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## Neoliberal expulsions, crisis and graphic reportage in Spanish comics

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### Abstract

In this article, after analyzing the comics industry in Spain in the context of the 2008 crisis, which reveals how small and medium publishers have adapted to new trends in consumption, I focus on the graphic novel Barcelona. *Los vagabundos de la chatarra* (2015) by Jorge Carrión and Sagar. This comic depicts the underworld of scrap metal collection in Barcelona, where mainly immigrant workers wander the streets, barely eking a living out of the detritus of consumerist society. It is an example of graphic journalism in comics, one of the most interesting developments in the genre in the past few years. It is also a novelty in Spanish comics because certain topics were far from common in the existing repertoire, which had been dominated by adventures, fantasy and science fiction. Drawing on Verónica Gago's *La razón neoliberal* (2014) and Saskia Sassen's *Expulsions* (2015), I challenge conventional approaches to neoliberalism by focusing on neoliberalism from below, which is seen by Gago to point towards the emergence of a new historical consciousness of living in perpetual crisis.

### Keywords

Comics; crisis; Spain; graphic journalism; neoliberalism.

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## Introduction

In a similar fashion to other cultural productions analysed in this special issue, comics artists have responded to the changing nature of society, reflecting on the causes for the 2008 economic crisis and its socio-political implications. Spanish literature works have, by and large, engaged with the crisis through social realism, dealing with the consequences of the crisis. Pablo Valdivia has established a useful typology for crisis literature in a recent article (2016: 25–26), stressing, on the one hand, that many novels deal with the aftermath of the crisis from a social realist perspective, but emphasizing also notable exceptions, such as the novel *Cenital* (2012) by Emilio Bueso. Set up in a post-apocalyptic dystopia, *Cenital* “ofrece una visión de la crisis distinta a la de las coordenadas anteriores para proponer un mundo posible tras la crisis” (Valdivia “Narrando la crisis” 27–28).

Comics present a diverse landscape with, for instance, graphic essays (*Españistan* 2011, *La simiocracia* 2012 by Aleix Saló<sup>2</sup>; *No os indignéis tanto* 2013 by Manel Fontdevila). Although there are remarkable examples of social realism, such as *El mundo a tus pies* (2015) by Nadar and *Andando* (2011) by Alejandro Torres, Daniel Riego and Albert Carreres, there are also more experimental examples of individual alienation such as *Lo que me está pasando* (2015) by Miguel Brieva and *Inercia* (2014) by Antonio Hitos, in which the protagonists experience similar processes of identity disintegration in a world defined by compulsive consumerism and stultifying communication media. This incomplete list of works and many more dealing with other topics not related to the 2008 crisis have led to the shared opinion that never before have Spanish comics produced such quality and diversity, given the appearance of some of the best Spanish comics in history during the last 15 years (López et al. 2016). Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> The promotional animated video for *Españistan*, created by the then young artist Aleix Saló to encourage readers to buy his comic went viral thanks to several elements (satirical style, colloquial and direct language, engaging story and last but not least, social media sharing coinciding with the 15M movement). Uploaded on 25 May 2011, the video has currently reached 6 million viewings.

this article considers the 2008 economic crisis and its aftermath following a series of changes experienced in Spain where neoliberal discourses and their everyday implementation have pervasively altered our societies. In order to consider this topic, I take the comics industry as a contextual case study and the graphic novel *Barcelona. Los vagabundos de la chatarra* (2015) as a specific manifestation of cultural production arising as a result of the crisis in Spain. *Los vagabundos de la chatarra* is an example of graphic journalism in comics, one of the most interesting developments in comics in the past few years. This graphic novel depicts the underworld of scrap metal collection in Barcelona, where mainly immigrant workers wander the streets, barely making a living out of what the overly consumerist society rejects. In the prologue, Jorge Carrión situates the comic within a global context of ever-expanding waste, despite efforts to mitigate the impact of refuse in our societies through recycling or slowing consumerism. For over a year, Carrión and Sagar investigated this global phenomenon locally in the city of Barcelona:

