

Empowerment through the arts: rap music and clothing design by street vendor activists in Barcelona

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The “merchandise city” of Barcelona (Espinosa Zepeda, 2017) is a theatre of deep contrasts and inequalities. Tourists visit the famous city en masse using low-cost travel companies, many of them transiting Europe freely or with eligible visas. A “migrant precariat” (Standing, 2012; Schierup & Ålund, 2013) on the other hand, arrives by irregular means, selling goods and souvenirs to the tourists through unequal power relationships. Every summer in Barcelona and along the Spanish coasts, hundreds of street vendors, mainly of Senegalese origin, become hyper visible (Morales & Kleidermacher, 2015) in public spaces, but not without tension from local police forces. Due to the multifaceted “illegalisms” (Foucault, 1975) they are targeted, Senegalese migrant street vendors (in Spanish, *manteros*) face daily persecution. Added to racism, they are indeed criminalised due to their irregular migration status and their activity of street vending (selling irregular goods in unauthorised public spaces). Practicing the ‘survival activity’ of street vending implies the risk of fines, being beaten, arrested, deported, and even the risk of death.

Despite the formation of a new municipal government that mobilised left-wing-oriented discourses, 2015 was still characterised by increased criminalisation and persecution towards street vending. According to research participants, summer 2015 marked a “boom” in *manteros*’ “community time” (Le Goff, 1991) when a street vendor died following a police intrusion in his apartment located in the touristic Catalan city of Salou. “Cycles of Contention” (Tarrow, 1998) were underway: the first local organisation in defence of street vending emerged (“Behind the Blanket”) and a few months after, the creation of the “Street Vendors Popular Syndicate of Barcelona” (hereafter *sindicato*) was publicly announced. As a matter of fact, both the death of the street vendor and the creation of the *sindicato* provoked “booms” for street vendors’ empowerment. The unconventional form of organisation that is adopted in the *sindicato* is indeed surprising and very successful in enlarging its struggles beyond the national-based identification. First, the *sindicato* members are organised in base of their working activity, including some street vendors of other origins. Second, they are not recognised as a formal syndicate; it is a “popular” syndicate. Their main aims are to regularise their migration status and to access legal work opportunities to stop street vending. To do so, the *sindicato* is deploying multifaceted repertoires of actions that enable the organisation to receive increased visibility, support, and legitimation. Today, the *sindicato* has had so much impact that it has become a model for the creation of other *sindicatos* in Spanish cities such as Madrid, Zaragoza and Palma. Going even further, the *sindicato*’s success is making an impact not only throughout Europe but also on the other side of the Atlantic. I will argue in this paper that through the redefinition and enlargement of the *sindicato*’s aims, artistic narratives, such as rap music and especially clothing design, have a strong potential for success in migrants’ activism.

This paper will be divided into different sections: first I will articulate contributions developed from literature on migrants’ political participation and the framework of arts, ethnicity and migration. Second, I will justify my case study selection and the techniques of data collection. Third, I will show through the analysis of the song “This is the Syndicate” how rap music has become a key narrative for the organisation’s identity and legitimation. Fourth, I will focus on clothing design, highlighting how the creation of the brand “Top-Manta” marked a turning point in the collective’s organisation. Finally, I will summarise and bring into discussion the findings of this paper.

Conceptualising migrants’ political participation through the arts

In order to frame the topic of undocumented migrants' activism through the arts it is necessary to articulate the two following theoretical frameworks: migrants' political participation, and arts, ethnicity and migration. I will highlight their potential as theoretical inputs for my research. To do so, I will draw upon literature based on migrants' political participation as it enables us to understand how undocumented migrant organisations, such as street vendors' associations, use alternative repertoires of political participation. Secondly, I will follow up with literature on arts, ethnicity and migration as it helps to frame the particularity of artistic expression within the migration context.

Migrants' political participation

In the context of exclusion and structural violence that face undocumented migrants, their political life may seem ghostly at first glance: the "structure of political opportunities" (Eisinger, 1973; Tilly, 1978) looks indeed unfavourable when working in precarious work such as street vending. However, Martiniello (2006: 6) suggests that the "structure of political opportunities" is "present at any given time and in any given society, which is the result of inclusion-exclusion mechanisms developed by the states (of residence and origin) and their political systems (Martiniello, 1998)". Excluded by states, lacking access to legal and conventional channels of political participation, some undocumented migrants' movements nevertheless have a growing influence. To understand how, it is worth taking into account Nicholls (2013, 2014) compelling case of "niche openings" instead of political opportunities. The author argues that "the concept demands a shift in attention away from big, general, and rare political-discursive opportunities and towards the narrow, nuanced, and interstitial openings that make up the political worlds of marginalized groups" (Nicholls, 2014: 26). In this regard, we might interpret how artistic expression within the migration context can have the potential to enable and enhance those interstitial "niche openings".

