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URBAN COSMOPOLITICS

AGENCEMENTS, ASSEMBLIES, ATMOSPHERES

EDITED BY ANDERS BLOK AND IGNACIO FARIÁS

Urban Cosmopolitics

Agencements, assemblies,
atmospheres

**Edited by Anders Blok and
Ignacio Farías**

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8 Matters of sense

Preoccupation in Madrid's popular assemblies movement

Adolfo Estalélla and Alberto Corsín Jiménez

INTRODUCTION

The rain took us by surprise when we were gathered in one of the weekly meetings in the open air held in the Cabestreros Plaza in Lavapiés, one of Madrid's central districts. The brief drizzle forced us to search for shelter and move under a nearby archway. When we tried to resume the meeting afterwards, the sound equipment we had been using was no longer available. Juan, a senior and experienced activist from Argentina, tried to intervene but his voice was so weak that it was barely audible to the dozens of people standing in a circle. Ana, at his side, started to repeat what he was saying, amplifying his voice for all of us. The gathering on that Saturday afternoon was one of the weekly meetings that the Popular Assembly of Lavapiés neighbourhood had been holding for almost six months by that time. It was one of the more than one hundred neighbourhood collectives (popular assemblies, *asambleas populares*) that sprang up all over Madrid after an encampment occupied the Puerta del Sol square on the 15th of May, 2011. It was the beginning of what has come to be known as 15M, the *Indignados* movement or the Spanish Occupy movement that would be a source of inspiration for the Occupy Wall Street mobilization that would emerge four months later in New York, in September 2011.

The introductory description evinces the problems that the assembly usually had in its open air installations for producing an adequate atmosphere for listening in the street. For more than two years, a collective composed of more than one hundred people was ambulating in the neighbourhood, holding meetings in the street during the whole week. The assembly made a strenuous effort to install its periodic gathering in the open air to discuss issues that mattered; yet inhabiting the street was always fraught with difficulties. In this chapter, we focus our description on the mundane practice of listening, paying attention to its places, infrastructures, and rhythms. Instead of taking for granted the political nature of the assembly, we take a step back and depart by suspending the self-declared political condition of the assemblies. Our aim is to explore what makes this public gathering a political object; we are interested in the political impulse that traverses this mode of urban dwelling. We focus our account on the practice of listening in the assembly and describe how the assembly engages with the city in a permanent state of awareness. Following this argument, we displace the common description

of the assembly as a consensual space for deliberative democracy to depict it as an urban organon oriented to sense the city. Our argument is that the assemblies put into practice what we call a politics of (pre)occupation, one that is characterized by an anticipation of the senses that is worked out in material practices of urban engagement.

The philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004) has produced one of the most elaborate explorations of the aesthetic and sensory condition of politics. A key notion of his work is what he designates as the *partage du sensible*. With this concept, he refers to the aesthetics distribution through which we experience our world, the *partage du sensible* is a partition that distributes legitimate and illegitimate modes of being in the world and establishes what can be said and heard and what cannot. Having ordered the world through this distribution, politics emerges when the partition is disrupted, when those previously expelled from politics take their stance: ‘politics is an activity of reconfiguration of that which is given in the sensible’ (Rancière and Panagia 2000: 115). Drawing on that conception, Rancière unveils a notion of politics that is not based on competing interests, a clash over different values or confrontations over representations of the world, but a conflict for competing worlds: ‘politics, rather than the exercise of power or the struggle for power, is the configuration of a specific world [. . .] not a world of competing interests or values but a world of competing worlds’ (Rancière 2011: 7).

Although uncommon, it is not difficult to move the line of argument over the aesthetics condition of politics to the cosmopolitical proposal of Isabelle Stengers (2005). Certainly we have learned from her that in our encounters with others in the world we are not only facing different worldviews but different worlds, we are not dealing with representations but with incommensurable worlds. Cosmopolitics urges us to escape from the relativist mono-naturalism that is inscribed in the idea of a shared world where different worldviews coexist. This has led us to forget that each world has its corresponding way of sensing, or following Rancière we may say that each world has its own distribution of the sensible. Airing a particular mode of listening, the 15M movement assemblies reassemble a different distribution of the sensible and our argument in this chapter contends that the political condition that assemblies enact in the city is effected when a new urban sensorium is brought into existence in their city dwelling.

