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Mortgage *durée*: towards a politics 'in construction'

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Abstract

The article offers an ethnographic analysis of the imagination of the city as a mortgage environment: a space of sociability mediated by interest rates, legal language, square metres, actuary calculations and temporalities, real estate brokers, political and financial corruption, etc. A central aim is to understand what it may mean for our contemporary political theory and anthropology to say that a society's democratic imagination rests on a real estate and mortgage ontology. Such an imagination renders the city as a political project 'in construction': an on-going, 'building-in-progress' development, whose social rhythm is inflected by a permanent temporal and spatial suspension; a holding in abeyance characterised by the hopeful and yet fearful economy of credit. The mortgage *durée* of a city-in-construction delineates the contours of our political ruins, but in this ruinous circumstance, amidst the hubris, it offers also the resources and materials for critique and re-construction.

Keywords: mortgages, anthropology of debt, crisis, anthropology of time, urban theory, Madrid

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In 2013 a particular genre of urban story stormed the pages and online reports of Spanish media. These were stories about *escraches*: a form of direct action where members of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, Mortgage Victims Platform) stood outside the homes of certain members of parliament to let their neighbours know that these deputies were against legal changes promoted by the PAH to stop foreclosures. In a few months the PAH had collected over a million signatures supporting a popular legislative initiative to change the laws regarding mortgages and foreclosures, but the ruling Partido Popular (People's Party) opposed the initiative, a position widely attributed to the mutual interests and alliances of the financial and political oligarchy.

Over this time *escraches* became objects of intense political and social debate. Supporters of government accused members of the PAH of employing intimidatory, even 'terrorist' tactics, transforming public space into a territory of accusation, vigilance and hostility. Others, however, were drawn to *escraches*' imaginative redeployment of the classical *agon* of political exchange. *Escraches* made publicly visible the complex apparatus of interest rates, mortgage clauses, and judicial sanctions that striate the spatial and temporal inflections of the economic crisis – including such rhythms and routines that make for waiting outside one's home into a predictably quotidian affair.

Thus, *escraches* succeeded at turning foreclosures inside out, by transforming the privacy of mortgage drama into a public matter of urban concern. They somehow 'expropriated' capital's very own rhythm of urban space-time occupation, turning personal financial debt into collective public spectacle.

Today the effects of the subprime mortgage crisis and the credit crunch are in everybody's mind. The role of the crisis in shaping our contemporary vision of the 'making of the indebted man', as Maurizio Lazzarato forcefully put it (2012), has reinvigorated debates about the nature of debt as the archetypal social relation (Graeber 2011; High 2012), and about its role in the neoliberal backlash for political and economic austerity. Our moral consciousness as global political actors is in many respects still being shaped as an after-effect of the mortgage debacle.

In this article I want to take a slightly different route for exploring our debt economy. I focus on the case of mortgages, not to better understand the anthropology of debt and social relations, but as a point of entry into the larger cultural economy of the contemporary urban condition. I am interested in how our taking residence (often quite literally!) in a mortgage society inflects the cultural and material resources for thinking about politics today. It is not 'indebted man' that I place centre stage here, then, but a 'mortgaged subject'. This subject is 'in construction', in the sense that it is shaped and moulded by the real estate and financial economy. But there is a second, more profound sense in which the condition of mortgage *durée*, of being 'in construction', plays out: one where the resources for political praxis obtain from the property and mortgaged condition of the city, a form that is in ruins today, but that in this ruinous circumstance, amidst the hubris, offers also the materials for critique and re-construction.

Thus, *escraches* participate of this mortgage *durée*. They use the city as a public stage where contemporary experiences of hope, credit, historical consciousness, and political terribleness are held together and made visible. They place the *polis* in suspension, by holding up its technical landscape, its apparatuses of control and calculation, its temporalities and spatialities, its juridical reason and standardised forms of political representation, to scrutiny and interrogation – and by re-describing these *in its own terms*, as a political scenario that is itself mortgaged, because it, too, is now posed as being 'in construction'.

The rest of the article describes in detail the characteristics of this mortgaged condition. I focus on three dimensions (acceleration, apocalypse, and conspiracy), which are neither strictly political nor financial, neither recklessly immoral nor outrageously principled, and whose temporality and spatiality is undulating and unstable, and all the more important for being so. They summon a world that is turbulent and confusing, intimidating, but also hopeful. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork carried out on Madrid's property market in 2006-07. This is important, I think, because it speaks of a cultural moment that preceded the financial crisis, yet one, as we shall see, that was already permeated by a sense of drama and conspiratorial politics, by the awareness of a *polis* that was tumbling into ruins.