To capture the particularity of undocumented migrants' activism we should also pay attention to the contributions developed on both sides of the Atlantic. On the one hand, and especially in the US and Dutch cases, citizenship and deservingness (Yukich, 2013; Patler & Gonzales, 2015; Nicholls, Maussen, Caldas de Mesquita, 2016; Swerts, 2017) are issues that have been addressed through the analysis of the *Dreamers*. On the other hand, research on the organisational methods of migrant activists shed light on two social and urban spaces for empowerment: a secure and structured strategy backstage and a public frontstage where disciplined performances take place (Fiorito and Nicholls, 2016; Swerts, 2017). We will thus follow the authors' recommendation to "look under the hood of public protest" and take into account the "backstage work needed to create strong and coherent frontstage performances" (Fiorito and Nicholls, 2016: 306) This framework leads us to wonder: to what extent are political narratives "given a voice" or theatrically constructed and performed?

In this regard, Davis (2002: 21-22) defines narratives as "social acts" and argues that "exploring the conditions and strategies of narration within social movements, stories are shown to be a powerful vehicle for producing, articulating, regulating, and diffusing shared meaning". I will therefore adopt this definition when referring to narratives, which I will classify more specifically as political narratives. Another kind of narrative addressed through this framework is storytelling (Swerts, 2015), taking into account how personal life stories are performed with emotion as political tools to a receptive audience. The performative reading of migrants' activism is indeed a driver for the understanding of specific channels of expression such as arts. Those channels of expression could be thus framed through cultural and resource dimensions thanks to the concepts of "known

repertoires of action", "cultural frames" and "cycles of contention" (Tarrow, 1998)¹. These concepts allow us to map the means and channels of expression deployed by social movements and the potential of arts for migrants' political participation.

Arts and migrants' political mobilisations

The role of arts as political narratives can also be framed through literature on migrants (ethnic) minorities' use of art; and especially through research on migrants' use of arts as forms of political mobilisation (Mattern, 1998; Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008). Indeed, as Martiniello (2015) argues, this is a "neglected research area" in a context where the political agency and creative potential of migrants is delegitimised or made invisible by mainstream culture. Nevertheless, arts play a significant political role, and can be used as an expression of protest and denunciation, with an important potential in structuring mobilisation. In this way, local and global identities are redefined and politically negotiated towards "glocal" identities (Luke, 2003), especially in the case of social movements using artistic expressions in collaboration with local society.

One of the well-known forms of artistic political expression is music, and especially rap, an artistic expression that emerged as a political response to the oppression of Afro American ethnic minorities (Lee Cooper, 1979; Rose, 1994). However, it is significant to observe how rap and hip-hop achieved influence far beyond the Afro American minorities, for example reaching Senegal. The presence of a contestatory rap culture in Senegal² and the way it has been redefined in the migration context by the *sindicato* is of interest to our case study. Through the analysis of rap lyrics, we can see from an anthropological perspective "forms of action" (Barber, 2007), and in our case political narratives and repertoires of action. These "forms of action" may thus be performed in public, but are even more diffused through social networks, enabling participation in "local and global debates" (Ntarangwi, 2009).

Most of the literature on arts, ethnicity and migration concerns music, and especially rap. However, lesser-known expressions can also be taken into account. Beyond music, other forms of artistic expressions used by minorities, such as cinema (Grassilli, 2008), cooking (Vandevoordt, 2017) theatre and photography (Godin, 2016) can also be analysed as political expressions³. Our proposal goes in this direction. Concerning clothing, Lewis (2015) looks at how dancing and clothing give vital means for identification and freedom for asylum seekers. Nonetheless, migrants' political participation through clothing design seems under researched. To contribute in filling this gap I will thus address in my analysis how the multifaceted artistic expressions developed by the *sindicato*, such as

¹ According to the author, "known repertoires of action", - which I decided to simplify and interpret here as repertoires of action - are based on "dense social networks and connecting structures" and "draw on consensual or action-oriented cultural frames" (Tarrow, 1998: 10). These "cultural frames" can be important sources of both consensus and conflict: the actors involved can therefore come into conflict, with the medias, as well as with states to "frame" the issues being contested. Social movements are therefore dynamics and subjects to "cycles of contention" (and opportunities). In other words, the success of one social movement can create opportunities for other movements.

² Gueye (2013) observes that the emergence of hip-hop and "revolutionary rap" in Senegal is related to the artistic and social movement *Y'en a Marre* which mobilised in the 2000's. "Urban guerrilla poetry" emerged in public, political, and disruptive performances as a reaction to Wade's neoliberal government.

³ Vandevoordt (2017) analyses how food practices play a role in reverting power relationships in asylum seekers reception centres in Belgium. In turn, Grassilli (2008) suggests how cinema produced by migrants in Italy is "guerrilla film-making" and is inserted in post-colonial debates. Godin (2016) examines how photography and theatre act as new political representations of rape for Congolese women in Belgium.

clothing design and rap music, have a strong potential for the political empowerment and social entrepreneurship of migrants and ethnic minorities.

