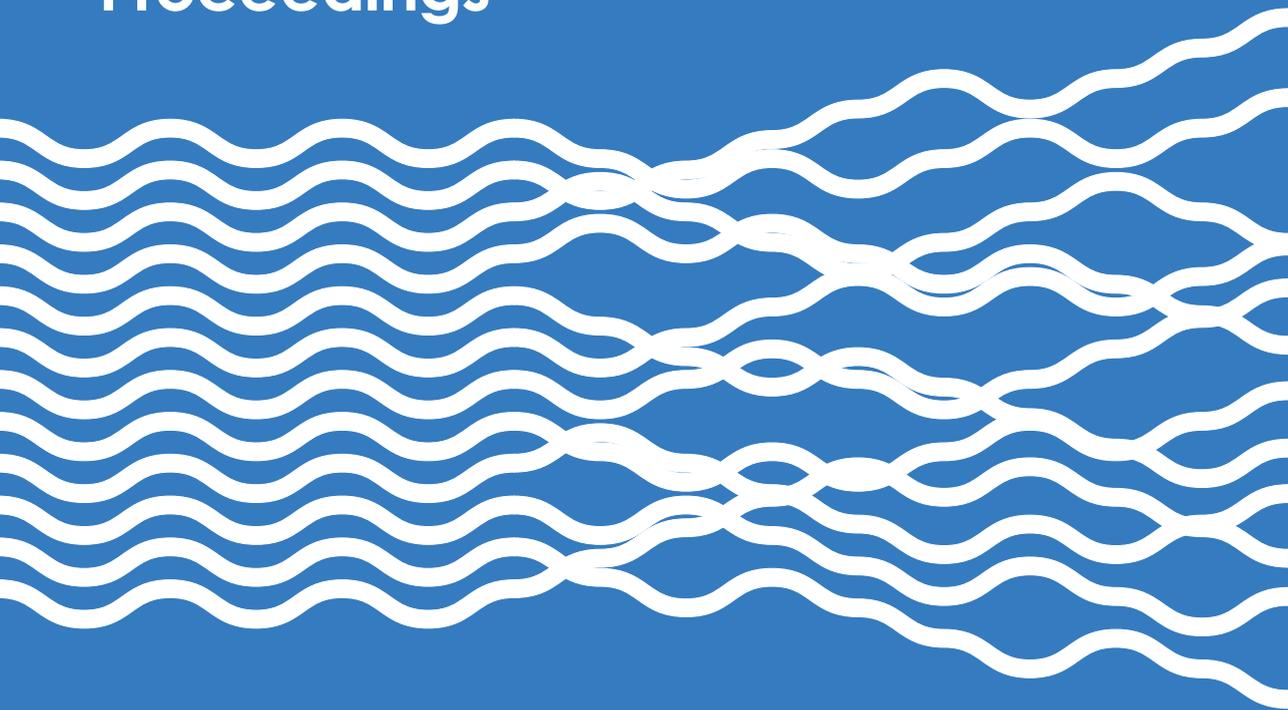


Conference Proceedings

 Sharing Society



International Conference

Sharing Society

**The Impact of Collaborative Collective Actions
in the Transformation of Contemporary Societies**

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Benjamín Tejerina, Cristina Miranda de Almeida and Ignacia Perugorria
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Collective Practices and Strategies around Leisure of Contemporary Basque Young People. The Phenomenon of *Lonjas*

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Abstract: *In the last decades, groups of youths in the Basque Country (Spain) have been renting former commercial premises as spaces for leisure and sociality. According to recent data, at least the 20% of young people of the Basque Country is member of this kind of collectivities. The institutionalization of this forms of collectivity is closely related to processes such as: a) urban transformations; b) the extension of youth; c) the precarisation of labour and housing markets; d) the implementation of some regulations over the uses of public spaces in the last decade and; f) some cultural features of the Basque Country. Grounded on two quantitative broad research produced by the Basque Youth Observatory and a qualitative research I coordinated for the city of Vitoria-Gasteiz, the objective of the paper is to analyse this phenomenon as a collective strategy that fights back against the processes of precarisation experienced by young people.*

Thus, the presentation will provide evidences of how phenomenon takes the form of a collective and creative response that enables young people more affordable leisure and consumption far from the adult-world surveillance. It will also go in depth on how the premises emerge as autonomous and communal social spaces where different learnings such as sharing and managing common goods, or making collective decisions take place. Lastly, the paper seeks to contribute to the conference with some developments for the debate around the concept of agency and the possibility of social change without political articulations or claims.

