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Self-Organised Practices of Social Participation; or How Individualisation is Collectively Contested in the Raval

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Abstract

In this article, I focus on current developments in the Raval district of the Spanish metropolis of Barcelona and show how social participation can be made possible despite hostility. Social participation is the opportunity for subjects to take part in society and, in this way, to experience "belonging to society." "Belonging to a society" means experiencing both active and passive opportunities to shape and use socially founded and politically constituted community relationships and infrastructures. The example of the Raval shows how neighbours can be activated as a collective through self-organised practices of social participation. In the context of a welfare state in transformation, social participation is partly being transferred from the state to civil society actors. Focusing on the issues of housing, security, and care, this article shows how, on the one hand, this transferring of responsibility contradicts individualisation and creates something in common. On this basis, the residents can find collective answers to individualised problems and improve social participation. On the other hand, it shifts the weight of social responsibility unto civil society, which means that social participation is no longer guaranteed by the state and, as in the case of the Raval, becomes dependent on more or less randomly developed structures in the social environment.

Keywords

Barcelona; collectivising; hostility; neighbourhood; self-organisation; social environment; social participation; Spain

1. Introduction

The population of Barcelona, as in the whole of Spain, was heavily affected by the financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the austere regulations of the European Union, such as cuts in spending on the welfare

state (Colau & Alemany, 2012). As a result, a variety of crisis management structures, mostly developed by civil society, emerged that attempted to compensate for the effects of this crisis and for how they were handled by the state (PAH Barcelona, 2016; Suarez, 2014). For example, one direct effect of the financial crisis was very high unemployment. As a result of job losses, many people in Spain were no longer able to pay off the mortgages on their homes. This led to an enormous increase in the number of evictions, with many people losing their homes. The protests against evictions gave rise to the Plataforma para los Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH, a self-organised initiative working against the eviction of people and in favour of the right to housing). This platform became a counselling body that supports people in negotiating mortgages with the banks and preventing evictions and initiated a row of social work that went far beyond these tasks (PAH Barcelona, 2016). This and other examples constituted what can be called a civically organised participation infrastructure.

One aspect of these civically organised infrastructures is the neighbourhood trade unions, as the example of the Raval Housing Union (Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval) used in this article. In contrast, the ongoing transformations of the welfare state are geared towards a further *individualisation* (Bauman, 2001) of *social participation* (Kreimeyer, 2017; Serrano Pascual et al., 2019). Consequently, this situation can be characterised as *hostile* to participation (e.g., Edwards & Maxwell, 2023; Morgan, 2023; Redert, 2024). Against this background, this article looks at how the residents of the Raval organise social participation themselves and, in this way, not only create participation infrastructures but also consolidate them, thereby contradicting social individualisation.

Social participation is understood by various authors as a counter-concept to exclusion (e.g., de Miguel-Luken & García-Faroldi, 2021; Kronauer, 2013; Morgan, 2023; Wansing, 2005). In this respect, social participation can be used to describe what no members of society should be excluded from (Niess, 2016, p. 69). Belonging to a society is subject to legal regulations (e.g., Koch et al., 2009, p. 273), but it is also framed by normative invocations (Bartolini, 2021, p. 63). Understood as a general abstract societal goal, social participation is a concept that can be used to work towards social cohesion (e.g., Berger-Schmitt, 2000; de Castro Sanz, 2013; Jaffe & Quark, 2006; Laparra Navarro, 2010). In this way, social cohesion becomes a process that takes place in local social environments, fed by acts of belonging and participation as well as the possibility of achieving self-imposed life and status goals, i.e., social participation (Kersten et al., 2022, p. 19). In this respect, social participation is an elementary component of social cohesion, which is closely intertwined with ideas of community, reciprocity, and acts of solidarity. Thus, social participation and the practices that enable it are the basis for the democratic constitution of societies: Solidarity as a unifying value creates a social obligation that enables participatory practices of shaping society and achieving respect for a common coexistence (Jaffe & Quark, 2006, p. 210; Keupp, 2010, p. 23).

I understand social participation as the opportunity for subjects to take part in society and thus experience belonging to society. "Belonging to a society" means active opportunities to shape and passive opportunities to use socially founded and politically constituted community relationships and infrastructures. Against this background, I understand hostility to social participation as something that directly and indirectly hinders access to societal relationships and infrastructures.

Hostility to social participation consists in particular of the *individualisation* of opportunities to participate. As Castel (2005), among others, shows, the transformation of welfare states is a decisive factor in this regard.

