, frequently encounter predicament of appropriation, guardianship and personal interests. Despite the tension transpiring from these challenges, they often strive solidarity and claim larger structural changes or social becoming (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). Be that for humanitarian reasons, for political antagonism, for a quest of recognition or to tackle the urging insecurity of expulsion, detention and deportation risks (as it is the case of independent undocumented squatters) each group navigates this moving terrain (Vigh, 2009) with a specific intention. These intentions are not static, they are continuously shaped and modeled through specific encounters and confrontations.

The Common we are accounting here gains its features through a rhizomatic development (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013). In a mobile, dif-

fuse and fluid manner, transcending predefined boundaries. In this framework, the squats as mobile commons stimulate the creation of supportive settings that facilitate migrants' navigation and appropriation of urban space and its politics. These elements, therefore, play a vital role in shaping the mobile commons within urban landscapes. They enable the circulation and expansion of solidarity. In essence, the different directionalities of solidarity within the mobile commons described here not only enable migrants to assert agency and autonomy but also redefine the socio-political parameters of the urban environment and ethical precepts regarding property and sovereignty associated with it.

### Conclusion

Squatting in migratory contexts is a phenomenon deeply rooted in notions of solidarity and resistance (Mezzadra, 2010; Martinez, 2020). Beyond the differences in dynamics, the three cases we have described in this article play an underlying common pattern, that is the production of mobile commons and the negotiation of norms and practices as a constitutive force of survival and resistance within the selective migration regime. Being in squats implies some degrees of infrastructuring practices, shaping the directionality of the squat. Squats are not fixedly bound to pre-defined social and spatial arrangement; rather, they are oriented towards a social becoming, as squatters adjust their relative engagements towards specific commit-

ments for diverse reasons (Meeus et al., 2019). In the case of SSC, multiplication of resources through mixity and the politicisation of the subjects is the direction sought. Beyond struggling for regularisation, SSC aims to mitigate their dependency on impersonal assistance. Conversely, CSC holds the position of 'supporter'. Without sharing the same shelter with the undocumented migrants, they position their intervention as intermediators with authorities and a message to incorporate excluded migrants in specific municipalities. Aside from organized collectives, undocumented squatters seek self-incorporation aside from structured interventions. Frustrated with impersonal assistance and non-consensual politicization, they seek to develop their own ways of doing, attempting potential transformation through incorporation around squats. Migration involves the appropriation of space and its politics. Illegalised migrant squatters often find themselves marginalized and stigmatized, perceived both as 'invaders' of state sovereignty without requisite authorization and as occupants of private property lacking conventional property rights. Consequently, their living spaces exist within a complex network of relations with broader society and its institutions, which simultaneously control, categorize, and occasionally manage these spaces. This intricate interplay underscores the multifaceted nature of squats as sites of contestation and survival strategies deeply embedded within broader socio-political and urban dynamics.

As migrants and their allies pursue settlement and inclusion, they produce and negotiate urban spaces. Squats in urban border zones like Brussels illustrate this, where illegalized migrants, often denied institutional reception, assert their right to the city and critique their marginalized existence. Institutional reception structures, part of a broader migration industry (Cf. Hernández-León, 2013), filter those deemed deserving based on securitarian and legal criteria. By occupying squats, migrants challenge these hierarchies and reclaim their right to the city, effectively subverting exclusionary urban policies. This resonates with Lefebvre's conception of democratized urban spaces, wherein all inhabitants, regardless of legal status, can participate in and shape their environment. The act of squatting itself serves as a direct challenge to the prevailing socio-political frameworks governing urban spaces in relation to migrants, prompting a reevaluation of the legitimacy of exclusionary policies and practices. Through asserting their right to the city, migrant squatters not only assert their presence in the urban landscape but also push for a negotiation of their social becoming.

What we find particularly interesting about these distinct situations is that squats are not a mere vacuum filled with dwelling people, they are rather spaces actively shaped by the interplay of social relation, constantly evolving and susceptible to subversion and alternations. The attempts to produce and maintain the squats

as a common bring about tension and negotiations in the social fabric of situations in arrival cities. We could say that it is not so much a matter of housing the excluded, but of building a common with the Other; the recognition of power relations and aspiration to autonomy takes precedence over that of humanitarian relations. Of course, it can be contended that this kind of shaping the common takes subjective preferences into account, thus reproducing dividing lines and moving geometries of coalition within specific migrant-citizen communities. However, we believe that this social terrain is the most fertile soil in which to observe seeds of alternative commoning grow. Identify how the common forms, moves and transform across the ordinary social interactions and relations within alternative dwelling infrastructures give dignity to actually existing underground practices of commonings. At the end, as Angela Davis contends, the existing tensions are not to be “torn down, but to be built up, and bring about alternative configuration” (Davis, 2010, p.23).

The significance of this account lies in its elucidation of unconventional interactions that disrupt exclusion and construct alternative commonings to bridge inclusion. Our exploration unveiled the potential of squats in not only (re) producing and negotiating commons of care and solidarity, but also as catalyst for migrants' agency and performative citizenship (Isin, 2017). By describing these interactions we propose directing the gaze to underground circuits invent-

ing norms and practices around commoning practices. All things considered, the reflection on the agency of migrants and their supporters in (re)producing the common have shown its potential in encouraging a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding solidarity configurations in migratory contexts.

## Note

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