Methodology

In the Spanish timeframe of the early 2000s, research on undocumented migrants' activism has focused on the struggles for citizenship extension (Suárez-Navaz, Maciá Pareja, & Moreno García, 2007; Varela Huerta, 2009). The case of Barcelona and the emergence of the *sindicato* have recently attracted growing media and academic attention. The attention focused mainly on how this bottom-up organization emerged in the unequal urban context (Delclós, 2019) of Barcelona's "merchandise city" (Espinosa Zepeda, 2017; 2019), the reasons for street vending, the interplay of security forces repressing the activity (Moffette, 2018) and the interest and instrumentalization of local institutions around this phenomenon. The analysis will go a step forward in showing how, in the case of the *sindicato*, arts have the potential to redefine and turn the targeted stigma of 'illegality' into a positive trait (in the sociological sense), and in particular how the clothing design project marked a turning point for the organisation's repertoires of action.

The most useful method for this research is ethnography as it enables a long-term understanding of the changing dynamic of the *sindicato*'s political narratives and repertoires of action. I carried out fieldwork from November 2016 until May 2017, and I came back to the field in August 2019. I conducted participatory observation in the frequent events organised in Barcelona where the *sindicato* were involved, I also helped to support the daily activities of the clothing workshop. I was included in many informal conversations whilst helping in the workshop. At first, I decided not to proceed with any interviews as interviews with the *sindicato* were highly requested from journalists, as well as students and several other researchers. I wanted not to be mistaken for a journalist and decided to wait before organising four principal interviews¹ involving one of the spokespersons, one close supporter and two artists.

I also conducted online ethnography, decrypting the numerous posts on the *sindicato*'s webpage and social networks, as well source analysis of the lyrics to the song "The Syndicate" and the related video clip. With the approval of the research participants, pictures taken during the events and from the workshop will be used as well as images from social networks and webpages managed by the *sindicato*. All research participants' names were changed for this article in order to preserve their anonymity. However, when referring to the song "The Syndicate", I decided to preserve the names of the artists by precaution of authors' copyrights.

Getting empowerment through multifaceted artistic expressions

Since 2015, the *sindicato* developed multifaceted artistic expressions: rap music, clothing design, "street vendors' dinners" with related "rebel drinks" (of Senegalese food and drinks) and annual "Balthazar king" street theatre performances. Furthermore, the organisation collaborated to the documentary dedicated to the *sindicato* "The Weight of the Manta" ("*El Peso de la manta*") (Brereton, et al. 2016), as well as the postcolonial poetry book "Differing Voices" ("*Voces del Impulso*") (García López, 2017). Referring to the "Balthazar king" street theatre performance, Ababacar, one of the spokespersons of the *sindicato* explains:

"People often accuse us of making victimizing speeches, but it is not about victimizing, it is about telling the reality. We denounce the black face, we denounce it in our own way, in the best way to get the message across, that's why we did the white face,

¹ The interviews were conducted in Spanish but translated to English in this article.

that's why we put black people to paint them as white, this was very successful too, these are ways of fighting, creativity also depends on the experience of each one” (Ababacar, Barcelona, 20/08/19).



The “Balthazar king” performance. The blankets usually used for street vending were in this case redefined for the distribution of sweets to children.⁵

The mobilisation of arts appears as a creative expression beyond victimising speeches, thus valorising the previous knowledge of the *sindicato* members. Moreover, Angélica, an activist close to the *sindicato*, remarks that: “They are very powerful people, regardless of whether or not they are street vendors, they are very politicised people, who have a lot of culture [...] they are people... they are basically people!... some cook very well, others don't... X is a tailor, he has always been a tailor, now he is making great clothes!” (Angélica, Barcelona, 22/08/19). However, behind this previous artistic knowledge of the members, a rapper explained to me that within the Barcelona activism environment “they (the street vendors) realized that it was not enough to organize, they had to create their own products to be visible in a different manner” (Ramón, Barcelona, 10/09/19). In this manner, and according to Angélica, as the *sindicato* became more visible, more artists showed interest in collaborating with the collective. Creating their own products enabled the organization to reach a larger audience. Speaking out and becoming visible “in the best way”, beyond victimising discourse. Within the diverse artistic expressions utilized by the *sindicato*, the ones that are the most influential for political mobilisations are rap music and clothing design. I will therefore refer to those two expressions in the following analysis.

“Behind the blanket people rise in protest”: rap music

The way the *sindicato* creates and performs rap music in collaboration with artists is a very important characteristic that brings us both to the organisation’s political narratives and repertoires of action. Furthermore, the practice of rap by some members of the *sindicato* has impact beyond the performative dimension: it also shares an insight into the collective’s backstage organization, we can observe this through the musical collaboration with the rap band *Malamara* and the creation of the song “This is the Syndicate”.