Acceleration

Housing markets are perhaps unusual in the economic literature for the early endorsement of their view as 'emotional economies'. As Hazel Christie et. al. put it: 'two set of debates have attended to the affective dimensions of (housing) market processes:… the role of certain emotions (most notably, confidence, optimism, and greed) in driving up the prices paid for properties; and second, work positioning the home as an emotional space' (Christie et al. 2008: 2298).

As observers have widely pointed out, the Spanish property market was throughout the turn of the century a prominent example of the emotional exuberance that drives house-price bubbles. By 2005, real estate wealth reached 550% of GDP, vs. 260% in the USA or 490% in the UK (Campos Echeverría 2008: 49). Eighteen new properties were built for every 1000 people, vs. a European Union average of 5.7 (Campos Echeverría 2008: 48). The year 2002, for instance, signalled a point of inflection in the recent historical evolution of Madrid's property market by registering a 20% rise in the number of new housing projects versus a 4% decrease the previous year. The year 2003 consolidated the tendency, establishing a 'record for the number of projects initiated, with almost 80000 housing projects registered, versus 72000 in 2002 and 59000 in 2001' (2007a: 20). The tendency sanctioned thus the labelling of the sector's economy as a 'property bubble', whose acceleration appeared unstoppable and in many respects, as we will see below, defied the structural paradigms of the national economy.

Economic analyses at the time were quick to contextualize the bonanza. A dominant explanation pointed to the evolution in the real estate's economy rate of productivity. For example, it has often been noted how the arrival of immigrant labour enabled property developers to increase substantially their margins without a concomitant increase in productive capacities (2007b: 8). Another explanation explores the structural links between the real estate and banking industries. Over half of all credits (56%) approved by the banking sector in 2006 were destined to the real estate sector (2007b: 10). Particularly significant in this respect is the reference rates typically used in the Spanish mortgage banking market: approximately '97% of all existing mortgage accounts in Spain are benchmarked against variable interest rates, this being Europe's highest.' (2007b: 10) When it comes to explaining the economics of Madrid's property market, two additional factors must be taken into account: on the one hand, in the year 2003 Madrid's population rose over the average for the past five years, with a subsequent increase in the demand for property (Fernández & de Mesa 2004); on the other hand, Madrid's real estate market became a safe haven for financial speculators looking to escape from the crises in international stock exchanges (Galindo Cueva 2003).

When I joined Antonio and Silvia in their house-hunting venture in March 2006, the climate of bonanza, demand-pressure, and financial and economic urgency certainly permeated their expectations, as well as shaping their relationship to the city at large. Antonio and Silvia met in England, where Antonio used to live and work as a freelance writer, and where we first met and became friends. Silvia, on the other hand, works as an industrial engineer in Madrid. A year into their relationship, Antonio decided to relocate temporarily to Madrid, given the relative flexibility afforded by his job.

Silvia had been looking for properties in Madrid for some months prior to Antonio's arrival. She had opened a tax-incentivised mortgage account four years previous and unless she found a property to buy by the end of the year she would have to pay back to the Inland Revenue the tax benefits that had accrued to her. With five months to go, Antonio decided to join Silvia in her property search. He had never imagined himself buying a property in Madrid, but reasoned that should they find something that suited them they would be better off sharing the investment.

They searched for flats using the Internet and walking around the streets. Antonio and Silvia knew what they were looking for: a flat with at least two bedrooms, plenty of natural light, and a lift. Their budget constrained them: their ceiling was at €360,000, and even that amount would require them to pay it back over a 30-35 year period, indebting them for 35% of their joint earnings. With such constraints, it would be unlikely they would find a flat larger than $80m^2$, unless it required heavy additional investment for its refurbishment.

Antonio, who declared himself openly ignorant of the Spanish property market, was fearful. He echoed rumours of an imminent 'explosion' of the property bubble; of the dramatic impact that a rise in interest rates would have on the mortgage economy; of the market's inevitable depreciation. Silvia was more optimistic. She would reply that the same fears had been around for over ten years now and in the meanwhile the market had kept rising, perhaps not at the pace of previous times, but still at a 9 or 10%, sometimes even a 12%, way above what a savings account could afford. She was further of the opinion that a nice and well-located apartment in Madrid would never depreciate in value.