Our account is based on intensive fieldwork across a number of assembly sites in Madrid in the districts of Lavapiés, Prosperidad, and Puerta del Sol. For almost 20 months, one of us was involved in the everyday practice of the assembly of Lavapiés, taking part in the organization of their weekly meetings, participating in the actions that took place all over the neighbourhood and sharing everyday life with them. The chapter is organized as follows. In the first section, we describe the Lavapiés Popular Assembly, paying attention to the organization of its activities, meeting methodology, and issues addressed in its urban dwelling. The 15M movement insisted on a particular mode of listening in their gatherings in the open air, so in the second section we depict the effort to condition a proper atmosphere for debate in the street and the transformation of the urban space that it involves. Following this line of argument, we describe the assembly as an urban organon

whose gatherings in the street are not only oriented to intervene through direct action or reach consensus through deliberation, they are intended to occupy the distribution of the sensible by assembling the sensory organon of its own politics. We then conclude our argument by contending that the democratic impulse of the assembly is not antagonist and not quite agonic either, but should be best described as ‘weary’.

THE ASSEMBLY

The encampment that was born in Puerta del Sol square on the 15th of May, 2011, lasted for four weeks. When it was dismantled in the middle of June 2011, one of us started to regularly attend the weekly gatherings of a large group of people involved in the 15M movement, held in the streets of Lavapiés. The neighbourhood was so close to Puerta del Sol that many of them had been involved in the encampment and remembered their experience with emotion. Adolfo just dropped by one Saturday afternoon in June, and very quickly got involved in the assembly for the next 20 months. At that time he was living in Lavapiés, one of Madrid’s old historic quarters and among its most vibrant multicultural wards (Pérez-Agote, Tejerina, and Barañano 2010). Full of young professionals and migrants, since the nineties the neighbourhood has been the preferred location of activist projects, from anarchist collectives to squatter initiatives strewn throughout the neighbourhood. The political character of Lavapiés was strikingly visible in the mix of participants in the public gatherings of the assembly, with a large number of young people coming from squatted buildings and others from anarchist collectives. They mixed with other participants without previous experience in activism, social movements, or political initiatives. Some of them in their late twenties, most of them in their late thirties and older, the composition of the assembly was diverse in age, balanced in gender, homogeneous in the educational formation (largely educated people) and very heterogeneous in the political experience of participants.

Assemblies like the one in Lavapiés became the form of organization of the 15M movement all over Spain since 2011, and their periodic gatherings in the street turned into its paradigmatic form of political expression in the city. The assembly of Lavapiés, like others we came across, followed a methodology produced during the encampment in Puerta del Sol that was aimed at ‘the recuperation of public space, and critical thought’¹. It included a sociology of roles, a praxis for conviviality, and a spatial, and cultural layout for the installation of the assemblies in the public urban space. The format insisted on a specific mode of listening that was called ‘active listening’ (*escucha activa*). It was described in the following terms in one of the manuals of methodology: ‘Two people with different ideas put their energy together to build something in common. From that moment, it is not my idea or yours anymore. The two ideas will together give birth to something else, something that neither you nor I knew. This is the reason that makes so necessary an active listening in which we are not just elaborating our reply’². The insistence on listening was part of a communicative and relational culture that involved

the use of a basic language of hand-signs, special care for the grammatical gender that promoted the use of both masculine and feminine (or a preference for the second), and the occasional presence of sign language translators. The assembly put great effort into unfolding the conditions for listening in the street so that anybody could take part: regular participants, people with impairments, strangers, and city dwellers of any condition. There was a general weekly gathering that was scheduled for Saturday morning or afternoon and held in the public space, in a location that varied among different squares, usually depending on weather conditions.

The assembly distributed its tasks into different working groups (*grupos de trabajo*) focused on topics like politics, education, housing, and migration. Each of them met regularly in the street to discuss the specific situation and problems of the neighbourhood. Three more groups (*comisiones*) were in charge of the organizational activities of the assembly, namely: communication, infrastructure, and *moderation*. The topics that assemblies undertook in different neighbourhoods mirrored in a very loose way the socio-economic structure and cultural and political character of the territory they inhabited. While the close neighbourhood of Austrias was focused on politics and cultural issues, the two main working groups in Lavapiés were devoted to housing and migration issues. The first was one of the main concerns for the 15M movement and it was especially worrisome in Lavapiés, whose working group on housing became prominent in the neighbourhood and beyond. It was dedicated to fighting against the frequent evictions in the neighbourhood, most of them of migrant families. Its interventions very often took the form of an insistent harassment of bank offices located in the neighbourhood: dozens of people periodically lent their presence in the offices to protest against the evictions the banks were going to execute. On other occasions, the façades of the offices appeared covered by posters denouncing evictions, windows were painted and cash machines attacked.