The song is an intercultural creation between several artists: three members of the *sindicato*, of Senegalese and Pakistani origin, and the two singers of *Malamara* of Spanish and Venezuelan origin. It is significant to observe the diversity of the artists in terms of

⁵ Credits: Xavi Ariza, (*Fotomovimiento*), Barcelona, 2018.

nationality and language. This way, the parts of the song sung by Zahoor and Daouda are respectively in Pakistani Urdu and Senegalese Wolof languages, while *Malamara* duo sings in Spanish. "What is interesting is how we all create the lyrics at the same time, this is the exercise through which creativity is shared [...] through the language you speak you can give it form, with the same words that we are thinking in Spanish" (Ramón, 10/09/19. Barcelona). *Malamara's* singers self-identify as street musicians, fighting for human rights through "combative rap": topics such as police violence, (immigrant) detention centres, freedom of movement and further issues related to immigration are indeed omnipresent in their songs. Through urban culture, the street musicians met with street vendors in squats. Equipped with their recording material in this active environment, they proposed to create a song: "The Syndicate" emerged. The song is performed at some of the public events in which the *sindicato* participate. It has been also recorded and can be listened to (and seen through the video clip) on the *Youtube* multimedia network⁶. One of the events was held in the old city on a rainy spring evening. Coming back to my fieldwork notes:

There is a stage installed in the middle of the square and a bar where some teenagers are gathered. Whilst some are trying to shelter from the rain, rock, punk and ska music are being produced through speakers. [...] Live music starts with drums. A woman from "Behind the Blanket" arrives and invites the spokespersons of the *sindicato* to go up on the stage. Then it is *Malamara's* turn. While the public is already lively, they give thanks for the food. The woman intervenes speaking about the situation in "Carcelona". Daouda, a spokesperson of the *sindicato* stays on the stage with *Malamara* singing the song "the syndicate". The public applauds and shouts their support. (Fieldwork notes, 31/03/17, Barcelona).

These observations highlight particular aspects. First, the generation dimension and the choice of using determined styles of music. The participation of the syndicate took place at the event "youth stays in the gothic quarter" about the youths' implication in a neighbourhood confronted with gentrification. Rock, punk and ska music are indeed styles that seduce the youth in the quest of disrupting the established order, as well as mobilising music as a space and tool for contestation. The presence of the rap duo *Malamara* and members of the *sindicato* singing protest songs together fits well in this youth engaged meeting. Indeed, as Rose observes "oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion" (1994: 99). Thereby, the author enables us to understand the creative and artistic dimensions of subversion, and how "unofficial truths" (ibid) and further narratives of resistance are legitimized through music. Second, and as mentioned previously, the issue of detention and especially the detention of immigrants was raised on stage through the use of the nickname "Carcelona" which is in fact the abbreviation of *cárcel* (prison) and Barcelona, characterizing the way the city of Barcelona is seen as a place of criminalisation and detention. When singing this slogan, the public responded strongly in support of the artists, thereby legitimising the issue, and in a broader way the narratives and claims expressed through the song "This is the syndicate".

⁶ "R.A.P. (Respeto, Amor y Paz) 2016". URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KW5JzM71dPs>. Accessed 02/03/20.



A live performance of “This is the Syndicate”⁷

Now I would like to analyse some of the most significant parts of the song itself, because it seems to have become a powerful narrative and repertoire of action that generates high support and legitimacy. The song is structured by the successive parts sung step by step by each of the 5 artists, and connected with a rhyming chorus, which claims that:

“I buy it, I sell it cheap
Survival is not a crime
This is the Syndicate
I don’t steal, I don’t hit, I don’t kill
There are persons behind the blanket
This is the Syndicate”
(“This is the Syndicate”, Daouda, Yahya, Zahoor and *Malamara*, 2015)

The chorus highlights the slogan of the *sindicato*: “Survival is not a crime, this is the syndicate”, which pushes focus towards the criminalisation of poverty and the collective efforts to expose the way their economic activity is perceived and sanctioned by the authorities. Furthermore, they distinguish street vending from crime and violence arguing that they just sell their products at a low cost in order to survive. Finally, to distinguish themselves as non-threatening, they use humanitarian-oriented narratives in suggesting that beyond their economic activity and its persecution there are human beings trying to live. The expression “behind the blanket” is used and signified by other local social movements. Moreover, one of these movements carries this phrase as its own name (In Spanish, *Tras La Manta*). Some further lyrics like the expression “behind the blanket, people rise in protest” suggest that in addition to human beings working “behind the blanket”, there are actually much more “people” supporting the cause of the syndicate. In the same way, the syndicate-friendly collective “The Space of the Immigrant” (in Catalan, *Espai del Immigrant*) is mentioned in the song.

⁷ Photography taken by the author (edited due to bad lighting conditions), Barcelona 2016.

The rest of the lyrics are composed on the one hand by narratives of storytelling (Swerts, 2015) about the migration trajectories of the *sindicato* members, shedding light on the hard process of leaving the family, the country of origin, the transit journey and the arrival in Spanish territory. On the other hand, the duo *Malamara* focuses more on the Barcelona localized context of demonstrations and alliances between collectives, as well as the purpose of legitimising street vending as a "working right" and the formation of the *sindicato* as a self-organized social movement acting beyond its present time. Indeed, the singers of *Malamara* use the words "for us", and refer to "those who were before, and will be then". This metaphor of time is interesting because it enables us to interpret the collective's understanding of the continuity of fighting, and also how the *sindicato* reaches out, through its diverse repertoires of action, to a large network of bottom-up organisations, artists, and other actors involved in its cause.