Durante más de un año, Sagar y yo [...] (n)os dedicamos a seguir el rastro del metal, de la chatarra, particularmente a través de los *metaleros* o *chatarreros* (no existe un nombre que los designe) que vagabundean con su carrito de supermercado, a la caza de tuberías, electrodomésticos, cable [...] Acabamos concentrándonos en una fábrica okupada del barrio de Poble Nou, donde durante algunos meses, entre 2012 y 2013, pasaron sus días y sus noches unas trescientas personas, alrededor del trabajo ilegal de la chatarrería [...] Nuestra investigación terminó en julio de 2013, cuando las 300 personas que vivían en la fábrica fueron desalojadas por casi 400 policías. (Carrión and Sagar 5)

### **Figure 1 here**

The presence of both artists among the *chatarreros*, in their capacity as graphic journalists, allows the reader an insight into a world that remains, for the most part, invisible

to the naked eye. Graphic journalism provides a close-up of that reality in stark contrast with more conventional approaches that, verging on yellow journalism, aimed to document crisis and poverty in Spain. An example of this is a *New York Times* article published in Sept. 2012 by Suzanne Daley. Without clearly stating for how long the journalist conducted her field reporting in Spain (it actually seems like a weekend at best), Ms Daley sketched a dramatic picture of Spain which infuriated many commentators, who accused the article of not painting the whole picture. The key aspect here is not only *to be at the scene*, but to know *how and where to look* in order to capture the “experiential truth linked to lived, embodied experience to which the reporter has access, thanks to being physically present at the scene” (Orbán 124). I argue that Carrión and Sagar successfully achieved this without compromising the aesthetics of a remarkable comic in terms of drawing style, narrative structure and page composition.

### **Editorial context of comics in Spain: Crisis and renewal**

I consider it necessary to provide a succinct general context of the publishing and reading of comics in Spain in order to focus on my specific case study. According to the official report issued by the Ministry of Culture in 2010 on the industry of comics in Spain, between 2007 and 2009 readership of comics reached the following figures by age range against the total Spanish population: 14–24years 20%; 25–44years 16%; 45–64years 9%. The most obvious conclusion is the expected decline in readership with age. Comics have lost the massive audience they reached between the 1940s and 1960s when they were truly a mass medium, broadly consumed by a large audience. However, these figures hide an important element which is very relevant to my analysis: comics have increased a stable readership for the 25–44-year-old age range. These segments of the population who read comics have, for the most part, higher education degrees and a disposable income that, despite the economic crisis and

the expected adjustment in each household—there has been a reduction of 29.7% from 2008 to 2014 in what families expend for leisure and culture according to official statistics<sup>3</sup>— make it possible to sustain a reduced but very selective production of Spanish comics. I say reduced because comics made by Spanish artists and published by Spanish printing houses only represent around 20% of the total volume (Barrero and López).<sup>4</sup> The comics industry is dominated mostly by translations of American comics, with a stable flux of Franco-Belgian comics and the irruption of Japanese manga in the last two decades.

Having said that, the Spanish comics industry has emerged, ironically, with the crisis (Roca “Arrugas”). The industry has adapted to new trends in consumption, mainly by exploiting foreign translations that represent a low-risk investment and profitable revenues as opposed to what could be considered higher-risk investments with new Spanish artists that might or might not produce the projected turnover. Perhaps the most interesting development is the creation of new independent publishers against the odds of the economic crisis. To the existing publishers in Spain, such as Norma editorial since 1977, or more recently Edicions de Ponent in 1995 or Astiberri in 2001, Apa-Apa originated in 2008, Caramba in 2011 (since 2015 it has been integrated within Astiberri) and Entrecomics in 2012, following the model designed by Caramba. This trend has been identified in the 2013 report issued by the Comics Cultural Association Tebeosfera (Barrero).

Moreover, small and medium-size publishers (Amaníaco, Anillo de Sirio, Astiberri, Bang, De Ponent, Diábolo, Dibbuxs, El Jueves, La Cúpula) are crucial for the survival and growth of comics created by Spanish artists since they devote more than 30% of their overall production to national comics (López). This effort is accompanied in some specific cases with astonishing successes in sales, such as *La casa* by Paco Roca<sup>5</sup>, published by Astiberri. Although

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<sup>3</sup> <<http://www.ine.es/prensa/np914.pdf>>.

<sup>4</sup> No page indicated because it is an online source. Please see the bibliography section for details.