In Spain, the transformation of the welfare state began in the 1980s (Albarracín et al., 2000). In general terms, the development of the Spanish welfare state was shaped by late social legislation at the beginning of the twentieth century and limited economic liberalisation under Franco and the democratisation of the post-authoritarian social system. It is currently a post-authoritarian system with mixed public–private components (Enderlein, 1999, p. 397; Lessenich, 2008, pp. 235–240). During the initial years of its existence and against the backdrop of the economic miracle of the 1960s, this system placed economic efficiency before social democratisation. This resulted in the maintenance of clientelism and traditional inequalities. Despite advancements in women's rights, family networks have remained crucial for social security (Koller-Tejeiro, 1988, p. 474; León & Migliavacca, 2013, pp. 27–28). The fragmentation of the welfare state system was a direct result of the flexibility of labour rights (Pavolini et al., 2015, pp. 66–67). Subsequently, the European austerity policies after 2007–2008 affected the system through employment flexibility and by linking social benefits to employment. The Spanish welfare state is criticised for its familiar-conservative model, which is particularly harmful to women, single mothers, families with young children, immigrants, and the elderly, especially during economic crises (Ibáñez & León, 2014, p. 294; Pavolini et al., 2015, p. 71). Among other things, this model implies a *decollectivisation of society*, which I understand as the tendency towards individualisation coupled with the transfer of welfare state's responsibilities unto citizens (Castel, 2011, p. 171).

Individualisation so defined means there's a hostility to social participation as opportunities to participate are not (or no longer) guaranteed by the state—or are so to a lesser degree than before. The realisation of the collective guarantee of participation in society is shifted to the individuals themselves. This also means that obstacles that stand in the way of participation become individual problems. Therefore, the individualisation of participation opportunities also means that the respective difficulties are individualised. This is particularly visible because the transformation of the Spanish welfare state following the global financial crisis has unequivocally resulted in increased social inequality (Gómez Bengoechea & Quan, 2020). The Spanish state transferred responsibility for parts of the welfare state infrastructure to local administrations and civil society organisations (Del Pino & Pavolini, 2015). This becomes clear, for example, at the level of social work and counselling, which were more strongly organised on a municipal basis before the European financial crisis. With the austerity measures, however, these services have been largely privatised and transferred to civil society organisations (Caravaca Sánchez et al., 2022). The process of transferring state infrastructures to civil society, which is generally described as neoliberal, fundamentally alters the logic through which states govern (Dean, 2014). Rather than retreating, the state modifies the logic and practices of its interventions. The resulting individualisation gives rise to new forms of subjectification (Lessenich, 2008).

In this sense, the state's abdication of responsibility for the community creates a crisis of social participation and, as a result, of social cohesion in societies (Kersten et al., 2022, p. 22). The transfer of responsibilities to civil society is linked to state incentive structures and normative affective debates as to who should participate in which areas of society or have access to which resources (Heinze et al., 2021, p. 82; Tietje, 2023a, § 34). While many studies in this context focus primarily on participation in the labour market as the basis for participation in society (e.g., Campos Vázquez & Chiguil Rojas, 2024; Koch et al., 2009; Naveed et al., 2024), some studies also refer to alternative participation structures such as protests or social movements (e.g., Carbonero Gamundí & Gómez Garrido, 2023; Gutiérrez-Sastre et al., 2024; Serrano Pascual et al., 2019, p. 228). Many studies on the enabling of social participation focus on rights and laws

(e.g., Rohrmann, 2008; Rudolf, 2017) and try to explain the exclusion of a specific, often marginalised group (e.g., Rodriguez & Giametta, 2024; Wansing, 2005).

Relying on the example of the neighbourhood of the Raval, a district of Barcelona, I will focus on self-organised participation practices. Related to studies on social participation investigating protests and movements (e.g., Gutiérrez-Sastre et al., 2024) and those looking at neighbourhood networks (e.g., Barañano Cid et al., 2023a; Lubbers, 2021), I will show how social participation can become possible in hostile situations and how neighbours establish at least temporary infrastructures of participation through self-organised practices. Those collective responses to individualised problems, I will conclude, carry a transformative potential. For this purpose, I will first describe my understanding of the hostility of the situation and expand my reading of social participation (Section 2). Based on my empirical findings since 2021, this will be followed by a short introduction to the neighbourhood of El Raval (Section 3). Building on this, I will briefly present my methodical approach (Section 4). After this, I'll show my empirical findings on how the inhabitants of the Raval establish self-organised practices of social participation amidst hostility (Section 5) and finally end with a brief overview of results (Section 6).