Beyond the stage performance and the lyrics, we can observe how the song is represented through the online video clip. It begins with the character of a woman in front of the department store *Corte Inglés* with a sign in hand and the slogan "Yes to the street vending struggle" and arguing "cheaper than *Corte Inglés*". The song follows this scene, with the *sindicato* members' singers appearing successively. The lyrics are subtitled and translated to Spanish. However, despite the presence of their voices, the duo *Malamara* does not appear in the video: "we did not want to appear... it was more like a manifesto, we were already doing rap, it was enough with the voice and the music... to put our face there? It should come out as what it is about... street vendors" (Marcos, 10/09/19, Barcelona). In the same logic of insuring that the *sindicato* are the main protagonists, Angélica clarifies that "we support and encourage them but less in the foreground" (Angélica, 22/08/19, Barcelona).

The visual material that appears was taken from previous recordings captured by the musicians' friendly network and edited, "with the expressions used in demonstrations" (Ramón, 10/09/19, Barcelona.). On the one hand, images of the street vending daily activity are represented with a focus on the process of installing and uninstalling merchandise, the products offered, and the interactions with customers. On the other hand, the demonstrations held in the streets by the *sindicato* and its network of supporters are represented in a montage, as well as a diverse crowd of people holding placards with the slogan "survival is not an offence". The video clip ends with the slogan "syndicate: we are also working class" and the chorus "surviving is not a crime".

Therefore, the video clip serves as a way to reinforce the song with visual material, including previous and post song scenes that are held by the civil society supporters of the *sindicato*. These scenes seem to serve as a way of legitimising the lyrics, the figures of the *sindicato* members, the daily activity of street vending, and the demonstrations. These aspects allow us to observe how the political narratives of subversion are embodied, and how they remember a shared past of several demonstrations between the supporting civil society and the *sindicato*, creating in this sense community belonging. Hence, the video clip "links the individual to a symbolic past, as the experience links the individual to a movement, a movement with a history, its own story, its own heroes and habitus" (Eyerman, 2002: 450).

All these elements convert the song and the video clip into a manifesto, a political narrative and repertoire of action with a large scope of impact: as Marcos says, "a video clip gives one billion views" (10/09/19, Barcelona). Both are powerful urban narratives constructing *other* knowledge and diffusing shared meaning (Davis, 2002) with a large support from local activists. In this regard, Eyerman highlights that:

"Through song, a collective, such as a movement, can objectify itself and its history, making itself visible to others, as well as creating and establishing a sense of continuity. At the same time, such cultural expressions, texts and other material artefacts permit the presentation of the collective's view of events free from the censorship of the dominant culture. Finally, music and art can serve as a basis for recruitment and support, economic as well as moral, passive as well as active" (2002: 442).

"This is the syndicate" was in this manner the first successful artistic basis for collective support. To elaborate how the *sindicato* reached increased empowerment as it was developing more artistic expressions we will see now how clothing design marked a turning point both for its backstage and frontstage organisation.

"Legal clothing by illegal people"

Clothing design has started to take a preponderant weight for the *sindicato* since it launched the clothing brand "Top Manta" in 2017. According to Ababacar:

"From that moment we started to create projects within the collective... our own designs, our own clothes, both stamped and tailored... to also create a group that can do other jobs such as maintenance, painting, carpentry, because (within the street vendors) there are people who have these skills (...) All these designs that you see, have been made by the street vendors... we made a workshop with P, they are journalists, they work with media, they helped us to get experts who could help us to make our struggle more visible and there it came up." (Ababacar, 20/08/19, Barcelona)

The project is thus the result of a collaboration between several supportive media outlets, activist and legal organisations, but also a photographer and a web designer; all these actors have supported the visibility of the project. According to the webpage⁸ of the *sindicato* and its crowdfunding page⁹, the collective defines the brand project as:

"The intention to enhance our living conditions as a collective. We wanted an alternative to fake products, and we dreamt to take all the marginalised groups of our city off the street. Today we initiated a crucial campaign for all the street vendors, it will serve to launch our activity as a registered association and our project of becoming a social company in the world of fashion" (Post of the *sindicato*, 2017).

In this presentation, the *sindicato* stresses that its original idea was to develop an alternative to street vending of 'fake' merchandise. This is indeed why the street vending activity is criminalised: street vendors are targeted for selling products that breach the rights of industrial ownership, and for selling these products in public unauthorised places. Nevertheless, the creation of the brand "transforms the pejorative, and dignifies it" (the *sindicato*, 2017). In a context where the denomination "Top Manta" is commonly used in Spain to create a negative image, racialize and delegitimise the activity of street vendors (and even their presence in Spain). Transforming this stigma, dignifying it, and turning it to a positive trait for empowerment is an essential goal of the project. Furthermore, the *sindicato* defines itself its new agency and role as a "social company" that aims to be active far beyond street vendors' concerns. Therefore, the collective aspires to include local

⁸ URL: <http://manteros.org/>. Accessed the 04/03/20

⁹ URL: <http://www.goteo.org/project/top-manta-bcn>. Accessed the 04/03/20

society and “take out of the streets” all the marginalized street collectives, whether migrants or not.