I joined Antonio and Silvia in their visits to eight properties. Their reaction in all cases was the same, they would always walk out disappointed. The flats they liked, either new or refurbished, were all very small. It just made no sense to them to spend 64 million pesetas (c. €384000, Antonio kept thinking in terms of the old Spanish currency) in a $40m^2$ property. When it came to second-hand properties, they also found it very difficult to get a sense of their potential. Many were decorated in ways that did not make it easy for them to imagine inhabiting that space: the furniture, the layouts, everything pointed to lifestyles and habits very different from theirs. Other properties were simply too deteriorated. They had entertained the idea of buying a property and investing some money reforming it. But given that Antonio would have to return to England sooner or later, they were not keen at the idea of having to wait for too long before moving into the property.

Early in November 2006 Silvia made an appointment to visit a new property development of refurbished flats in the centre of Madrid which she had spotted surfing the Internet. When we got there we were welcomed by a real estate broker and a sales representative of the property developer. 'The second I walked into the flat', Antonio was later to recount, 'I knew this was the one.' The property was a fourth-floor apartment in a 19th century refurbished building. It had two balconies overlooking one of Madrid's most traditional squares. Throughout our visit the sales representative, who had perspicaciously noted Antonio's interest in the flat, repeated stories of how over the past nine months a number of people had deposited partial instalments to signal a reservation. For a variety of reasons, on all occasions the sale eventually fell through. A man from Valencia, for example, had to retrieve his instalment after the sale of another property there fell through, thus freezing his liquidity to pay for this flat. In fact, we were told, a close acquaintance of one of the building's first residents was travelling from Bilbao to Madrid the following Sunday with the intention of making a deposit himself. 'He knows the property well', the sales representative told us. 'We have shown him around on two occasions, plus he has of course been to his friend's flat, which is only three floors down from this one.' She further beefed-up her sales pitch by reminding us that this was the last flat in the building with balconies to the square. She also disclosed to us the financial advantages that the property developer had cleared on behalf of future owners. For starters, the property developer had in place a mortgage agreement with a well-known savings bank. Antonio and Silvia could spare the hassle of having to go through a mortgage negotiation. More importantly, the bank was committed to fund 100% of the property's value. (An unusual commitment; at the time, in the Spanish context, banks rarely risked mortgage loans over and above 80% of the property's price.) All that Antonio and Silvia needed to do now was to deposit a €6000 partial instalment. Once paid, they would then have three months to clear the transference of the mortgage paperwork and property titles with the savings bank. A final concern of Silvia was also skilfully attended to by the sales representative. Silvia was worried that the property had no parking space for residents. This is no mean requirement if one lives in the centre of Madrid. But the sales rep had an answer to that too. The firm was developing another property with parking spaces nearby. There were some vacant parking allotments there so it would not be a problem to buy the allotment in that development. It all seemed easy and expedient.

Upon leaving the property we walked to a nearby bar. Antonio was aflame with enthusiasm. 'This is our flat, Silvia! This is the flat we were looking for!' Silvia, on the other hand, was slightly nervous. She too liked the flat but felt that Antonio's enthusiasm was carrying her away. They constantly turned to me with questions: did you like the flat?, what would you do in our place?, do you think we are crazy? We decided (I was part of the decision-making team by now) to think through our options over lunch.

The sales rep had imprinted our visit throughout with a sense of urgency and high tempo. She told us about the imminent visit by a potential buyer from Bilbao; of the number of times the sale fell through in the last minute; she insistently reminded us that this was the last available flat with balconies to the square; and spent some time describing in detail the expediency with which the mortgage could be set up. On all accounts, therefore, this was a hot property.

We were all very excited. Silvia got a notebook and started drafting numbers. With Antonio's help, they started modelling a variety of scenarios: we buy the flat but must leave for England next year; therefore, we rent it; how much do you think we can rent it for? Alternatively, Antonio commutes back and forth between England and Spain: what would our expenses be?, and our joint earnings? And what about the interest rates? What if they go up? How much of a rise in interest rates can we afford?

Over dessert, Antonio calls his father and tells him about the flat and the range of financial scenarios they have come up with. Silvia does likewise with her mum. Finally, they decide to make another appointment to visit the flat one more time that very evening, and ask Antonio's parents, who live in Madrid, to come along.