2. Hostility to Social Participation

I define social participation as the opportunity for subjects to take part in society and thus experience belonging to society. This means, in concrete terms, focusing on whether and how people can participate in the areas of coexistence that are fundamental to a decent life: clean air, safe housing, adequate food supplies, basic amenities, childcare, access to education, communication infrastructure, healthcare and local public transport (Rao & Min, 2018, p. 229). Concerning the distribution of such goods, it becomes clear that social participation is not a social precondition but must be fought for. Demands for equal participation by different social actors mark the path to democracy (Rudolf, 2017, p. 13). Hostilities toward participation operate in different ways, but for the context of this article, it is—first—particularly relevant to look at the neoliberalisation of the welfare state. Above all, neoliberalisation leads to the individualisation of participation opportunities. Secondly, countering this hostility to social participation appears to occur above all in the social environment. This is where renewed collectivisation of responses to social problems can take place. However, this collectivisation by civil society actors can mean a responsibilisation of civil society. In order to better link these considerations with my further explanations, I will now unpack these points in detail.

First, the neoliberalisation of the welfare state shifts opportunities for social participation primarily to the individual level. While previously state guarantees were an expression of state collectivisation of welfare, these are now largely linked to individual wage labour performance. This, for example, excludes people under the age of 25 from unemployment benefits, and all others must have worked for at least 360 days in six years to gain access. In this way, public security is transformed into social insecurity (Castel, 2005). The people who are most affected by this insecurity are those who have less or no economic, cultural, or social capital and are therefore dependent on collective social security in order to be able to participate in society (Castel, 2005, p. 65). The privatisation of social security, in turn, severely restricts access to participation. The privatisation of public spaces and services also plays a particularly important role in Barcelona (Mansilla López, 2016), as I will show below.

At the onset of the austere treatment of the financial crisis, after 2007–2008, activists from protest movements succeeded in developing their own strategies for dealing with the exacerbation of social inequality (Beltran, 2024). A famous example is the above-mentioned PAH, which succeeded in developing collectivised advisory strategies in which members were relatively successful in resisting evictions (PAH Barcelona, 2016). The PAH has changed over time and lost relevance in many places in Spain. Currently, in some areas like Valencia and Barcelona, its strategies are being followed by the creation of neighbourhood unions in which activists from the neighbourhoods come together and jointly develop practices for enabling participation (Rossini et al., 2023). These neighbourhood unions place a special focus on forms of community organising—as examples from some neighbourhoods in London show (Bader, 2020, p. 191).

The shift in responsibility for social participation opportunities from the collective to the individual level acts as a strategic activation of civil society (Lessenich, 2008). This responsabilisation of civil society accentuates the level of community responsibility in addition to both personal and family responsibility. Social participation is developed through renewed collectivisation organised by civil society at the neighbourhood level (Heinze et al., 2021, p. 73). This responsabilisation, partly initiated and partly supported by the state government, thus refers to the responsibilsation of civil society actors.

For example, in 2012, following the financial crisis of 2007–2008 in Spain, healthcare was linked by Royal Decree directly to social security (RDL 16/2012). This had effects on those among the population living in Spain without a work permit or who were not registered in the social security system. Previously, people living in Spain could simply apply for a health insurance card (*tarjeta sanitaria*) and use state healthcare. From then on, because of the austerity measures, health insurance was linked to social security, and it was made much more difficult for people working in informal employment to participate.

Secondly, it can therefore be stated that hostility can be aimed directly and indirectly against participation and can create obstacles to participation both intentionally and unintentionally (see Zvonareva & Egher, in press). In Spain, social participation has especially been met with hostility since the financial crisis. Conditions in the labour market have improved somewhat through state subsidisation of banks in financial difficulties, but the neoliberalised social security system has created difficult conditions for all people in Spain who live in the lower-income brackets. My reflections on the neoliberalisation of the welfare state led to the relevance of the social environment and new forms of collectivisation. Although everyone in Spain still has the right to healthcare, regardless of their residence status (RDL 7/2108), they must still prove that they have been employed for 90 days to be able to participate in healthcare and not only have access to emergency care. Various initiatives and protest movements tried to achieve access for people in informal employment without a *tarjeta sanitaria* (e.g., Cruz Roja, 2024; Huke & Tietje, 2014, pp. 540–542). The result was that their participation-generating activities led to a reform of the law and in 2024 to granting healthcare for everybody living in Spain ("Cualquier residente en España," 2024; Revision of RDL 16/2003). In terms of how Spanish society sees itself, it becomes clear that there is a great lack of interest among those people who are not already part of the social security system. While it may not have been the explicit aim of the reforms to exclude migrants from healthcare, this was the consequence.