Keywords: *Youth cultures, sociability, precarisation, collective agency, urban spaces*

1. Introduction

In the last decades, groups of young people in the Basque Country (Spain) have been renting former commercial premises (known by locals as *lonjas* and named as such hereinafter) as semi-private spaces for leisure, consumption and sociality. In this communication I will argue that the phenomenon of *lonjas* is a significant case study through which understand certain 'divergent' sharing practices in a socio-structural context of generalized precarisation processes. Analysing the intersection between leisure time, the social network building and the construction of identity in liminal spaces between home and semi-public space (*lonjas*), the objective of this communication is to analyse the practices deployed by them in those premises and the effects of those practices in their lives. I will give evidence that the *lonjas* phenomenon promotes a collective and creative response that enables young people to achieve more affordable leisure and consumption patterns far from the adult-world surveillance or the institutional control. Furthermore, the *lonjas* emerge as autonomous social spaces where different learning processes such as sharing and managing common goods, or making collective decisions, take place. Lastly, this study case will be posed as an interesting departure



point to explore processes of social change without conventional political articulations, collective representations or clear claims.

This paper is divided into five main sections. In the first section (2), a quantitative overview is presented that allows ‘measuring’ the phenomenon in the Basque Country. The second (3) focuses on explaining the emergence and progressive institutionalization of the phenomenon from a socio-structural, historical and cultural perspective. The third section (4) gives account of the forms of organization, innovative practices and self-management of youth collectives. The fourth (5) section is focused in the shared experiences that this phenomenon allows among young people. Finally, the fifth (6) debates around the concept of agency and the possibility of social change without political articulations or claims.

2. An Overview of the Lonjas Phenomenon

To start with, *lonjas* can be defined as a semi-private physical and symbolic space rented, conditioned and used by a group of young people in their free time as a place for sociality.

In 2013, the Basque Observatory of Youth (OVJ) reported that around 20% of Basque youth had access to a *lonja*, and another 25% of young people had been a member of one at some point in their lives. The remaining 55% had never belonged to a proper *lonja*, but the same research underlines: more than a third had ever gone to the *lonjas* of friends; a third of young people who did not have access to a *lonja* at the time of the interview would like to be part of one; and, those who had previously been involved in a *lonja* showed a greater desire to participate again than those who had never been members (OVJ 2013: 25). The most relevant change detected in the survey carried out in 2017 by that same institution is that those interviewed who claim to have participated in a *lonja* rises 5 points, thus estimating that currently around 50% of Basque youth have a direct experience in this type of spaces (OVJ, 2017).

In relation to the motivations for belonging to a *lonja*, the most notable in 2013 were: “not to be in the street because it is cold or raining” (75%), “the need to have a place of one’s own where the rules are set by oneself” (47%) and “to be able to be with friends without anyone controlling you” (46%) (OVJ, 2013:19 ff.). Beyond the weather argument, it is important to stress that the desire for autonomy and the ability to make decisions on one’s own are the two main reasons to be a member. The fact that more than half of Basque youth participate actively and directly in the *lonja* phenomenon — and a higher percentage, if we take into account those who have participated in the past or do so indirectly through friends and acquaintances—, requires an explanation that takes into account both cultural and socio-structural factors.

3. The Phenomenon from a Socio-structural Perspective

The emergence and consolidation of this phenomenon cannot be understood without taking into account a broader social and historical context and the influence of other factors and conditions.

First, there is a particular social institution through which friendship relations are woven and

maintained in the Basque Country: the group of friends known as *cuadrilla* (Gatti et al. 2005). The group is formed by people united by bonds of friendship that are established during childhood and adolescence that last beyond the youth period and, in many cases, throughout life. Even though *cuadrillas* have changed a lot in last decades, it has a central sociality component—possibly shared with a feeling of individualization greater than in previous generations—and, above all, it has evolved articulating free time, leisure and consumption. In few words, the *cuadrilla* has made it possible for young people to think of themselves as a group and to develop collective leisure and consumer tactics (de Certeau 2000) through those spaces.

Second, urban transformations and regulations on the use of public spaces have collaborated in the emergence of this phenomenon. The decline of neighbourhood stores and shops since the 1990s, along with the expansion of shopping centres (CEIC 2005: 133), left a large number of empty commercial premises—*lonjas*— on the ground floor of many city dwellings. This availability of space partially explains the phenomenon. By renting these premises, young people have somehow colonized many of these disused spaces and turned them into anthropological places (Augé, 2004) where they can catch up, hang out and develop and expand different practices in their leisure time (Carbajo and Martínez 2013: 302). It can be affirmed that as an urban process, the *lonjas* phenomenon signals, and is the effect of, a process of urban reconfiguration that is inseparably linked to a change in the production and consumption model in the Basque Country over the last twenty-five years (Gurrutxaga et al. 1990). And more importantly, which emptying effect has been exacerbated by the 2008' financial crisis. Together with it, in recent years there has been a multiplication of regulations and legislation on the uses of public space applied by municipalities, Autonomous Communities and the State. Together with it, several interventions of the administrations to neutralize some of the youth practices in public spaces such as drinking and/or smoking, have contributed to this displacement and withdrawal of the youth collective towards the semi-private space of the *lonjas*.