<sup>5</sup> Paco Roca is an excellent example of quality and wide readership. *Arrugas* (2007), initially published in France as *Rides* by Delcourt, and two months later in Spain, has reached 50,000 copies and 10 editions. The comic won

it is difficult to provide accurate figures for sales, *La Casa* by Paco Roca stands out as the bestseller in European comics in Spain during 2015.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, the economic crisis has made clear that there are three differentiated consumer groups for comics in Spain which represent three distinctive genres: superheroes; French-Belgian *bande dessinée* and manga; and sporadic consumers who tend to buy satirical comics or more socially committed works in non-specialized bookstores. This trend coincides largely with the changing landscape in the Spanish book industry in which medium-sized and small publishers have adopted creative editorial decisions in order to continue with their work in a challenging market for new independent publishers and, as a consequence, for new writers and artists:

Ha habido todo un conjunto de editoriales, de las llamadas pequeñas y medias, que no sólo han aguantado bien durante la crisis sino que además han obtenido beneficios y han gozado de un crecimiento en sus niveles de facturación. Por ejemplo, la editorial Galaxia obtuvo el año 2014 un 10% de beneficios, la editorial Salamandra un 11% de beneficios y el grupo CONTEXTO (en cuyo caso me detendré brevemente) ha crecido un 30% durante ese mismo periodo. El grupo CONTEXTO incluye un conjunto de editoriales de las denominadas “pequeñas”: Libros del Asteroide, Nórdica, Impedimenta, Periférica, entre otras. (Valdivia “La novela Española”)

## Neoliberal discourses and societal expulsions

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the National Prize for Comics in Spain in 2008 and a successful animated movie was released in 2011. The comic has subsequently been translated into Italian, Dutch and Japanese. His graphic novel *Los surcos del azar* (2013) won the award for the best Spanish comic at the Salón Internacional del Cómic in Barcelona (2014). It was published on 29 November 2013, with 10,000 copies, and a second edition (5,000 copies) followed a month later. A Franco-Spanish project is currently underway to produce a TV miniseries based on this comic. For a detailed analysis of this comic I refer to my study “Exilio y memoria en la nueva novela gráfica española. El caso de *Los surcos del azar*” to be published by Brill in 2017 for the volume *Españoles en Europa: Identidad y Exilio desde la Edad Moderna hasta nuestros días*.

<sup>6</sup> Figures for sales and readership are taken from Félix López et al. “La industria de la historieta en España en 2015” *Tebeosfera* 2016, who conducted a survey using six bookshops (Action Comics, Murcia; Atom Comics, Madrid; Generación X, Valencia; Joker Comics, Bilbao; Sindicato del Cómic, Ourense; The Comic Co, Madrid; Universal, Barcelona). Many more were invited but declined to take part in the survey.

The focus on the social implications of the 2008 economic crisis in Spain is a novelty for Spanish comics in the sense that certain topics were far from common in the existing repertoire, dominated by adventures, fantasy and science fiction. I do not ignore the rich tradition of comics in Spain with the exceptional Escuela Bruguera (1940s–early 1980s) in which authors such as Josep Escobar depicted pressing social issues such as hunger, poverty, domestic violence or unemployment during the Franco dictatorship through the language of humour. But it is a new development that certain issues with a profound impact in society—such as the 2008 crisis—are the focus of a number of artists. Using the language of comics, these artists have contributed to the debate surrounding the causes, implications and consequences of the long crisis in Spain. Paco Roca, currently one of the most talented comics artists, refers to the freedom enjoyed by artists of comics against other audio-visual media as a reason for this proliferation of works dealing with the crisis:

El cómic tiene una libertad que otros medios visuales no tienen. Es un medio muy barato de producir a diferencia del cine o la televisión porque solo requiere del esfuerzo del autor. La industria del cómic ha cambiado mucho en los últimos 15 años. Lo que antes era impensable en un cómic como hablar de la muerte, los desahucios, del autismo o el alzhéimer. (Roca “Interview”)

