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## SQUATS, SQUARES, UNIVERSITIES. ABOUT SIGNIFICANT PLACES IN THE BIOGRAPHIES OF REBELS

**ABSTRACT:** This article discusses a fragment of an empirical study on the learning of adults participating in various forms of rebellion such as manifestations, demonstrations, urban activism and many others. Several interviewees from Spain pointed out the importance of specific places in their practices of rebellion and learning. These 'significant places' could be an important context of people's lifelong learning. They mediate activities, build social relationships, produce norms, values and – what is crucial from the point of view of biographical research – construct the identities of rebels.

**KEYWORDS:** significant places, rebellion, learning, identity.

### Introduction

In 2021, ten years have passed since the beginning of one of the most significant social mobilizations in modern Europe known as the *Indignados* Movement, born in crisis-hit Spain in crisis-hit Spain. The symbolic date of the start of the wave of protests is considered May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011, hence the *indignados* are also called the 15-M Movement. The distinctive feature of 15-M – like the Occupy movement – was the accumulation of people who were angry and disappointed in institutional policies on the squares of many Spanish cities. The most numerous gatherings took place in Madrid's *Puerta del Sol* and in Barcelona's *Plaça de Catalunya*. During the assemblies, tent cities were built by the protesters. It was there that they lived, debated and laid the foundations of a real direct democracy (Castells 2012; 2017; Subirats 2015; Monge Lasierra 2017). Even a cursory retrospective glance at the *Indignados* Movement allows us to come to some conclusions about its significance. The 15-M enabled the creation of a new political order in Spain. It also had a great educational importance in terms of raising people's awareness and potential to the possibility of creating alternative forms of politics by the "ordinary" people (*el pueblo*). However, this text is not about the *Indignados* Movement. In the 10th anniversary of this famous social movement, I would like to dedicate this article to its creators, participants and all rebels.

I would like to describe the phenomenon of 'significant places' of rebels in this paper which were revealed during the analysis of empirical material in my research project on learning mechanisms of adults participating in various practices of rebellion. These

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practices included participation in demonstrations, manifestations, broadly understood social and political activism, urban activism and so on. My study has an andragogical character. Methodologically I am situated in the perspective of biographical research (e.g., Jurgiel 2011; Jurgiel-Aleksander 2013; Urbaniak-Zajac 2017). I was particularly interested in (1) what and how do the people who define themselves as rebels at some point in their lives learn?, and (2) what are the learning mechanisms in the context of rebellion? In the course of the research project I made the following research steps in accordance with the assumptions of context-sensitive analysis (Jurgiel-Aleksander & Dyrda 2016). First, I analysed individual biographies in order to reveal the unitary level of constructing the meanings of participation in rebellion; second, I identified what was different and common in all narratives in terms of learning on the socio-cultural level. One of the most significant analytical categories that I managed to capture in the course of the analysis of empirical material was 'socialisation to rebellion'. I describe it widely in other publications (Szczygieł 2018; 2020). An interesting thread of place with its educational aspects emerged within the mentioned category. Now, I will describe the phenomenon of significant places.

### **Significant places as an educational category**

The category of place is not new in pedagogy. In Poland for example, it was particularly explored by such researchers as Tomasz Szkudlarek (1997), Maria Mendel (2003; 2006; 2017; 2019), Astrid Męczkowska (2005), Ilona Copik (2013; 2018) and others. In the field of andragogy, Ewa Kurantowicz (2003; 2007; 2008), Ewa Skibińska (2011), Elżbieta Dubas & Anna Gutowska (2017) studied place.

Being aware of the complexity of the concept of the pedagogical place, I will present the issues that seem to be adequate from the point of view of the phenomenon of learning in the context of rebellion that I explored. The interest in place, not only in the sense of physical properties or spatial location parameters, is associated with the so-called 'spatial turn' announced by Edward Soja, a geographer of politics and culture. In the new, 'socialised' version, place is treated as a human space for experiencing the world, the 'significant space', which includes the experiences of entities in their social, cultural and political aspects (Męczkowska 2005). Place becomes an area of meetings with others, overlapping meanings and intersecting discourses. In pedagogical reflection it is treated as a significant space from the point of view of actions (e.g., socio-cultural animation practices), learning and the shaping of human identity (Mendel 2006; Męczkowska 2005).