Let’s focus now on the disruptive slogan of the brand: “legal clothing by illegal people”. The terms ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ used in the slogan seem to provoke and highlight the ambiguity and paradox of both ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’. Indeed, even if apparently opposed, they are in a way complementary: ‘illegality’ refers by negation to the opposite of ‘legality’ and would not exist without the definition of what is ‘legal’, and vice versa. Furthermore, these categories are dynamic: first, the definition of ‘legality’ and its opposite are constructed in time and place, and subject to institutional changes. Second, the people targeted as ‘legal’ or ‘illegal’ might have multiple status and identities. Through the disruptive slogan, the *sindicato* is thus active in challenging the “production of illegality” (de Genova, 2002). Moreover, the changing nature of ‘illegality’ and the grey line between the category and its opposite, in “liminal politics” (Swerts, 2017), is evidenced by the change of status¹⁰ of the *sindicato*. In fact, the activist organisation had been considered during its first years as ‘illegal’, and is now considered as ‘legal’: a civic association with legal personality. This enables the *sindicato* to make some economic alternatives ‘legal’ (such as the clothing brand project) while some other members of the *sindicato* are still practicing the ‘illegal’ street vending activity.

To understand the economic development of the brand, it is worth characterizing how the *sindicato* develops social and commercial strategies in order to carry out the project. Through a crowdfunding campaign, supported by a web page¹¹ with high definition pictures and videos, web users were invited to crowdfund “Top Manta” in exchange for some of the products and other kinds of reciprocity. The web page sheds light on how the funds are used with transparency. A large part is intended for administrative costs, salaries, infrastructure and the services of the workshop where the products are created and sold. Another part is intended for “gifts” to the donors such as “street vending tours” or “street vendors dinners”, and a small part is intended for the collective benefit of the *sindicato*.

In consequence, the *sindicato*’s repertoires of action are changing its internal backstage organisation. Indeed, through the crowdfunding web page, the *sindicato* highlights the fact that several assemblies were held in order to decide how the funds destined to the collective benefits would be distributed. Through these assemblies it has undertaken a “popular planning” of several funds for accommodation, law, health, education, cooperative, political participation and culture. This new internal organisation signals a restructure and redefinition of the agency and self-organisation of the *sindicato*.

Through the analysis of the brand designs we can decrypt how they are related to political narratives. The symbol of the brand and the different styles of t-shirts, sweatshirts, and bags stamped with different representations are all creations of the members of the *sindicato*. First, the symbol of the brand represents a blanket, slightly curved, of black and

¹⁰ The *sindicato* reached the hard goal to be formally recognised as an association with legal personality. The collective is now officially registered as a non-profit association named “Popular Association of Street Vendors of Barcelona”. This change of legal status is highly significant in the sense that, after two years and a half of political participation without legal status; the organisation took the opportunity to be considered as a civic association but had to renounce formally to the denomination of *sindicato*, while it is still commonly known by social movements and medias as the *sindicato*.

¹¹ The *sindicato* created the crowdfunding page as well as the webpage of the collective (where the brand project is central) in collaboration with friendly not for profit organisations. Considering the visual quality of the pictures, videos, and descriptions, both web pages have indeed a professional aspect. In less than one month, more than 2,200 people donated a total sum of more than 67,000 euros, which corresponds to the triple of the minimum expected amount to make the project viable.

grey colour. Above it fits the brand name "Top Manta". Second, the blanket, due to its form, symbolises also the wave and the pirogue, both symbols of the migration journey taken mostly by sea by street vendors. These artistic representations create a positive spin on the way they are targeted and represented through material attributes and symbols. The wave and boat represent their 'illegal' migration journey, while the blanket and the name of the brand represent their 'illegal' street vending practice. Hence, the *sindicato* adopts these representations through an artistic and economic practice that has social and political impact.

The brand's logo (Top Manta, 2018):



Regarding the products offered, most of the black and white stamped logos present the slogan "Legal Clothing, Illegal People", and the related slogan "Fake System, True clothes". Consequently, the *sindicato* is playing between the grey lines that characterise the categories such as "legal", "illegal", "fake", "true", "black", "white", while using hashtag social network expressions. Other prints contain drawings of a 'black' street vendor carrying a big bag, a 'black' or 'white' face crying or colourful little huts. Most of the clothes made are t-shirts both for 'men' and 'women', but some sweatshirts, hats, shoes and handbags are also designed. All products wear the brand name "Top Manta" just under the slogans. Concerning tailoring, some t-shirts and a few suits include pieces of colourful wax fabrics. According to Ababacar, tailoring enables to "dissimulate" elements of Sub-Saharan "African"¹² fashion to urban "Western" clothing. It is worth taking into account that the products offered are targeting 'urban culture' more so than ethnicity, or, as Ababacar says, "dissimulating" it. This style-oriented choice reminds us that the *sindicato* is organised more around the working class than ethnicity.