Lavapiés is a neighbourhood with one of the highest levels of migrant population in Madrid (Schmidt 2010). Young people from Senegal and other African countries populate its streets, a dense network of grocery and electronic shops is managed by Pakistani people, and a large number of clothes and accessory stores are in the hands of Chinese businessmen. In this context, the other most active strand of the assembly was the working group of migration and coexistence (*Grupo de migración y convivencia*), composed of some Spanish participants and other nationalities. It was mainly concerned by the common police harassment that young African migrants suffered in the street³. The group designed different strategies to fight what they called racist raids effected by the police, a sophisticated protocol of rapid response was developed and put in practice to make this issue visible. We refer to it later in more detail.

The contestation and rebuff of representative politics was a distinctive character of the 15M movement. The encampment in Puerta del Sol started after a large demonstration in Madrid and other cities of Spain under the motto, 'They don't represent us'. Months later it would take a different expression: 'Having assemblies we don't need government'. The challenge and rebuttal of representative

politics had important effects on the everyday operation of the assembly. Nobody could participate in the gatherings in representation of other collectives, associations, or institutions such as political parties and unions, for instance. Everybody was a bare participant and had to speak on her own behalf. According to this principle, the assembly had no representatives, and only occasionally did some people act as spokespersons with only the responsibility of communicating previous decisions of the assembly, they were not invested with the attribution to make consensus or speak on behalf of the assembly without previous debate and consultation.

LISTENING

During the first year, the working group of migration and coexistence was very active. In May 2012 they held a large meeting to discuss an incident that had happened a few days before. Two policemen were running after an illegal peddler in Lavapiés, when they caught up with the young African migrant in the street, they beat him, and the people witnessing the incident aired their reaction. Incapable of managing the situation, one of the police officers shot into the air in the middle of the mess. Everything was recorded by a witness with a mobile phone and uploaded quickly to the Internet. A meeting was organized a week later to discuss this issue, the following note from Adolfo's field diary describes it:

The working group of migration and coexistence is holding a meeting that is expected to be crowded because it aims to address the controversial issue of the arrest of a young immigrant that happened on Sunday, the aggression of several others and the police shooting into the air. It starts at 20.00 in the Plaza de la Corrala. We are surrounded by metal sheds that the council has placed there because the Madrid Bollywood festival is being celebrated this weekend, an event organized annually at this time.

I leave my apartment and just after 20.00 there are more than 20 people in the meeting, and the number of participants is rising slowly. Many of the participants are young Senegalese. Peak attendance is reached with at least 80 people, approximately 30 of them young black Senegalese. We met for more than two hours, until 22.30. The assembly is tedious and slow because when the Senegalese guys intervene, they are then translated into Wolof. Natalia has the megaphone and she is in charge of moderating the meeting. She asks for volunteers to take turns speaking and writing down the minutes. The orderly turn-taking is organized by Salma, a young migrant woman engaged to Lucas. Later, Raket notes down the personal data of people who want to file a collective complaint against the police. [. . .]

I sit on the floor next to Natalia. She has a small notebook with the agenda [. . .] There are three points for the meeting: to discuss the events of Sunday, to file a collective complaint against the police, and then to open a slot for other topics. I do not know if the subject about the demonstration that arises later on was already in the agenda or just popped up during the meeting.

Natalia begins by explaining that the meeting is an assembly of the migration group. She then asks a Senegalese guy to translate into Wolof and to explain the language of gestures used in the assembly.

[. . .]

The assembly is getting crowded with more and more people. On two occasions we are forced to open the circle to accommodate new attendants. Some young Senegalese guys arrive, some of them sit while others stay standing. Some stay for the whole assembly, while others leave.

In the back of the square, a group of black guys are sitting on the stairs. They start singing and it becomes difficult to listen to the gathering. An Italian woman from Cambalache [a squatted building] approaches the group to ask them, I guess, not to sing. It seems that they don't take the request very kindly.

Senegalese participants intervene on different occasions. They speak in Wolof and then are translated into Spanish, or they speak in Spanish and then they translate themselves. Somebody says that it is not necessary to make the translation (he intervenes in Spanish), that it is useless to translate into Wolof. Natalia insists on making the translation because some people cannot understand Spanish.

Several interventions show gratitude for the help received and call for working collectively to solve the problem of police harassment. They recognize that selling on the street is an illegal activity, but they say they do not have any other alternative to make a living. 'It is better doing that than other bad things', one of them says.

Another says that the boy was beaten and arrested just for being black, and not for being a *mantero* [illegal peddler]. He was not selling but just standing at the entrance of his house, and he received the beating for being black.

[. . .]