Place mediates the construction of the identity of social actors in an indeterministic way. Postmodernity and the fluidity of cultural meanings and patterns, that are

the building matter of identity, indicate that human identity is created in relation to a given place or places. Significant places provide us with the orientation of 'being ourselves'. They are a safety valve in the rapidly changing conditions of everyday life. Place is like our home that we return to and relax in willingly. The relation between identity and place can be described as a continuum whose poles are: 'rooting' and 'homelessness'. Męczkowska (2005) pointed out this issue in her analysis. She associated rooting in a given cultural space with generating permanent identity structures and local identifications. This mechanism was typical for the premodern and modern periods. Homelessness may have two meanings. On the one hand, it is the result of an individual's choices aimed at identification broadening, and on the other hand, the result of a limited choice due to the entrapment of a person in a symbolic void. These phenomena are typical for postmodernity characterized by openness, fluidity and the possibility of (sometimes too many) choices from the palette of available identity options. Of course, it has both positive and negative consequences for individuals. It is important that we are currently dealing with problematic and heterogeneous forms of identity-building.

It is also interesting and important that places participate in learning processes. They can be considered as one of the learning contexts of individuals and social groups. If we treat place not only literally – in sense of a physical space – but also as a certain symbolic construct, it becomes an interesting starting point for analysing adult learning. The category of place corresponds to the andragogical concept of situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991; Malewski 2010; Páramo 2010). This concept is one of the theories of social learning, which assumes that 'people learn through observation and interaction with others in their respective social environment' (Malewski 2010, p. 94). One of its premises is a critique of institutional (formal) education and an openness towards exploring informal learning spaces. Situated learning is treated widely. Knowledge is created through social interactions, narratives told by people and transmitted through dialogues. Additionally, social concepts of learning assume that '(...) learning is a derivative of participation in the worlds of social practices' (Malewski 2010, p. 177). Thus, understood learning is an integral element of human activities. Examples of worlds of practice are workplaces treated as learning organizations (Czubak-Koch 2014) as well as local communities identified as learning communities (Kurantowicz 2007). Rebellion is also a practice that has learning potential.

How can we briefly refer to the theoretical framework presented above in the case of learning of rebels? What are the significant places of rebels? What are the contexts of these places? I understand significant places to be a space which is important from the point of view of the experiences of individuals or groups. It is associated with a sense of people's attachment and engagement. People coexist with others and act within

significant places. Moreover, significant places can be a carrier of norms and values important for a given person and group. Another crucial feature of significant place is that within which people socialize, learn (construct meanings) and build their identities. Significant places can be both physical and virtual. In this article I will focus on physical places of rebels. Referring to Judith Butler's performative theory of assembly I would say that, perhaps, physical space is more significant than virtual place because in it much more is at stake, since the social actors put their bodies in direct danger (Butler 2015). At this point I also would like to emphasize that the thematic field of significant place was revealed in the analysed empirical material 'on the occasion'. Meaning, it was not caused by me intentionally asking a guiding question in order to match the interlocutors' statements to a specific theory. My assumption was to conduct the study in an inductive and open way. It began with the opening question 'How did it happen that you took part in the demonstrations?'

### **Significant places in the narratives of rebels – reconstructions**

For the purpose of this text, which is to describe significant places, I use only fragments of the narratives of interlocutors from Spain. I want to 'unify' the context of analysis related to place (in the case of a country with specific regions). My additional justification for choosing the narratives of people from Spain is the 10th anniversary of the famous *Indignados* Movement, mentioned in the introduction, which also appeared in some stories.

Threads of significant places were present, among others, in the following biographies: w11, w12, w21 and w22<sup>1</sup>. The respondents were Polish (an emigrant living in Catalonia, w11) and Spanish (Galician, w21 and Catalan, w12, w22). They are activists in their local communities. One of them is a member of a leftist political party (w22). Their biographies evolved in different ways. Each of them is unique. However, my goal is neither to reconstruct the facts of lives nor to show the uniqueness of the biographies. In the research material I wanted to find commonalities in terms of place and learning. At this stage of the analysis, I treat biographies as a material for exemplifying studied phenomena. Significant places were revealed in the narratives in several contexts.

Places were associated with the beginnings of the subjects' involvement in rebellious practices. These were a squat, university, educational centre and others. A squat appeared in the story of a woman who was living in such a place. She noticed that the inhabitants of the squat had social norms regarding protesting. During our conversation

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<sup>1</sup> Coding used in this text refers to the numbers of interviews conducted during the research project. The numbers reflect the order of interviews. The total sample included 22 people from Poland, Spain, Belarus and Mexico.

she even joked that you are exposed to the corrective 'evil gaze' of squatters if you do not comply with these norms. Here are fragments of this narrative:

How did it happen that I took part in the protests? In manifestations. Ymmm, I lived in a squat with activists, so it's natural to go to such mani... manifestations, right? That there is such a social norm, that if you live in a squat you have to go. (...) if you do not go, they look at you badly [laughs]. No, it's a joke.