Until this reform in the first half of 2024, illegalised immigrants in Spain were dependent on support from their social environment and networks if they needed medication or other medical care (e.g., Huke & Tietje, 2014, p. 542). Such support from people's immediate social environment plays an important role in a wide

variety of aspects of participation, especially when state infrastructure—as in the above-mentioned example—is not guaranteed (e.g., Bartolini, 2021, pp. 134–136). Neighbourhood networks, family, and friendship relationships often form the basis for practices of enabling participation and can, under certain circumstances, gain non-institutionalised perpetuation in relationships of solidarity. Creating such relationships can become a very important aspect. Within a social environment, these relationships become what, in relation to the question posed at the beginning, makes it possible to work out collective answers to individual problems.

As I will show below, the interactions in the social environment become particularly relevant. Social environments include the immediate physical surroundings, social relationships, and cultural milieus within which people interact and function (Barnett & Casper, 2001, p. 465; Zastrow et al., 2019, p. 3). These environments can produce infrastructures within which new opportunities for social participation can be developed (Barañano & Santiago, 2023, p. 2). Thus, with the concept of the social environment, I refer to the networks, infrastructures and relationships of the subjects that come into play at the local level. In the social environment, collective forms of dealing with the problems of social participation can be developed. Those forms can also point in the direction of social transformations (e.g., Barañano Cid et al., 2023b; Serrano Pascual et al., 2019).

Against this background, it becomes obvious—thirdly—that social participation as such is linked to the debates about exclusion (Bartelheimer et al., 2020, p. 43). Discourses, laws, and norms in societies shape the frameworks that make the unequal treatment of individuals or groups legitimate. These ideas and frameworks are created and implemented by people and can therefore also be changed by them. In conjunction with the above-mentioned transformation of state logic as a neoliberalisation of social security policies, a transfer of responsibility to citizens is taking place. This responsabilisation of civil society and the activation of civic voluntary work make the neoliberal enlistment of civil society (Lessenich, 2008, p. 16; Serrano Pascual et al., 2019, p. 229; Tietje, 2021, p. 136). Social participation as a value in and of itself enables social security tasks to be transferred to civil society. In this way, not only are the possibilities for participation neoliberalised but also its practices, which in turn has a direct impact on those professions, such as social work, that are historically responsible for organising social participation (Bettinger, 2021, p. 59). With these three aspects of hostilities toward social participation, the article will now turn to the neighbourhood of the Raval.

3. The Neighbourhood of El Raval

Barcelona is a large city in northern Spain. The Raval neighbourhood is a degraded historic centre next to the harbour that is now in the process of urban rehabilitation and has become a touristic hotspot and home to the famous Rambla (a 1.2-kilometre-long promenade in the centre of Barcelona). The neighbourhood is inhabited by a considerable number of immigrants from the global south. At the heart of this neighbourhood is the district popularly called “Chinatown,” an area with a long history of street sex work (Aisa & Vidal, 2006, p. 325; Benito, 2000, p. 344). The district was subject to major restructuring, particularly in the mid-1990s, which, however, did not improve the quality of life of the district’s residents as much as it made it more attractive to tourists (Scarnato, 2014, p. 16). With the construction of the new Rambla, the expansion of the port, and the establishment of several large museums in the district, the number of tourists increased continuously (Rius-Ulldemolins, 2014, p. 7).

Since then, the neighbourhood of Raval in Barcelona has undergone an ambiguous development characterised by contrasts and change (Aisa & Vidal, 2006). Once notorious for its crime and neglect, the area has transformed into a cultural and touristic centre in recent decades (Degen, 2003). This transformation has been propelled by several factors, including government investments in urban renewal projects, the establishment of cultural institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) and the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB), as well as the rise of alternative art and music scenes, and the influx of young, creative residents (Rius-Ulldemolins & Klein, 2022).

In spite of these changes, and despite the shift of Barcelona's local government to the left after 2015 (Blanco et al., 2020), the Raval remains a place of social challenges. The neighbourhood continues to attract a diverse mix of locals, newcomers, and tourists. The Raval has faced challenges related to social inequality and marginalisation. The neighbourhood has a history of stigmatisation and marginalisation of its poorer, mostly immigrated inhabitants, which has manifested in various forms of hostility and discrimination. This hostility often stems from socio-economic factors, such as the perception of the Raval as a disadvantaged area associated with poverty, crime, and social problems (Rius-Ulldemolins & Klein, 2022, p. 6). The inhabitants of the Raval face various forms of exclusion, such as discrimination in access to housing, employment, and public services, thus exacerbating their social and economic marginalisation (Scarnato, 2014, p. 12). Gentrification and rising property prices have further marginalised low-income residents, leading to their displacement and the loss of affordable housing options (Sequera & Nofre, 2018, p. 94; Suarez, 2014, p. 86). This hostile environment for the inhabitants underscores the ongoing struggle for social justice and equity within the neighbourhood, highlighting the need for inclusive urban development policies that prioritise the needs of all residents, regardless of their socio-economic status (Sequera & Nofre, 2018, pp. 94–95). Even though social housing projects had been implemented in the 1980s, from the beginning of the 2000s onwards, the renewal projects in the district mainly meant rising rental costs for the residents and increased air pollution from the larger ships, especially cruise ships, in the port.