Thirdly, the *lonja* phenomenon has to be framed in the extension of youth in contemporary Western societies. Extension that, understood as a delay in reaching the marks of adult identity, transforms this type of place into spaces of autonomy outside the family home and enables forms of partial emancipation (Carbajo, 2014). The economic dependence that young people have on their families of origin in the Basque Country (Tejerina et al. 2012b), together with the low economic cost of the *lonja* compared to other more conventional and commercialised forms of leisure, is crucial to understand the expansion of the phenomenon. This “in-between” perspective in relation to time or to life periods such as youth and adulthood allows us to analyse the *lonja* as a liminal social space where young people try and test forms of semi-independence through leisure, in a socio-economic context subject to a strong process of precarisation of living conditions.

4. Forms of Organisation of the *Lonja*

As said, the *lonjas* become spaces of relative autonomy in a context of significant difficulties in emancipating oneself from the family of origin. But this autonomy is carried out collectively. This fact favours processes such as learning to live in common or creating new forms of shared leisure and consumption patterns in times of precariousness.



Lonjas are generally large and multifunctional spaces, usually with a bathroom. They are basically furnished with all kinds of objects related to their members' needs and tastes: sofas, tables, chairs, shelves, microwaves, refrigerators, televisions, the last video game consoles, stereo music players and board games, darts, table computers, table football, ping-pong and poker tables or even pin-balls, and posters of football teams, media stars, groups of music and so on. As this equipment is usually obtained through donations from the members of the lonja themselves, from their families, or by recycling and reusing objects found in the street, different and eclectic styles of decoration can be found.

However, in order to make the diverse leisure activities possible, the lonja requires a minimum management which, in most cases, involves: signing of a rental contract (managed by the parents when the young people are minors); paying the rental fee through members' fees; pantry provisioning of (mainly food and drink); and the organisation of cleaning and maintenance shifts. Through the payment of that modest monthly fees (between €20 and €50 per month per individual) and the collective purchase of consumable products, the lonja allows the development of a certain type of economic rationality insofar as it makes shared consumption practices possible to reduce costs.

In this way, the lonja produces certain submerged leisure economies that do not necessarily pass through conventional or established consumer circuits. These consumer practices are not forms of resistance to an instituted order, but ways of agency, recreation or parody of some conventional consumer practices. From a subordinate and dependent position on the economic resources available to them as citizen-consumers, lonjas create a sort of associations or communities for consumption in the form of precarious recreational societies that revolve around a notion of a collective project (CEIC 2005, 79) and the previously mentioned cuadrilla.

If the reduction of costs in order to give continuity to certain forms of leisure and consumption provides meaning and economic legitimacy to lonjas, greater centrality they acquire through the experiences, affectivity and friendship that they generate and reinforce. The sociality and affectivity that takes place in the lonja is derived, evidently, from a whole set of activities, events, celebrations, conflicts and moments of collective effervescence that participants experience in and around this physical and symbolic space. A place that, prior to the massive use of mobile phones or the Internet, has been boosted by new technologies. Almost all lonjas have today parallel presence on the Internet through social networks such as Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp groups, either to share photos, videos and information or as a form of coordination, control and communication among their members.

5. Sharing Transitions to Adulthood, Shared Learning

Through the practices described above, the lonja becomes an important space of autonomy that is not produced individually but it is constituted with others. The lonja allows and demands a series of actions and responsibilities (maintenance work, in its broadest sense) that contribute to develop subjective experiences of self-sufficiency that compensate for some dependencies with respect to the adult world.

On the one hand, this type of autonomy requires a collective management of the daily place:

from the rental fee payment, to the cleaning shifts, but also the organization and equitable distribution of the activities that are carried out in the lonja, distinguishing between times for the party (weekends) and times for a quieter enjoyment (weekdays). The establishment and collective discussion of rules are progressively developed in a process of trial and error through facing different problems and conflicts regarding the organization and distribution of tasks and functions.

On the other hand, the very generation of a place, which implies the decision to rent a space, the searching processes, the rental procedures with the owners, as well as the adaptation of the place to their needs, tastes and desires —repairing, painting, furnishing, decorating—, constitutes for many young people a first experience close to that of leaving the parental home —the search for accommodation—, but through collective practices of informal learning. Although the phenomenon does not deny the existence of individualized biographical trajectories and itineraries, lonjas intervenes synchronising or pacing them, which makes evident the need to pay attention to the collective and, therefore, shared aspects of contemporary youth transitions.