(...) it was kind of a fashion [laughs]. No, no, I don't know, it was just a curiosity to see how the people manifest here, because it is different than in Poland, and here [in Catalonia] it's different. (w11)

A university as a significant place of rebellion, according to another interlocutor, was associated with the regularity of organised demonstrations regarding educational and student matters. The protesters had manifested disagreement with the increases of university fees. The protests were described as joint meetings of students (rebellion comrades, colleagues) who move from their university to the square where the significant event took place. Here is an excerpt illustrating this matter:

I studied at the Autonomous [Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, UAB] in 1997. From this point onwards, there were at least one or two university manifestations each year that demanded more and better rights for students, for example, that the university fees not increase so much. So, as Autonomous students **we met together and travelled** by train (about thirty minutes) to *Plaça de Catalunya*, and there **we met with comrades from other universities** at the University Square. It was the place where manifestations began. (w12)

An educational centre was another place associated with the beginnings of rebellious experiences. One of the interviewees told me about this significant place in the context of one of the most important protests for him. The story began with the ecological disaster off the coast of Galicia in Spain and the slow response of the local authorities in reducing its negative effects. This unpleasant event mobilised people from the interviewee's school and local community. This collective opposition to the authorities seemed to be important also at the national level:

I think that the first [protest] (...) I mentioned, was very important [to me] because it was the first one. It was the first time I had this kind of experience. And also, because **it was an experience shared with the high school**. I am from a coastal city, and (...) the ecological disaster had hit us deeply. So, it was an experience shared by the whole centre - educational centre. **It was something I shared with my friends**, something very big. And finally, one had the feeling of sharing it at the national, national level. (w21)

I would say that the exemplary places analysed above had socialisation significance. The interviewees referred to places in relation to social norms, lifestyles, concerns and attempts to solve social and political problems. The important role of others as well as mutual experiences of rebellion were also emphasised many times.

Significant places were related to spaces, people and collectives accompanying the interviewees in their experiences of rebellion. They were associated with many situations: joint struggles regarding particular matters, building social relations (colleagues, friendships), organising joint meetings and exchanging information on various topics. Here are fragments of the narratives that illustrate these contexts:

*Guinardó-Can Baró* Social Assembly is the assembly that consolidated in 15-M<sup>2</sup>. There were also some groups in *Guinardó* earlier. So, from 2011 until now every Tuesday they meet... and this is a continuation. This is a meeting place for many struggles. Sometimes the groups come up with some suggestions and it is a very interesting place. (...) sometimes people come to meet other people. Sometimes there is a continuation of meetings on the street<sup>3</sup>. **This has allowed the neighbourhood to not be totally separated into isolated groups, but there are groups with many profiles.** There are people with many profiles and this [*Guinardó-Can Baró* Social Assembly] is an initiative to exchange information and to respect others. **Also, it is interesting in terms of social relations because a lot of strong friendships have been made there.** (w22)

Anyway, a block was taken to live there and establish a social centre in the district. (...) half of the young people from the Social Assembly were involved in the occupied building. So, **I was more involved in this place.** (w22)

Place allows people and social groups to meet with others as well as to exchange thoughts (which is a great example of learning among others). Significant places protect us from social separation and closure, enabling the building of strong relationships. Interesting identity threads appeared in the presented fragments. This topic will be developed later.

In the rebels' narratives, significant places also appear in the context of experiencing specific values. Place appears as a space for their production, renegotiation, and practice, which has a strong link with the biography of one of the interlocutors in particular. She states that a squat: 'seemed to me a place of freedom from all these dictates, where one can start **looking for one's own way**' (w11). Freedom experienced by a woman in a squat enabled her to build identity and 'look for her own way' of living. The same place turned out to be paradoxical: on the one hand, it was read by the interviewee as a positive and encouraging place, and, on the other hand, it was related to the experience of rejection by the people outside the squat and marginalisation in a broader social context: '(...) if you live in a squat you feel marginalised very much, and rejected, **you feel like a social reject (...)**' (w11). Living in a squat 'you feel a lot of social pressure (...)' from the outside of this place.

<sup>2</sup> The respondent gives an example of the impact of 15-M on the activism in microscale. M. Castells (2017), cited in the introduction of this text, describes political impact on a wider scale. One of the effects of the *Indignados* Movement was the creation of new political entities and changes in the composition of the official policy of Spain. The right-wing party *Ciudadanos* and the left-wing *Podemos* (founded in 2014) appeared on the political scene. The 2015 parliamentary election outcome was as follows: PP – 28.7%, PSOE – 22%, *Ciudadanos* – 13.94% and *Podemos* and confluences – 20.6%.