These factors have a particularly strong influence on the living conditions. Due to the historical development of the neighbourhood—its former peripheral place and the direct connection to the port—many people live in the district who have direct experience of migration and/or are racialised due to an attributed migration history (Sargatal Bataller, 2009). The poverty of migrant people in the Raval is often linked to crime and sex work in public discussions and public media (Benito, 2000). Against this background, migrantised people are not only exposed to the exclusive factors already mentioned but must also deal with racist attributions and discrimination (Contreras Hernández, 2019).

4. Methodical Approach

The insights presented in this article are based on a research project ("Social Participation of Migrantised People in the European Union") on the voluntarisation of practices that enable social participation. The project, supported by postdoctoral funding from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, is in its final stages at the time of writing. In this research, I use an ethnographic approach with participant observations (Lamnek, 2010, pp. 498–500) and semi-monological interviews (Helfferich, 2011, pp. 43–44). I conducted observations and interviews (N = 30 interviews) in the two cities of Barcelona and Hamburg between 2021 and 2023. Interview partners were mostly neighbourhood activists, social workers, and members of small cooperations, clubs, and associations.

At the beginning of the semi-monological interviews, I asked the interviewees to tell their stories regarding my research topic on social participation in a very open way but accompanied by narration provoking questions (Helfferich, 2011, p. 36). These narrative-generating questions were always adapted to the respective interviews and worked as follows in the context of the neighbourhood union: "I am interested in everything that you say led to you becoming active in the neighbourhood. I would like to ask you to tell me how you came to be a member of the Raval neighbourhood union." The aim of these interviews was therefore to produce episodic stories based on the research question(s). Within the framework of this multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) urban ethnography (Ocejo, 2013), I produced diverse and far-reaching data that point to the focus of this article (for insights into my research in Hamburg see, for example, Tietje, 2023a).

I analysed the anonymised data by making the situational analysis framework (Clarke et al., 2018) fruitful for my research, which is a post-structuralist version of grounded theory. I use the mapping procedures developed by Clarke et al. (2018, pp. 101–103; see also Tietje, 2023b), which I adapted and developed further for this specific analysis, as I explain elsewhere in more detail (Tietje, 2023a). Situational analysis is a research method that enables scientists to analyse with its mapping techniques complex, multidimensional, and closely interwoven social realities (Clarke et al., 2018). The integration of mapping approaches into research serves the empirical and analytical investigation of collective actors and their negotiation of controversial issues.

5. Neighbourhood Practices Between Individualisation and Collective Answers

Against the background of my explanations above on social participation and the developments in the Raval district, in this section I will focus on the self-organisation of residents of the district. To this end, I will first focus on hostility to participation and then show how the potential for social participation can be generated through the practices of self-organisation despite such a hostile situation.

5.1. Been Left Alone: The Situation of Hostility

The development in recent years has enormously increased the attractiveness of the Raval for tourists. However, the fact that the policies that place the attractiveness for tourists on the backs of the people who live in the Raval are being continued is leading to great dissatisfaction. In one interview, an activist of the local association *Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval* states:

> All of the city policies in Barcelona, since 1992, since the Olympics began [were]...a disaster for the neighbourhoods, especially in the centre....All of Barcelona has suffered from it, but here all the policies that have existed in the city since the Olympics until today have gone to great effect, have implemented policies to attract more tourism and large companies to invest here. (Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval/activist 01, interview 8 September 2021)

The neighbourhood unions that have emerged in some parts of the city consist of self-organised structures that work in various areas to promote the participation of people in the respective districts. The Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval is—like other neighbourhood unions in districts of Barcelona (e.g., Poble-Sec or Poblenou)—an association that provides support for everyone looking for it in the neighbourhood of Raval.