That evening they fall in love with the flat again. Antonio's parents are equally impressed. They have made-up their minds. They call the sales rep and let her know that they are on their way to deposit an instalment. Silvia catches Antonio's eye. She is enthralled and befuddled. She can't believe what just happened. It all happened so quickly: in a day, in less than a day; in fact, not even ten hours. Ten hours: the time-compression of hope.

Apocalypse

How fast is fast – how long does it take to decide to buy a flat? What is the *durée* of hope?

Reinhard Koselleck has argued that the time of modernity is an accelerated time, heir to the Christian apocalypse (Koselleck 2003 [2000]). In the apocalyptic imaginary of the first Christians, the time of the annunciation was to be revealed by the abridgement of temporal experience. It was thought that the temporality of the world would rush-up as it approached its end. Christians would know when the world was coming to an end because they would experience an intra-temporalisation of waiting and hope. Things wished-for would happen more often, more quickly.

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, however, this infolding of time underwent a process of secularisation, when the temporal rhythm of apocalyptic experience was internalised as historical and 'mundane' knowledge (Koselleck 2003 [2000]: 47). In Koselleck's own words, 'the ancient aspiration of a world that comes to an end through episodic shortenings of time – an aspiration that was hoped for, awaited or even feared in an apocalyptic register – became with the Enlightenment a worldling and intra-experiential concept.' (Koselleck 2003 [2000]: 59, my translation) Hope became mundane, something to attach one's temporal bearings to; a household name for apocalypse.

The agony of the apocalyptic appears therefore entangled in the constitution of the modern subject as an existential site of, at once, hope and expectation (cf. Laín Entralgo 1957). The sensorial and experiential rhythms of secular life oscillate between presages of urgency and rather more calm visions of social imagination and prognosis.

We find an exemplary case of such rhythm of prognosis and anxiety in the variety of financial futures that Antonio and Silvia modelled for their own use in the ethnography above. Antonio and Silvia 'intra-temporalised' their present circumstances by staging a 'discount' on a variety of mortgage futures: what would happen if property prices collapse, if interest rates rise, if rents become dearer? If they leave for England, if Antonio leaves but Silvia stays behind, if they were to rent the flat? All such models and scenarios were in turned 'accelerated' by the circumstances of the actual sale: it was a miracle that the apartment remained unsold; a reservation had been made on it but the sale fell through in the last minute; and yet the menace of potential and very interested buyers lurked from all over the country (from Valencia, from Bilbao). The amorphous and not-quite-intelligible shadow of the property market's demand curve pressed against Antonio and Silvia's fragile purchasing position. Moreover, Silvia's opportunity to take advantage from the tax-incentivised account was running-up. They had a few months left to make a call. Altogether it therefore urged them to decide whether this was a flat they could and wanted to buy, indeed, if they could buy it now, on the spot, without delay. The financial grounds for the decision were clear and tailor-made: the property's mortgage had already been secured by the developer; it was guaranteed and secured for 100% of the price; and would therefore carry no legal or administrative fees. No burdens, no complicated intermediations. It was all easy and expedient. All that

Antonio and Silvia felt was pressure and urgency. The property world seemed to thrust upon them an apocalyptic revelation.

Conspiracy

In the months that followed it all proved anything but easy and expedient. The second they sat down with the savings bank to clear the mortgage paperwork they found out that almost everything they had been told was false. Neither the mortgage was secured and guaranteed for 100% of the property's price, nor they had three months to effect the transference of entitlements, nor there existed the possibility for Antonio and Silvia to buy a parking space in a nearby building. Moreover, it turned out that the sales rep had actually lied to them about the property's size, deliberately confounding 'constructed sq. metres' for 'usable metres'.

Within a week of having deposited the partial instalment, they requested an appointment with the property developing firm's managing director. Antonio and Silvia invited me to join them at the meeting. We were in for a treat. At the meeting, the director was joined by the sales representative who broke the deal with Antonio and Silvia. He listened carefully to Antonio and Silvia's angry declamation, and briefly added: 'You are right. You have been misled and lied to. But I am afraid we are not responsible. If there is someone you should sue or take to court, that's this young lady sitting here next to me [pointing to the sales representative].'