<sup>3</sup> 'Meetings on the street' refer to street protests (demonstrations and many other actions).

The described feeling is a denial of the freedom that the woman previously spoke about. This specific inconsistency and discontinuity of the narrative shows two sides of the same coin, that is the process of identity-building in relation to living in a squat. The aforementioned freedom is important from the point of view of self-reflection and creating ones' own life projects. In the literature this was pointed out in Anthony Giddens's concept of reflexive project of the self (Giddens 1991). According to him, as individuals we are free in creating our life projects, but at the same time we are dealing with a pressure of ongoing reflexive construction of the self. Additionally, identity-building is the result of social interactions with many people and groups that we meet in our lives. This may be accompanied by restrictions of freedom and the need to renegotiate meanings. George Herbert Mead (1962) described it as the social process of personality creation.

Places in narratives are spaces of rebels' learning. In the biographies cited, learning threads relate to specific experiences in various places, reflections about these experiences and meanings given to them. What is particularly interesting is that learning has an informal nature here. Let us see how the respondents spoke of this matter. Interviewee w11 stated that she had learned that people can organise themselves. The woman mentioned self-organisation in the context of squatting ('the first or the second time I came to Barcelona, I noticed that the squat scene was very big and very well organised here') and the episode of her participation in the *Indignados* Movement. During the 15-M Movement, rebels gathered in tent cities. Debating in specially organised committees on various topics such as education was a distinctive form of protesters' activism. Interlocutor w12 said that 'during protests it is clear that not everyone thinks the same, so you share ideas and **take over the ideas of others**, take over and learn'. Protesting 'is good, it **shapes you** and allows you to be critical. Not everything is black and white, there are different shades'. According to this rebel, discussion is a good method for exchanging thoughts and learning. In turn, respondent w21 told me that 'you can learn to **identify with a group**' by protesting. Protest is a 'form of obtaining something, but also a **form of self-identification**', which is part of the respondent's experience of protesting in an educational centre in Galicia many years ago. Subject w22 said that for him protesting was something 'more like a school than a matter of useful struggle'. (...) For him it was a school not only in terms of 'knowledge about other spaces in the city, occupying places and radical anarchism' but also about 'future moments'. Furthermore, this interlocutor learned about social diversity and a variety of social interests.

It is worth paying attention to the bolded fragments of the respondents' statements. They refer clearly to the previously outlined thread of identity-building, which is crucial in socio-cultural concepts of learning mentioned before (see Malewski 2010). Just

a reminder, learning is seen as being situated in worlds of practices and social interactions within cultural, social, political and institutional contexts in these concepts of learning. Knowledge created in the worlds of social practices becomes a constituent element of social actors' identities. The identity is in a continuous process of creation. Of importance in this paper is the idea that identity-building is linked with learning experiences within significant places for rebels. We could observe that identity appeared in both individual ('I') and collective ('we') meanings. I think it shows very well that the community of people engaging in rebellion is becoming one of the frames for creating the interlocutors' individual narratives.

### **Interpretative paths**

The identity of rebels is one of the effects of their activities and learning that takes place on the occasions of these activities (it is worth noting that the interviewees also mentioned other forms of learning not directly related to rebellious actions, but connected with things like studying theories, ideologies, etc.). It is constructed in specific places that had turned out to be significant for the interviewees. The importance of these places, at the narrative level, is evidenced, *inter alia*, by the fact that they were told. In the context of biographical research and the constructing of narratives by respondents, Mariusz Granosik notes that:

The narrator is not a passive participant in events but rather an active perpetrator of what is happening around him and how it happens. Therefore, he is an 'activist', but one whose impact is interpretive: [this impact] is based on reflection, which gives rise to an argumentative idea (Granosik 2019, p. 119).

Constructing a biography depends on many factors that narrators consider significant from the point of view of their stories. For example, Barbara Merrill (2011) identifies class and gender as significant in her study. Henning Salling Olesen does the same when he describes educational experiences where gender and work are one of the 'factors' for constructing individual narratives (Salling Olesen 2005). Different researchers point to other, intersecting social categories such as gender and race (see hooks 2000).

The titled significant place – as part of the context of learning and constructing biographies of rebels – is, paradoxically, both deterministic and indeterministic (Mendel 2006). How can this be understood? In my interpretation, from the point of view of biography research, we can look at place as a specific frame of learning and constructing a biography. It structures our lives 'from outside', and, in this sense, is deterministic. I would refer to Judith Butler (1999) who writes that people come into the world with

‘prepared’ social roles for us to perform<sup>4</sup>. Indeterminism of place means that space can be changed under the influence of activities such as rebellion and the socio-political involvement of citizens. In such a situation, individuals and groups involved contribute to forming their own places (worlds of life).