Designs. (Top Manta, 2017)

Another aspect to consider regarding the brand is its ethical, fair trade and environmentally friendly angle. This is achieved through the recognised label *Continental*

¹² By the use of these categories I refer to the research participant's terms. The idea here is not to characterize so called 'African' or 'Western' clothing styles in an antagonistic manner as both categories are very heterogeneous. Moreover, it is worth to note that the main 'African' wax fabrics industry is located in the Netherlands.

Clothing where the designs are produced. This decision highlights the values of the *sindicato* and its broader ideology. This way, the collective stresses that the brand is “human, solidary and popular” as well as “subversive in front of big companies”, thus asserting its anti-capitalist scope whilst recognising itself also as “working class” (crowdfunding page, 2017). Hence, the collective is reinforcing its class identification as a precariat, while articulating “local and global debates” (Ntarangwi, 2009). Amplifying its political narratives through fair trade and environmentally friendly clothing, the *sindicato* is able to construct new legitimacies and therefore reach a larger audience beyond street vending concerns.

In order to complete the analysis, I will describe some of my observations from *being there* at the workshop: the space for producing and selling “Top manta” products. The workshop is located in the intercultural neighbourhood of *El Raval*. It is located a few blocks away of the *Espai del Immigrant* friendly collective, as well as being close to the *Tancatsquat*. The position of the shop is placed in a physical and social network of ‘friendly spaces’. These connected spaces seem to bring significant social and material support to the ambitious repertoire of action that fills the shop.



The entrance of the shop from the street. On the left, a flyer of a demonstration. Inside, books on sale and a mannequin. Photograph taken by the author (2018).



Inside the shop, scouts looking at the T-shirts after a “talk” with the spokespersons. Books and the *Malamara*'s CDs are on sale. Photography taken by the author (2018).

The shop is open during the week while in the afternoons awareness raising talks are held with scouts or children groups, Saturday mornings are dedicated to interviews. In

the evenings some decolonialization book presentations are also organized. Entering the workshop, one can see the diversity of products offered. Along the walls the clothing products are presented, as well as some pictures of demonstrations. Engaging literature as well as artist collaborations are on sale such as *Malamara's* CDs. The workshop is thus a space that gathers a collection of alternative artistic expressions and products created by the *sindicato* but also its sympathisers. The workshop is located right at the back of the shop.



The workshop, behind the shop. In the middle there is the screen-printing press. Photography taken by the author (2019).

The workshop is thus the physical continuation and creative part of the shop. The t-shirts are presented on the screen-printing table before they are stamped with the logos. The printers are the spokespersons themselves as well as other members of the *sindicato* and supporters, in total they are 15. In response to the *Goteo* awards and reciprocity 'gifts', they produced more than 5000 t-shirts. As I was helping with the tasks, Alioune told me: "screen printing is very nice" while using the press with energetic movements of the arms. Moreover, they are also producing particular prints at the demand of some other activist organisations such as a feminist organization and some festivals. Also, on some Wednesdays screen printing techniques are taught to unaccompanied minor migrants. Finally, it is important to mention that another shop will open in Madrid and that the *sindicato* recently launched an online shopping page¹³ that responds to the increasing and international demand of the "Top Manta" products.

The shop is much more than a commercial place but also a creative, productive, political, social, cultural and sensitising place. Multifaceted repertoires of action are united in the same place. All these aspects convert the clothing project into a turning point for the *sindicato's* backstage and frontstage organisation. Moreover, it is converting the unconventional collective into a new and alternative entrepreneurial actor. With "Top-Manta", the public of consumers is evolving from a massive tourist demand for cheap and 'fake' fashion street vending products towards an urban, and politically engaged youth living in Barcelona, especially in the gentrified neighbourhood of *El Raval* where the shop is

¹³ URL: <https://www.topmanta.store/> (Accessed 03/09/20)

located. Nevertheless, according to *Malamara's* singers it could be even more commercially oriented. In this manner, Marcos proposes a style "more rap music oriented, more street people" (Marcos, 10/09/19, Barcelona) while Ramón argues for: "A more urban orientation that can create products focused more in the creative market, for example skateboarding... to make girls that can be sponsored more visible, and to give visibility to the store in other scopes" (Ramón, 10/09/19, Barcelona).