In 2012, Paco Roca published a short piece (8 pages) in the Spanish newspaper *El País* entitled “Crónica de una crisis anunciada” (Roca “Crónica”) in which he reflects on *before* and *after* the crisis. Roca depicts a society playing Monopoly with their own resources, shifting gradually and, to a certain extent, willingly from “la sociedad del consumo a la del consumismo materialista; la ostentación y el derroche sin escrúpulos.” This was, as Carlo Bordoni highlights, “the apotheosis of modernity: consumerism for everyone—with no exceptions” (Bauman and Bordoni 120). According to the narrator in Paco Roca’s comic the crisis is the

symptom of a rotten and exhausted system. The idea of a failing system was at the heart of what Habermas coined a “legitimation crisis” in the book published in 1973 with the same title. The German philosopher distinguished between system crisis and identity crisis that results from a loss of confidence in administrative institutions, when the individual does not recognise herself in the existing system and, as a consequence, a rupture appears between the still legal authority and the individual.<sup>7</sup> In sum, what the narrator unveils in Roca’s comic about the crisis coincides with what sociologist Alan Touraine argued years ago: “We must speak of crisis if our societies have become incapable of conceiving of themselves, of knowing what they are and what they are making themselves be” (Touraine 12).

Having said that, the most common discourse around the causes and consequences for the neoliberal turn and the subsequent 2008 crisis centres around top-down approaches, perhaps best exemplified in Naomi Klein’s influential *The Shock Doctrine* (2007). I consider Klein’s approach to be valid insofar as it stimulates the debate around governmentality at a wider level and system change as a result of the exacerbation of the capitalist economic system, with pervasive implications at a societal level. Klein’s arguments are compelling too when analysing how crises allow the packaging of shock doctrines for the sake of balancing the books and stabilizing the economy as happened with most Latin American countries during the 1980s (Klein 55–68), but also in Europe during Margaret Thatcher’s term in office in the early 1980s, because in those periods of crisis the “rules of democracy could be suspended and economic control could be handed over to (a) team of experts” transforming a crisis into a “a golden opportunity to be seized” (Klein 156). In a similar line of argument, Saskia Sassen argues that debt restructuring programs in the global South during the 1980s and 1990s aimed at transforming economies and redefining countries as extracting locations: “the restructuring

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<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed analysis on the concept of *crisis* drawing on Habermas, Durkheim, Touraine and Wiewiorka in relation to social sciences and the humanities I refer to my article “Crisis y su tratamiento en la obra de José Ricardo Morales” (2014) *Laberintos: revista de estudios sobre los exilios culturales españoles* n. 16, pp. 249–263.

programs were about more than debt service: they aimed at shaping a political economy and a repositioning of these countries as sites for extraction, ranging from natural resources to the consumption power of their populations” (Sassen, “Expulsions” 90). I agree with Klein and Sassen in relation to their macro analysis, but they do not account for the internalization of neoliberal logics and practices, at micro level. I refer for instance to the financialization of the economy which, according to Matt Davies, meant that the “the promotion of home ownership in the United States [and in the UK under Thatcher] was tied to the production of economic subjects whose debts and property would link their well-being and fortunes to the defence of property rights and individualized subjectivities, rather than pursuing collective interests through unions” (Davies 318). Much of the success of neoliberal policies across the globe is down to strategic biopolitics at play, in other words, to the internalization of a neoliberal *way of life* (Dardot and Laval 2014) that, no matter the political ideology of the party in government, is reproduced even unintentionally. As I will elaborate below, I find this approach at micro level fully developed by Verónica Gago.

In *La razón neoliberal* (2014) Gago aims to challenge the hegemonic discourse on neoliberalism by questioning the validity of three initial hypotheses. The first one is that neoliberalism constitutes macro-policies from imperialist centers (going North to South) to which national-state intervention is opposed (Gago 27). With the specific example of Argentina during the *Kirchnerismo*, neoliberalism did not retreat in Argentina despite the government’s efforts to reduce poverty and inequality.<sup>8</sup> The issue lies at the heart of this binary opposition, which is in fact more complex since the physical location of these “imperialist centers” is less relevant given the increasingly transnational context of big corporations with stakeholders scattered around the globe. National-state intervention models do not imply necessarily an

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<sup>8</sup> Kirchnerism is an Argentinian political group (originally a faction in the Justicialist Party and directly linked to Peronism) formed by the supporters of the late Néstor Kirchner, president of Argentina from 2003 to 2007, and of his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, president from 2007 until 2015.