Place is susceptible to change. It can become a space for building democracy (e.g., Brookfield 2005; Biesta 2011; Mendel 2017). This interpretation is particularly justified when analysing biographies of adults involved in various forms of rebellion. Rebels cited in this text learn democracy when trying to change their places. Gert Biesta (2011) pointed out that learning democracy takes place in many contexts and is problematic. One of these contexts is learning as an effect of the implementation of official programmes in the field of citizenship education. In this case, learning democracy is the result of the teaching processes. The responsibility for this lies with places like schools and other educational institutions. According to Biesta, learning democracy should be understood broadly. He argues that:

(...) there is a need to shift the focus of research, policy and practice from the teaching of citizenship towards the different ways in which young people ‘learn democracy’ through their participation in the contexts and practices that make up their everyday lives, in school, college and university, and in society at large (Biesta 2011, p. 6).

Biesta is against the idea that citizenship is a matter of *individuals*. From this point of view, learning democracy is not an issue of the individuals’ skills, knowledge, dispositions and individual responsibilities. Biesta puts an emphasis rather on individuals-in-context and individuals-in-interactions and the role of people’s actual condition of citizenship in their learning. He is also against citizenship understood in *social* terms, that is in terms of socially adaptive and integrative behaviours. He thinks it should be focused on democracy politics, political engagement and collective decision making. Democracy is not only doing something in/for local community. It is also the orientation towards political values of freedom, equality and justice. In addition, Biesta is opposed to the economic approaches to learning democracy which are seen as functional and subordinated to economic imperatives. Learning should make contributions to democratisation processes rather than to the economisation of our lives.

The fragments of narratives presented in this text are related to the broad understanding of learning democracy in significant places. This is the perspective of the

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<sup>4</sup> Conversely, we can point to subversive practices with the aim of going beyond normativity and determinism (Butler 1999). From the point of view of significant places, a good example of this kind of resistance are precariat’ assemblies in public spaces like streets and squares organised in order to fight for a dignified life. According to Butler ‘[a]sserting that a group of people is still existing, taking up space and obdurately living, is already an expressive action, a politically significant event, and that can happen wordlessly in the course of an unpredictable and transitory gathering’ (Butler 2015, p. 18).

rebels' biographical experiences. In this case, civic involvement and the participation of interviewees are related to informal learning. This was portrayed by fragments of the rebels' narratives about experiencing values, in which particular care was given to places and building interpersonal relationships by working together. All of these with their learning outcomes. I think that this form of informal learning corresponds to the Basil Bernstein's competence model (Bernstein 1996). Bernstein understands competences in the context of engagement procedures and the building of the world by individuals and social groups. The competences are seen as dispositions to act, change the world (and places) and so on, meaning a specific sensitivity and willingness to act. Additionally, what is important, while acquiring such broadly understood competences, the identities of social actors are constructed.

## Conclusions

In this text I analysed rebels' significant places as an educational category. Significant places were spaces of rebels' actions, learning, building relationships, and sharing values with others. The identities of social actors were constantly created within significant places too. The results of the analysis indicate that acting, learning and identity-building in such places are important from a democratic point of view. When focusing on rebels' narratives we may wonder: what is the quality of significant places and democracy in relation to these places? We are certainly dealing with a considerable diversity in this matter. Participation in significant places has both good and bad sides. It is worth paying attention to the learning potential of significant places with its positive and pro-democratic contexts. I think that such a picture emerges from the analysed narratives. However, we cannot forget about the 'dark side' of such participation. How should one interpret significant places and democracy in times of increasing fascism in Europe and in the context of such phenomena as xenophobia, homophobia and many others? These too mobilised many people to act in their places. Among others, I would like to recall such situations as protest activities against the reception of refugees in some European countries or aggressive blockades of the Equality March in Białystok, Poland, in 2019. These phenomena in specific places were even undemocratic or anti-democratic in nature if we assume that democracy is a system that favours the protection of all kinds of minorities. I believe that the issues outlined in this text can act as a topic for reflection by adult learning researchers. Knowledge about the contemporary world(s) of social practices is important from a critical point of view. After all, this is the world we live in together. The significant places for people mentioned in this text, permeate individual and community involvement and are subject to constant change. Positive

changes depend on the quality of places, and, of course, the places depend on dispositions of individuals and groups to think and act in a pro-democratic way.

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