There are so many people that it is exciting at times. It is, however, tiring. At the end, the assembly finishes at about 22.30 with a round of applause. Remaining to be decided are the motto for the demonstration and the statement to be drafted. Some people want to do it right now and others prefer doing it the following morning. A quick survey is made and it is agreed to do it tomorrow. Raquel suggests that the Senegalese guys should help them, so that it is not the usual participants who write the communiqué.

(Fieldwork Diary, 30 May 2012)

The assembly ended up with a consensus to organize a demonstration against police brutality. A public statement composed of three different pieces of text with diverse styles was written afterwards. Singularly, the demonstration that happened weeks later was crowded with immigrant people. It was one of the few occasions in which they had the opportunity to take part in a demonstration, because it is prohibited for immigrants without a legal residence permit to take part in political events like protests.

Certainly, the gathering of the migration and coexistence working group that day was exceptional, rarely were there so many migrants in the meeting, and it

was exceptional to need a translation in the gatherings. However, it was not the first time, in other meetings there were two interpreters for English, and during the first weeks there were sign language interpreters for deaf people in the weekly general meeting. The effort to provide the conditions to allow anybody to talk was a common feature of open air gatherings. It was not unusual that passers-by would join the assembly and intervene, on one occasion it was a woman that skipped the waiting list to complain about personal housing problems. Another time, the gathering listened to a group of four teachers that came to explain the call for demonstrations that they were organizing to protest against recent cuts. Whether formally scheduled or improvised interventions, the assembly tried to remain open and was intended to create the atmosphere for listening to anyone. With every installation in the open air, the assembly reworked the condition of the street, interrupting its harsh pace, and breaking the correlated noise of the city.

In its installations in the street, the circle that is drawn by people sitting or standing opens a space for a precise mode of talking: the turn has to be requested, a certain style of language must be used (in relation to grammatical gender for instance), an order dictated by the agenda is imposed and respecting a certain rhythm is obligatory. In this sense, assemblies destabilize some of the cultural conventions that have guided etiquette between strangers in urban public spaces since the nineteenth century, such as the right to be left alone or the right to silence in public (Sennett, 1977). Erving Goffman (1971) provided empirical evidence of this practice describing how strangers treat others with civil inattention in the public space, demonstrating that they are aware of one another without imposing on each other. The public gathering of the assembly airs a different condition for the public space, one that grants the right to address any stranger within the assembly's own atmosphere, a condition that is enacted by those actively listening.

The western notion of politics has been constructed for centuries around the practice of speech. Language is what makes humans different from animals, a *zoon politikon* in Aristotelian terms. Language is the central instrument for a notion of politics very often focused on deliberation. Despite the relevance granted to talk in our political imagination, listening has been diminished by the political theory as a relevant political practice. Theorist Benjamin Barber (2003) has argued that a strong democracy is only possible when listening is granted political relevance: 'The adversary system [. . .] puts a premium on speaking and a penalty on listening [. . .] In fact, speech in adversary system is a form of aggression [. . .] It is the war of all against all carried on by other means' (Barber 2003: 175). While his comment is valuable for highlighting the political value of listening, it is not completely accurate. The development of liberal democracies over the last two centuries has run parallel to the construction of architectures that locate representative politics: parliaments. Their history can be described as an effort to unfold the visual and acoustic conditions of politics (Schwartz 2005). The chamber of the British House of Commons is described by Paulo Tavares (2008) as an example of 'architectural speech-machineries where air works as the medium that guarantees the voice of rhetoric and provides the adequate climate conditions for one to wait while listening to the others' (para. 2). His description of

the British Parliament follows the conceptualization that Peter Sloterdijk (2005) makes of democracy by saying that it is an exercise of producing the atmosphere that sets out the conditions for us to live in common. The representative architectures of parliaments are thus sensory chambers that isolate the political atmospheres which allow those gathered to see and hear each other (Parkinson 2012). Perhaps listening has not received much attention in political analysis because it is a responsibility that in our political systems has been delegated to these docile and silent architectures.

Travelling from place to place, the Lavapiés assembly had to arrange in each meeting its own atmosphere. Even when the technologies used were simple, it was usually difficult to deploy them. Very often, the assembly relied on other activist projects and political collectives: it borrowed the amplifier, microphone, and loudspeaker from two squatted centres it had close relationships with, or from an anarchist collective and union. However, when the equipment was borrowed, putting all the pieces together was a nightmare. Carrying around the assembly's own infrastructure was a difficult task, but this was not the only challenge of occupying the street during the meetings; on several occasions, the assembly clashed with police officers over the need for specific municipal authorization to use sound equipment in the street. Competing with the street noise, overcoming legal regulations, and calming down the potential disorder that threatened to shut down the gathering at any time, the assembly produced its own distinctive soundscape (Smith 1994), different from that of the demonstrations, rallies and *caceroladas* (Rodríguez Giralt et al. 2010). Out in the street, the assembly had to carry around its own infrastructures and rework the space it occupied: the assembly had to weather its own sensory atmosphere.

