

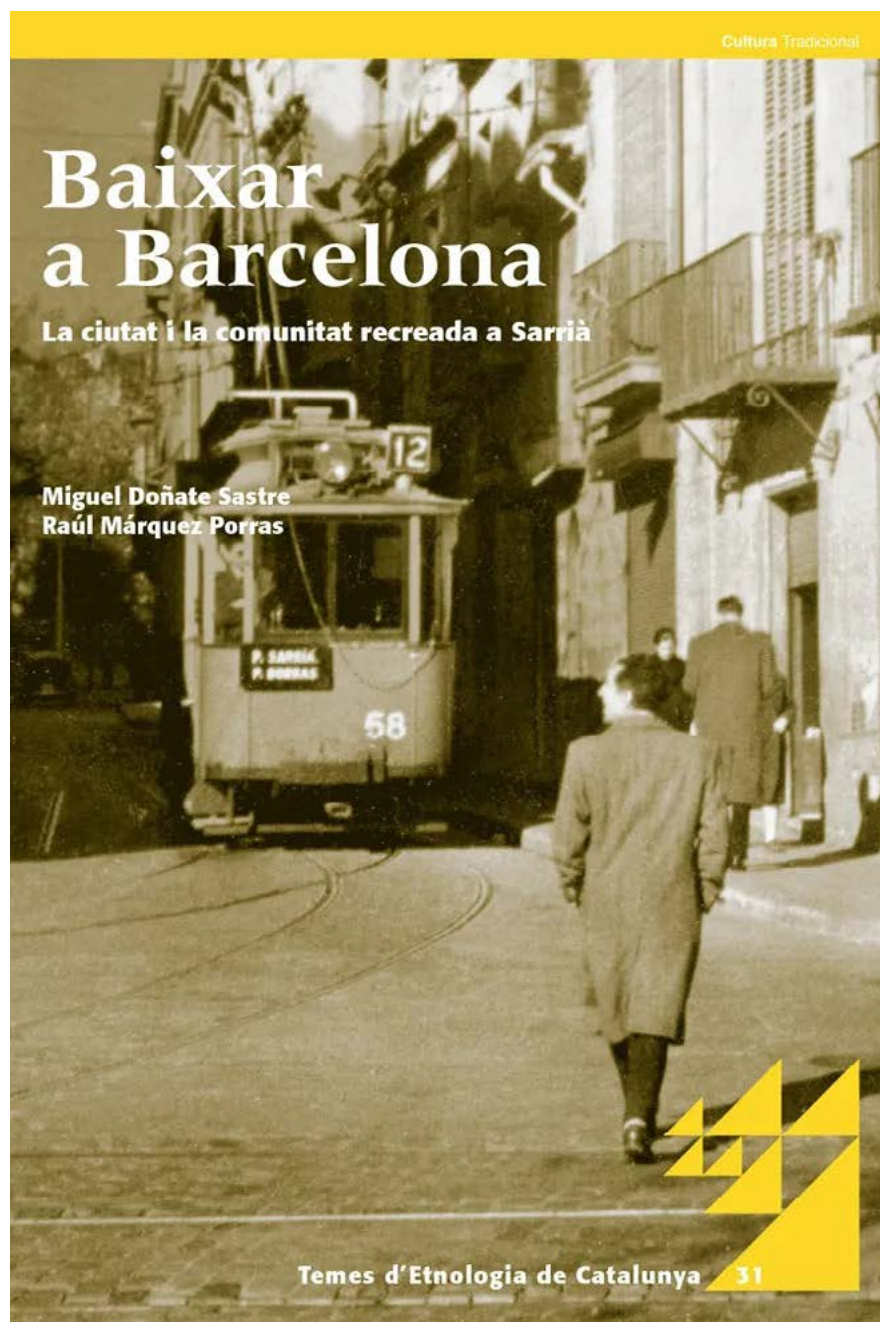
# Sarrià, a two-sided neighbourhood

Review of the book “Baixar a Sarrià. The city and the community recreated in Sarrià”.  
Ethnology topics of Catalonia, 31

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From the end of the Franco dictatorship, interesting and significant changes took place in popular urban culture. Among these, we see how in Barcelona the universe of the *gegants* goes from being based on hieratic images of kings and queens - such as those that predominated when they were at the service of the Church's public liturgies - to those popular characters featured in the parades who represent what was understood as the spirit of the neighbourhood where they belonged. This is how, for example, the giants of Sant Antoni, Tonet and Rita, are the 19TH century porter and a market seller. Xava and Xinxà, the new giants of Sants, are two workers from the Espanya Industrial factory. Sometimes, the new giants evoke the independent past of neighbourhoods like Sant Andreu, where Andreu and Coloma represent a farmer and a villager of the town before it was annexed to Barcelona.