We left the office in shock. The last thing we would have imagined was the firm acknowledging their negligence and yet exonerating themselves and individuating the blame onto the sales representative. But that was only the beginning. Things took yet a further complication when Antonio asked the director about some minor repair work, as well as some unfinished construction work he had observed when walking around the building's common premises. The director here too evaded responsibilities. He told us that the property developing firm had in fact bought the property from another firm specialized in refurbishments. Civil responsibility owed to construction work, then, fell on the refurbishment firm, not them.

During the weeks that followed, Antonio and Silvia were overwhelmed by the collective imagination of a mortgage society that Antonio described as a 'juridical monster': 'Never in my life', he told me, 'have I experienced this sense of helplessness. I feel utterly vulnerable; as if the only way to exercise my sense of citizenship demands my studying law.' Indeed, from that moment on Antonio and Silvia invested considerable effort and time in understanding the juridical nature of the relationships linking them to a diversity of real estate agents and organisations: the property developer, the refurbishing company, the real estate broker that posted the advert on the Internet, surveyors, the savings bank, the Inland Revenue, etc. An indication of the very complex nature of this juridical institutional landscape is the discovery, well into the negotiations with the savings bank for the transfer of the mortgage titles, that the actual owner of the building from whom they were buying the flat was neither the property developing firm nor the specialized refurbishment company, but a third corporation which had been legally constituted by the property developer for the sake exclusively of transferring the property titles. It all seemed so complicated that Antonio and Silvia decided to get in touch with the legal department at Madrid's City Council Housing Division. In order to secure Antonio and Silvia's legal empowerment throughout the sale, the lawyers of the Housing Division advised them to institute *juridical relations* every time they communicated or interacted with any of the actors in the process. Henceforth, Antonio and Silvia documented every conversation, meeting or email exchange they had with the refurbishment company and property developer, transcribed it and produced an affidavit. They then sent copies of the legal document to the parties involved. This required of them a considerable investment of time: Antonio, Silvia and Antonio's father spent hours surfing the Internet, reading legal documents, legislations, consumer forums, and generally familiarising themselves with the language and rhetoric of the legal profession, identifying points of reference that might help them develop and make robust their own 'juridical reason'.

Antonio and Silvia finally signed the transfer of property titles three months after paying the instalment, although their negotiations with the bank were not exempt, either, of a few 'tactical concessions', as Antonio called them. For a couple of days the bank's branch director had 'gently' suggested Antonio that their request for a full 100% mortgage might be eased if they 'expressed indications of their fidelity' to the bank, such as by further contracting a variety of financial products, including a house and life insurances and a couple of credit cards. Antonio quickly learned that the play of such 'tactical fidelity' was necessary because it facilitated approval by the branch's director of the use of mortgage borrowing to finance other non-housing consumption (such as some of the furniture Antonio and Silvia wanted for the flat). (Such use of mortgages for non-housing consumption is known as 'mortgage equity withdrawal'; see Cook et al. 2009.)

The moment Antonio and Silvia registered their communications with the various actors of the real estate landscape in legal form, in the manner advised to them by the Council's legal team, things started to change: the refurbishment firm sent a construction squad to repair the faults in the common premises that Antonio spotted early in the process; and the property developer designated a liaison officer whose sole job was to make sure that Antonio and Silvia encountered no further obstacles on their mortgage negotiations. Notwithstanding, the experience proved, in Antonio's turn-of-phrase, a lesson in 'conspiratorial law':

> You suddenly realise there is a world out there that not only you don't understand, but that it organises itself so you cannot understand it. You find out that your local savings bank branch director is close friends with the property developing firm's management director; they talk about you and your mortgage behind your back; you wonder whether they might be delaying your paperwork so that the three-month period goes by and, should you desire to set the mortgage with another bank, you run out of time to do so. So you find yourself locked into a mortgage scenario, like it or not. If you want to buy the flat – and you don't want to lose the instalment you have already deposited – you are therefore locked into accepting their financial conditions. Your own capacity to reason through all this has a limit. There is a point at which you bump into a wall of conspiratorial law: an outside world that speaks a language you don't understand, that is well above you, and that leaves you feeling utterly vulnerable. This is a lot of money we are talking about – your money!! – and it suddenly creeps on you the realisation that these people can corner you, they can bound you and do with your money whatever they please.

What Antonio calls 'conspiratorial law', the threshold or limit where reason confronts its own intelligibility – here, a limit-case represented by the social imagination of 'the law' as interpretive excess – is an example of what George Marcus has called 'paranoia within reason' (Marcus 1999). In Marcus' argument, the terms of construction of the paranoid style are provided for by the everyday and the commonsensical, which sublimate what the paranoid means for contemporary rationality. In this context, paranoid reason is not so much 'out-of-joint' vis-à-vis reality as part-and-parcel of our own historical and social time.