We know from the sociology of music that listening has been deeply transformed over centuries. In the mid-eighteenth century, Parisian opera attendees were rarely attentive to the spectacle, they were loud, noisy, and busy with their own affairs, but a century later the audience listened attentively to the musical event (Johnson 1994). Materialist approaches to musical taste have evinced the sophisticated spatial and material arrangements that listening to music requires: 'The ability to listen is not so much a personal quality as the end result of having reflexively made the necessary time and space' (Hennion 2001: 4). The assembly listening we have described is thus far from an individual activity, a personal skill, or a subjective experience, certainly it involves all of that but it is something else. The assembly listening is the effect of gathering persons, bearing infrastructures, practising methodologies, making place, and rhyming rhythms. The assembly thus appears as a heterogeneous assemblage that brings into existence its own sense for listening.

SENSORY ORGANON

A few days before the described meeting took place, Adolfo travelled outside Madrid to his village. Upon arrival, he received a text message from Natalia: 'Neighbours: we have to meet today in Sol square at 19.00 in the Agora Sol

[meeting]! We will present a summary [of the work of the assembly] and denounce what has happened today! See you in Sol [square]!’ He immediately phoned back to hear the whole story about the clash with the police. Although not present, Natalia was able to follow everything on her mobile phone because there were members of the assembly narrating the incident and sending messages (using the Whatsapp message system). A rapid response was prompted in both Facebook and Twitter: ‘Someone has informed me that there has been a mess in Cabestreros [square]’; another one adds: ‘it seems that a policeman has fired two shots into the air’; and Ana texts from her Blackberry: ‘One hour ago there has been a racist raid in Lavapiés, police have shot into the air while some children were playing in the street [. . .] see you at 19.00 in the general meeting at Sol’ (Fieldwork diary, 27 May 2012). The quick reaction that day was common against this kind of police interventions. The working group of migration and coexistence had designed a protocol at the end of 2011 for rapid response to police raids in the neighbourhood, intended to quickly mobilize a collective reaction. There was a list of mobile phone contacts and a rule according to which anyone should send two text messages to assigned contacts to make the alert travel; as part of the effort to mobilize people in the street, public messages were usually posted in Facebook and Twitter too. The alert usually ended with a group of people gathering in the street and shouting at the police: ‘No human being is illegal’.

This and the former ethnographic description of the Lavapiés 15M assembly shed light onto two distinctive modalities of urban occupation: through forms of direct action that take the shape of rapid response gatherings, and through processes of slow debate in open air meetings. The reaction to the police seizure of the young migrants in the street exemplifies what Jeff Juris (2012) has called the logic of aggregation that characterizes the use of digital technologies deployed in the Occupy movement. He describes with this notion an action framework ‘that involves the viral flow of information and subsequent aggregations of large numbers of individuals in concrete physical spaces’ (Juris 2012: 266). John Postill (2014) has provided evidence of this viral form of politics in the 15M movement in descriptions of the explosive propagation of media content, while other commentators have given accounts of the swarm-like forms of organization based on the use of digital technologies in the 15M movement (Peña-Lopez et al. 2014) and the relevance of digital technologies in the coordination of actions (Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014). While this literature has foregrounded the interplay between digital technologies and the repertory of action, a different strand of work has focused its analysis in the organizational form and procedural protocols of meetings and gatherings of the Occupy movement. Maple Razsa and Andrej Kurnik (2012) provide a detailed account of the relevance of small workshops in the Occupy movement in Ljubjana (Slovenia) that contrast with Occupy Wall Street in New York, whose organization and decision-taking method relied on a large assembly. Their account led them to characterize the first as a form of direct action democracy while others have referred to Occupy as characterized by a form of prefigurative politics (Graeber 2011). Following this line of reasoning and for the Spanish case, the 15M movement gatherings have been interpreted as spaces of

deliberative democracy (Botellas-Ordinas et al. 2011) characterized by horizontal decision-making methods (Maeckelbergh 2012).