They describe the environment as hostile to social participation. In the interviews I conducted, many activists identified the Olympics and the associated renovations as the starting point for gentrification in the Raval. The renovations are seen as being connected with the deterioration of the living conditions of the local population and make Barcelona look like a city that functions as a model of how economic interests can be asserted in a very hostile and aggressive way against the people living in the neighbourhoods (Delgado, 2017, pp. 12–13). With the election of the left-wing PAH-based mayor Ada Colau in June 2015, many hoped for improvements in the general situation, but these only came very slowly. The legal regulations against the so-called "Airbnbisation" have had little direct impact, especially in the Raval (Sequera & Nofre, 2018, p. 94; see also Blanco et al., 2020; Peña López, 2019):

> Very few municipal policies have been at the service of residents. It's ridiculous, even now that in principle a government reigns that was going to change everything….In fact, [it became obvious] that tourism does not bring money because all the big companies extract it and take it away. Now they want to build the Hermitage, the museum here in the port, what service does that provide to the neighbours?...We have seen that the wealth of tourism has gone away, because in neighbourhoods like El Raval almost half of the population is at risk of social exclusion. In the centre of Barcelona, the great tourist capital, and here people don't even have enough to eat. (Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval/activist 01, interview 8 September 2021)

The activist's disappointment becomes particularly clear against the background that the population of the district was barely or not included in planning considerations and there have been hardly any improvements to participation infrastructure and opportunities. Since the 2015 local elections in Barcelona, for example, there has been a shift towards greater citizen participation in political decision-making, even outside of parliamentary processes (Peña López, 2019). At the level of social participation in everyday life, however, people in the Raval neighbourhood experience this only to a limited extent, which indicates that social participation must be fought for.

At the same time, the cost of living has risen enormously (Solís & Gil, 2024, p. 26), which means additional burdens, especially for the mostly poorer population in the Raval. This has a particularly negative impact on the affordability and quality of life of residents in neighbourhoods with high tourist traffic, such as the Raval. In conjunction with the transformations of the welfare state mentioned above, people with a low or no income are socially decollectivised in this way: Individual social participation can no longer be guaranteed by state infrastructures.

A further dimension becomes visible when we look at the gendering of social participation opportunities. Women in particular are disproportionately affected by poverty, especially when they take on responsibility for children or family members (Barañano Cid et al., 2023b), particularly since the opportunities for using the social security system in neoliberally organised societies are often linked to regular employment (Kronauer, 2013, p. 23). Hostility towards social participation accumulates here and the individualisation of social participation opportunities becomes gendered.

The hostility of the situation for many of the residents in the Raval is further increased by the fact that to be able to offer holiday apartments, many companies try to drive away tenants by increasing rents. If people can no longer pay the rent or mortgage for their apartments, they are forcibly expropriated and thrown out of their

apartments (e.g., Sorando et al., 2023; Suarez, 2014). Childcare and schooling are also complicated under these conditions, which points to the relevance and urgency of close social relationships. Overall, the situation in the Raval is characterised by stark social discrepancies stemming from the developments described above. On the one hand, many tourists cross the district every day, shop and party here, enjoy the sights, and take in the cultural offerings. On the other hand, the people who live in the district and, in a sense, function as a backdrop for the Raval brand in Barcelona (Rius-Ulldemolins & Klein, 2022) cannot afford the district's amenities:

> What neighbours of the Raval go to the MACBA? Or what's it for? In a neighbourhood where half of the population is at risk of social exclusion, that they evict them, that everything, you have a museum there with works costing a million euros. Are we crazy? What's the point? What good does that do for the neighbourhood? On the other hand, just the construction of the MACBA, there were houses there, and they tore it all down, kicked out the neighbours and built this mega-structure, here in the middle….Everywhere around MACBA, they raised the prices and ended up expelling all the neighbours who lived in that area. (Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval/activist 01, interview 8 September 2021)

The gentrification of the Raval is vividly illustrated by the example of the MACBA (Mazorra Rodríguez & López-Gay, 2024, p. 3). Although this is of little interest to the residents of the neighbourhood, their living space was directly restricted by the fact that houses were demolished to build the MACBA, and indirectly as rents have risen due to the presence of the museum in the neighbourhood.

Accordingly, activists in the Raval developed forms of protest against the continuous increase in tourist attractiveness and the further expansion of the district in precisely this direction (Sequera & Nofre, 2018, pp. 95–96), for example, through tourism-attacking graffiti or stencils in popular places in the district, banners hanging from apartments that address real estate speculation or other strategies that diminish the attractiveness of the district for tourists (Geography Field Work, 2005; Oskam, 2019).

Overall, the Raval has become much more attractive to tourists in recent years. This is only associated with a few improvements for the residents of the neighbourhood—such as increased opportunities to find employment in the tourism sector (Solís & Gil, 2024). In recent years, Barcelona's left-wing city government has also implemented very few positive developments for the neighbourhood's residents (Blanco et al., 2020). The overall high increase in the cost of living due to tourism in the city has been combined with an expansion of tourist infrastructure at the expense of both neighbourhood and care infrastructure (Sargatal Bataller, 2009). Coupled with the transformation of the welfare state and the resulting decollectivisation of participation structures (Castel, 2011), the residents of the Raval are largely thrown back on themselves with their problems: they feel left alone.