But for the propose of this communication, what is at stake within the lonja is the management of the common or a community good (commonwealth) by means of rules that are aimed at avoiding internal and external conflicts. Most of the rules point to improving internal coexistence but, above all, giving continuity and preserving the place, which implies maintaining certain rules for keeping a good coexistence with the neighbourhood (related mainly to limiting opening hours and sound volume and noise), and avoiding possible complaints and the consequent eviction by the local police. In this sense, the notion of social laboratory helps understanding both the experimental nature of its physical conformation and the negotiation process of agreeing “the internal policy of the lonja” (CEIC 2005, 78). That is to say, the very rules and sanctions by which to govern and self-govern themselves. In other words, ‘the rules and regulations’ that allows the place to be produced, shared and being meaningful.

6. Social Change and Political Effects without Political Articulation

These forms of self-regulated, collectivity self-managed and co-produced autonomy are central when it comes to understanding some of the resistances that the young people at the lonjas have shown to the processes of regulation and intervention on the part of the Town Councils. The programmes and regulations implemented in some municipalities have been problematic precisely because they aspire to intervene, alter and over- regulate this type of social process. One of the main concerns expressed by the interviewees was the latent and constant threat of eviction and closure of the lonja by the police. Faced with this threat, the main demand of young people, —that does not necessarily politically unite or articulate a collective action—, can be summed up in the claim: “leave us alone”. Thus, for its participants, the lonja constitutes a physical and symbolic space of personal and collective autonomy built in collaboration with peers but without any kind of claim in the public space (or the Polis). It is formed as a place where to develop and deploy a common project that is crossed by several meanings, unexpected configurations and innovative practices —with, by no means, political effects.



Overall, it can be said that young Basques have translated a whole series of cultural and socio-structural factors, limitations and dependencies into a form of complex agency that goes beyond the analytical dichotomy of structure and action (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014; Kelly, 2018). Agency that, objectified in the lonja and without necessarily being resistant, contestatory or rebel in modern terms (Raby, 2005: 153 and 154), is by no means problematic for the municipal forms of government. The lonja can be understood as a displacement, an escape or as a flight through the creation of places of shared privacy that, without seeking social notoriety in the public space (Polis), alters it as a collective project and phenomenon that tries to elude the adult and institutional control. Among the elements that make this phenomenon novel we find certain assembly or communal forms of decision making and management —not strictly new but resignified— both of the group of participants, and of the lonja as a project or common good. Thus, youth lonjas consist of a kind of social laboratories that, in a playful way, reproduce and alter the traditional forms of sociality, a place where the forms of sociality that are about to arrive are tested and rehearsed.

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8. Methodological Appendix

The results presented here are based on a research carried out in Vitoria-Gasteiz (Tejerina et al, 2012a), the capital of the Basque Country, and developed in two phases. In the first phase, in collaboration with the association Ailaket, a mapping of the existing lonjas in that city rented by groups of young people was carried out. During this phase, we were able to localise 160 lonjas, measure the phenomenon and carry out an exploratory survey (N=54). This was followed by qualitative fieldwork consisting of 5 discussion groups with young people, 1 discussion group with parents, 15 personal interviews with neighbours, and 2 personal interviews with members of the Vitoria- Gasteiz City Council services. Finally, with the audio-visual recording of these two research phases, a documentary was made, together with the final report. It can be viewed or downloaded with English subtitles from: <https://vimeo.com/54550320>

9. Biographical Note

Diego Carbajo is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of the Basque Country funded by the Basque Government Doctoral Research Staff Improvement Programme 2017. Affiliated to the consolidated research group “Social Change, Precarity and Identity in Contemporary Society”, he is currently developing a postdoctoral project about the “global grammars of self-entrepreneurship” at RMIT University in Australia. In recent years he has been lecturing on different subjects in the Dept. of Sociology 2 and in the Dept. of Didactics of Social Sciences at the University of the Basque Country. His Phd Thesis (UPV/EHU 2014) obtained the second position of the Social Reality Prize granted by the Presidency of the Basque Government. Researches Projects on contemporary residential transitions (2014), the phenomenon of youth premises and “lonjas” (2012) or the squatter movement (2007) relate to the research line structured around the concepts of youth, space and precarity. A second line of research (intermittent and underfunded) is emerging and seeks to force the limits of enunciation of Sociology, exploring ANT, the analysis of artistic productions and new uses and meanings of the Zamorano-Leonés donkey breed.

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