Our ethnographic vignettes explore a different description of the incorporation of digital technologies and infrastructures in the assembly. We have tried to demonstrate how the assembly may be understood as more than just a meeting for deliberation or a repertoire of direct action: a heterogeneous collective spread all around the neighbourhood wireframed by digital infrastructure, a collective that gathers in the open air with different rhythms while also attentive to what happens in the city. The assembly reveals in its bare urban dwelling the heterogeneous effort to bring to life issues that matter: gathering people in the street to debate or demonstrate, narrating in minutes taken during the meetings, urgently referring through digital infrastructures unanticipated events, intervening in the street through spatial layouts, and infrastructurally refurbishing the public space. This form of engaging with the city resonates with the recent conceptualization of what Noortje Marres (2012) has called material publics, a notion aimed at describing forms of public participation characterized by modes of material engagements. The notion intends to account for the political condition of public participation that flourishes outside the conventional locus of politics, it tries to tackle the role of objects in politics without reducing them to just instruments or means. The notion of material publics heavily draws on the work of the American pragmatist philosophers John Dewey and Walter Lippmann. The emergence of publics is for Dewey deeply connected to the production of ‘problematic situations’, in his own words publics and their problems are concomitant process: ‘the process of the specification of issues and the organization of actors into issue assemblages go hand in hand. Here, the composition of the public [. . .] must be understood as partly the outcome of, and as something that is at stake in, the process of issue articulation’ (Marres 2012: 53).

Material publics are codified through the notion of politics of participation, a trope that has been extensively mobilized to think of the political engagement of citizens in the contemporary. Yet participation, as we have mentioned, is far from being the vocabulary through which the assembly thinks of its work. We have referred and described elsewhere how taking part in the assembly involves a particular mode of dwelling in the city that we have characterized by the figure of the neighbour (Corsín Jiménez and Estalella 2013). The imbrication of digital infrastructures in the everyday practices of participants is perhaps a paradigmatic example of this mode of being-in-the-neighbourhood. The assembly’s work may be described as the outcome of the incorporation of very specific and small practices into the everyday dwelling that lead participants to be aware of what happens in the city. It resembles the forms of living experiment described by Noortje Marres (2009), where the public participation of people concerned by the environment takes the form of material practices incorporated in their everyday life. But digital infrastructures are just one of many strategies that the assembly mobilizes to be aware and listen (both metaphorically and literally) to the neighbourhood. It happened when a waitress from a cooperative restaurant was fired and her case was brought by a participant to a working group that patiently paid attention to the

issue. It happened again with a group of Pakistani migrants who were fired, or when a woman abruptly intervened in a meeting to request help because her flat had been squatted. During the first two years, there were proposals aimed at sounding the different political initiatives in the neighbourhood, and the assembly seemed eager to have a general view of the ongoing political work to create spaces of coordination among them. Different to the rapid aggregation in the street and the slow deliberative communication in the square, the assembly occupation of the public space is characterized by an aware preoccupation with the state of the city.

More than articulated by the idea of participation, we intend to characterize the assembly by a politics of (pre)occupation. The notion of preoccupation echoes the invocation regularly made at assemblies about caring for the city, at the same time as it enacts an orientation towards uncertainty and unknowability, a concern for bringing unforeseen issues into life. We may therefore think of this anticipatory awareness as a sort of occupation of, and a preoccupation for, the city in advance.

Assemblies are not bootstrapped by thematic issues or topics. The harassment that migrants have traditionally been subjected to in public space, or the increasing number of evictions in Lavapiés, have become central concerns for the assembly. But they are by no means the only ones. The assembly's openness at embracing and endorsing new causes displays a political hospitality that goes well beyond narrowly conceived matters of concern or public issues. The assembly dismantles the homology so commonly established between issues and publics when thinking of political participation (Marres 2012). At the assembly, participants are brought together not by a common problem but by a common sense: an attentive awareness to what happens in the city, a state-of-being that takes the form of an anticipatory preoccupation with city life.

Thus understood, the politics of preoccupation displaces the locus of political action as we have come to think of it. Preoccupation signals the moment when politics is tensed in anticipation of its 'public' appearance. This is a politics that surfaces in anticipation of its becoming a matter of concern, before issues are aired in public and streets are occupied. A politics of preoccupation. The preoccupation of the assembly describes therefore the efforts invested in anticipating issues that remain unknown and problems that are not even guessed, a hopeful expectation that thrusts the assembly into a readiness towards the not-yet. Such is the assembly's common sense: a prognosis that emerges from its material navigation of everyday urban affairs. The assembly's preoccupation is not a concern proper (a preoccupation) but a mode of engaging with the city in a state of awareness for what is yet to come.