We find ourselves, then, amidst a new type of political space and rational subjectivity. Antonio and Silvia's case offers a first impression: on the one hand, a state of law defined by conspiratorial politics; on the other hand, an accelerated paranoid reason at the threshold of its own intelligibility. They both contribute to the shaping of the property market in Madrid as a polis 'in construction': skewed, muddled, over-determined by juridical reason and technique, by an apparatus of legal-financial extremeness. The urban sublime as placeholder for a mortgaged subject.

'In construction'

> *Saturday, 23 September 2006*. I meet Luna to join her visiting some flats. She is thinking of buying a flat in the vicinity of Tribunal-Noviciado-Callao. Luna opened a 'cuenta vivienda' [a tax-incentivised bank account, like Silvia's above] four years ago. Time is running-up and if she is to avoid losing her tax-savings she needs to buy a flat before the end of the year. Luna is critical of the tax-incentivised account model: 'It's a win-win model for everyone but young people', she says. 'If you think about it, they all win but us: banks, property developers, the Council. They keep your money for four years, giving it back to you under the condition, of course, that you re-invest it in their own business.'

We take a walk around the neighbourhood. 'Not long ago,' she says 'some streets around here were infamous for being home to prostitutes and drug addicts. I don't think it ever really got dangerous – though it is true it wasn't the most edifying of environments.' A few days back, however, I saw on TV news of a murder at Plaza de Santa María de Soledad Torres Acosta, the very heart of the neighbourhood where Luna is intent in buying a flat. I mention the episode to her. She knows about it, she too saw the news. 'I did say it didn't have the most edifying of environments. Notwithstanding, there have been some changes. Prostitutes and *camellos* [drug sellers] have moved a couple of streets up, to Desengaño Street. You'll find they have concentrated in one area – I guess this way it's easier to police them. Jesús and Pedro [two friends of Luna] told me that local residents have joined forces and take to the streets a couple of evenings a week. They march to protest against the local drug economy. They have also posted videos on the Internet. People are angry about conspicuous expenditure on urban works for the Olympics and yet the abandonment of basic local services. You see, this has traditionally been a bohemian, progressive and liberal neighbourhood.' I ask Luna what she means by that. 'Well, I mean the neighbourhood is populated by unassuming and generally cool people. It has very much of a chill-out ambience. But traditional, too – in the sense that it is un-suburban, if you know what I mean: there are still plenty of traditional shops around here, bakeries, newspaper kiosks, haberdasheries; there are plenty of places you can still go for an appetiser at midday on Saturday. People like to spend time out on the streets. Unlike La Moraleja or Las Rozas [suburban residential neighbourhoods], where they would never take to the streets – there is no ‘street culture’ there. Yep, I think that’s the difference: there is street culture here, like in the old Republican times, ‘taking culture out to the streets’…

I am amused by Luna’s reference to Republican times and ask her whether she means it seriously. ‘Well, there’s a politics of the street, sure there is. You do not find *botellones* [large gatherings of youngsters drinking openly in the streets] in Salamanca [traditionally, Madrid’s upmarket neighbourhood]. It’s way smarter there. Traditional wealth, I’d even say aristocratic wealth. You can even trace their names and genealogies back to the winners of the Civil War. There are families who count their patrimony in houses and flats. Real high society ‘in construction’ (*alta sociedad en construcción*) [laughs].’ (Luna refers to social class and wealth being symbolized by property ownership; by owning assets in ‘construction’, i.e. in real estate.)

Re-enter the mortgaged *polis*: an urban condition whose project transpires a complex of political corruption, millenarian history and capitalism, and the experience and predicament of uncertainty and suspension – expressed in stories about mortgage negotiations and property exchanges; historicist reflections about Spain’s past, with special reference to the civil war and Franco’s dictatorship; and conspiracy theories relating to the moral pedigree of the corporate and political establishments.

What does it mean to live in democracy? How is democratic conviviality *built*? Cornelius Castoriadis once noted that democracy is the only form of government that is self-limiting and, as such, self-instituting. For Castoriadis, democracy is a ‘tragic regime’ because it wholly depends on its self-regeneration: true democracy requires the on-going revision of its constituent principles, a revision that demands the participation of all. Thus the tragedy, because every regenerative impulse pushes us to our limits, inviting us to tilt into the abyss, or to renew our engagements with the convivial (Castoriadis 2002 [1999]-b: 150-151).