opposition to a neoliberal model. The 2008 crisis produced unprecedented state intervention with the UK bailing out many high street banks in fear of a system collapse. But this has not translated into significant changes from an economic or societal perspective. And the same applies to Spain, when Spanish banks were bailed out with €100,000 millions of public money, which the state has no hopes to claim back. The state merely intervened to save the system, not to oppose it or transform it. Public money was pumped into the banking system (€2.175 per inhabitant<sup>9</sup>) while many citizens experienced the undermining of their levels of health and well-being, in addition to their already precarious job conditions.<sup>10</sup>

The second hypothesis in *La razón neoliberal* is that neoliberalism is a rationality that not only concerns big political and economic actors whether they are transnational, regional or local (Gago 27). Gago argues that we need to investigate how the neoliberal rationality has expanded at a molecular level. That is to say, how citizens have contributed, inadvertently or willingly, to the solidification of a new way of life based on hyper-consumerism and informal economies as a defense mechanism. Gago's proposal for a neoliberalism from *below* goes as follows:

Por *neoliberalismo desde abajo* me refiero entonces a un conjunto de condiciones que se concretan más allá de la voluntad de un gobierno, de su legitimidad o no, pero que se convierten en condiciones sobre las que opera una red de prácticas y saberes que asume el cálculo como matriz subjetiva primordial y que funciona como motor de una poderosa economía popular que mixtura saberes comunitarios autogestivos e intimidad con el saber-hacer en la crisis como tecnología de una autoempresarialidad de masas. La fuerza del neoliberalismo así pensado acaba arraigando en

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<sup>9</sup> <[http://www.elconfidencial.com/empresas/2014-03-30/cinco-anos-y-100-000-millones-despues-historia-del-rescate-de-la-banca-espanola\\_109053](http://www.elconfidencial.com/empresas/2014-03-30/cinco-anos-y-100-000-millones-despues-historia-del-rescate-de-la-banca-espanola_109053)>.

<sup>10</sup> In Spain, for example, close to 90 percent of those made redundant had been employed on temporary contracts. Source: <<http://eurohealthnet.eu/sites/eurohealthnet.eu/files/publications/EC%20Consultation%20-%20Green%20Paper%20on%20Restructuring.pdf>>.

los sectores que protagonizan la llamada economía informal como una *pragmática vitalista* (Gago 25).

Gago's argument reads neoliberalism as a set of conditions that determine social conditions and everyday practices for the population, who assimilate neoliberal practices in their everyday lives, paradoxically deteriorating their wellbeing. These practices often take shape as defense mechanisms, as can be seen in the Argentinean (and Spanish) case(s) with a thriving informal economy. Gago describes this as a *pragmática vitalista*, which turns neoliberal practices into *a way of life* (Dardot and Laval 2014). As Margaret Thatcher summarized in 1981, "economics are the method: the object is to change the soul."<sup>11</sup> The third and final argument challenged by Verónica Gago about neoliberalism is that if neoliberalism is only understood at macro level, then responses to overcome this social and economic ideology need to be macro too. This is at the heart of the populist reason according to Laclau (2005) and leads to a reinforcement of state intervention (Gago 28). Coinciding with Sassen on global markets and the already denationalized states, Gago questions the return to the state as a pathway to a political autonomy as the populist discourse claims.

What I find illuminating about Verónica Gago's arguments is her engagement with neoliberalism at a molecular level. Because the macro level here (being the actions of corporations and big players) is, contrary to common opinion, more visible to our common eye and has been analyzed in detail (Klein). But at a micro level, the everyday practices we engage with and share at a domestic level, are all but too visible, too obvious, to the point that they become naturalized and hence invisible.

For this reason, I propose to go beyond Habermas and Klein because their typology and approach is anchored in stable structures and binary oppositions (systemic vs identity crisis in

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<sup>11</sup> <<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475>>.

