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# Making sense of the square. Facing the touristification of public space through playful protest in Barcelona

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## Abstract

This research is concerned with local social conflicts and recent mobilisations related to the increasing dominance of tourism in urban space. Nowadays, urban scenarios are experiencing abrupt changes, both symbolic and materially. Therefore, the affected areas and the different forms in which cultural manifestations act strategically should be taken into seriously account.

As is known, many cities are witnessing forms of contestations: in several European capitals, streets display messages of aversion, including "Tourists go home", "Too much tourism kills the city" or "Terramotourism". Protests have been organised in Venice, for instance, with the mottos "Venexodus, without Venetians there will be no more Venice" and "Stop cruises, the neighborhood is for the people who live in there". Another paradigmatic example is Barcelona, known worldwide as a major tourist destination since the early 1990s. Here, in recent years, grassroots movements in popular tourist neighbourhoods have been debating the negative impacts of mass tourism on the daily lives of locals. The Catalan capital works, therefore, as a productive example to discuss urban tourism as a fragmented and multi-faceted phenomenon. The starting-point of this research is a playful urban intervention that exhibits the connections that link place-based activism, local identity construction and sense of place in relation to a strong presence of tourist policies in the neoliberal city. The subject of this study, called *Fem Plaça* (Let's make the Square), highlights the more proactive rather than merely reactive role of inhabitants. *Fem Plaça* (FP) is actually the name of an urban collective and monthly event that took place for almost 3 years (from early 2014 to the end of 2016) each time in a different square of Ciutat Vella, the old district of Barcelona. It consisted of a monthly urban strategy identified by the organisers themselves as "the act to go out in the street and have a good time" which involved several implications and meanings. Seen from the outside this "urban happening" did not present a strong feature of protest but, analyzing deeper, the initiative came from the idea that people could be able to "be" comfortably in the public space controlled more and more by the private sector.

Since 2016 the conflicts in Barcelona, connected to tourism policies, have been worsening. This is due to the fact that inhabitants are complaining about tourism to force the rents up. Subsequently, privatization of public space and illegal tourist flats have become part of a broader protest. Organisers of FP are now part of *Assemblea de Barris per un Turisme Sostenible* (Neighborhood Assembly for Sustainable Tourism, ABTS). ABTS combines

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almost 30 neighborhood associations and collectives of the city that are trying to face the negative effects of tourist boom.

The study I am submitting draws from assemblage thinking and focuses, at first, on the inner dynamics of FP. It seeks to highlight the urgency of community spaces for the citizens and not just to promote the destination. FP confirms how different groups can appropriate space by drawing, metaphorically and concretely, new settings that points to the spontaneity of normally denied daily practices allocated in separate spaces standing for a specific social ordering. This specific urban happening acts on the space in which it subjectifies its ideas and, acting, it also renews the sense of belonging and collective identity of the social movement itself. It shapes the space and the agent itself in a relation of reciprocity. The symbolic creation of a square inside the square in which FP played its protest, engaged with the physical occupation that acquired both a strong symbolic significance and strongly affects the participants themselves, reinforcing and legitimising further agentic behaviours. In this sense, actions shape the location and overlap different spatial relations, each of them characterised by its own sense of meaning and a peculiar rhythm.

Moreover, the developments of the last months that saw FP joining ABTS, allow for a better understanding of protest as a series of relational, processual practices of empowerment, overcoming the efficiency rhetoric that values a process only for its final success. Finally, my research strives to expand the tourist analysis to the performance and performativity of the local people's disaffection in urban contexts to ensure a broader comprehensiveness in the tourism academic field.

**Keywords:** urban tourism, touristification of public space, assemblage thinking, playful and creative protest