The attentive awareness of the assembly resonates with the cosmopolitical proposal of Isabelle Stengers, she poses a challenge for the construction of a different form of politics that has to take into account the proliferation of worlds, and not only the representations of them: 'How can we present a proposal intended not to say what is, or what ought to be, but to provoke thought, a proposal that requires no other verification than the way in which it is able to 'slow down' reasoning and create an opportunity to arouse a slightly different awareness of the problems and situations mobilizing us?' (Stengers 2005: 994). The reference to

the necessary awareness to slow down and make space for a different politics highlights a particular dimension of any cosmopolitical project. We know that Stengers' proposal evinces that when encountering others we are not only dealing with different worldviews but with different worlds. Each of these worlds has a particular mode of seeing, hearing, and tasting the world, we may say that each of them senses its own world in a particular way or, drawing in the vocabulary of Jacques Rancière, that for each world we have a distribution of the sensible. Responding to the police raids or gathering to discuss events, sounding activist initiatives, and listening to individual problems, the assembly not only tries to make sense of the world in its gatherings but it is concerned with how to sense the world, how to assemble its own regime of perceptibility (Murphy 2006), or more precisely, which world to bring into existence by sensing it.

Bruno Latour (2004a) has tirelessly insisted on the heterogeneous entities that take part in politics and the ontological work that goes with them: before a thing is granted existence, a concern is usually brought into existence. Yet at any moment a matter of fact turns into a matter of concern, a controversial issue is brought into existence where everything was solid. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) has added a gesture of care to this approach by suggesting that we should take into account the attachments and affective dimension of gathering concerns, in order to recognize that care matters. We point here to something different: before a concern comes (in)to matter or an issue is brought into life, a thing has to be sensed; that is, before a matter of concern is brought into existence through a gathering, a matter of sense needs always to be assembled. Very often the assemblies of the 15M have been thought of as a situated collective whose main objective is to reach consensus. We have tried to reconstruct here a description of the assembly as a collective whose effort is put into gathering a different form of *consensus*, understood not just as a common agreement on issues or a common construction of problems but a common sense, as the etymological origin of the word *con-sensus* indicates: feeling together. That way, the gatherings in the street of the 15M movement seem to occupy something more than the public space, they preoccupy the distribution of the sensible by assembling the sensory organon of its own politics. In its sensory engagement with the city, this urban sensorium has a notorious effect: slowing down the pace of politics. In the next section, we pay attention to the tardy path that the assembly brings to politics to conclude our argument.

WEARY POLITICS

Out in the street, the assembly installation tried always to be open to anybody and the presence of strangers was common: a passer-by, the friend of a friend, a newcomer, or a completely unknown person. Not infrequently, the meetings were interrupted by drunkards and people who tried to speak out of turn, the rhythm of the gathering was broken down on these occasions. Isabelle Stengers (2005) suggests that the optimal figure for slowing down politics is the idiot, the one who avoids participating in any decision, the one who does not even care and prefers to be left aside. The idiot in the 15M assemblies is not someone who stubbornly

avoids taking part, but someone who honours the original etymological root of the word: a person who did not speak Greek language. Certainly, the assembly of the migration and coexistence group was populated in our description by many who did not speak the language, but we are not intending to make a literal reading. For many assembly participants it was the first time that they took part in activist projects and political initiatives, while for experienced activists it was one more political initiative in their ample personal experience. For all of them, the assembly was a learning space to collectively relearn how to do politics, as many activists acknowledged on different occasions. Those slowing down the pace of politics are not disinterested parties, like Stengers' idiot, neither are they an affected community defined by a concrete problem, nor a public clearly delimited by a particular issue. Those taking part in the assembly are not gathered around a specific issue but concerned with how to be assembled, learning to engage with the city in new ways; and the only way to do it is by slowing down the pace.

Learning makes the assembly take a unhurried pace and it was explicitly highlighted in a common motto of the 15M movement: 'we move slowly because we're going far' (*Vamos despacio porque vamos lejos*). This requires a particular mode of relationality to others that was highlighted in its methodology: 'Patience and respect. Everybody [Tod@s⁴] has very interesting things to contribute, yet we must listen to everybody if we want to be listened to; that way we will improve and we will elaborate a more clear opinion. Not everybody has the same conviction and determination when speaking in public, but this is not a reason to discard other's opinions'⁵. The slowness we are referring is not a procedural phlegm or strategic delay, it is not the effect of elusive consensus or impossible agreements. The slowness to which we are referring is the result of making a place for new presences. The strangers had a singular effect in the assembly: being out of it, they turned out to be part of it by their presence in the meetings. The stranger has traditionally been an ambivalent urban persona that Georg Simmel (1950) described as 'close to us . . . he is far from us. Between nearness and distance, there arises a specific tension' (1950: 407). Her presence endows the meeting with an experimental condition when the stranger becomes a source for the unexpected in the middle of a periodic repetition (Rheinberger 1997). And so the incorporation of these newcomers forced the assembly to a constant mending in its ambulatory itinerary. The assembly was always reconfiguring its own limits: it modified its tempo and composition and reconstituted its sensory atmosphere with the incorporation of strangers.