The case of the Gegants Vells de Sarrià is one of the samples of the festive yet vindictive revival of the identities of each neighbourhood, in which characters are chosen who embody what is perceived as their essence. What happens



Cover of the monograph *Baixar a Barcelona. La ciutat i la comunitat recreada a Sarrià*.



Commemorative poster of the 60th anniversary of the annexation of Sarrià.

ASSOCIATION OF RESIDENTS OF SARRIÀ

is that the ones from Sarrià – which premiered in 1977 – have a strange characteristic: they are a couple that are actually two couples, one on either side. This is why they are also known as the two faces of Sarrià, because they certainly have two faces and are dressed differently depending on the side from which you look at them. In front are a lady and a gentleman of a prosperous appearance; he wears a barretina and she wears a diadem on her head and carries a fan in her hand. From behind, they are a man in work clothes and she in simple clothes carrying a bundle in her hand. They represent the working class and the tradesmen.

The neighbourhood of Sarrià is the subject of issue 31 of the Ethnological Themes of Catalonia collection, *Baixar a Barcelona. La ciutat i la comunitat recreada a Sarrià* [Go down to Barcelona. The city and the community recreated in Sarrià]. It results from the historical-ethnographic research of Raül Márquez and Miguel Doñate, a good example of how archives can be a setting and object of anthropological field work, completed in this case by interviews and observations that update the information obtained. The book is an excellent contribution to the definition, always difficult, of what a neighbourhood is, a subdivision of

the city that it identifies but which is difficult to identify as an objectivable territorial unit, to such an extent that it is affective and relational contents that delimit it and fill it with meanings.

Sarrià is a neighbourhood because, like all neighbourhoods, it has dimensions that are neither too large nor too small; a landscape and elements – shops, façades, buildings, fountains, corners, intersections, squares, characters... – loaded with collective memory; some limits – not necessarily the same for everyone – in certain streets or squares; a morphology that must not only allow, but encourage interaction between residents... But, above all, Sarrià is a neighbourhood because its residents tend to share a sense of belonging and proclaim it as a sign of self-distinction. There is one more feature that cannot be missed and that Sarrià possesses: a neighbourhood must have a name, a denomination of origin that allows a collective individuality – that of the people of Sarrià – to stand out, which, like all identities, can only be understood as the result of one controversy contrasted with another. Here, one that is imprinted on it from the outside and almost by force: that of the people of Barcelona.

This is a remarkable aspect of the book. It tells us about the process that led to the late incorporation – in 1922 – of Sarrià into the Catalan capital, after decades of resistance to Barcelona's expansionism. It is interesting because it is an example the old, almost obsessive official claim to make Barcelona a great unit not only administratively, but also emotionally, by way of phagocytising neighbouring towns -Santa Maria de Sants, Horta, Gràcia, Sant Martí de Provençals, Sant Andreu del Palomar...- to which their personality was denied and to which arbitrary borders and internal divisions were



Image of the Sarrià Desert (2013). MIGUEL DOÑATE AND RAÚL MÁRQUEZ

implanted. This project of political and symbolic centralism that Barcelona began to exercise in the second half of the 19th century, continued with the dream of the Greater Barcelona of Francoist mayor José María de Porcioles, whose heritage is none other than the "Barcelona model" of Pasqual Maragall. The objective: to put an end to the tendency of the neighbourhoods – both the annexed towns and those that were later nourished by the immigration of the 60s – to exist behind the backs of a Barcelona that was and is in reality little more than the Eixample and part of the Old Town. The instruments at the service of this machine for levelling differences, not inequalities: a uniform urban planning, the invention of new political compartments – the districts – and an offer of festivals and special effects to exalt a kind of new

urban patriotism with the capital in Plaça Santa Jaume.

*Go down to Barcelona* chronicles this institutional and popular defence - strikes, demonstrations... - of Sarrià's independence until its final absorption by Barcelona on 1 April 1922. This insubordinate character of the neighbourhood had other episodes, some glorious, like the one starring the "martyrs of Sarrià", the more than a hundred republican volunteers who, led by Joan Martí, the Xic de les Barquetes, died in the town square facing the troops of Martínez Campos. It was on 12 January 1874 and in defence of republican legality against the coup d'état of General Manuel Pavia. Their bodies rest in the common graveyard of the Sarrià cemetery. No plaque or monument remembers this episode or its protagonists.

Returning to the definition of what a neighbourhood is, a neighbourhood has neighbours, "community", a social bond based on contiguity and the routine of contacts in a delimited territorial context. Now, every neighbourhood is a community, but not every community is a neighbourhood, in the same way that every home is a house, but not every house is a home. For a community to be a neighbourhood it must have unique qualities, difficult to define but which constitute a kind of amniotic fluid made of experiences that are both intimate and shared. This is why Raúl and Miguel speak of Sarrià as a lived identity, the result of which is the feeling of being part of a community, a memory of that form of fraternal and supportive coexistence - the *gemeinschaft* about which Tönnies wrote – that we imagine prior to or alien to the modern urban experience and the type of cold, self-interested human relations that it imposes.