5.2. Collectivising Strategies: Social Participation Amidst Hostility

In this hostile situation, the residents have developed different ways of working together, opposing individualisation. Following the long history of collective organising in Barcelona (Pera, 2020, p. 3), there is a particular focus on the question of housing, along with rising rents and high mortgage debts:

> For example, the Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval, the vast majority of cases [we are accompanying] are cases of occupation, some of rent payment, and a little of everything, but above all it is occupation.

> And yes, people meet there and talk about their problems. (Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval/activist 02, interview 8 September 2021)

As the activist explains in this interview, the members of the Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval use old vacant residential buildings and occupy them. In this way, housing is organised for those who urgently need it. The activists here also work with occupation strategies when members are threatened with eviction. Many people are then organised to unite at the affected apartment, and by overcrowding the respective apartment through large numbers of people, they prevent the eviction notice from being handed over and the police from carrying out the eviction (fieldnotes from September 2021). In this way, neighbours fight together in everyday life against direct and indirect forms of hostility and for social participation. It is apparent at this point that the close social environment is of great significance for practices enabling participation.

A particularly successful example of such occupations is the Antiga Massana in the Carrer de Floristes de la Rambla. This empty former music school, which is the new centre of the neighbourhood union, was occupied by the neighbourhood. Here, in the middle of the Raval, collective consultations take place, through which people who live in the Raval and are struggling can find support. Usually, those seeking support present their difficulties to the collective of a meeting, after which a solution is found together (fieldnotes from September 2021). Following this strategy, the activists can collectivise the individual housing problems and develop joint solutions.

For many people, the Raval—apart from its touristic attractiveness—is famous for being close to crime (e.g., "Droga, robos y okupaciones," 2022; "El Mapa de los delitos," 2017). And crime is indeed a problem in the district. There are 40 delicts per 100 inhabitants here. Among the major Spanish cities, Barcelona is also the one with the highest crime rate (epdata, 2024; "Los barrios," 2020). The general crime rate and the high numbers in Barcelona and the Raval are directly linked to the touristification of the city. While over 200,000 tourists stroll daily along the Rambla, the people there live in unreasonable poverty (Solé Ollé et al., 2020; "My Barcelona is being destroyed," 2024). However, the neighbourhood is tackling this problem itself. Because of the feeling that something had to be done against the crime there but also because of the criminalisation of people on the streets to enable more people to participate in public life, the residents developed new strategies. Some activists of the Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval are working to enhance safety on the streets for the residents:

> We have had a bit of a problem with insecurity, because…there is a small group of people who buy stolen things. We had serious problems with shoplifting, knife fights, things like that. So, instead of trying to deal with the issue, at first many reactionary neighbours called for the police. We tried to try to reoccupy public space. A market was organised among all the merchants, together with the neighbours, who every Saturday made a paella right there on the corner, which is the most problematic place [in the neighbourhood]. (Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval/activist 02, interview 8 September 2021)

While some neighbours initially called in the police to deal with security in the district, other residents looked for alternative solutions. The activists distance themselves from the practices of securitisation through the police. This is also closely linked to the experiences of the district residents of being criminalised and stigmatised by the police (fieldnotes from September 2021). Searching for and finding their own ways to improve security in the district is also an important element in creating a basis of solidarity and further

deepening the close social environment. With the district festival mentioned above, which is held regularly every weekend, the neighbours reach a larger audience for small businesses as part of the Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval, as well as a greater unity and presence of many people, within the framework of which the attacks by petty criminals have been curbed. Nearly every business established in the Riera Baixa street participates in the little festival, contributing at least with decorations or street food (fieldnotes September 2021). In this way, the residents collectivise the problem and give it a common answer.

In addition, the activists also organise care infrastructures in the Antiga Massana. These are particularly important since only under these conditions do people with low incomes doing shift work, and especially working in informal labour, have an opportunity to participate in social life:

> Because Social Services require that women, in order to take care of their children, have to have either a job or decent housing, with a certain amount of square footage….So, it is always thinking about care and thinking about the specific contexts of…women: that you have to raise children, that they have no one to leave them with, that there is no family network. (Mujeres P'alante, interview 14 September 2021)

In the excerpt, the counsellor from the Mujeres P'alante initiative (women's counselling regardless of residence status) addresses the relevance of childcare services. Not only for the children does this mean the possibility of early participation in the education system, but the women are also dependent on it to be able to pursue wage labour. Participation in the labour market, in turn, is crucial for social participation as a whole (Brook, 2005; Naveed et al., 2024). Due to the very poor supply of care infrastructure in the neighbourhood, the activists of the Antiga Massana have come up with a joint approach and offer childcare in rotating procedures: "We made our own kindergarten!" (fieldnote from September 2021). Here again, the neighbours of the Raval established a collective answer to the individual problem of childcare.