Habermas) or powerful structures, top-down and North-South, conveniently omitting Foucault's argument that "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). I am fully aware of unequal power distributions in any given society, but a rigid top-down approach forgets that, as Bauman has remarked, "power to get things done floats in the 'space of flows' (Manuel Castells); it is evasive, highly mobile, infuriatingly difficult to locate, pinpoint or fix, and, like the legendary hydra, has many heads" (Bauman and Bordoni 103). In sum, the approach in Habermas and Klein does not provide the micro level analysis I consider essential to unveil the intricacies of neoliberal power structures and societal practices that I find in Verónica Gago's *La razón neoliberal* (2014) and, to a certain degree, in Saskia Sassen's *Expulsions* (2014).<sup>12</sup>

If Gago argues for a reassessment of a neoliberalism from below, Sassen studies the creation of new logics of expulsions, whether these are expulsions of low-paid workers and the unemployed from government welfare benefits or homeowners from their residences due to evictions, as Spain has sadly become accustomed to in the past few years. Homelessness is a radical example of the societal expulsions documented in the comic *Barcelona. Los vagabundos de la chatarra*: "En 2008 había en España unas 12,000 personas sin domicilio. Ahora son casi 25,000, según las estadísticas oficiales, que no siempre pueden registrar a los invisibles ni a los que van y vienen" (Carrión and Sagar 27). Abudu, a Senegalese character in the comic, informs the graphic journalists about this invisible reality: "Tened en cuenta que hace ya más de trece años que hay gente en esta ciudad viviendo de nave en nave, de desalojo en desalojo" (Carrión and Sagar 45). This issue of *expulsions* based on what Gago understands as the "cálculo como matriz subjetiva primordial" is the basis for El Roto's example of graphic

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<sup>12</sup> Gago uses the idea of *governmentality* developed by Michel Foucault during his 1979 courses on neoliberalism. Published under the title *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2010), Foucault uses the concept of governmentality to expand "the analysis of neoliberalism beyond the role (or lack of a role) of states, shifting the focus to a wider spectrum of ways in which people 'conduct the conduct' of others" (Moreno-Caballud 24).

humour which appeared in *El País* on 9 July 2016 with the Syrian refugee crisis as the unresolved context in European politics.

### Figure 2 here

Money and calculus are the omnipotent logic in our societies. Sassen has unveiled the globalized structure of this logic linked to global markets with interrelated interests at the national and international level in *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (2006). In *Expulsions* (2014) Sassen exonerates individuals and blames transnational financial decisions for the mortgage subprime crisis:

The so-called subprime crisis was not due to irresponsible households taking on mortgages they could not afford, as is still commonly asserted in the United States and the rest of the world. Rather, the mounting foreclosures signalled to those investors who had bought credit default swaps, that it was time to cash in their “insurance,” but the money was not there, because the foreclosures had also devalued the swaps (Sassen, “Expulsions” 127).

Sassen hints towards a reassessment of our idea for growth and how currently corporate economic growth has substituted a more holistic understanding of *growth*, with human beings at the core of it and not economic charts.<sup>13</sup> It is important to reassess growth in a global scale and in the long term in order to understand that rapid economic growth is all but an illusion

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<sup>13</sup> “Growth was of course crucial to the project of the welfare state. But it was also a means of advancing public interest, of increasing a prosperity in which many would share, even if some far more than others. Today, by contrast, our institutions and assumptions are increasingly geared to serve corporate economic growth. This is the new system logic [...] Anything or anybody, whether a law or a civic effort, that gets in the way of profit risks being pushed aside —expelled. This switch in economic logics is one major systemic trend not fully captured in current explanations” (Sassen, “Expulsions” 213). Despite the book’s strengths, it is certainly debatable Sassen’s assessment of communist regimes in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe having welfare states “that took care of their citizens” (Sassen, “Expulsions” 214-215). I agree that huge numbers of homeless people and the lack of social services for the very poor is a new challenge for these countries but the idea that communist regimes *looked after their citizens* needs a wider reflection in light of the numerous examples which precisely point towards the opposite direction.