We have tried to highlight in our account that the assembly should not only be understood as a space for deliberative democracy or a collective for building consensus. The assembly certainly overcomes the consensual orientation that Chantal Mouffe (2005) has criticized in the contemporary liberal politics that equates consensus to the suppression of conflict, cancelling the agonistic condition that she considers essential to politics. The assembly seems to take a different route in its rebuttal of representation and overcoming of consensus, one that Latour has suggested is distinctive of the cosmopolitical composition: 'Cosmos protects against the premature closure of politics, and politics against the

premature closure of cosmos' (2004b: 454). Going backward and forward, from the quick gatherings to the slow meetings, between airing its disagreements in the street and forging its labile consensus in the square, the assembly strives for maintaining the world in suspension and the politics that put it at stake. It comes, however, with a price: that of weariness.

Sustaining the assembly through its dwelling was a tiring process. As the ethnographic vignette of the migration and coexistence group meeting illustrates, assembly meetings were always long and tiring. The general weekly meeting usually took three hours, and it was exhausting. Very often, the weather conditions were inappropriate: we were very cold in winter and sweating in summer. The street was a weary place: sitting on the floor, after hours in the street, participants ended up always hungry and thirsty. Other meetings during the week usually lasted for hours, so it was always difficult to follow the path of the assembly. Mouffe's characterization of politics has been extended by the German-based philosopher of Korean origin Byung-Chul Han (2012) to the whole society to describe the twentieth century by a dichotomous thinking that tends to distinguish between inside and outside, friend and enemy, yourself and the strange. The turn of the century has brought about a change in which this scheme is no longer valid. While society was organized following an immunologic view of the world that tried to suppress anything strange, contemporary society is characterized by an excess of positivity; it is a society that provokes a lonely tiredness that splits and isolates, that separates and destroys any community. Han argues on behalf of a different weariness that he calls, drawing on Peter Handke, fundamental weariness. It is not a condition that leads you to do nothing, but a form of weariness that inspires; a form of attention completely different, slow and long-lasting: 'The fundamental weariness loosens the bond of identity . . . this special in-difference grants an aura of warmth. The rigid distinction between yourself and others is suppressed'⁶ (Han 2012: 76). Han elaborates on his concept of fundamental weariness: 'A special rhythm is awakened that lead to a concordance, a closeness, a neighbourhood without any functional or kinship bond' (Han 2012: 78). The weariness is a special faculty that rouses an ability to see, argues Han, although we may suggest that the fundamental weariness of the assembly brings into existence the ability to listen to the city, or we may even say to sense the city. The assembly installation weathers its own atmospheric politics, one whose democratic impulse is not antagonist, not quite agonic either, but that ought best be described as weary.

Four years after the 15M movement sprang up all over the city, housing was still a key issue. In Lavapiés, two of the half-dozen bank offices of the neighbourhood became vacant during this time; one of them had been a common target of the assembly interventions. We do not know for sure their reasons for leaving these offices, but it would not be senseless to bet on their tiredness. One general manager blurted out to some members of the assembly that had camped for days in front of the bank headquarter close to Puerta del Sol square: 'you are really tiresome people' ('sois cansinos'). Weary of ambulating from one place to another, weathering its own political atmosphere, the assembly had turned its weary condition into a political form.

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NOTES

- 1 'What is the neighbourhood working group?' ('¿Qué es la Comisión de Barrios?'), <http://madrid.tomalosbarrios.net/%C2%BFque-es-la-comision-debarrios> (accessed October 10, 2011).
- 2 'Assembly methodology' ('Metodología asamblearia'), <http://madrid.tomalosbarrios.net/metodologia-asamblearia> (accessed October 10, 2011).
- 3 Amnistía Internacional has highlighted the situation in different reports 'Parar el racismo, no a las personas: Perfiles raciales y control de la inmigración en España' (December 2011), <http://bit.ly/srwa97>.
- 4 Tod@s, in the original Spanish writing, mixing the two gender expressions of 'todos' and 'todas'.
- 5 'A proposal of the neighbourhood working group for healthy assemblies', <http://madrid.tomalosbarrios.net/metodologia-asamblearia>.
- 6 Our own translation from the Spanish version.

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