In her rush towards the abyss, the *polis* confronts a space of political abeyance and suspension, an interstice of possibilities and future-abilities, where the city reinvents and regenerates its very project, or tumbles and falls ‘in ruins’, carried away by arrogance and violence, by *húbris* (Castoriadis 2002 [1999]-a: 25) In the ethnography, we have seen, the repertoire of possibilities took a credit expression: the politics of the city resurrects through mortgage relations and projections. We may say that the relational imagination of politics in Madrid is constituted and organised in terms of a *mortgage reason*: a compendium of reasons and arguments that take stock of the social and political relations through which the city emerges as a placeholder for the on-going ‘construction’ of urban conviviality and citizenship.

In people’s talk about Madrid’s urban geography and construction landscape we find a city shaped by malleable and movable contours: tax-incentivised accounts and other financial instruments that discount and speed-up the temporality of the city; wealth that moves selectively upscale, or that holds entire populations in suspension and uncertainty; financial and juridical actors, whose technical machinery of intervention in the urban landscape induces incomprehension and vulnerability. The city emerges as a gigantic political trickster whose theatrical scaffolding both constructs and confounds the real estate landscape of (the) capital.

The process of 'construction' reveals, moreover, our very residency in an apocalyptic condition. The city evinces an exhilaration of times abridged: temporal units that rush towards agonistic ends. The property form of the city would therefore appear a paradigmatic symbol of our acccelerationist times, a sign of capitalism's drive for self-annihilation, a sense of historical velocity aiming for its own eviction (Moreno 2013).

Yet the ethnography shows that 'in construction' the city offers also a space for hope and imagination. Amidst its construction and destruction, production and consumption, life in the city is lived 'on credit', under the spell of a mortgage condition. The point echoes Slavoj Žižek's remark about the significance of the notion to 'live on credit': we live 'on credit' when we open up a space between ourselves and our projects; thus, when we make a decision to live beyond the normative model (Žižek 2004: 126-127). In this context, the *polis* whose semblance remains forever 'in construction', whose social relationships interfold and reproduce in accordance with mortgage and credit projections, such a political imago may be said to be built, also, upon the premises of critical thought.

Thus, 'in construction', Luna and her soon-to-be neighbours find a place for the city as a republican safe-haven[1], a mortgaged landscape, but one whose cultural resources are not determined by '*alta sociedad en construcción*', by the forces of real estate capital accumulation. Rather, they draw on a very different urban praxis, where the conditions of possibility of the mortgaged subject – of 'indebted man' – are not circumscribed to property ownership, to his or her liabilities as a financial actor, but are 'taken out to the streets', are set in circulation out and about the city, and in this capacity are traversed by powerful memories: for example, of the Civil War and Franco's dictatorship, or the economic geography linking aristocratic wealth and suburban growth, or simply of youngsters drinking festively in the open air. This politics 'in construction' contrasts starkly with the *politics of representation* exemplified by the members of parliament whose homes supporters of *escraches* stalked. I noted in the introduction how *escraches* 'expropriated' the city's rhythms of space-time occupation, and how in this guise they opened-up a space for a different expression of political justice (cf. De la Cadena 2010). Thus, the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (Mortgage Victims' Platform) slogan throughout this time has been '*sí se puede*' (yes, it is possible), whose affirmative stance conveys that even amidst the accelerationist, apocalyptic and conspiratorial, there is still space within construction (within the property market) for a different type of construction.

Mortgage *durée* displaces therefore the question of debt from the individual to the city, from the order of financial obligation and guilt to a much wider and much more complex urban and political history and ontology. It re-describes the spaces and times and objects and practices – the 'bakeries, newspaper kiosks, haberdasheries… [the] places you can still go for an appetiser at midday on Saturday', as Luna put it above – that still hold the city together as a source of relief and possibility. It delineates the contours of our political ruins, but in this ruinous circumstance, amidst the hubris, it opens-up a space for re-appropriation and renovation, for a politics 'in construction'.

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Notes

[1] Spanish republicanism, that is, whose imaginary goes back to the days of the Spanish Civil War: anti-monarchical, leaning towards anarchism, and at any rate to the left of the American democrat tradition.