For the purpose of visibility, a fashion parade was held for the launch of the brands new products. Some of the models were members of the *sindicato* itself and numerous sized media outlets such as *New York Times* and *AlJazeera* covered the event. Thanks to its increasing visibility and support, the *sindicato* is gaining access to a global audience and a global market as the collective expands sales through online shopping and deliveries. Through this process, the organisation is day-by-day becoming more professional and legitimate. Within the *sindicato* some were critical of the 'commodification' process: "Within the fight there are also mistakes that we make (...) for example you can do something that the collective itself doesn't like, for example the parade, the models that were presented (...) they have only presented a group of street vendors as merchandise, right?" (Ababacar, 20/08/19, Barcelona)

The very success seen by the global audience may have also had an opposite effect of generating some disagreements within the internal organisation. The clothing design project represents a turning point for the repertoires of action employed by the *sindicato*. It marks the organisation's increasing professionalism, visibility and legitimisation but still this is sometimes questioned. For some others, the restructuration of the collective through the clothing project generates misunderstandings around the *sindicato's* goals: "The idea of the brand is not to give up activism, because there were people who thought it was like: well they have reached their goal. No, their goal is not to sell T-shirts (...) it is a way to free some people..." (Angélica, 22/08/19, Barcelona). The clothing project does not seem to be the end goal of the organisation but rather a tool for empowerment. It gives visibility to the *sindicato's* narratives through an activity that brings working alternatives to street vending. Moreover, the collective has the aspiration to become a cooperative, a "social company" that could offer job contracts for street vendors and therefore regularise their migration status. In this regard, the *sindicato* is significantly changing and restructuring its agency as it engages in economic planning with the projection of becoming a cooperative.

The unique trajectory of this bottom-up political organisation, with its success and hypervisibility, turned it into reference and example for five others street vendor *sindicatos* that emerged in several Spanish cities. Moreover, the *sindicato* has regional connections with Italian social movements and left-wing euro deputies who invited it to the European parliament in Brussels. On the other side of the Atlantic, the collective is also in touch with Senegalese migrant organisations in Argentina, and particularly for our interest with Afro-American antiracist organisations including ex members of the *Black Panthers* movement. Since the 2014 Ferguson police violence events in the US, the *sindicato* and its supportive Catalan network built new connections with Afro-American organisations. The *sindicato* designed the "Black Manters" symbol (playing between the *Black Panthers* and *manteros* terms) and started producing T-Shirts in high demand.



On the left a handbag, “Black Manters” (credits: Top Manta, 2020), and on the right a *Black Lives Matter* demonstration held in Barcelona (credits *sindicato*, 08/06/2020)

This symbol turned even more meaningful with the recent worldwide *Black Lives Matter* movement of Spring 2020. In times of the Covid-19 pandemic, Spain and particularly the undocumented street vendors have been severely affected by the sanitary, social, political and economic crisis. In this context the *sindicato* responded with many solidary measures, for example the creation of more than 14,000 masks for the local hospitals in lack of material and for further persons in situation of vulnerability. For this purpose, the shop was almost exclusively converted by 20 undocumented migrant tailors to work hard on making masks in times of lockdown. Since then, the *sindicato* has been selling those masks online with the “Top Manta” logo and has launched a new collection, called “Black Manters” that offers handbags and T-Shirts (almost all out of stock) with the successful symbol. As the above picture shows, the demonstration of June 2020 in Barcelona reactivated the strength of the antiracist narrative. The *sindicato* members were there wearing clothes and masks designed and produced by themselves with the slogan, written in English, “Black Lives Matter”, “Happy to be black” and “Black Manters”, uniting the transatlantic struggle of ethnic and migration minorities through the arts.

Conclusions

My aim in this paper was to understand how the *sindicato* brings about political narratives and repertoires of action through the arts. Through the ethnographical analysis of the creation of the song “This is the Syndicate”, and the “Top Manta” project, it is clear that the organisation is reaching remarkable visibility, legitimacy, and support from local society. The artistic expressions are thus coming from the street vendors current and previous knowledge whilst also being redefined and stimulated by supporters in Barcelona. These expressions are also productised in order to gain more visibility and means for fighting. As shown, rap music is a very powerful intercultural narrative the *sindicato* is mobilising. It builds community ties not only for the *sindicato* members but also with civil society supporters, while clothing design represents a turning point for the *sindicato*'s backstage and frontstage organisation. Through these projects, the *sindicato* has been effective at reversing the multiple stigmas targeting the collective, deconstructing the “production of illegality” (De Genova, 2002). The echoes and success of its narratives and repertoires of action are such that the organisation accessed a legal status and increasing international support.

“Denouncing in the best way”, has a strong potential for the political participation and implication of the *sindicato*. They “get more support each time” as they embrace and adapt using arts to confront concerns that go beyond street vending: asylum, antiracism,

anticapitalism, anticolonialism, etc. In only five years of activity they developed all the projects I mentioned or described. Their means to continue fighting plus their creativity and understanding of "local and global debates" (Ntarangwi, 2009) lead us to wonder what new artistic expressions they will mobilise in future.

With this case study I hope to have contributed to a better understanding of undocumented migrants' political solidarity, I also hope to have shone a light on their promising artistic creativity despite precarity and multifaceted discrimination in Southern European countries. When conventional political opportunities are not an option for excluded populations such as undocumented migrants, the reformulation of "glocal" (Luke, 2003) political identities through the arts is an avenue for the convergence of strikes. Beyond victimising discourse, undocumented migrants create, sing, design and even aspire to gather all the marginalized street collectives, whether migrants or not.

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