The activists of the Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval also organise free food distribution in the Antiga Massana, in which basic foodstuffs are redistributed to people that are donated by local markets and supermarkets, or which are collected by the activists. Sports activities to get young people off the streets—in the sense of low-threshold social work (e.g., Lawson, 2005)—also take place here, as do counselling services and a self-organised kindergarten (fieldnote September 2021).

The inhabitants of the Raval have established meeting spaces that facilitate interpersonal contact. The neighbourhood union offers counselling on matters about rent and other issues that fall outside the remit of the welfare state apparatus. In this way, the self-organised Sindicat d'Habitatge del Raval not only establishes an infrastructure that compensates for the deficiencies in the welfare state, but the activists also succeed in identifying diverse collective solutions to individual problems. The various practices of improving social participation in the close social environment contradict the tendencies towards individualisation.

6. Conclusion: Collective Responses to Individualised Problems

This article demonstrates how social participation can be made possible in hostile situations. It is apparent that the neighbours in the Raval district have become active themselves, thereby establishing at least a temporary infrastructure of participation through self-organised practices. In the context of hostility towards social participation, the individual issues encountered in the Raval neighbourhood are addressed through

collective responses. The hostility towards social participation as a situation is primarily the result of the individualisation of social problems. Housing, security, and care are three examples in which the residents of the Raval district contradict this individualisation and create something in common. On this basis, they can find collective answers to the individualised problems and improve social participation.

The neoliberalisation of social security systems, as outlined at the beginning of this article, primarily entails an individualisation of opportunities for participation. The transformations of the welfare state decollectivise the state's responsibility for enabling participation. The individual problems that arise as a result can be addressed at the level of the immediate social environment. The new relationships are established by the activists of the Sindicat d'habitatge del Raval and other groups and initiatives particularly in the meetings, and activated as a resource. Through the collective practices, the neighbours in the district themselves become activists and thus establish a local participation infrastructure that simultaneously becomes an infrastructure for welfare provision. This type of collective search for solutions is also linked to a sense of belonging to the district. This connection between participation and belonging crystallises in the neighbourhood union and points to a possible consolidation of the self-organised infrastructure. Furthermore, the transfer of the organisation of participation to civil society also occurs, which can be defined as a form of responsibilisation. The structures that emerge in this way achieve at least medium-term continuity and at least partially compensate for the deficient municipal infrastructure and connect to the historically extensive civil society organisations in Spain (Blanco et al., 2020).

As international studies show, civil society actors are becoming increasingly important in the context of the transformation of welfare state guarantees of participation (e.g., Castel, 2011; Heinze et al., 2021; Pera, 2020). My analysis also shows that local networks are becoming important. While some authors focus on networks for specific concerns (e.g., accompaniment when dealing with authorities; Bartolini, 2021, pp. 12–13), my analysis shows the importance of the immediate social environment, since social participation depends on how people live and can establish or participate in networks. This dependence means relying on individual circumstances and serendipity to get by, or in other words: The people who want to experience social participation despite a hostile situation must establish their own local networks to enable such participation. They must become active on their own and hope to be able to build appropriate relationships. This is possible in very different ways depending on the environment and good or bad luck.

Barcelona shows itself to be a model city in late capitalism and shifts the responsibility for the city's citizens to the citizens themselves (Delgado, 2017, p. 14). Transferring at least partial responsibility for social security to civil society tends to make the self-organised practices described above seem like a necessity to cushion the worst poverty. At the same time, collectively opposing exclusion and thus mitigating the individualisation of problem situations also becomes a task that takes on a life of its own. Marginalised individuals and groups must deal with difficulties here and, when state guarantee structures are no longer in place, are dependent on their social environment for social participation. All in all, this means that the opportunities to participate remain highly individualised and depend on voluntary structures.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that I have shown how self-organised practices in neighbourhoods activate residents and enable them to find answers to problems related to participation and livelihood. The article thus contributes to research on social participation by illustrating how social participation amidst hostility can be made possible. At the same time, the article shows how neighbours become

activists and reactivate or develop strategies for collectively dealing with problems. Those collective responses to individualised problems carry a transformative potential by developing alternative forms of social participation.

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Conflict of Interests

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