and it only occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “the point I want to stress is that the twenty-first century may see a return to a low-growth regime. More precisely [...] growth has in fact always been relatively slow except in exceptional periods or when catch-up is occurring” (Piketty 72). Implicitly we need to consider the concept of *progress* too, which is a modern idea because, as Bauman argues, it considers that every human action is aimed at improvement (Bauman and Bordonni 118). But is rapid improvement sustainable? This is particularly poignant when those who are most directly affected when companies do not meet their economic targets are the ones in the lower scale of the labor force. In Spain, low-skilled temporary workers in construction jobs, who had experienced rapid economic growth as a result of the housing bubble during the 2000s, found themselves jobless in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. Many of them were immigrants from Eastern Europe or Africa, such as Vasile, depicted in *Los vagabundos de la chatarra*. The same applies to another Senegalese man who narrates a common story shared by many immigrants who arrived to Spain during the bonanza years: “He estado cuatro años en la obra, en la misma empresa de Terrassa. Cuatro años de contrato y algunos meses de paro. Y ahora estoy aquí, esperando, a ver si ahora que sabemos que no ha llegado el fin del mundo, pasa la crisis y vuelve el trabajo” (Carrión and Sagar 39).

A crisis might be a “golden opportunity” for neoliberal economists but it is also a chance to rethink alternatives and question our way of life. In this regard, I consider it essential to think about whether growth and progress (in the sense that is often used in economic terms) are quintessentially linked to real improvement for our human existence. Bauman stresses that the idea of progress as “a linear, essentially straight-line and predetermined, unstoppable itinerary of the human condition, from savagery through barbarity to civilization [...] was the hub of the optimistic, self-assured, boisterous and adventurous *Weltanschauung* of the up-and-coming middle class” (Bauman and Bordonni 122). The concept of progress has been, for the

most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, intrinsically linked to economic growth until the 1980s. It is at the MONDIACULT summit (in collaboration with UNESCO) that took place in Mexico in 1982, that it was declared that “desarrollo significa el enriquecimiento de la identidad profunda de un pueblo, de sus aspiraciones, de la calidad integral de su vida tanto en el plano colectivo como en el individual” (quoted in Maccari and Montiel 38–39). In this sense, the Indian economist Amartya Sen (Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998) has emphasized that “es posible concebir el desarrollo como un proceso destinado a acrecentar la libertad de cada cual en el logro de sus aspiraciones esenciales.”<sup>14</sup>

To this long-standing and largely positive idea of progress linked to economic growth, *crisis* has been articulated as its counterpoint. But as Rosalind Williams has analyzed, crisis begins to define the normal status of things, altering the common idea of crisis as it becomes “no longer a turning point in history but rather an immanent condition of history, part of its ‘normal’ working, indistinguishable from its own aftermath” (Williams 30). This new condition of living in a perpetual crisis—Williams speaks of *the emergence of a new historical consciousness*—is exemplified in the Spanish case, where recovery has taken much longer than what was initially forecast and eight years after the 2008 crash, Spain is still struggling in many global indicators such as population at risk of poverty or social exclusion (22% in 2014<sup>15</sup>) and unemployment (currently at 20%<sup>16</sup>). The graphic novel *Los vagabundos de la chatarra* provides an insight into this reality from a non-canonical culture production.

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<sup>14</sup> This shift in the understanding of progress and growth can be traced back at least to the ideas of Adam Smith, the pioneer of free market policies: “The feminist Italian economist Antonella Picchio reminds us that the so-called classical political economics of Smith, Ricardo, and Marx always kept very clearly in mind the cultural—ethical and political—dimension of economics, beyond its technical, quantitative, or specialized aspects [...] Picchio notes a key moment in this transformation: the appearance of the famous *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, written in 1932 by the British economist Lionel Robbins (1935). In it, asserts Picchio, ‘with the purpose of reaching his goal of redefining economics, he trades the analytical object of wellbeing—understood as effective living conditions—for the more general, abstract idea of utility as optimization of individual choices, under the bonds of scarcity’ (35)” (Moreno-Caballud 29–30).

<sup>15</sup> <<http://www.ine.es/prensa/np969.pdf>>.

<sup>16</sup> <[http://www.ine.es/prensa/epa\\_tabla.htm](http://www.ine.es/prensa/epa_tabla.htm)>.