This is so because the neighbourhood is a subjective and biographical space, which often allows the personal history and present to be recomposed as a permanent articulation between the stage we call private and those other frameworks for depersonalised and anonymous interaction that we locate as and in "the centre" of a city. The neighbourhood is, therefore, the mediation space that allows us to move smoothly from our home to the full urban maelstrom. This is, in our case, what the title tells us: "Go down to Barcelona", that is to say, leave behind a sphere of trust and certainty to descend, literally and metaphorically, into another world, alien without truth or warmth. In the neighbourhood - in Sarrià - you can do what you can't do in Plaça Catalunya or the Rambles: develop reticular relationships based on proximity and mutual recognition - even if it is "in sight" - of those who we identify with the name of an English television series from the 80s: "gent del barri" (*EastEnders*).

This is what makes relevant the moving foreword by Lluís Mallart, who was a resident of Carrer Calatrava and who evokes his childhood in Sarrià, the roots of a neighbourhood boy that determined -in a way that could destroy- he wonders- his future career as a missionary, later an ethnologist, who carries out a mission among the Evuzok of Cameroon. Indeed, at the start of *I am the son of the evuzok*, Mallart recognizes all his African uniqueness as a kind of return to his neighbourhood and the streets where he played as a child, to the point that, watching the batanga fishermen with their canoes on their heads walking along the beach, what he saw were the apprentices of Can Foix also carrying boats full of cakes up and down the neighbourhood on their heads.

Same for the difference between *be from the neighbourhood* and who is domiciled in the neighbourhood, especially in a case like that of Sarrià, which is in many ways a bedroom community. Like those in some working-class suburbs of Barcelona, only in this case those who come to rest after work are not workers but "well-heeled", people from upper-class families who, since the 19th century, have been settling in the neighbourhood looking for a quiet refuge away from the big city. This is what explains this image, close to the stigma, which makes Sarrià for many people a rich neighbourhood, that is to say a neighbourhood of "people with money". An image that does not correspond to areas of the neighbourhood with a population that is not as prosperous as many Barcelona residents imagine. This optical effect is falsely corroborated by statistical data on income per capita that offer averages obtained from the sum of very different socio-familial profiles. As the book highlights, Sarrià is a neighbourhood like any other, far from the romantic image of social homogeneity that is often associated with it; a neighbourhood with rich and poor, with conflicts within it between social segments that live close to each other but with origins and interests that do not coincide. Only from idealism can we conceive of a neighbourhood as an integrated and placid universe, free from conflict and the exclusionary practices that certain neighbourhood relationships are made of. And Sarrià is the proof.

The distance between this composite reality of Sarrià and its simplification in the form of the clichés that affect it could be what means that, for now, the neighbourhood has had to assume a reputation as a den of the extreme right, with the Plaça Artós as a meeting point and symbolic reference. A usufruct that hides the tradition that

corresponds to it as a vindictive and fighting neighbourhood from the first neighbourhood unionism of the 70s and 80s to a long tradition of squatters that extends from the 90s - la Ploma, la Fusteria, l'Esquerda, la Lipoteka, which is the current Ateneo Popular in the neighbourhood - and which has arrived today with the appropriation, in February 2021, of some basements on carrer Salvador Mundi. The name they gave to the place is significant for how these young people are taking on the revival of the neighbourhood's identity: and of their lost freedom: Casal 21, in reference to the year the Spanish government decreed the annexation of Sarrià to Barcelona.

Sarrià, a neighbourhood that used to be a town and that many people live as if it still were. A neighbourhood of rich people who live in the neighbourhood without living it and of people who live it. A neighbourhood with history and active centres of rebellion that vote for the right and with an alternative youth that also lives side by side with young people who salute in the Roman style and sing "Cara al sol". This is why the old *gegants* of Sarrià are at the same time a well-to-do couple seen from the front and a couple of tradespeople seen from the back. They have two faces, like the neighbourhood they represent, which also has two faces. Well, two and surely more, as many as the human complexity that inhabits it. ■

Doñate, Miguel; Márquez, Raúl (2020) *Baixar a Barcelona. La ciutat i la comunitat recreada a Sarrià*. Barcelona, Department of Culture of the Generalitat of Catalonia (Temas d'Etnologia de Catalunya; 31), 200 p. This book, as well as the rest of the volumes in the *Temas d'Etnologia de Catalunya* collection, can be downloaded here: <http://calaix.gencat.cat/handle/10687/427743#page=1>.