### **The unkind face of recycling: Graphic journalism in *Barcelona. Los vagabundos de la chatarra* (2015)**

Graphic reportage in comic format is still a novelty in Spain and the genre has not yet produced a significant body of works dealing with the 2008 economic crisis. The most relevant example of it is *Barcelona. Los vagabundos de la chatarra* (2015), about the scrap metal business, undertaken primarily by homeless migrants who are paid in cash for collecting and delivering any scrap metal they can find. The comic has a hybrid composition, with sections in handwriting representing a notebook folder. The section entitled “Esta historia es Antigua” consists of three parts in which the authors combine the urban history of Barcelona and the post-industrial era, with the scars left by the 2008 crisis in the city’s social fabric. Interestingly, they take one of the most representative objects in our consumer societies, the trolley or shopping cart, and briefly document the new uses it has been given by cardboard and scrap metal collectors, making this object more efficient in the transportation of metal and cardboard around the streets.

#### **Figure 3 here**

Composition is particularly successful in this multimodal comic, which combines real photographs, drawings and dialogues in comic format with, for instance, real tweets issued by the Barcelona city council on the evictions from areas that had been used by homeless people working as scrap metal collectors. The tweets provide information about urban planning for those areas and the help provided to vulnerable people. In a compelling example of double narration, the tweets are superimposed to panels in which the reader can follow the route taken by the scrap metal from collection to a recycling plant that melts all the metal and turns it into

iron beams ready to be shipped to foreign markets. This multimodal and hybrid combination provides evidence of the author's research work on the subject matter, perhaps to counterbalance those readers who are not familiar with the possibilities and genres within comics.

#### **Figure 4 here**

Benoît Mitaine shares this view in his analysis of *Un largo silencio* (1997), another hybrid Spanish comic dealing with memory and autobiography, which includes photographs and historical documents with official stamps that “garantiza al lector la veracidad y autenticidad de las informaciones manejadas por el autor. Todas esas precauciones eran indispensables para poder escapar de los criterios básicos y a menudo estereotipados que definen un género tebeístico muy poco acostumbrado a las autobiografías” (Mitaine 158). In *Los vagabundos* the purpose is also to get a closer look at real events unfolding in the city of Barcelona and directly affecting many vulnerable people. The authors strive to organize the materials in a way that narratologically works but also engages with readers through, for instance, the use of social media tweets.

This use of actual pictures and drawings of real places around Barcelona has in mind the model of the new graphic journalism started by acclaimed artist Joe Sacco in his works *Palestine* (1996) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), on Israeli–Palestinian relations; and *Safe Area Gorazde* (2000) and *The Fixer* (2003) on the Bosnian War. The authors of *Los vagabundos* explicitly relate their graphic novel with Sacco by means of an epilogue which reproduces an interview in comic format that took place in Barcelona. Aligning themselves with the non-fiction comic, they recognize the pioneering work of Sacco, emphasizing his compromise with injustices around the globe. The opening quote for the epilogue extracted from a moment in

the interview stresses this idea: “Reality matters. Victims matter. Power needs to be questioned.”<sup>17</sup> The authors of *Los vagabundos* position their graphic novel as a socially and politically militant work of art through graphic reportage.

### Figure 5 here

*Los vagabundos* unveils a profitable business for a few people who take advantage of hundreds of scrap metal collectors who barely make a living out of it. But as the comic states in the prologue, the world produces 1.3 trillion tonnes of solid waste every year and it has become quicker and cheaper to recycle scrap metal rather than relying on the mining industry. China and India top the demand for iron, steel, copper and aluminum in order to boost their industrial expansion. According to the authors “the crisis is a historic regression. From production to recollection, from manufactures to waste treatment” (Carrión and Sagar 27). *Los vagabundos de la chatarra* may represent a turning point for comics in Spain through the genre of graphic journalism. Time will tell. In any case, the authors have successfully applied Joe Sacco’s approach to the Spanish context, giving voice to vulnerable people who are the silent protagonists of these *logics of expulsion* unveiled by Sassen (2014). As this case study demonstrates, a new historical consciousness is at play, in which individuals assimilate a more sophisticated and perverse ideology, from the point of view of inequality. The informal economy depicted in the comic becomes a legitimate defense mechanism or, as Gago puts it, *una pragmática vitalista*. The neoliberal system expels people from the conventional labor force when they are not needed. We should not be surprised that these same people develop alternative economic strategies that, bypassing official channels, allow them to make a living. The eviction crises denounced in the comic and endured by, for the most part, the immigrant

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<sup>17</sup> Translation mine.

population, represent the ruthless face of an inhumane system which has lost empathy towards *the others*.

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